

## Maduro raid label sparks safety debate

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The United States' decision to label the military extraction of Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela last weekend as a "law-enforcement" operation has sparked a legal debate that the designation could put service members operating across the globe at risk of not being treated as prisoners of war if captured by an adversary.

All of the nearly 200 special operations troops and 150 aircraft that participated Jan. 3 in the raid to capture the dictator returned to U.S. soil, prompting Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to praise the operators for their flawless execution.

The debate comes from the language used to describe the 2½-hour operation that sent American troops into a military complex in Caracas with support from the CIA.

"This past weekend, colleagues, the United States suc-

cessfully carried out a surgical law-enforcement operation facilitated by the U.S. military against two indicted fugitives of American justice, narco-terrorist Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores," U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Mike Waltz said before an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Monday.

In using this language and clearly avoiding characterizing the operation as an armed conflict, there could be consequences down the road for any countries that look to the United States' example as an excuse to avoid extending prisoner of war status to captives, said Geoffrey Corn, a retired Army attorney and professor at Texas Tech University School of Law.

"We can agree that the end that was achieved is something that is not a bad thing," he said. "But the manner by which it was achieved creates second- and third-order consequences

that don't appear to be sufficiently contemplated."

The decision to mark this as a law-enforcement operation is not only "perplexing, it is fundamentally inconsistent with the entire rationale of the 1949 Geneva Conventions," Corn said.

When drafting the definitions, armed conflict was adopted in a deliberate effort to prevent states from bending the application of its humanitarian laws by misidentifying what is obviously war, he said.

When two countries engage in armed conflict, members of their armed forces who are captured are entitled to a prisoner-of-war status and international law would grant them combatant immunity among many other benefits. Otherwise, they would be held to the laws of that country and charged with crimes.

If the U.S. begins to manipulate that entitlement, it could lead its adversaries to do the

same, Corn said.

Had any U.S. service members been captured during the Maduro raid, "the U.S. would almost certainly be insisting that they are entitled to prisoner-of-war status, that the Red Cross is entitled to access to them, and that they need to be immediately repatriated as soon as the hostilities are over," he said.

Rich Whitaker, a retired Army attorney with experience in special operations units, interpreted statements by Waltz and others from U.S. officials to be describing a mission of self-defense, an action codified in the U.N.'s charter.

He cited public information about Maduro's actions toward the U.S. as justifying self-defense. A federal court indictment stated Maduro and his co-conspirators have distributed "tons of cocaine" in the U.S. for decades and have operated as narco-terrorists relying on corruption and violence.

## Iran warns US against strikes amid deadly protests

*Associated Press*

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A crackdown on nationwide protests in Iran has killed at least 538 people and even more are feared dead, activists said Sunday, while Tehran warned that the U.S. military and Israel would be "legitimate targets" if America uses force to protect demonstrators.

Another over 10,600 people have been detained over the two weeks of protests, said the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, which has been accurate in previous rounds of unrest in Iran in recent years. It relies on supporters in Iran

crosschecking information. It said of those killed, 490 were protesters and 48 were members of security forces.

With the internet down in Iran and phone lines cut off, gauging the demonstrations from abroad has grown more difficult. The Associated Press has been unable to independently assess the toll.

The Iranian government has not offered overall casualty figures for the demonstrations.

Those abroad fear the information blackout is emboldening hard-liners within Iran's security services to launch a bloody crackdown. Protesters flooded

the streets in the country's capital and its second-largest city again Sunday morning.

President Donald Trump has offered support for the protesters, saying on social media that "Iran is looking at FREEDOM, perhaps like never before. The USA stands ready to help!!!"

Trump and his national security team have been weighing a range of potential responses against Iran including cyberattacks and direct strikes by either the U.S. or Israel, according to two people familiar with internal White House discussions who were not authorized to comment publicly and spoke

on condition of anonymity.

The White House, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment, has not indicated it has made any decisions. The massive ongoing U.S. military deployment to the Caribbean has created another factor that the U.S.' national security planners must consider.

It remains unclear how serious Iran is about launching a strike, particularly after its air defenses were destroyed during the 12-day war in June with Israel. Any decision to go to war would rest with Iran's 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

# Army shuts down foreign training command

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army shuttered its Security Force Assistance Command on Thursday at Fort Bragg, N.C., closing the one-star headquarters that oversaw its brigades of soldiers specially trained to advise foreign military forces.

Unit leaders cased the command's colors for a final time Thursday, signaling the inactivation of the SFAC as part of a broader Army reorganization effort that has prioritized units that generate combat power over other capabilities.

The reorganization mandated last year by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth will also result in the shuttering by the end of the year of four of the Army's six Security Force Assistance Brigades, or SFABs.

Col. Matthew Bunch, who took command of the SFAC from Brig. Gen. Kevin Lambert in June, said that despite the command's inactivation, its soldiers — known as "advisors" for their role in aiding partner armies — had proven successful in their mission to improve allied and partner military forces around the

globe.

"From its inception, the Security Force Assistance Command headquarters enabled advisors to deploy with purpose, clarity, and the support necessary to build meaningful relationships with allies and partners," Bunch said during the inactivation ceremony, according to a news release. "Through planning, coordination, and an unwavering commitment to readiness, this headquarters empowered our brigades to operate in every geographic combatant command, advancing the Army's mission in places where trust, cooperation, and shared understanding mattered most. The impact of SFAC's work will continue to be felt long after these colors are cased."

The SFAC was established in late 2018 alongside the 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade, which was also headquartered at Fort Bragg, until its inactivation in November.

The 1st SFAB stood up at Fort Benning, Ga., in 2017, as top Army officials pitched it as a smaller-than-normal brigade of volunteer soldiers who are experts in their craft and receive extra training to advise foreign armies on the

trades of soldiering. Ultimately, the Army stood up six SFABs — five active-duty brigades and one National Guard unit — and the SFAC to oversee the training and manning of those units.

The SFABs were the brainchild of retired Army Gen. Mark Milley, who served as the Army chief of staff before becoming the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Milley pitched them as units purpose-built to conduct the kind of training, advising and assisting operations that brigade combat teams had been doing in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As operations wound down in Afghanistan and Iraq in recent years, the SFABs were assigned to geographic combatant commands, where they maintained near constant presence to train partner nation forces.

The service intends to leave only two SFABs beyond 2026. The 1st SFAB, which is aligned to U.S. Southern Command, will remain at Fort Benning and the 5th SFAB, which is aligned to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, will remain at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., said Maj. Ryan Miller, an SFAC spokesman.

## US again strikes ISIS sites in Syria

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The U.S. has launched another round of retaliatory strikes against Islamic State in Syria following last month's ambush that killed two U.S. soldiers and one American civilian interpreter in the country.

The large-scale strikes, conducted by the U.S. alongside partner forces, occurred around 12:30 p.m. EST Saturday, according to U.S. Central Command. The strikes hit multiple ISIS targets across Syria.

The Jordanian military later announced it had taken part in the strikes.

Saturday's strikes are part of a broader operation that is part of President Donald Trump's response to the deadly ISIS attack that killed Sgt. Edgar Brian Torres-Tovar, Sgt. William Nathaniel Howard, and Ayad Mansoor Sakat, the civilian interpreter, in Palmyra last month.

"Our message remains strong: if you harm our warfighters, we will find you and kill you anywhere in the world, no matter how hard you try to evade justice," U.S. Central Command said in a statement Saturday.

## Ex-Navy officer's murder conviction upheld for wife's death in Belgium

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

A former Navy officer who is serving a life sentence for pushing his drugged wife out the window of their seventh-floor apartment in Belgium more than 10 years ago failed in his bid to have his murder conviction overturned.

The U.S. Navy-Marine Corps Court of Criminal Appeals upheld the findings and sentence for Lt. Craig R. Becker, who was found guilty by a military court in 2022 of one specification of premeditated murder in the death of his 32-year-old wife, Johanna Hove-Becker.

Becker was an explosive ordnance disposal technician serving at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe in Casteau. His wife died on Oct. 8, 2015, less than two hours after falling from her apartment in nearby Mons.

After a drawn-out appeals process, a three-judge panel ruled unanimously on Dec. 17 that none of the 12 trial issues they took under consideration warranted redress.

Besides murder, Beck was convicted of one specification of battery for poisoning his wife

and two specifications of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. His life sentence includes the possibility of parole, according to court documents. At trial, Becker contended that his wife had jumped from the window after drinking wine and taking medication, according to court documents.

Belgian police immediately ruled her death a suicide but reopened their investigation days later after receiving additional reports calling the initial determination into question. A month prior, the couple had signed a separation agreement, according to court records.

The appeals judges noted that the defense's case had relied on the theory that Hove-Becker threw herself from the window, yet there was no indication that she was suicidal at the time, they wrote.

"Indeed, friends and coworkers described her as happy and moving on with her life," the 111-page opinion said. "She also signed a lease on a new apartment on the same day as her death," and had packed a bag for a trip to China she was planning to take with her father the very next day.

# Suspect charged in fatal Mississippi rampage

Associated Press

WEST POINT, Miss. — A 24-year-old Mississippi man killed six people — his father, brother, uncle, 7-year-old cousin, a church pastor and the pastor's brother — at three locations during a Friday night rampage in a rural area, authorities said.

Daricka M. Moore was arrested at a police roadblock in Cedarbluff just before midnight after dozens of local, state and federal officers flooded the northeast Mississippi area.

Moore was being held without bail Saturday at the Clay County jail in West Point on murder charges and ahead of an expected initial appearance Monday before a judge.

Clay County District Attor-

ney Scott Colom, who said he expects to pursue the death penalty, told The Associated Press that Moore would likely be appointed a public defender at that time.

If charges are upgraded to capital murder before then, Moore will be ineligible for bail under state law.

Clay County Sheriff Eddie Scott said at a Saturday news conference that evidence and witnesses indicate Moore was the only shooter and no other injuries have been reported.

Investigators were continuing to interview Moore but do not currently know what may have motivated him, he added.

"A situation like this, you've got a family member attacking

their own family," Scott said. "Whatever the reason is, we're hoping that we'll find out."

The shootings unfolded in an area of fields, woods and mostly modest homes about 125 miles northeast of Jackson.

Investigators believe Moore first killed his father, 67-year-old Glenn Moore, his brother, 33-year-old Quinton Moore and his uncle, 55-year-old Willie Ed Guines, at the family's mobile home on a dirt road in western Clay County.

The sheriff said Moore then stole his brother's truck and drove a few miles to a cousin's house, where he forced his way in and attempted to commit sexual battery. Scott said Moore then put a gun to the head of a

7-year-old girl and fatally shot her.

"I don't know what kind of motive you could have to kill a 7-year-old," he said.

Scott said that according to witnesses, Moore then placed a gun against a younger child's head, but she was not shot. It was not clear whether he did not pull the trigger or the gun misfired.

The mother and a third child were also present, the sheriff said.

Moore then allegedly drove to a small white frame church, the Apostolic Church of The Lord Jesus. There, Scott said, he broke into a residence, killed the pastor and his brother and stole one of their vehicles.

## Anti-ICE protesters assemble across US

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Thousands of people marched in Minneapolis on Saturday to protest the fatal shooting of a woman by a federal immigration officer there and the shooting of two people in Portland, Ore. Minnesota leaders urged demonstrators to remain peaceful.

The protest was one of hundreds planned for towns and cities across the country over the weekend. It came in a city on edge since the killing of Renee Good on Wednesday by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer.

"We're all living in fear right now," said Meghan Moore, a mother of two from Minneapolis who joined the protest. "ICE is creating an environment where nobody feels safe, and that's unacceptable."

On Friday night, a protest outside a Minneapolis hotel that attracted about 1,000 people turned violent as demonstrators threw ice, snow and rocks at officers,

Minneapolis Police Chief Brian O'Hara said. One officer suffered minor injuries after being struck with a piece of ice, O'Hara said. Twenty-nine people were cited and released, he said.

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Freystressed that while most protests have been peaceful, those who cause damage to property or put others in danger will be arrested. He faulted "agitators that are trying to rile up large crowds."

"This is what Donald Trump wants," Frey said of the president who has demanded massive immigration enforcement efforts in several U.S. cities. "He wants us to take the bait."

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz echoed the call for peace.

"Trump sent thousands of armed federal officers into our state, and it took just one day for them to kill someone," Walz said on social media. "Now he wants nothing more than to see chaos distract from that horrific action. Don't give him what he wants."

## Judge halts effort to block 5 states' child care money

Associated Press

A federal judge ruled Friday that President Donald Trump's administration cannot block federal money for child care subsidies and other programs aimed at supporting low-income families with children from flowing to five Democratic-led states for now.

The states of California, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota and New York argued that a policy announced Tuesday to freeze billions of dollars in funds for three grant programs is having an immediate impact on them and creating "operational chaos." In court filings and a hearing earlier Friday, the states contended that the government did not have a legal reason for withholding the money from them.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said it was pausing the funding because it had "reason to believe" the states were granting benefits to people in the country illegally, though it did not pro-

vide evidence or explain why it was targeting those states and not others.

U.S. District Judge Arun Subramanian, who was nominated to the bench by President Joe Biden, did not rule on the legality of the funding freeze but said the five states met a legal threshold "to protect the status quo" for at least 14 days while arguments are made in court.

Health department officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The affected programs are the Child Care and Development Fund, which subsidizes child care for 1.3 million children from low-income families; the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, which provides cash assistance and job training; and the Social Services Block Grant, a smaller fund that provides money for a variety of programs.

The five states have said they receive a total of more than \$10 billion a year from the programs.



# US and Venezuela explore restoring ties

Associated Press

GUATIRE, Venezuela — The United States and Venezuela said Friday they were exploring the possibility of restoring relations, as a Trump administration delegation visited the South American nation.

The visit marks a major step toward reestablishing diplomatic ties between the historically adversarial governments. In a brazen intervention this month, the U.S. military captured former Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro from his compound in Caracas and flew him to New York to face federal charges of drug-trafficking.

A small team of U.S. diplomats and a security detail traveled to Venezuela to make a preliminary

assessment about the potential reopening of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas, the State Department said in a statement.

Venezuela's government on Friday said it plans to send a delegation to the U.S. but it did not say when. Any delegation from the country traveling to the U.S. will likely require sanctions to be waived by the Treasury Department.

The government of acting Venezuelan President Delcy Rodriguez said it "has decided to initiate an exploratory process of a diplomatic nature" with the U.S., "aimed at the re-establishment of diplomatic missions in both countries."

Rodriguez is engaged in a delicate balancing act, under pres-

sure to meet the Trump administration's demands and also win the support of Venezuela's military hard-liners outraged over the U.S. seizure of Maduro.

Her statements on Friday laid bare that tension.

Relating her telephone conversations with the left-wing presidents of Brazil, Colombia and Spain, she condemned Washington's "grave, criminal, illegal, and illegitimate aggression" against her country.

Later, in televised remarks at the inauguration of a small women's health clinic in downtown Caracas, she emphasized diplomacy with President Donald Trump as the best way to defend Venezuela and even "ensure the return of President Nicolas Ma-

duro and first lady Cilia Flores."

"We will meet face-to-face in diplomacy ... to defend the peace of Venezuela, the stability of Venezuela, the future, to defend our independence and to defend our sacred and inalienable sovereignty," Rodriguez said without mentioning the possible resumption of operations at the U.S. Embassy.

Trump has sought to coerce Rodriguez and other former Maduro loyalists still in power to advance his vision for U.S. control of Venezuela's lucrative oil exports. The South American country has the world's largest proven crude reserves.

The U.S. and Venezuela severed ties during Trump's first term in 2019.

## Ukrainian drone attack kills at least 1 in Russia

Associated Press

A Ukrainian drone strike killed one person and wounded three others in the Russian city of Voronezh, local officials said Sunday. Meanwhile, thousands of residents were still without power in Kyiv, following an intense Russian bombardment.

A young woman died overnight in a hospital intensive care unit after debris from a drone fell on a house during the attack on Saturday, regional Gov. Alexander Gusev said on Telegram.

Three other people were wounded and more than 10 apartment buildings, private houses and a high school were damaged, he said, adding that air defenses shot down 17 drones over Voronezh. The city is home to just over 1 million people and lies some 155 miles from the Ukrainian border.

The attack came after Russia bombarded Ukraine with hundreds of drones and dozens of missiles overnight into Friday, killing at least four people in the capital Kyiv, according to Ukrai-

nian officials. For only the second time in the nearly four-year war, Russia used a powerful new hypersonic missile that struck western Ukraine in a clear warning to Kyiv and NATO.

Ukraine's largest private energy supplier, DTEK, said Sunday that 30,000 people in Kyiv were still without power following the attack. Mayor Vitali Klitschko said Friday around half the apartment buildings — nearly 6,000 — in snowy Kyiv were left without heat in daytime temperatures of about 17.6 degrees Fahrenheit.

The intense barrage and the launch of the nuclear-capable Oreshnik missile followed reports of major progress in talks between Ukraine and its allies on how to defend the country from further aggression by Moscow if a U.S.-led peace deal is struck.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Saturday in his nightly address that Ukrainian negotiators "continue to communicate with the American side."

## Kurdish fighters evacuated from Aleppo after clashes

Associated Press

ALEPPO, Syria — Kurdish fighters were evacuated from a contested neighborhood in Syria's northern city of Aleppo, officials said early Sunday, a move that could bring an end to several days of violent clashes with government forces.

State-run news agency SANA reported buses transported the last of the fighters from the Aleppo neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud to northeastern Syria, which is under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.

"Through international mediation to halt the attacks and violations against our people in Aleppo, we have reached an understanding leading to a ceasefire and the safe evacuation of martyrs, the wounded, trapped civilians, and fighters from the Achrafieh and Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhoods to northern and eastern Syria," SDF commander Mazloum Abdi said in a post on X.

He called for "mediators to

uphold their promises to stop the violations and work towards the safe return of the displaced to their homes."

An Associated Press journalist at the scene saw buses leaving Sunday and was told by officials that the transports carried 360 fighters. Other buses carrying civilians and detained fighters departed on Saturday.

Syrian security forces deployed Saturday in Sheikh Maqsoud after days of clashes with Kurdish fighters that killed and wounded dozens.

During the day, several drone strikes were reported in Aleppo, Syria's largest city, leading authorities to stop civilian flights at Aleppo International Airport until further notice, state TV said.

On Saturday afternoon, an explosive drone hit the Aleppo Governorate building shortly after two Cabinet ministers and a local official held a news conference on the developments in the city. There was no immediate word on casualties.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### White House: Saving East Wing not economical

**DC** WASHINGTON — The White House said Thursday that it was not feasible to save the East Wing because of structural issues, past decay and other major concerns as officials shared details of President Donald Trump's planned ballroom at a public meeting of the commission charged with approving it.

Josh Fisher, director of the White House Office of Administration, said an unstable colonnade, water leakage, mold contamination and other problems made it more economical to tear down the East Wing to make room for the \$400 million ballroom than to renovate it.

It was the most comprehensive explanation to date for the dramatic demolition of the East Wing, which caused a public stir when it began in October with little advance notice.

### Decades-old school desegregation order ends

**LA** DESOTO PARISH — The Trump administration and Louisiana officials have lifted another decades-old school desegregation order, part of a campaign to end court mandates they describe as outdated.

A federal judge on Monday approved a joint motion from Louisiana and the U.S. Justice Department to dismiss a 1967 lawsuit in DeSoto Parish schools, a district of about 5,000 students in the state's north-west. It's the second such dismissal since the Justice Department began working to overturn desegregation cases it once championed.

The case dates to 1967, when the Justice Department sued DeSoto Parish to end its racially segregated school system. The case resulted in a 1970 court order requiring the district to eliminate segregation and provide regular progress reports.

### State loses \$160M over licenses for immigrants

**CA** SACRAMENTO — California will lose \$160 million for delaying the revocations of 17,000 commercial driver's licenses for immigrants, federal transportation officials announced Wednesday.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy already withheld \$40 million in federal funding because he said California isn't enforcing English proficiency requirements for truckers.

The state notified these drivers in the fall that they would lose their licenses after a federal audit found problems that included licenses for truckers and bus drivers that remained valid long after an immigrant's visa expired. Some licenses were also given to citizens of Mexico and Canada who don't qualify. More than one-quarter of the small sample of California licenses that investigators reviewed were unlawful.

Last week California said it would delay those revocations until March after immigrant groups sued the state because of concerns that some groups were being unfairly targeted.

### Notorious 'Torso Killer' confesses to 1965 killing

**NJ** FAIR LAWN — One of the New York City area's most notorious serial killers has confessed to another killing.

Police in New Jersey announced Tuesday that Richard Cottingham, known as the "Torso Killer," admitted killing Alys Eberhardt in 1965. The 18-year-old was found dead in her family's home in Fair Lawn.

Investigators reopened the cold case in 2021, and "through countless interviews" over several years, extracted a full confession from Cottingham, "including details that were never publicly known," the department said in a statement.

Fair Lawn Police Chief Joseph Dawicki said Cottingham will not face additional charges. The 79-year-old has been imprisoned since his arrest in 1980. He is serving three life sentences at the South Woods State Prison in Bridgeton, N.J.

### Hochul, Mamdani unveil plan for free child care

**NY** NEW YORK — New York City parents would have access to free child care for their 2-year-olds under a plan unveiled Thursday by Gov. Kathy Hochul and Mayor Zohran Mamdani, the first step for the mayor in delivering on a signature campaign promise.

The two Democrats announced the proposal at a celebratory event in Brooklyn a week after Mamdani was sworn in — marking an early political victory for Mamdani, who has faced questions over whether he will have the state support needed to enact his ambitious affordability-focused agenda.

Hochul, a moderate who is up for reelection this year, has been aligned with the city's new progressive mayor on his free child care plan, though questions remain on precisely how the program will take shape and

what it might cost over the long term.

The proposed program will begin slowly, focusing first on "high-need areas" selected by the city, then expanding gradually over years until it becomes available across the city. The mayor expects it to cover around 2,000 children this fall.

### Medical issue prompts early return from space

**DC** WASHINGTON — In a rare move, NASA is cutting a mission aboard the International Space Station short after an astronaut had a medical issue.

The space agency said Thursday the U.S.-Japanese-Russian crew of four will return to Earth in the coming days, earlier than planned.

NASA canceled its first spacewalk of the year because of the health issue. The space agency did not identify the astronaut or the medical issue, citing patient privacy. The crew member is now stable.

NASA officials stressed that it was not an onboard emergency, but are "erring on the side of caution for the crew member," said Dr. James Polk, NASA's chief health and medical officer. Polk said this was the NASA's first medical evacuation from the space station although astronauts have been treated aboard for things like toothaches and ear pain.

The crew of four returning home arrived at the orbiting lab via SpaceX in August for a stay of at least six months. The crew included NASA's Zena Cardman and Mike Fincke along with Japan's Kimiya Yui and Russia's Oleg Platonov.

— From wire reports

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# Stafford leads Rams past Panthers late

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Puka Nacua stepped into the huddle with the Los Angeles Rams trailing by four with 2:38 left, the home crowd roaring and his team's season on the line.

He never thought twice about losing.

"Never a doubt — No. 9 is with us," Nacua said with a wide smile in reference to the team's 37-year-old All-Pro quarterback, Matthew Stafford.

Stafford calmly led the Rams 71 yards by completing 6 of 7 passes — the only incompleting coming on a drop by Davante Adams — before capping it with a perfectly-placed 19-yard touchdown pass to Colby Parkinson with 38 seconds left, lifting Los Angeles to a dramatic, come-from-behind 34-31 win over the Carolina Panthers in the opening game of the NFL playoffs Saturday.

Stafford finished 24 of 42 for 304 yards with three touchdown passes and an interception, while Nacua had 10 receptions for 111 yards and two total touchdowns as the Rams

(13-5), who were 10½-point favorites, advanced to the divisional round.

Stafford surpassed Kurt Warner for the most postseason passing yards and completions in franchise history. He credited his calmness to his 17 years of NFL experience.

"I have been in that spot a lot in my life — and I love that spot," Stafford said. "I would rather be me having to go out there with our offense and do it then watch from the sideline. You can make it stressful or you can make it calm and collected, and think the latter is what we were today."

Bryce Young threw for 264 yards and a touchdown and ran for another score for the Panthers (8-10), who finished their second season under coach Dave Canales by losing four of their final five games.

Jalen Coker had career highs with nine receptions for 134 yards with a touchdown and Chuba Hubbard ran for 46 yards and two touchdowns as Carolina lost in its first playoff appearance since the 2017 season.

The Panthers, who beat LA 31-28 on this same field six weeks ago, fell behind 14-0 early but stormed back to take a 24-20 lead on Hubbard's second touchdown of the run game early in the fourth quarter.

Stafford, who was selected as an All-Pro earlier in the day, led the Rams back down on the field and found Kyren Williams for a 13-yard touchdown to regain the lead.

Los Angeles appeared to be in charge after getting a stop on defense, giving Stafford the ball back.

But a holding penalty put the Rams behind the sticks and forced a punt, which Isaiah Simmons blocked to set Carolina up the LA 30.

Four plays later, Young found Coker in the left corner of the end zone for a 7-yard touchdown to give the Panthers a 31-27 lead with 2:39 left, sending the crowd into a frenzy. But the celebrations quickly turned to silence after Stafford gave the Rams the lead again.

Carolina's last attempt to

move into field-goal range ended when Jimmy Horn dropped a fourth-down pass from Young. The Panthers were hoping the return of former quarterback Cam Newton to Bank of America Stadium to hit the "Keep Pounding" drum before the game would give them a little extra mojo early, but things didn't start well.

After Los Angeles' defense came up with a stop on fourth down at midfield on Carolina's opening drive, Stafford quickly moved the offense downfield and found Nacua for a 14-yard touchdown over the middle for a 7-0 lead.

Nacua made it 14-0 on a 5-yard run following Young's interception.

The Panthers cut the lead 17-14 at halftime after a 1-yard touchdown run by Hubbard and a 16-yard scramble by Young, the second-longest TD run of his career.

The Rams had a chance to build on the lead, but Nacua dropped a potential third TD on a pass down the right sideline from Stafford just before halftime.

## Williams rallies Bears for playoff win over Packers

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Caleb Williams dropped back, pump-faked and found DJ Moore wide open down the sideline for the go-ahead touchdown.

His latest clutch throw propelled the Chicago Bears to yet another improbable comeback win and kept their breakout season going for at least another round of the postseason.

Williams came through in his playoff debut, throwing a 25-yard touchdown pass to Moore with 1:43 remaining, and Chicago rallied from an 18-point deficit to beat the rival Green Bay Packers 31-27 in a wild-card game Saturday night.

The Bears trailed 21-3 at half-

time and 21-6 through three quarters, only to outscore Green Bay 25-6 in the fourth on the way to their first playoff win in 15 years.

After Williams connected with Moore to give Chicago its first lead since it was 3-0, Jordan Love led the Packers into Bears territory. But on third down at the 28, he dropped the snap, scrambled and heaved a pass to the end zone with no time left. Jaquan Brisker deflected the ball, setting off a wild celebration — and a curt handshake between Chicago coach Ben Johnson and Green Bay coach Matt LaFleur.

The Bears will host a divisional-round game next weekend

against either Philadelphia or San Francisco.

Chicago pulled within 21-16 on D'Andre Swift's 5-yard run early in the fourth quarter. The Packers responded, with rookie Matthew Golden breaking three tackles and leapfrogging a fourth defender on a 23-yard catch-and-run for his first career touchdown, making it 27-16. Brandon McManus missed the extra point wide left. The Bears went 76 yards, with Williams throwing an 8-yard touchdown pass to Olamide Zaccheaus and hitting rookie Colston Loveland for the 2-point conversion to make it 27-24 with 4:18 remaining.

Green Bay then drove to the

Chicago 21, only to come away with nothing when McManus missed wide right on a 44-yard field goal attempt. The Bears responded with the go-ahead touchdown drive and hung on for their first playoff win since the 2010 team beat Seattle in the divisional round at Soldier Field.

Loveland caught eight passes for a career-high 137 yards for the Bears, who had closed the regular season with tight losses to the 49ers and Detroit.

Love threw for 323 yards and four touchdowns after missing the final two regular-season games.

Romeo Doubs, Christian Watson and Jayden Reed each had TD catches in the first half.



# Wisconsin hands No. 2 Michigan first loss

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — John Blackwell had 26 points, Nick Boyd scored 22 and Aleksas Bie-liauskas set a career high with 17 points to lead Wisconsin to a 91-88 win over previously unbeaten, second-ranked Michigan on Saturday.

The Badgers (11-5, 3-2 Big Ten) beat their highest-ranked regular-season opponent since a win over No. 2 Michigan in 2019. They beat the AP poll's No. 2 team on the opponent's court for the second time since winning at Maryland on Feb. 13, 2016.

The Wolverines (14-1, 4-1) led by as much as 14 in the first half and lost because they gave up 54 points in the second half.

**No. 1 Arizona 86, TCU 73:** Freshman Koa Peat had 20 points and seven rebounds, Anthony Dell'Orso and Jaden Bradley scored 17 points apiece and the visiting Wildcats beat the Horned Frogs.

Arizona (16-0, 3-0 Big 12) never trailed while extending the school's best start since going 21-0 in 2013-14. The victory came a few hours after No. 2 Michigan's 91-88 loss to Wisconsin reduced the number of undefeated teams to five.

**No. 3 Iowa State 83, Oklahoma State 71:** Joshua Jefferson had 19 points and five assists, and Milan Momcilovic scored 16 of his 18 points in the first half to lead the host Cyclones over the Cowboys.

Iowa State's best start in program history continued as it improved to 16-0 overall and 3-0 in the Big 12. The Cyclones are one of five unbeaten Division I teams and could jump No. 2 Michigan in the AP poll following the previously undefeated Wolverines' loss to Wisconsin earlier in the day.

**No. 4 UConn 72, DePaul 60:** Braylon Mullins had 16 points and Alex Karaban scored 15 as the host Huskies extended their winning streak to 12 with a win over the Blue Demons.

Mullins was active on both sides of the court with seven rebounds, three assists, three steals and two blocked shots.

**No. 5 Purdue 93, Penn State 85:** Braden Smith had 26 points and 14 assists and Oscar Cluff had 23 points to lead the host Boilermakers to a win against the Nittany Lions.

Fletcher Loyer scored 17 and C.J. Cox 16 for Purdue (15-1, 5-0 Big Ten), which won its seventh

consecutive game.

**No. 6 Duke 82, No. 24 SMU 75:** Isaiah Evans scored 21 points and had a critical 3-pointer with 1:15 left to help the host Blue Devils beat the Mustangs.

Evans slipped to the left side for the 3-pointer off a feed from freshman star Cam Boozer to make it 76-70, a repeat of the play that sent Duke past Florida when he hit a late 3 in December.

**No. 7 Houston 77, Baylor 55:** Emanuel Sharp scored 17 points to lead five players in double figures for the visiting Cougars, who overcame two extended shooting slumps before halftime in a win over the Bears. Houston set a school record with its 16th consecutive road win.

**No. 9 BYU 89, Utah 84:** Richie Saunders scored 17 of his 24 points in the second half and the visiting Cougars outlasted the Utes.

**No. 10 Nebraska 83, Indiana 77:** Jamarques Lawrence scored a career-high 27 points and Rienk Mast added 13 points and six rebounds Saturday to help the visiting Cornhuskers overcome a 16-point second-half deficit and extend major college basketball's longest winning

streak to 20 games with a victory over the Hoosiers.

**No. 11 Vanderbilt 84, LSU 73:** Tyler Tanner scored 20 points to lead five Commodores in double figures as host Vanderbilt matched the best start in program history Saturday by beating the Tigers.

**Texas 92, No. 13 Alabama 88:** Jordan Pope scored 28 points, Dailyn Swain added 18 and a huge block in the waning seconds, and the visiting Longhorns stunned the Crimson Tide for their first Southeastern Conference win of the season.

**No. 14 Texas Tech 73, Colorado 71:** Donovan Atwell scored 17 points, JT Toppin had 16 points and 13 rebounds, and the visiting Red Raiders held off a furious second-half rally by the Buffaloes.

**Auburn 95, No. 15 Arkansas 73:** Keyshawn Hall scored 30 points and the host Tigers shot 57% from the field in routing the Razorbacks.

**No. 17 North Carolina 87, Wake Forest 84:** Henri Veesaar had 25 points and nine rebounds, and the host Tar Heels edged the Demon Deacons for their 500th win at the Dean E. Smith Center.

# Wembanyama's late surge seals Spurs' win vs. Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — Victor Wembanyama scored 16 of his 21 points in the second half, including a game-sealing jumper with 19.2 seconds left, and the San Antonio Spurs beat the Boston Celtics 100-95 on Saturday night.

De'Aaron Fox also finished with 21 points for San Antonio and Keldon Johnson added 18 points and 10 rebounds. The Spurs won their second straight after losing two in a row.

Derrick White led Boston with 29 points and Jaylen Brown had 27. The Celtics lost for just the third time in 12 games.

**Cavaliers 146, Timberwolves 134:** Donovan Mitchell scored 28 points and host Cleveland took control in the second half for a win over Minnesota on that snapped the Timberwolves' four-game winning streak.

Mitchell also had four 3-pointers as the

Cavaliers had five players score at least 20 points.

**Pacers 123, Heat 99:** Andrew Nembhard had 29 points and nine assists, Aaron Nesmith added 12 points and nine rebounds before an early exit as host Indiana routed Miami.

The Pacers matched their longest winning streak of the season with a rare second straight victory, this time taking an easy route. Indiana never trailed and held a double-digit lead for most of the game.

**Clippers 98, Pistons 92:** Kawhi Leonard scored 26 points and John Collins added 25 as visiting Los Angeles rallied to beat short-handed Detroit.

The Pistons played without Cade Cunningham (wrist), Isaiah Stewart (illness), Tobias Harris (hip) and Jalen Duren (ankle). That left Detroit without its top three scorers, three

of their top four rebounders and their top three shot blockers. Cunningham also has 321 assists — the only player who entered Saturday's action with more than 100.

**Bulls 125, Mavericks 107:** Coby White scored 22 points, Ayo Dosunmu had 20 and host Chicago beat Dallas to snap a three-game losing streak.

The Bulls put seven players in double figures, outscored the Mavericks 38-8 in fast-break points and never trailed.

**Hornets 150, Jazz 95:** Brandon Miller scored 18 points, LaMelo Ball had 17 and visiting Charlotte built a 47-point lead in the first half of a rout against Utah.

Brice Sensabaugh scored 26 points for the Jazz, who rested leading scorer Lauri Markkanen and were without injured starting center Jusuf Nurkic.

# Coronato, Flames snap Pens' win streak

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Matt Coronato scored in the third period to lift the Calgary Flames over the Pittsburgh Penguins 2-1 on Saturday.

Connor Zary also scored for the Flames, who won for the first time in 2026 and snapped a four-game losing streak. Calgary was limited to one goal in each of its previous three losses.

Devin Cooley stopped 27 shots in his first start since Dec. 20.

Egor Chinakhov scored for the Penguins, who saw a season-high six-game winning streak end. Pittsburgh had won seven of eight before Saturday's loss. Arturs Silovs made 23 saves.

Thomas Novak thought he scored the tying goal in the third period, but it was ruled that Sidney Crosby interfered with Cooley.

Evgeni Malkin got his 854th assist to pass Bryan Trottier and Anze Kopitar for the 10th most assists in NHL history with one team.

Crosby's eight-game point streak ended, and Erik Karlsson's nine-game home point streak was also snapped.

Coronato scored the winning goal when he beat Silovs with a wrist shot 42 seconds into the third period.

Zary opened the scoring for Calgary with a breakaway goal at 2:33 of the first period. He intercepted an errant pass from Ryan Shea at the offensive blue-line and beat Silovs between the legs.

Pittsburgh scored its only goal at 9:17 of the second period when Chinakhov finished a give-and-go with Malkin from the right faceoff dot.

**Bruins 10, Rangers 2:** Pavel Zacha recorded his first career hat trick — one of which was a delayed goal awarded after a replay review during the first intermission — and host Boston coasted past the Rangers.

Marat Khushnutdinov had

four goals to go along with Zacha's three, giving the Bruins their first pair with hat tricks in the same game since 1964.

The Bruins won for the fourth time in five games.

David Pastrnak matched a Boston record with six assists.

Mika Zibanejad and J.T. Miller scored for New York, which has lost six of seven.

**Avalanche 4, Blue Jackets 0:** Brent Burns scored twice, Trent Miner made 29 saves for his first NHL shutout and host Colorado beat Columbus for its 17th straight home win.

The Avalanche move one victory away from matching their longest home win streak in franchise history, a mark that was set during the 2021-22 Stanley Cup-winning season. The longest home win streak in NHL history is 23 by Detroit in 2011-12.

**Sharks 5, Stars 4 (OT):** Tyler Toffoli scored twice and added an assist, including the winning goal at 1:58 of overtime as host San Jose rallied from two goals down to beat Dallas.

Jason Robertson scored his 26th goal of the season and added an assist for Dallas, Mikko Rantanen also had a goal and an assist, and Justin Hryckowian and Kyle Capobianco also scored. Casey DeSmith finished with 26 saves.

**Lightning 7, Flyers 2:** Nikita Kucherov scored on each of his first two shots and assisted on Gage Goncalves' two goals to help visiting Tampa Bay win its ninth straight game, beating Philadelphia.

Nick Paul, Brandon Hagel and Yanni Gourde also scored for the Lightning. Andrei Vasilevskiy made 18 saves for his seventh consecutive victory.

The teams will meet again Monday night in Philadelphia.

**Sabres 5, Ducks 3:** Jack Quinn scored twice, Tague Thompson had a goal and an assist, and host Buffalo beat Anaheim for its 13th win in 14 games.

Buffalo's 14-game run is the

best in franchise history. The stretch has elevated the Sabres from last place in the Eastern Conference into a playoff position as the team tries to end the longest postseason drought in NHL history at 14 seasons.

Olen Zellweger, Leo Carlsson and Mason McTavish scored for the Ducks late in the third period after the Sabres twice established three-goal leads. Lukas Dostal had 27 saves as Anaheim closed out a four-game trip by losing its ninth in a row.

**Hurricanes 3, Kraken 2:** Jacob Slavin's first assist of the season on William Carrier's goal lifted Carolina to a home win over Seattle.

Berkly Catton and Matty Beniers scored for the Kraken and Joey Daccord stopped 31 shots. Seattle lost in regulation for the first time in 11 games (8-1-2).

**Maple Leafs 5, Canucks 0:** William Nylander had a goal and two assists in his return from an injury, Joseph Woll made 29 saves for his second shutout of the season and host Toronto beat Vancouver.

Nylander missed six games because of a lower-body injury.

Matias Maccelli, Max Domi, John Tavares and Nick Robertson also scored for Toronto. The Maple Leafs improved to 22-15-7. They have won three straight and seven in a row at home.

**Red Wings 4, Canadiens 0:** Visiting Detroit took over first place in the Atlantic Division from Montreal, blanking its Original Six rival.

Detroit, which has won three in a row, is now two points ahead of Montreal, although the Canadiens have a game in hand.

Lucas Raymond, Dylan Larkin, Alex DeBrincat and Andrew Copp scored for the Red Wings. John Gibson stopped 27 shots as he recorded his third shutout of the season.

**Panthers 3, Senators 2:** Gustav Forsling and Carter Verhaeghe each had a goal and an assist, and visiting Florida

beat Ottawa.

Evan Rodrigues also scored for the Panthers, and Sergei Bobrovsky had 18 saves. Florida snapped a two-game skid and got its second win in six games (2-3-1).

**Blackhawks 3, Predators 0:** Drew Commesso made 37 saves for his first NHL shutout and victory, Connor Bedard set up the first two goals and visiting Chicago beat Nashville.

Tyler Bertuzzi scored his team-leading 23rd goal and had an assist, and Nick Lardis and Ryan Greene added goals to help Chicago — playing its lone road game in an eight-game stretch — win for the fourth time in five games.

**Islanders 4, Wild 3 (OT):** Simon Holmstrom scored his second goal of the game 1:34 into overtime and visiting New York beat Minnesota.

The Islanders improved to 3-0-1 in their past four games.

Matt Boldy, Kirill Kaprizov and Ben Jones scored for Minnesota in its third loss in four games (1-1-2). Quinn Hughes assisted on all three Wild goals and Filip Gustavsson stopped 23 shots.

**Golden Knights 4, Blues 2:** Mitch Marner had a goal and an assist in his 700th career game, Mark Stone tied the Golden Knights' record with a goal in his seventh straight game, and host Vegas defeated St. Louis for its third straight win.

Robert Thomas had a goal and assist for the Blues, and Jake Neighbours scored the other goal on a power play. Jordan Binnington finished with 21 saves as St. Louis lost its third straight.

**Kings 4, Oilers 3 (SO):** Adrian Kempe scored the lone goal in a shootout and visiting Los Angeles beat Edmonton in its first meeting since the first round of the playoffs.

Edmonton has eliminated Los Angeles in the opening round of the playoffs the past four seasons.