

This week in history: February 1-February 7

1 February 2010

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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25 years ago: Australia, New Zealand rebuke US nuclear policy

Responding to mass popular hostility toward the Reagan administration's rapid nuclear build-up, the governments of Australia and New Zealand this week in 1985 delivered separate rebukes to US military planning, rattling the South Pacific military alliance—the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty, or ANZUS.

In New Zealand, as part of a "nuclear free" policy passed months earlier, the Labour government of David Lange demanded that the US declare which of its naval vessels were carrying nuclear materials. The US refused, and in February sent the USS Buchanan to test Auckland's adherence to the policy. New Zealand refused entry.

The Reagan administration was even more stunned by the decision of Robert Hawke's Labour government in Australia to bar the US military from using Australian territory to monitor MX missile tests. On a visit to Washington just after the New Zealand rebuff, Hawke was at pains to reaffirm ANZUS. He blamed the decision on a split within the Labour Party over the question.

The US reacted hysterically toward New Zealand while attempting to minimize the controversy with Australia. It called New Zealand's decision "a matter of grave concern," cancelled joint naval exercises and

warned of "appropriate responses," mentioning punitive trade measures and hinting at the break-up of ANZUS. The Reagan administration openly declared it wished to make an example of New Zealand.

"Some Western countries have antinuclear and other movements which seek to diminish defense cooperation among the allied states," said State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb. "We would hope that our response to New Zealand would signal that the course these movements advocate would not be cost-free in terms of security relationships with the United States."

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50 years ago: African-American students stage Woolworth's sit-in

On February 1, 1960, four students of the all-black Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina staged a sit-in at a Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina. Woolworth's many stores, like most public spaces in the US South, were segregated, providing no seats for black customers at their service counters.

The store owner, fearing violence, did not have the students arrested. The next day 27 more students joined the sit-in, and as the days wore on black students from two more colleges and a nearby high school arrived, so that by February 5, an estimated 300 appeared at Woolworth's. The sit-in only ended when a bomb threat forced an evacuation. The owner used the occasion to shut his store for two weeks; he would de-segregate his lunch counter within a year.

From Greensboro, similar protests spread to neighboring cities, and within a year, to urban centers across the South.

The students took considerable risks in their protests. One hundred years after the civil war, the black population in 1960 remained subject to a system of racial apartheid enforced by widespread political disenfranchisement and terror.

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75 years ago: Mexico voids British oil contract

The Mexican government on February 4 repudiated all concessions to the Eagle Oil Company, a British firm, on the grounds that they were illegal and against national interests.

A subsidiary of Royal/Dutch Shell, Eagle was the largest oil firm operating in Mexico. Its representatives protested the move by the government of President Lázaro Cárdenas, but expressed confidence that arrangements could be made with the Mexican government.

Cárdenas had come to power in 1934 with the backing of General Plutarco Elias Calles, who ruled the Mexican government and the National Mexican Party (PMN) from behind the scenes. However, Cárdenas, once in office, began to maneuver against Calles with the support of sections of the PMN. His move against Shell was in line with his promotion of nationalist politics. Within three years, the Cárdenas government was to nationalize all foreign-owned oil interests, prompting threats of intervention from both Britain and the United States.

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100 years ago: France joins naval race as European tensions mount

The French cabinet on February 7, 1910 announced plans for a major naval expansion. France would appropriate \$28,000,000 over the next decade to establish a fleet numbering nearly 200 vessels.

France was a latecomer to the naval race that had been blazing between the United Kingdom and Germany over the previous decade. In four naval acts from 1890 on, Germany sought its "place in the sun" through an expanded blue water fleet. Britain responded by attempting to keep its 2 to 1 advantage in the crucial "Dreadnought" category. The US had also embarked on a major naval build-up beginning in the 1890s.

Tensions in Europe were highlighted the same week by the intervention of the Great Powers in Crete. Britain sent in a naval squadron to Crete, and France and Italy prepared to follow. The intervention came amidst tensions between Greece and Turkey over the island, which was nominally a part of the Ottoman Empire, but which was moving toward incorporation with Greece.

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