

This week in history: February 27-March 4

27 February 2012

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

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25 years ago: Tower Commission report whitewashes Reagan on Iran-Contra

On February 26, 1987, the Tower Commission released its report whitewashing the role of US President Reagan in the Iran-Contra Affair, in which the Reagan administration illegally sold arms to Iran—then embroiled in a bloody war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq—in order to arm Contra death squads in the dirty war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The report concluded Reagan did not know of the procurement of arms for the Contras and thereby absolved him of responsibility. The commission’s findings made largely procedural criticisms. The threat to democratic rights posed by the existence of a secret “fourth branch” of government, allegedly run by Lt. Colonel Oliver North, was completely overlooked.

That the Iran-Contra scandal resulted in no serious punishment—no jail time was served by any of the major conspirators—proved an important episode in the decline of American democracy, and marked a step back from the positions taken by Congress and the Supreme Court over a decade earlier during the Watergate crisis. At that time, blatant crimes by the Nixon White House were exposed, forcing the first resignation of a US president in history.

The investigating body was commissioned by Reagan himself the previous November and consisted of former Texas Senator John Tower, a Republican, Edmund Muskie, former Maine senator and governor and US secretary of state, a Democrat, and former national security advisor General Brent Scowcroft. Tower was once the supervisor of Robert McFarlane, who brought Oliver North onto the National Security Council staff and spearheaded the Iran arms deal.

The results of the inquiry were praised by both Democratic

and Republican members of the House and Senate.
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50 years ago: Military coup in Burma

On March 2, 1962, the Burmese military led by General Ne Win toppled the civilian government of Prime Minister U Nu in a quickly executed and nearly bloodless coup d’état.

At 8:50 a.m., Ne Win announced the coup in a national radio address. Soldiers raided the home of every government minister, arresting 40, including Nu. At 1:15 p.m. another radio broadcast gave the name “Revolutionary Council” to the military junta that now ruled Burma. The next day parliament was dissolved.

The military opposed the Nu government’s move toward a decentralized state. Nu was attempting to appease the ruling elite of the ethnic Shan regions, who threatened to secede from the union if their demands, including the retrenchment of their authority over the peasantry, were not met. The military also feared that Nu’s move to make Buddhism the official religion might further inflame the centripetal forces in the polyglot former British colony.

The military regime quickly declared its government to be “socialist,” and within two months had produced a document called “The Burmese Way to Socialism.” In reality the new government was not “socialist” in the least. As was the case in Nasser’s Egypt and in several other states of the non-aligned movement, the usurpation of the word socialist meant to tap into the immense prestige that the Russian Revolution continued to hold among the oppressed masses of the Third World, while suppressing independent working class political organization.

In Burma, communist workers and peasants had built an extensive network of unions and cooperatives during and after the Japanese occupation in World War II, and a series of powerful strikes and demonstrations had forced Great Britain to retreat from the country in 1948. But the Burmese Communist Party traded away the power of the working class in support for

the bourgeois Nu regime, only to be targeted for repression by the military in 1958, which set the stage for the 1962 coup.

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75 years ago: Roosevelt warns of civil war in America

On February 28, 1937, Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave an exclusive interview to *New York Times* correspondent Arthur Krock in which he broadly indicated that his reformist policies were necessary to avoid social upheaval. In the midst of the sit-down strike wave that had begun among General Motors workers in Flint, Michigan, Roosevelt drew historical comparisons to the American Civil War, telling Krock, “I do not want to leave the country in the condition [President James] Buchanan left it for [Abraham] Lincoln”—i.e., a nation on the brink of civil war.

Roosevelt hoped to use the two-page interview to lay out the case for his “court packing” legislation. A reactionary majority on the Supreme Court had repeatedly overruled components of the New Deal. Of particular concern to Roosevelt was its ruling against the National Labor Relations Act, which had granted rudimentary workplace rights. In response to this defeat, Roosevelt had proposed a law requiring that justices either retire at age 70, or else allow him to nominate a new justice to the court if they refused to do so.

According to Krock, Roosevelt “believes that legalistic or other obstructions” to his reforms “are the real incentives to revolutions ... The President ... sees a future far more dangerous if he is balked of his solutions,” and furthermore that to avoid “social dangers” it was necessary to secure “a better spread of income, steady work for the employable, a good standard of living, protection for the aged, opportunity for the young, and national action.”

The interview also floated the possibility of Roosevelt seeking a third term in the White House. Ever since the third president, Thomas Jefferson, had followed the example of the first, George Washington, and left office after two terms, no American president had sought a third term. But in the face of the Great Depression and the looming threat of another world war, the question of a third term for Roosevelt had become a topic of frequent media speculation.

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100 years ago: Nationwide British coal strike

A strike of coal miners that had begun on February 26 rapidly spread this week in 1912, with more than a million workers across Britain participating in the action by March 1. According to historian Roger Geary, the strike was more extensive than any previous “stoppage in the history of the industrialised world,” with the possible exception of the 1905 Russian General Strike. In some areas, there was no need for a picket line due to the near unanimous support for the strike amongst coal workers.

The strike, which extended to England, Scotland and Wales, had been called by the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain in response to the refusal of the coal magnates and the government to satisfy rank-and-file demands for the introduction of a national minimum wage. Concerned by the scope of the strike, and the implications of a coal shortage, the government intervened, with Prime Minister H.H. Asquith telling miners on March 1 that the government supported the introduction of a national minimum wage, but that it opposed the rates proposed by the Miners’ Federation.

During the course of the strike, a number of militant union leaders, including the prominent syndicalist, Tom Mann, were charged under the Incitement to Mutiny Act. Public opposition to the prosecutions was such that the Home Secretary intervened, reducing the sentences of those convicted. The government sent troops to a number of collieries beginning March 28, but few, if any clashes between soldiers and coal workers were reported.

The strike ended with the government imposing its pre-strike compromise proposal that fell short of the original demands of the miners, but introduced a national minimum wage. The Miners’ Federation acceded to the proposal, and demobilised workers on April 6.

The miners’ strike was one of a series of major industrial disputes in Britain that highlighted the growing militancy. In August 1911, a strike of 200,000 railway workers was suppressed by 50,000 troops, and in May 1912, 100,000 London dock workers took strike action.

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