

This week in history: March 10-16

10 March 2014

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

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25 years ago: Testimony reveals Reagan ordered illegal Contra aid be kept secret

On March 10, 1989, former National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane testified that President Ronald Reagan authorized the solicitation of illegal financial support for the right-wing Contra guerrilla war against Nicaragua and directed that operation be kept secret from Congress and the public. Otherwise, “we’ll all be hanging by our thumbs in front of the White House,” McFarlane quoted Reagan as saying.

McFarlane was testifying for the prosecution in the criminal trial of Lt. Col. Oliver North, the central operative in the Iran-Contra affair. McFarlane testified that he expressed doubts that the operation that he and North were involved in was legal.

He revealed that White House Chief of Staff James Baker warned Reagan that he could be impeached for abetting the solicitation of funds for the Contras, which violated a congressional prohibition of direct or indirect US military assistance to the anti-Sandinista guerrilla forces. McFarlane testified that Baker’s warning was rejected by others in Reagan’s inner circle—including then-Vice President George H.W. Bush.

Unlike the Iran-Contra congressional hearings in the summer of 1987, which were televised and widely covered in the media, the criminal trial of Oliver North was comparatively downplayed. It was monitored carefully by Attorney General Richard Thornburgh and under the constant threat of being scuttled on grounds of damage to national security.

McFarlane resigned as national security adviser in December of 1985, before the Iran-Contra affair became public. In 1988, he pleaded guilty to four counts of withholding information from Congress. He was sentenced to two years probation and \$20,000 in fines. In 1992 he was given a presidential pardon by Bush.

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50 years ago: US military increases aid to South Vietnamese puppet regime

A top-level US delegation led by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor and CIA director John McCone visited Saigon this week in 1964 to assess the military situation and bolster the position of the puppet military government of South Vietnam. Major General Nguyen Khanh, who took power in a January 30 coup, was the third ruler in less than six months, ousting Gen. Duong Van Minh, who had overthrown and killed Ngo Dinh Diem.

The American delegation visited three towns in the Mekong Delta, where the National Liberation Front had its strongest base in the country. Two US soldiers were killed during the visit, as NLF fighters shot down one of the helicopters assigned to protect McNamara’s delegation, dramatically demonstrating the power of the insurgents.

Promises were made for an additional \$50 million in US aid to bolster the ARVN military forces, which were to be concentrated in critical areas like the Delta. McNamara also gave his approval to a plan for guerrilla harassment of North Vietnam, through the landing of small groups of ARVN commandos on the northern coast, using US ships as transport. This tactic would lead directly to the Gulf of Tonkin provocation in August.

While publicly claiming the war was going better than ever, McNamara privately told President Lyndon Johnson that the NLF controlled 40 percent of the country and 90 percent of the Mekong Delta. In a revealing March 16 memorandum to the President made public by Daniel Ellsberg in the “Pentagon Papers,” McNamara outlined what was known as the “domino theory”:

“We seek an independent non-Communist South Vietnam. ... Unless we can achieve this objective... almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), accommodate to Communism so as to remove effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence (Burma), or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely then to become so (Indonesia taking over Malaysia). Thailand might hold for a period with our help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India to the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased.”

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75 years ago: Nazi Germany invades Czechoslovakia

With severe inflationary economic pressures forcing the pace of

territorial expansion, the German Nazi regime invaded Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939. On March 10 Hitler definitively informed major Nazi and military figures that he planned to break up the remaining rump Czech state and occupy Prague. Two days later orders were given to the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe to be ready to enter Czechoslovakia.

With the Wehrmacht massed only five miles from the Czech-German border on March 14, the Czech State President Dr. Emil Hacha requested an audience with Hitler. After deliberately keeping him waiting for hours, Hitler met Hacha at 1 a.m. in his New Reich Chancellery. Informed in no uncertain terms that a full-scale military invasion was only hours away and that the annihilation of Prague and its population would be his fault, Hacha fainted. After being revived by Hitler's personal physician, Hacha telephoned Prague and ordered Czech forces to stand down. By 9 a.m. on the morning of March 15, the forward units of the Wehrmacht marched into Prague. Hitler arrived on the deserted streets of the capital that evening.

The insatiable demand created by the Nazi rearmament drive for raw materials could only be fed by the further conquest of adjoining states. Such a conundrum only confirmed in Hitler's mind the suitability of his proposed remedy for Germany: territorial expansion (Lebensraum) to the central European state's east.

The annexing of the previously Czech Sudetenland had brought supplies of crucial raw materials to Germany. But the rump Czech state that remained held an abundance of further materials required by the Nazis for their war drive. Most Czech industry and industrial resources were to be found in Bohemia and Moravia. Even after the incorporation of the Sudetenland, four-fifths of engineering, machine-tool manufacturing and electrical industries remained within Czechoslovakia.

The Czech Skoda works produced locomotives and machinery as well as armaments. Czechoslovakia was by far the best armed of the smaller central European states and Czech-manufactured machine-guns, field-guns and anti-aircraft batteries were widely considered superior to those produced by German manufacturers. When Hitler invaded the remaining Czech state it is estimated that enough arms fell into the possession of the Wehrmacht to equip a further twenty divisions.

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100 years ago: Serbia and Turkey sign Treaty of Constantinople

On March 14, 1914, senior diplomatic representatives of Serbia and Turkey signed the Treaty of Constantinople, affirming the Treaty of London of May 1913, which had been established following the First Balkan War, and restoring relations between the two countries. It was widely viewed as the final conclusion of the two Balkan wars, which had dominated inter-European politics for almost two years.

The First Balkan War, which began in October 1912, pitted the

Balkan League of Serbia, Greece, Montenegro and Bulgaria against the ailing Ottoman Empire. The Balkan states were implicitly backed by Russia, and other European powers, who were anxious to take advantage of Turkey's decline, along with weakening the Austro-Hungarian empire by promoting the hostility of the Balkan states towards it.

Serbia played a central role in the conflict, mobilising over 250,000 soldiers. Along with Bulgarian forces, they played a critical role in the seizure of Adrianople, viewed as a gateway to the Ottoman capital of Constantinople.

The conclusion of the war, with a crushing defeat of the Ottoman Empire, was rapidly followed by the Second Balkan War, which pitted the former allies of the Balkan League against one another, in a battle for the division of the spoils of the previous conflict. Serbia and Bulgaria in particular had intense conflicts over the division of Macedonia. The end of the Second Balkan War in late 1913 left Serbia the most powerful of the Balkan states.

With the conclusion of that conflict, the Ottoman Empire was anxious to normalise relations with the Balkan states, to stave off the threat of another attack on its dwindling possessions. It signed the Treaty of Athens with Greece in November 1913, re-establishing relations between the two countries but leaving the question of the disputed possession of the Aegean Islands unresolved.

The Treaty of Constantinople established norms agreed by Turkey and Serbia for the treatment of Muslim graves in territories formerly controlled by the Ottomans that had been secured by Serbia, and establishing political rights for Muslim minorities. It also gave the residents of those regions the opportunity to choose Ottoman or Serbian citizenship. Diplomatic relations were restored, with each country appointing a chargé d'affaires.

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