

This week in history: September 14-20

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25 years ago: US Air Force chief of staff cashiered

General Michael J. Dugan, the Air Force chief of staff, was summarily dismissed from his post on September 17, 1990, by US Defense Secretary Richard Cheney for partially lifting the veil on the preparations being made for a bloody war of imperialist aggression against the Iraqi people.

It marked the first time that a senior US general has been censured in this fashion since President Harry Truman sacked Gen. Douglas MacArthur for publicly opposing the administration's military strategy in the Korean War. In the case of Dugan, however, it was not a matter of a general challenging civilian authority, but merely publicly declaring what everyone else was only stating off the record.

Speaking to reporters aboard an airplane bound for Saudi Arabia, Dugan sketched out plans for a US onslaught which centered on the assassination of the Iraqi leadership and massive terror against the civilian population.

The general said that the first objective of a US attack would be to assassinate Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, his family and his mistress with precision-guided bombs. After "decapitating" the Iraqi regime, Dugan said the Air Force would launch a massive bombardment of the country whose "cutting edge would be in downtown Baghdad."

In announcing his decision to cashier Gen. Dugan, Cheney refuted nothing of what the Air Force chief had said, but merely declared that his remarks were "inappropriate" and reflected "poor judgment at a very sensitive time." He added, however, that Dugan's statements were "potentially a violation of the standing Presidential executive order" prohibiting the assassination of foreign leaders.

Within a day of the announcement of Dugan's dismissal for saying openly what others would only discuss in private, every television network together with much of the capitalist press acknowledged that the general's remarks only echoed similar statements that they had been receiving off the record for weeks. Nothing of these briefings, however, found their way into the news until Dugan's indiscretion. The capitalist press dutifully protected the Pentagon's secrets from the public.

50 years ago: Government of "national emergency" in Greece

On September 17, 1965, former Deputy Premier Stephanos Stephanopoulos was installed as prime minister of Greece by King Constantine. Calling his cabinet a "government of national emergency" Stephanopoulos pledged to restore "calm, order and unity" following weeks of militant protests by students and workers.

An intense political crisis had gripped the Greek bourgeoisie since July 15 when the King deposed Prime Minister George Papandreou. The Greek monarch intervened on behalf of the military to sack Papandreou in order to halt an attempted purge of right-wing officers.

Even as Stephanopoulos was sworn in, students marched through the streets of Athens to protest the new right-wing government. Demonstrators shouted democratic slogans including the demand for immediate elections. The chant "fascism will not pass" was taken up by the marchers.

The new prime minister ominously warned that no elections would be held until political demonstrations were ended. "We are not an election party!" Stephanopoulos declared. "We have to face colossal social, economic and political problems ... After we tackle these problems and restore law and order and peace the country will be ripe for elections."

The Stalinist Communist Party was in a popular front alliance with Papandreou and the corrupt bourgeois politicians of the Center Union Party, whom they hailed as defenders of democracy against the threat of military dictatorship. Supporters of Papandreou in parliament had successfully blocked the formation of a new government since July. The new cabinet, however, included six defectors from the Center Union Party which, along with the smaller bourgeois parties, would provide the margin for the government to survive a vote of confidence.

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75 years ago: US Congress passes draft bill

On September 16, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the Selective Service and Training Act, which required men from the ages of 21 to 35 to register for the draft. The law went into effect beginning on October 16. It was the first-ever peacetime draft in US history. In its first year it provided for the induction of 800,000 men, as American imperialism readied itself for entry into World War II.

For some three months Congress had debated the draft issue alongside another bill that would allow the government to take over factories or any other facilities deemed necessary for war.

These peacetime measures provoked sharp debate in Congress, with some senators openly calling for dictatorship.

Senator Claude Pepper of Florida, a liberal Democrat who backed the legislation, shouted at opponents, “If this is dictatorship, make the most of it.” Senator Joshua Lee of Oklahoma, also a Democrat, said, “The government should have the power to take a man, a factory, or even a radio station or newspaper for propaganda purposes. ... We must fight the dictators with their own methods.”

Those who voted against the two bills did so not because they were opposed to arming the military and conscripting men, but because US imperialism’s appetite for arms profits and the conquest of international markets were not sufficiently couched in defensive terms so as to dupe the working class and sections of the middle class, who would have to bear the burden of the war.

Speaking for this section of the ruling class, Senator Walter George, a Georgia Democrat, replied, “Do not try to deceive the American people. They will know that you are not preparing for peace, for national defense, but that you are preparing for war. The American people do not want war. I am willing to provide for military training in this country to assure an adequate reserve force from which the country can draw in time of need. But do you have the faintest idea that you can conscript the manpower of this country, the industrial plants of this country, the labor to operate these plants and the wealth of this country—that you can take them all over and then say, ‘We are standing for peace?’”

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100 years ago: Tsar suspends Russian Duma amid mass strike wave

On September 16, 1915, the Tsar suspended the Fourth Russian Duma, or parliament, amid a deepening crisis of the regime spurred by disastrous reversals in World War I, deepening social discontent, and a mass strike movement of the

working class.

A series of major strikes had broken out, beginning in June. Various sections of the working class entered into struggle, including metal workers and workers in other strategically critical industries in Petrograd. The Tsarist autocracy launched a wave of arrests and repression, directed at militant workers and the Bolshevik Party of Vladimir Lenin.

On August 10, 25,000 workers in Ivanovo-Voznesensk responded to the arrest of 20 militants, including Bolshevik leaders, by launching strike action. When they marched on the prison demanding the release of the political prisoners, they were fired upon, with 100 killed or wounded. The strike continued for another four days, with political slogans, including “down with the war”, and “down with the Tsar” increasingly prominent. News of the repression prompted political strikes throughout the country.

At its height, the industrial and political upheavals involved some 150,000 workers in Petrograd, and 90,000 in Moscow.

The political establishment was increasingly fearful of the social powder keg. A “progressive bloc” of liberals and conservatives had been formed in the Duma, which called for palliative reforms, including an end to the most overt forms of national oppression and discrimination, and limited changes to the state administration to better prosecute the war.

One of its leaders, Pavel Miliukov summed up the fear of social revolution at the time, declaring, “We are treading a volcano... The tension has reached its extreme limit... A carelessly dropped match will be enough to start a terrible conflagration... Whatever the government—whether good or bad—a strong government is needed now more than ever.”

Leon Trotsky explained, “The dissolution of the Duma in September 1915 was a direct challenge to the bourgeoisie, not the workers. But while the liberals were dispersing with cries of “hurrah!”—to be sure, not very enthusiastic cries—the workers of Petrograd and Moscow responded with strikes of protest. That cooled off the liberals still more. They feared most of all the intrusion of an uninvited third party in their family discussion with the monarchy.”

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