

This week in history: October 26-November 1

26 October 2015

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Bush sets Iraq invasion timetable

The US State Department confirmed October 31, 1990 that Secretary of State James Baker was leaving on a trip to the Middle East and Europe. He was to visit Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, France and Britain, all of which had substantial military forces on the border of Iraq. The purpose of Baker's trip was to discuss the timing of the military action by the US-led coalition whose forces were building up in the Persian Gulf region.

Along with the 240,000 American troops on Iraq's southern border, there were 60,000 Saudi troops and 48,000 from Britain, France and Egypt. Turkey had 95,000 troops on Iraq's northern border, and US air bases in Turkey would be the launching pad for air strikes on Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. The war scenarios elaborated by the Pentagon predicted the death of 20,000 American troops and 250,000 Iraqi troops in the first four days of a successful US invasion of Kuwait and Iraq, bloodshed on a scale not seen since World War II.

In London, Sir Patrick Hine, the commander of British forces in the Persian Gulf, told a press briefing that his troops would be ready in about two weeks to participate in an offensive operation against Iraq. Other British military officials added that the operation could not be limited to Kuwait, but would have to include major air strikes against targets within Iraq. "One thing we are clear about is it's not going to be a cheap business in terms of casualties," one official told the *Washington Post*.

Meanwhile, some 10,000 marines participated in a 10-day exercise in amphibious warfare on the coast of Oman, a dress rehearsal for the expected landings in Kuwait and southern Iraq. More than 500 M1-A1 tanks were en route from NATO depots in Western Europe to Saudi Arabia, and were expected to arrive within two weeks, increasing the number of US tanks in the region by 50 percent.

In a speech to the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles, Baker issued a scarcely concealed warning that the administration was considering nuclear war against Iraq. He said that Saddam Hussein "must also realize that should he use chemical or biological weapons, there will be the most severe consequences." In response to a question from the audience about the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons, Baker said, "Within the military option, many, many options are available and I won't speculate on what those might be."

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50 years ago: NLF attack US airfields in South Vietnam

In one of the most devastating attacks yet on US forces in South Vietnam, National Liberation Front fighters destroyed over 20 aircraft in mortar assaults against airfields at Danang and Chulai on October 28, 1965. Twenty-seven more planes were damaged.

US commanders expressed anguish and amazement at the determination of their opponents who, despite shortages of rice and supplies, were stepping up their attacks all over South Vietnam. In addition to the attack on the airfields, the NLF initiated 811 armed clashes in the same week. Fifteen hundred South Vietnamese puppet troops were besieged in the Central Highlands outpost of Peime.

Returning from a five-day trip to Vietnam, liberal Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts claimed that he was "encouraged" by what he had seen. A long struggle lay ahead, however, he warned. Parroting the line of the Johnson administration, Kennedy added that he was sure that "the people in the United States are going to make a long-term commitment to freedom and democracy here."

Meanwhile, student protest against the Vietnam War increased with the announcement by some local draft boards that student deferments were being reviewed. A Roman Catholic pacifist pleaded not guilty to charges of burning his draft card, the first person charged under a new law signed by President Johnson making draft card mutilation a felony.

carrying a maximum penalty of five years in jail. In addition to calling up students, some local draft boards announced that they might be calling up married men without children as early as December, in order to meet the new higher Pentagon draft quotas.

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75 years ago: Fascist Italy invades Greece

On October 28, 1940, Italian forces launched an attack on Greece from Albania after Greece refused an ultimatum from Italian dictator Benito Mussolini to surrender strategic bases to Italy.

Italian troops occupying the right flank along the coast advanced 60 miles into Greece, while forces in the center and on the left bogged down within the first week of fighting after encountering unexpectedly strong resistance from Greek troops.

Mussolini ordered the attack to place Greece in the Italian “political-economic sphere.” It came in reaction to Nazi Germany’s unannounced move into Romania. Previously, Hitler had assured his Axis partner Mussolini that Italy would hold dominance in the Balkan countries.

Mussolini, who had achieved almost nothing in the way of territorial conquests after the surrender of France to Germany, now feared that Germany would secure hegemony in the Balkans and Italian capitalism would retain only tiny Albania.

Mussolini’s invasion was begun under conditions where a partial demobilization of Italian troops had disorganized the military. Deep demoralization existed within the army, and the generals were pessimistic about the possibilities of any success.

The invasion turned into a complete debacle after the first week, as Greek forces began a counteroffensive that ultimately drove the Italians back into Albania. British imperialism intervened by landing on Crete, bombing the Italian navy at Taranto, and later crushing Italian forces in Egypt.

The invasion of Greece accelerated the crisis of Italian capitalism and hastened the decline of Mussolini’s fascist regime. It also worked to bring about exactly what Mussolini had set out to prevent. The Italian setbacks forced Hitler to decisively intervene and establish control over the Balkans in order to defend Germany’s access to oil resources in Romania.

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100 years ago: Cabinet crisis in France

On October 27, 1915, French Prime Minister René Viviani resigned, amid a deepening crisis of his cabinet prompted by mounting difficulties for French imperialism in World War I, including the failure of a new offensive on the Western Front, and the entrance of Bulgaria into the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary.

On October 12, Viviani’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Theophile Delcassé, abruptly resigned, in the wake of Bulgaria’s declaration of war against Serbia, an ally of France, Britain and Russia, on October 4. Delcassé had been a virulent supporter of Russian militarism, including expressing support for Russia’s plans to annex Constantinople.

Such positions were thought to have contributed to Bulgaria’s decision to enter the conflict against the Allied Powers. Its offensive created a crisis for the poorly equipped Serbian army, leading to a setback for Allied forces in the geo-strategically critical Balkan region.

Viviani survived a no-confidence vote and agreed to remove Alexandre Millerand, his minister for war, but leading French politicians refused to join the government, forcing his resignation.

Viviani’s successor, Aristide Briand, crafted a cabinet that included representatives from most of the major parties. After the outbreak of war, the entire French political establishment, including the Socialist Party, initiated what was dubbed a “Sacred Union”—an agreement to suppress any struggles of the working class, including strikes, and to mitigate political conflicts, in order to boost the war effort of France.

Both Viviani and Briand had backgrounds in the Socialist Party. Briand had been a close collaborator of Jean Jaurès, and a founder of the socialist newspaper *L’Humanité*. In 1906, he had been expelled from the party after joining a bourgeois government. By 1910, he was overseeing the arrest of striking workers, and raids on the offices of *L’Humanité*, along with ordering police attacks on protesting workers. Briand remained a major figure in French politics until his death in 1934.

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