

This week in history: January 4-10

4 January 2016

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

25 years ago: On eve of war on Iraq, Pentagon muzzles press

On January 4, 1991, on the eve of the US-imposed deadline for Iraq to unconditionally withdraw its forces from Kuwait, Pentagon representatives met with Washington bureau chiefs of the major US news organizations on the just-announced “press guidelines” for the impending war. In what was described as “an acrimonious two-hour session,” the Pentagon was said to have backed down on the restrictions announced the previous day in Saudi Arabia.

By that time, the US and allied regimes in Saudi Arabia had assembled the largest invasion force since Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa in 1941 against the Soviet Union. US commanders issued a 12-page document of restrictions for war reporting to journalists on the ground, which laid down rules far more stringent than any measures taken in the Vietnam war.

Even after Pentagon officials later “softened” some of the restrictions in response to an outcry by media representatives, the so-called guidelines represented an unprecedented attack on press freedoms. Reporters were banned from any independent travel. Military-organized “press pools” were the only means by which reporters would be allowed in the war zone. All reporters were required to “remain with your military escort at all times.”

All reports were subject to a “security review” before being submitted for publication. A military censor would have the power to override any objections from the journalist and hold articles until reviewed by press headquarters and then the Pentagon if deemed “unreleasable.”

Eight publications, including *The Nation*, *Harpers*, *The Village Voice* and *In These Times*, filed a lawsuit with a US District Court on January 7, challenging the constitutionality of the rules. Major broadcast networks ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN wrote a letter to Defense Secretary Richard Cheney to complain about the restrictions.

The publication in *Newsweek* magazine that same week of a report titled “THE NUCLEAR OPTION: THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE,” revealed what the Pentagon feared. The

weekly newsmagazine reported on a high-level debate within the US government over the possible use of the atomic bomb in Iraq. The magazine said, “the US commander in the gulf, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, requested authorization to explode a nuclear device high over Iraq at the start of hostilities. Such a blast would generate a massive electromagnetic pulse, which would shut down every electronic device in Iraq.” *Newsweek* reported that the use of atomic weapons was rejected by the White House, but only in favor of using conventional weapons in such a concentrated way, including hundreds of cruise missiles and over 2,000 air strikes per day, that more Iraqis would be killed than by a nuclear strike. “Without ever splitting an atom,” the magazine concludes, “US forces may yet subject the Iraqis to something like ... [a] nuclear holocaust...”

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50 years ago: Massacres continue in Indonesia

On January 12, 1966, the first reports of the extent of the slaughter of members and supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party appeared in the capitalist press. “Experts” from Britain claimed the total killed exceeded 150,000 since the aborted October 1, 1965 CIA-backed military coup.

All leaders of the three-million-strong Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) were said to have been killed or captured.

US diplomats and CIA officers helped orchestrate the massacre which ultimately claimed one million lives. Masterminded by CIA Director William Colby, it was the biggest anticommunist pogrom in history. US officials worked hand in hand with the death squads of General Suharto to exterminate every known member and supporter of the PKI. Suharto’s men were ordered to report back after each set of killings so the names could be taken off the CIA death lists which were drawn up in advance.

Gangs of youth from right-wing Muslim organizations were instigated by the military to carry out mass killings. There were reports of one river being “choked with corpses.” On the island of Bali, a PKI stronghold, at least 35,000 were killed by early January. One German reporter told of bodies lying along the roads or heaped in pits and of half-burned villages where villagers were terrified to leave the shells of their huts.

Throughout the mass extermination, the leaders of the Stalinist Communist Parties of China and the Soviet Union urged workers and peasants to offer no resistance. Even as the massacres continued, the PKI leadership continued to instruct workers and peasants to give full support to the bourgeois nationalist regime of President Sukarno, which had paved the way for the bloodbath.

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75 years ago: AFL bars strikes by building trades

On January 7, 1941, leaders of 19 national unions affiliated with the Building Trades Department of the American Federation of Labor announced that they would bar strikes on construction sites related to military defense projects.

“There is no reason for strikes of any character on defense building projects,” declared John Coyne, president of the Building Trades Department. The unions pledged themselves to accept mediation of the Department of Labor if direct negotiations with the General Association of Contractors failed. If mediation failed, arbitration would decide contract disputes.

The decision was taken without any consultation of the 1.5 million members of the unions affected. It followed similar action taken by the AFL’s Metal Trade Department, which represented 900,000 union members. In December AFL President William Green pledged,

“We commit ourselves to avoid strikes ... for scarcely any cause.”

The Building Trades Department decision also came one day after US President Franklin Roosevelt delivered his annual state of the union address in which he declared, “the immediate need is a swift and driving increase in our armament production.”

“A free nation has the right to expect full cooperation from all groups,” Roosevelt said, specifically mentioning labor.

American imperialism was launching a rapid military buildup to both supply British imperialism, embroiled in war with Nazi Germany, and at the same time prepare for conflict with Japan in the Pacific.

Under these conditions, the AFL bureaucracy was lining up behind Wall Street’s war efforts and moving to sabotage any attempts by the working class to defend or increase its living standards.

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100 years ago: Allied troops complete evacuation of Gallipoli peninsula

On January 9, 1916, the final contingent of British troops left the Gallipoli peninsula, marking the end of the campaign launched in April 1914 with a decisive victory for the Ottoman Empire over the invasion by the Allied Powers including France, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

Allied troops had first landed at Gallipoli on April 25, 1914. The move was aimed at securing control of the Dardanelles, a narrow strait that separates mainland Asia from the Balkans and connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Control of the Dardanelles would have enabled the Allies to establish a new supply line to the Russian Empire, which had been cut off from British and French supplies by Germany and Austria-Hungary on the Eastern Front.

At a number of beaches, the landing parties were strongly opposed by Ottoman troops, with thousands of casualties reported in the first days after troops had disembarked. Turkish casualties were also high. One entire regiment, the 57th Infantry Regiment, perished attempting to repel the invaders with just bayonets.

Over the ensuing months, both sides launched a series of offensives and counteroffensives, with the peninsula known for brutal trench warfare. A major offensive by the Allies was successfully repelled in August. With the failure of the campaign increasingly apparent, the Allies prepared to disembark in December, 1914. In what is regarded as one of the most successful aspects of the campaign, Allied troops evaded Ottoman attacks during their withdrawal, avoiding casualties.

The number of Allied casualties throughout the campaign is estimated at around 250,000, or almost half of the troops who fought at Gallipoli. Turkish casualties are likewise thought to have been as high as 251,000.

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