

This week in history: February 15-21

15 February 2016

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

25 years ago: US rejects Iraqi offer to withdraw from Kuwait

As the war in Iraq entered its second month, the Bush Administration brushed aside the February 15, 1991 offer of the Iraqi government to withdraw from Kuwait. Instead, Bush delivered a 24-hour ultimatum demanding the complete capitulation of Iraq's military forces.

The terms set by the White House for an end to the war amounted to a demand for the surrender of Iraq and its de facto transformation into a colonial protectorate under American military rule.

The Bush Administration knew full well that the terms of its ultimatum could not be accepted. Indeed, the conditions which existed at the time in war-ravaged Iraq, whose communications facilities had been largely destroyed by saturation bombing, made it impossible for the Iraqi government to discuss the ultimatum with military commanders in Kuwait within the time limit imposed by Bush.

The US rejection of the eight-point proposal presented in Moscow was accompanied by the launching of major ground assaults along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border by American and British forces.

After a single month of bombing, Iraq was already in ruins. Its economic and industrial infrastructure, which had provided the foundation for impressive social, cultural and scientific achievements, was reduced to rubble. Baghdad, a city of 4 million inhabitants, which until January 16, 1991 was one of the urban jewels of the Middle East, was left without electricity and running water. The hospitals that continued to function operated under conditions resembling those of the mid-19th century; operations and amputations were carried out

without either antiseptics or anesthetics. The threat of pestilence hung over the city, as its inhabitants were compelled to draw water from polluted rivers.

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50 years ago: Meany denies CIA funding of AFL-CIO

On February 21, 1966, AFL-CIO President George Meany brazenly denied well-documented reports that the labor federation was receiving funds from the CIA. Meany's statement followed revelations during the week exposing the funneling of CIA money into the pockets of the trade union bureaucracy.

Reports in the press linked the CIA with the American Institute for Free Labor Development, the so-called International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the American-African Labor Institute. The press also reported that the American Newspaper Guild received up to \$1 million in contributions from foundations identified as CIA fronts and that the Retail Clerks union was receiving money from another CIA front organization.

The American Institute for Free Labor Development was established in 1962 with the blessings of Wall Street and the US State Department to support the construction of anticommunist unions in Latin America. Its top man was ex-Stalinist Jay Lovestone, the director of the AFL-CIO International Affairs department. Columnist Drew Pearson charged that Lovestone was working under the direction of the CIA. Irving Brown, head of the American-African Labor Institute, was also reported to be linked to the CIA.

Meany stonewalled the new charges, piously claiming he opposed connections between the AFL-CIO and the CIA. He denied any knowledge of affiliated unions receiving CIA funds and said he would conduct a private investigation of the allegations. Continued public reaction to the revelations of CIA domestic subversion forced

President Lyndon Johnson to order a halt in March to such activities, except for “overriding security reasons.”

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75 years ago: US big business condemns high school textbooks

On February 21, 1941 a panel of academics, commissioned by the National Association of Manufacturers to review social science textbooks, announced a substantial portion were critical of American capitalism, its government and history, and tended to create discontent and unrest among students.

The texts were the product of the 1930s Great Depression and the rising struggles of the working class. The reaction against them by NAM came on the eve of US entry into World War II.

The panel reviewed 6,000 textbooks, which comprised 90 percent of the texts used in secondary education. The two questions asked by the panel in appraising the educational material were: “What is the attitude of the writer toward the American form of government?” and “What is his attitude toward our system of free business enterprise?”

They produced a catalog of excerpts from the texts that attempted to explain the history of the US from the standpoint of the class struggle; that detailed the rise and consolidation of the richest capitalist families and their control of political parties and government; that described the ruthless suppression and exploitation of the working class; and that scorned the conception of the “free press” and demonstrated how newspapers were controlled by the rich.

Dr. Ralph Robey, professor of banking at Columbia, who headed the panel, commented on his findings. The textbooks “emphasize the small number of large corporations, rather than the large number of small ones,” he said. “What you get is a critical attitude that is destructive in its influences. Let’s teach the pupils something about the principles of democracy or private enterprise before we start to tell them it is all run by a bunch of crooks and is no go.”

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100 years ago: Russian offensive captures Ottoman fortress city of Erzurum

On February 16, 1916, Russian troops captured the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum, then the third most powerful fortress city of the Ottoman Empire. The capture of the city, which played the central role in Ottoman defense of eastern Anatolia, was a major blow to the beleaguered and ailing Empire.

The Ottomans had successfully repelled an attempted invasion by the Allied powers in the Gallipoli campaign of 1915, which concluded with the withdrawal of remaining British, French and Australian troops at the end of the year. But they were immediately confronted with a surprise winter offensive by the Russian Army. A similar attack, begun at the end of 1914, had led to mass Turkish casualties, with Ottoman troops poorly equipped and ill-prepared to fight in harsh winter conditions.

The new winter offensive began on January 10, across the front, with Russian troops breaking through Ottoman defenses at Koprukoy within a week, resulting in some 25,000 Turkish casualties. The Third Army escaped in time, retreating to Erzurum, which was considered by Ottoman command to be almost impregnable.

The Russian siege on the fortress began at the end of January and registered its first successes on February 13, with the first of the outer forts captured by Russian troops. Within three days, the entire city had fallen. Some 350 guns were seized, along with around 13,000 prisoners. Retreating Turkish troops narrowly escaped complete encirclement. Fighting would continue in the province of Erzurum for the rest of the year. The defeat at Erzurum was one stage in a catastrophic year for the Third Army, which lost some 100,000 men in 1916.

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