

This week in history: September 12-18

12 September 2016

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25 years ago: Criminal charge against Oliver North dropped

US District Judge Gerhard Gesell dismissed all criminal charges against US Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, former deputy national security adviser in the Reagan administration, and a key figure in the Iran-contra conspiracy, on September 16, 1991.

Not only North, but a host of top officials of the George H.W. Bush administration, including Bush himself, played key roles in the Iran-contra affair. Acting at the direction of top officials of the CIA, State Department, Pentagon and White House, North organized a secret network of paramilitary operatives, ex-military and CIA officers, gangsters and fascists to supply weapons to the contra terrorists who waged war against the Nicaraguan people from 1982 to 1989. The contra war resulted in the killing of at least 20,000 Nicaraguan men, women and children and the devastation of the tiny country's economy.

This contra support network, directed from the White House basement, was viewed by top officials of the Reagan administration not merely as a means to carry out its preferred policy in Central America, but as a private “government within the government” that would carry out a series of operations in the interests of US imperialism, free of any legal or constitutional restrictions.

This included preparations for drastic attacks on the democratic rights of the American people. Lt. Col. North, as part of his duties on the National Security Council, drafted the plans for operation Rex '84, which called for the roundup of 300,000 Central American immigrants and political activists in the event of a US invasion of Central America, and the establishment of concentration camps for political prisoners at military bases throughout the United States.

North's 1984 contingency plan provided for the declaration of martial law, the suspension of the Constitution, the appointment of military officers to take over the running of the states and cities and the arming of paramilitary vigilante groups to assist in the maintenance of “law and order.”

The final episode of the long-running court proceedings degenerated into farce. North's former boss and political mentor, former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, was called before Judge Gesell to state whether his testimony in North's criminal trial had been affected in any way by North's nationally televised appearance before the congressional Iran-contra hearings

in 1987. Knowing that an affirmative answer would insure that North went scot free, McFarlane, not surprisingly, answered, “Yes.” The special prosecutor's office issued a perfunctory protest, then announced there would be no attempt to retry the case.

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50 year ago: Segregationists attack black school children in Mississippi

On September 12, 1966, dozens of black children attending school for the first time at the newly-integrated Lizzie Horn Elementary School in Grenada, Mississippi were attacked by racist mobs organized by the Ku Klux Klan, which were aided and abetted by local police. Many children were injured by white “patrols” as they tried to walk to school. Some 35 who made it to the building were attacked by a mob throwing bricks and bottles, hurting a number of children. One child, 12-year old Richard Sigh, was hospitalized with a broken leg. Another child suffered a fractured skull.

Considerable planning went into the attacks. Police and state troopers stood aside as the children were attacked. Carloads of Klansmen came in to Grenada to disrupt the school integration. “This is not a spontaneous mob, this is a military-style action organized and led by the KKK,” wrote Southern Christian Leadership Organizer (SCLC) Bruce Hartford in a diary chronicling the events in Grenada. “Equipped with two-way radios, they bar all approaches [to the school]. Radio-equipped scouts in pick-up trucks search for Negro students (grades 1-12) coming to school and direct the mob to attack them. There are few police in evidence and they do nothing to halt the violence.”

The summer and fall of 1966 saw the emergence of a mass movement among the area's black population, supported by some whites from the county, and others who had traveled longer distances. Over months of struggle the mass movement withstood the racist mobs and successfully completed the integration of the schools

Grenada County illustrated the inequality generated by racial segregation, which had been the law of the land in the South since scores of laws and court rulings in the 1890s, which had as their specific aim the separation of black and white workers. The most important of these was the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case of 1896, in which the US Supreme Court ruled that states and municipalities could legally segregate public facilities so long as they were equal.

In practice, when it came to the South's already inferior public school system, this meant the creation of a segregated and substandard education for blacks.

A center of cotton production going back to the days of slavery, Grenada County had a population that was roughly half African-American. But the median black student completed only 5.1 years of schooling as opposed to 12.1 for the median white. The median family income for blacks was \$1,401, well below the \$3,300 per year the federal government marked as the poverty threshold for a family of four in 1966, and still further below the county's median household income for whites, which stood \$4,300. Only 3 percent of eligible blacks were registered to vote, as opposed to 95 percent of whites.

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75 years ago: Nazi forces surround Kiev

On September 16, 1941, German tank units completed the encirclement of three-quarters of a million Red Army soldiers near Kiev and initiated the final siege that resulted in the annihilation of the Soviet forces in Ukraine.

When Hitler's armies launched their attack against the USSR on June 22, Marshall Budenny, Stalin's underling and an incompetent in military affairs, was put in charge of a 1.5 million Red Army force in Ukraine. Despite their numerical superiority to the Germans, Stalin's failure to foresee the attack, combined with his purges of the experienced officers, immediately precipitated a crisis. Red Army tank units were caught off guard and sent into battle piecemeal under inexperienced officers to be destroyed one after the other against concentrated German land and air power in the first weeks of fighting.

The slow-moving infantry units trapped near Kiev, without sufficient tank support and short on ammunition, were slashed to bits by the highly mobile German tanks, backed by air and artillery assaults. Despite the appearance of a hopeless situation, Red Army soldiers fought to the death against the fascist invasion. German witnesses described how whole battalions would launch mass counterattacks, advancing directly into heavy weapons fire with only a handful of rounds left in their guns and ultimately using their hands and teeth to defend themselves.

After five days of ruthless slaughter, the first surrenders began. Throughout Ukraine, Soviet forces suffered nearly 1 million casualties. Some 527,000 prisoners were taken and shipped to forced labor camps. Less than 3 percent would survive the ordeal. The Battle of Ukraine resulted in the destruction of nearly one-third of the Soviet forces in existence at the very beginning of the war.

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100 years ago: Allied offensive at the Battle of the Somme

On September 15, 1916, Allied forces launched a major offensive against German troops, initiating the third stage of the Battle of the Somme, fought in northern France. The campaign was aimed at securing a decisive victory, and ending the months of trench warfare that had seen neither side able to make substantial advances.

With a heavy bombardment of German lines, Allied forces gained 2 kilometers within the first three days of the battle. But German reinforcements and adverse weather conditions hampered the advance and the offensive was called off September 22. The Allies suffered almost 30,000 casualties, while German forces suffered as many as 130,000 losses in fighting on the Somme in the month of September.

The bloodshed ended in November, with British casualties approaching half a million, French losses at 250,000 and reported German casualties at 236,000.

Artillery exchanges over the strategically critical region had begun in June, with an Allied bombardment of German positions. On July 1, the first day of fighting, Britain suffered over 57,000 casualties. Over the following 10 days, another 25,000 were killed or wounded, while German troops suffered an estimated 40,000 casualties in the first two weeks of the conflict. Over the following months, both sides sustained massive casualties in battles as Pozieres, Fromelles and elsewhere.

British and French authorities had begun planning a new offensive in August. British command planned to commence the attack in mid-September, with the rollout of a new military machine, the tank. Twelve divisions and 49 tanks were allocated to the offensive.

The new weapons, however, were highly unreliable. Just 15 of the tanks made it to the frontlines of the battle. While they initially dented German morale, and were able to withstand small arms fire, they were extremely slow, and were virtually defenseless against shells. Poor visibility also hampered the Allied assault.

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