

# This week in history: January 29-February 4

29 January 2018

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## 25 years ago: Clinton targets welfare, Social Security for cutbacks

It took less than two weeks for the newly elected Clinton administration to reveal its reactionary character. The US president made clear this week in 1993 that he would dismantle the system of aid to the poor known as “welfare,” while White House officials leaked to the press Clinton’s intention to impose cuts in Social Security, the pension system for elderly retired workers, their survivors, and the disabled established in Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” during the Great Depression.

On January 30, it was revealed that, in the words of the *New York Times*, “Clinton and Democratic Congressional leaders have concluded that retirees receiving Social Security benefits and Government pensions should pay a significant part of the price of deficit reduction ... either by limiting cost-of-living increases in benefits or by increasing taxes on benefits.”

Meanwhile, Clinton reiterated his aim of forcing welfare recipients, many of them single mothers of small children, off of relief and into work, dressing it up in the guise of giving them greater “dignity” by stripping them of the miserly benefits provided under Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

“Most people who are on welfare are yearning for another alternative, aching for a chance to move from dependence to dignity,” the president told a February 2 gathering of the National Governors Association. “And we owe it to them to give them that chance.” Clinton’s threats against the poor were welcomed by the nation’s governors, Democratic and Republican alike, and cheered by the right-wing Heritage Foundation.

Clinton signaled how drastic his intentions were by appointing three governors to a welfare advisory council: Democrat James Florio of New Jersey, who had eliminated increased payments for mothers who give birth to additional children while on welfare; Republican John Engler of Michigan, who had tossed tens of thousands off of the welfare rolls by abolishing the state’s General Assistance program; and Republican Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin, who had scrapped welfare altogether, replacing it with a punitive system of what was, in all but name, forced labor, under the title “Wisconsin Works.”

Clinton’s rhetoric about “shared sacrifice” and “hard choices” did not extend to corporations, which, he told the governors, he would offer \$31 billion in business tax credits and “job stimulus.”

## 50 years ago: Tet Offensive stuns Johnson administration

On January 31, 1968, fighters of the National Liberation Front launched a coordinated series of attacks across South Vietnam on the date of the Lunar New Year, Tet. The offensive dealt a stunning blow to the Johnson administration, which had persistently claimed that the war was winding down.

Hundreds of towns, cities and American bases were assaulted almost simultaneously in the attack. US bases at Danang and Cam Ranh Bay were hit, as well as staff headquarters at Bien Hoa. The capital of Saigon was the focus of a concentrated assault. In one of the boldest actions, commandos raided the American Embassy in Saigon. They seized part of the compound and held off Marines for six hours.

Five districts of the city were occupied by the liberation fighters. Unable to defeat the enemy in house-to-house fighting, the US command ordered warplanes to bomb the densely populated working-class districts of the capital. To prevent the NLF from infiltrating reinforcements, neighboring towns were completely destroyed by air strikes. After the obliteration of one village, Ben Tre, an American officer made the notorious remark, “We had to destroy it to save it.”

Simultaneously, the northern provincial capital of Hue was seized and occupied by thousands of liberation fighters. At least 5,000 men were infiltrated past government lines disguised as workers and peasants. Hue was only recaptured after 25 days of bloody fighting.

The offensive caught the Americans and their South Vietnamese puppets almost completely off guard, despite intelligence reports indicating a major NLF buildup. The US command was preoccupied with the siege of Khe Sanh, whose capture they mistakenly believed was the main target of the liberation fighters.

The Tet offensive marked the major turning point in the Vietnam War, provoking a reevaluation by the US ruling class of its entire strategy, and leading, within a matter of weeks, to the announcement by President Lyndon Johnson that he would not run for reelection.

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## 75 years ago: Last Germans surrender at Stalingrad

On February 2, 1943, the last pocket of the German Sixth Army holed up in Stalingrad finally surrendered to the Soviet Red Army after bitter resistance. After more than five months of fighting, and as many as 2 million dead on both sides, the German Wehrmacht was defeated, with its final 80,000 soldiers on the Volga forced into unconditional surrender.

Stalingrad was the decisive turning point of World War II. The invasion of the Soviet Union, dubbed Operation Barbarossa and launched in 1941—the largest invasion in world history—was now in ebb tide, and the days of Hitler’s “Thousand Year Reich” numbered. German imperialism’s dream of “*lebensraum*” to the East—the seizure of the Soviet Union’s vast productive capacity and the destruction of its people—lay in ruins.

For more than two months, the Red Army had continued to tighten the noose around a dwindling force of 330,000 German troops. The overwhelming firepower of Soviet artillery turned the encircled pocket into a terrifying cauldron of flying metal.

A limited number of German flights managed to evacuate some 30,000 troops, many of them wounded, but with a number of officers also bribing their way on board. Some desperate soldiers clung to the undercarriage of aircraft as they took off. Many wounded soldiers awaiting evacuation died a grisly death lying out in the open in the subzero temperatures. Other wounded were shot rather than being abandoned to the advancing Red Army. Suicides became so prevalent that German General Von Paulus had to issue a special order declaring them to be dishonorable.

But the bulk of exhausted, frozen and starving German troops continued to fight to the death. Of the remaining 300,000 Germans after evacuations, it is estimated between 150,000 to 200,000 died fighting.

The Red Army twice offered lenient surrender terms. But these were issued to the German staff and the core of fanatical Nazi officers refused to surrender. The rank-and-file German soldiers believed that because surrender terms had been rejected they would be executed upon capture. They also knew well the mass slaughter the Wehrmacht had inflicted on surrendered Soviet soldiers and citizens alike in the first years of the war.

Liquidating the German Sixth Army thus continued to cost the lives of Red Army soldiers until the final surrender. The only weapon that could have averted this carnage would have been the use of revolutionary propaganda appealing to the German soldiers to turn against their officers. But throughout the war, Stalin forbade any appeal to proletarian internationalism in favor of national-patriotic propaganda.

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## 100 years ago: Unionists oppose compromise on Irish “Home Rule”

On February 2, 1918, Sir Edward Carson, Conservative Party politician and longtime leader of the Ulster Unionists, implacable foes of Irish national independence, promised a renewed fight against Irish “Home Rule” in a speech in Belfast.

Addressing the Unionist Council, Carson declared that the only acceptable solution was “one that would enable the people to feel that they still maintain their status as citizens of the British Empire and are protected in their business and daily lives against the possibility of harmful interferences.”

He declared, “Ulster alone in Ireland has shown any reason at all. Some of our old friends and supporters, who are calling out for a settlement, really mean surrender. If by settlement, people have in their minds surrender, there will be no settlement.”

Carson, the organizer of the Ulster Volunteers, was “welcomed like a victorious general” in Belfast. In his speech, he rejected the notion that “unless the Irish question is settled America will no longer go on with the war, or will prosecute the war with less vigor. Anything more ridiculous or insulting, is impossible to conceive.”

The third Home Rule Bill had been passed by the British Parliament and received royal assent in 1914. By a simultaneous act, however, it was not to come into force until after the war, and the Liberal government had pledged that, before it was put into force, an amending bill dealing with the question of Ulster would be introduced.

The home rule legislation never came into effect. In the wake of the crushing of the Easter Rebellion in 1916, the bourgeois nationalist Sinn Fein party, in a convention in Dublin in October 1917, adopted a constitution for the Irish Republic and elected Eamon de Valera as president, in effect rejecting home rule or any other political arrangement that would maintain British sovereignty in Ireland.

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