

This week in history: January 7-13

7 January 2019

25 years ago: Bill Clinton agrees to special prosecutor in Whitewater case

On January 12, 1994, under mounting media and political pressure, President Bill Clinton agreed to the appointment of a special prosecutor in the Whitewater case, involving a money-losing Arkansas land deal linked with the failed Madison Guaranty Savings and Loan.

White House counsel Bernard Nussbaum submitted a formal request to Attorney General Janet Reno, stating: “The president has directed me to request you to appoint as special counsel a respected, impartial and qualified attorney who is not a member of the Department of Justice or an employee of the federal government to conduct an appropriate independent investigation of the Whitewater matter and report to the American people.”

The probe became the basis for ongoing investigations into the Clinton administration instigated by ultra-right political circles in the Republican Party, ultimately culminating in Clinton’s impeachment in 1998. The agreement to appoint a special prosecutor was a political retreat following months of media attacks on the Whitewater deal.

The *New York Times* first reported in March 1992, in the initial stages of the presidential campaign, that the Clintons invested and lost money in Whitewater Development Corporation. A federal investigator looking into the failure of Madison Guaranty Savings and Loan, owned by Jim and Susan McDougal, submitted a referral to the FBI charging the Clintons as witnesses in the Madison investigation. The investigator was later revealed to be an extreme-right supporter of the Republican Party, acting on the basis of political hostility to the Clintons rather than any genuine evidence of financial corruption.

Following Nussbaum’s letter to the Justice Department, senior White House adviser George Stephanopoulos announced to the press that while President Clinton maintained his innocence, he requested a special prosecutor to “ensure the public a full and fair accounting of this matter.”

This request was granted by Reno, who appointed former US Attorney Robert Fiske, who made a preliminary finding that no criminal actions had been committed. Fiske was sacked after six months by a panel of three right-wing appeals court judges, who replaced him with former Republican Solicitor General Kenneth Starr, who supervised the legal witch-hunt against the Clintons for the next five years. Neither Bill nor Hillary Clinton was ever prosecuted or charged for any criminal activity in the Whitewater deal.

50 years ago: Sweden recognizes North Vietnam

The Social Democratic government of Sweden recognized the Stalinist regime in North Vietnam on January 10, 1969 and indicated it would send an official envoy in the spring. The announcement came via a letter and cable gram to Hanoi’s foreign minister. Prime Minister Tage Erlander timed the announcement to come just days before the inauguration of US President-elect Richard Nixon.

Sweden was the first Western European government to recognize North Vietnam. Hanoi had diplomatic ties with only a handful of governments outside of the Stalinist-ruled countries.

The US State Department immediately denounced Sweden’s action, declaring it would not “help the cause of peace.”

The Swedish Social Democrats had maintained informal diplomatic contact with the North for three years. Swedish Foreign Minister Torsten Nilsson regularly briefed US Secretary of State Dean Rusk on the content of these meetings. Recognition of North Vietnam had been under discussion for a year. Sweden said the decision was taken in connection with plans for postwar aid to North and South Vietnam.

After the relations between North Vietnam and Sweden were finalized, Stockholm would begin to send various forms of aid to the North. The support was mostly medical aid and other humanitarian assistance; however, Sweden also granted asylum to hundreds of American soldiers who deserted the Army. This particularly infuriated Washington and would contribute to tense US-Swedish relations for the next several years. While relations between the two were never officially cut, there were periods of time where neither Sweden or the US sent ambassadors to their respective embassies.

As Sweden established diplomatic ties with Hanoi, in Washington, DC, Democratic Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri strongly criticized the government of South Vietnam, accusing it of stalling the peace negotiations in Paris. The former secretary of the air force warned that the war could become a “costly tragedy.” He called on the new administration to set a date for the start of negotiations and proceed independently with the talks if necessary.

The next day the press carried reports of a tentative proposal by South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu for the withdrawal of up to 60,000 American troops by the end of the year.

In the days leading up to the inauguration, Nixon received intensive briefings from the outgoing Johnson administration on possible changes in Vietnam strategy. Most of the options involved withdrawal of at least some US forces from the region.

75 years ago: American Stalinists “dissolve” Communist Party

On January 9, 1944, the American Communist Party, under orders from Moscow, announced at a public meeting in Madison Square Garden that it would “dissolve” itself as a political party and that it did “not believe it would be of benefit to national unity to make proposals of a specific communist or socialist nature at this time or in the immediate postwar period.”

The Communist Party declared the postwar period would be “not only a prolonged peace without precedent in history,” but also proclaimed, “A flourishing of economic relationships of cooperation and a development of economic well-being and social reforms is the prospect open to all. It is beyond question that the postwar reconstruction, like production for war at present, will be carried out under free enterprise ... It is equally evident that the political issues of the time will be decided within the form of the two-party system.” Socialist revolution was labeled “a puerile dreamworld” or “a form of escapism.”

In reality, both the imperialist powers and the Stalinist regime in the USSR feared that the collapse of Mussolini in Italy and the anticipated defeat of Hitler in Germany would unleash revolutionary upheavals throughout war-torn Europe and influence the class struggle in the United States. The official dissolution of the CP was aimed at deepening the counterrevolutionary collaboration of Stalinism with US and British imperialism.

In the past the CP had defended its betrayals as temporary expedients and sought to convince its ranks that Stalin’s policy of “socialism in one country” did not exclude revolution in the United States. But American CP leader Earl Browder now openly admitted, “British and American ruling circles had to be convinced that their joint war together with the Soviet Union against Hitlerism would not result in the Soviet socialist system being expanded.”

100 years ago: General strike in Buenos Aires

On January 9, 1919, thousands of workers in the Argentine capital led by the Argentine Regional Workers Federation struck in protest of the police killings of workers in two separate strikes in the previous days. Workers halted transportation, telephone communication and newspaper publication. Stores and hotels were closed. The strike marked the high point of working-class struggle in the event known as the Tragic Week (La Semana Trágica), one of the central events in the history of the Argentine and Latin American working class in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

On January 3, workers at the Vasena metal works, a British-owned plant on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, had fired on policemen who were conducting scabs; one cop died the next day.

Four days later (January 7, which marks the beginning of the Tragic Week) the police laid a trap for the workers, killing five of them.

On the next day, waterfront workers began a strike for better wages and hours, and maritime commerce in the city’s port came to a halt. Workers from the Vesena plant held a funeral procession for the five killed the previous day. The procession sparked a riot. A tram station owned by the British was burned, as was a church. The police then fired into the demonstrators, killing and wounding many.

The city exploded into violence. The Vasena works were attacked as crowds tried to reach British managers trapped inside, and the tram station was besieged by thousands. Looting and arson were widespread. The Argentine Chamber of Deputies was also a scene of confusion and uproar. Argentine president Hipólito Yrigoyen called out the military and gave a shoot-to-kill order. Buenos Aires was experiencing the rapid development of a revolutionary situation.

A fascist organization made up primarily of wealthy youth, the Argentine Patriotic League, now appeared on the scene and conducted a pogrom against Jews, identifying them with Bolsheviks. Many of the Jews were of Russian origin and comprised a militant section of the working class, particularly in the baking industry.

Order was restored by the appearance of troops on January 12 when the city was placed under martial law. On January 13, anarchists (many Argentine workers at the time belonged to this tendency) attempted to seize arms from the police but were repulsed after they came under fire from an Argentine naval ship. Estimates of the aftermath of the Tragic Week have been placed at 700 dead, thousands wounded, and over 50,000 imprisoned.



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