

This week in history: September 6-12

5 September 2021

25 years ago: Former Clinton partner jailed in Whitewater scandal

On September 9, 1996, Susan McDougal, a former business partner of Bill and Hillary Clinton in the Whitewater real estate investment, was sent to prison for contempt of court after she refused to answer questions about her relations with the Clintons before a grand jury investigation into the Whitewater affair. McDougal denounced special prosecutor Kenneth Starr, claiming he had pressured her to implicate Bill Clinton in return for leniency.

“No one has asked me not to tell this story,” she told the press. “It’s just that I can’t trust them. They’ve always wanted something on the Clintons. They’ve always asked me to tell something for any deal they’ve offered me. It’s not something I can be a part of.”

McDougal and her ex-husband James were the Clintons’ partners in the Whitewater development. Susan McDougal kept records of the venture during the mid-1980s before turning management over to Hillary Clinton in 1987. Starr’s questions focused, however, not on these financial dealings, but on whether Clinton had testified truthfully in her trial on charges of fraud.

Susan McDougal was convicted and sent to prison for receiving an illegal \$300,000 loan in the 1980s from a federally backed fund headed by former Little Rock Judge David Hale. Starr’s prosecutors claimed that Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas, lobbied for the loan, and that part of the loan was used to retire his Whitewater debts.

The loan was part of a complex scheme engineered by James McDougal to sustain his failing Madison Guaranty Savings and Loan and other real estate developments. There was no evidence that any of the funds went to Whitewater or that either of the Clintons profited from or was aware of the arrangement. The flimsy case nonetheless served as the launching pad for the five-year-long campaign of political destabilization waged by right-wing groups against the White House, ultimately culminating in the impeachment of Clinton in 1998.

50 years ago: Attica prisoners rebel against guards

On September 9, 1971, prisoners being held in the Attica Correctional Facility in Attica, New York rioted against the prison guards and took control of a large portion of the prison. The inmates took a number of guards as hostages and issued demands for improvements to their barbaric living conditions.

The prison uprising in Attica followed a rebellion inside the Manhattan Detention Center, called the Tombs, about one year earlier. Many of the leaders in the Tombs uprising were sent to Attica to be held in solitary confinement after it was suppressed.

Adding to the unrest in the prisons, Black Panther George Jackson was shot and killed in a botched escape attempt from San Quentin prison in California on August 21, just weeks before. Jackson was one of the Soledad Brothers who was the target of frame-up charges for the murder of a prison guard because of his embrace of anti-capitalist and anti-racist politics.

Conditions in Attica were abysmal. At the time of the riot, the prison held 2,243 inmates despite being designed for a maximum of just 1,200. Prisoners were regularly abused by the guards. Black inmates, who were over 50 percent of the prison’s population, complained of intense racism from the all-white guard staff. Guards would only allow black inmates to work the least desirable and lowest paid prison jobs.

The riot broke out after a relatively minor scuffle between two inmates. When guards intervened to bring the prisoners back to their cells, a larger brawl broke out that involved fighting between prisoners and guards. Initially the guards restored order and took the inmates involved to solitary confinement. Fearing backlash and punishment from the guards, inmates rebelled en masse.

The riot spread, quickly involving about half of all inmates, who took control of one of the prison yards, two walking tunnels, and the prison’s central control room. They held 42 prison guards and other employees as hostages.

Prisoners elected a committee to issue demands to New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. The demands included

better medical treatment, fair visitation rights, improved food quality, religious freedom, higher wages for inmate jobs, and an end to physical abuse from the guards. They also called for the removal of the prison warden and an assurance that there would be no retaliation against prisoners for the riot.

While Rockefeller led the prisoners along with negotiations, he began preparing a raid to take the prison back with brutal violence. On September 13, a force of prison guards and New York State police retook the prison by throwing gas grenades and indiscriminately firing shotguns, killing 29 prisoners and nine of the hostages.

75 years ago: US Secretary of State delivers Cold War speech in Germany

On September 6, 1946, US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes delivered a speech in Stuttgart, Germany, outlining plans for an extended American military presence in Europe and marking a further deterioration in relations with the Soviet Union.

The speech was one of the first major statements of US post-war policy in Germany. In it, Byrnes effectively disavowed earlier assurances that the American armed forces would remain in Europe for only two years following the end of World War II in 1945, instead signaling an indefinite troop presence.

Byrnes also distanced the Truman administration from previous plans for the large-scale dismantling of German industry, which had been aimed at preventing the country from again becoming a significant military power. He declared the US intended “prosperity” and “unity” for Germany and would oppose any attempts to carve out parts of it, including the Ruhr and the Rhineland, for annexation.

Under conditions in which the country was still divided into US, British, French and Soviet-controlled zones, he called for rapid economic and political unification. Contrary to previous assurances to the Soviet and Polish authorities, Byrnes also stated that the boundary of Germany’s eastern border was yet to be finalized.

The remarks were widely viewed as being directed against the Soviet Union. Occurring amid a sharp clash between the US and the Stalinist bureaucracy over access to the Turkish Straits, they were an assertion of American imperialism’s plans for a preeminent role in postwar Europe. The speech also implicitly suggested that German development under the guidance of the US and other imperialist powers would result in “prosperity,” whereas a turn to the Soviet Union

would lead to the further immiseration of the population.

100 years ago: British premier sets limits to Irish Independence

On September 7, 1921, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George declared that there was no question of negotiating the complete independence of Ireland from the British Empire. Ireland could have no more than commonwealth status, in which the British government made foreign policy decisions.

Lloyd George called a halt to the exchange of diplomatic notes between the British cabinet and representatives of the Irish Dail, the nationalist parliament dominated by Sinn Fein. In particular, the prime minister’s letter addressed the attempts by the leader of the Irish negotiators, Eamon de Valera, to sever all connections with Britain.

The British government and the Irish nationalists had declared a truce in the brutal war, known as the Irish War of Independence, that had raged since 1919, and had opened up negotiations in July.

Lloyd George’s letter said in part: “To decline to discuss a settlement which would bestow upon the Irish people the fullest freedom for national development within the empire can only mean that you repudiate all allegiance to the Crown and all membership in the British Commonwealth. If we were to draw this inference from your letter, then future discussion between us could serve no useful purpose, and all conferences would be in vain.”

The British proposed a conference for September 20, which they canceled in light of de Valera’s intransigence.

Nevertheless, a section of Sinn Fein supported an agreement of this sort and obtained a slim majority in favor of it in the Dail. The Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in December, on the conditions that Lloyd George wanted, which included the separation of Northern Ireland from the south, with six northern counties remaining under direct British control.

The new 26-county polity in the south was called the Irish Free State. Its declaration caused a split in the Irish nationalist movement and the beginning of the Irish Civil War of June 1922 to May 1923.



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