

This week in history: April 4-10

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25 years ago: Whitewater probes deepen crisis in the White House

On April 10, 1997, Hillary Clinton appeared on a radio talk show and denied that hush money was arranged for her former law partner, Webster L. Hubbell, amid the ongoing years-long Whitewater scandal, which culminated in the 1998 impeachment of US President Bill Clinton.

One of the most threatening aspects of the Whitewater affair at that point was special prosecutor Kenneth Starr's investigation into hundreds of thousands of dollars paid to Hubbell by individuals and business interests close to the Clintons and the Democratic Party, after Hubbell resigned his post as Associate Attorney General in April of 1994. He left the administration after being charged with fraudulent billing practices at the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, Arkansas, and his close relationship with the Clintons made him a prime target for the investigation.

Initially, President Clinton denied any knowledge of payments made to Hubbell after the resignation, but was later forced to admit that top officials in his administration were involved in lining up jobs for Hubbell, and that the First Lady knew of these efforts.

A whole series of investigations had already been in progress, including the nearly three-year-long probe by the Whitewater independent counsel arising from Clinton's financial dealings with a corrupt savings and loans banker while he was governor of Arkansas; a Justice Department task force on campaign finance violations; grand jury hearings in Arkansas and elsewhere; and investigations by both houses of Congress.

On April 14, 1997 Attorney General Janet Reno rejected formal requests from Republicans on the House and Senate judiciary committees that she call for an independent counsel to probe the financing of Clinton's reelection effort, amid a flurry of press reports documenting the direct role of Clinton, Vice President Gore, and other top administration officials in the Democrats' fundraising blitz. The same day, a US District Court judge in Little Rock sentenced James McDougal, the Whitewater partner, to three years in prison.

50 years ago: Iraqi president signs friendship treaty with Soviet Union

On April 9, 1972, the Soviet Union entered into a treaty agreement with the government of Iraq. Officially known as the

“Soviet-Iraq Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation,” the most significant aspect of the pact was to ensure that the USSR would increase its military support to Iraq as the protracted conflict between Israel and the surrounding Arab nations continued.

Signed in Baghdad by Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin and the President of Iraq Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, the 15-year agreement called for “cooperation in the field of strengthening the defensive capabilities of each.” Already the Soviet Union provided a major portion of supplies and arms of the Iraqi army and air force, but the agreement was an assurance that support would continue as more divisions emerged between the various Arab countries over their relationship with imperialism.

Speaking about the agreement, the representatives of the two countries took somewhat different tones. While Kosygin insisted that the treaty was not aimed at any other country, al-Bakr told the press that the additional support would allow Iraq and other Arab nations to become “capable of liberating their usurped land,” meaning the territory taken over by Israel in the 1967 war.

The treaty itself also included language saying that the Soviet Union and Iraq “will continue their determined struggle against imperialism and Zionism and for the total elimination of colonialism.” The response from the United States was to see the agreement as a further threat to its political domination of the Middle East that had been in decline since the wave of Arab bourgeois-nationalist revolutions in the late 1950s.

An internal memo sent by US State Department official Theodore Eliot to national security adviser Henry Kissinger articulates the analysis of the Nixon administration. Eliot wrote, “The Iraqi-USSR treaty symbolizes recent Soviet advances in the area and reflects the considerable and increasing Soviet presence in Iraq. This presence, which complements the Soviet position in Egypt, has been in the form of strong political ties, continuing military assistance and large-scale Soviet economic assistance.”

The memo also indicates that the US planned to use its puppet government in Iran to oppose the treaty and heighten tensions between Iran and Iraq. Speaking of their instructions for Iran, the memo states, “the Treaty will put a strain on the Soviet-Iranian relationship, which has been fairly good recently. The Shah will see the Treaty as another major Soviet achievement and as confirmation of his fears about long-term Soviet intentions in the area.”

While on his visit to Iraq, Kosygin also attended the opening ceremonies celebrating the start of oil production at the giant North Rumaila oilfield, which was made possible due to financial and technical support from the USSR. The same fields had once been owned and operated by US and British companies but had been nationalized by Iraq in 1961.

The agreement was in line with the standing Stalinist foreign policy of the Soviet government. Having long abandoned a revolutionary program for the Arab working class, the Stalinists had instead adopted a policy of financing and arming the Arab nationalist military dictatorships in return for diplomatic support and access to oil that had previously been under the control of imperialism.

75 years ago: Black and white activists challenge segregation in the US south

On April 9, 1947, a group of 19 activists, black and white, male and female, set off from Washington D.C. to publicly challenge the racist, segregationist laws that were in place throughout the south of the United States. The trip was organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a black civil rights group, and its white supporters.

Those who took part included 16 men, eight white and eight black. Among them were students, lecturers, a scientist, as well as anti-war and anti-racism activists.

The group set off from Washington, traveling south through Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia, and Raleigh, North Carolina. They used public transport and throughout defied segregationist laws mandating that blacks sit at the back of buses, leaving the front seats to whites.

Having passed through their first southern cities unmolested, the group met trouble in Durham, North Carolina. Bayard Rustin, a black Quaker from the Fellowship of Reconciliation ministry, rejected a driver's demand that he move to the back of the bus. A standstill ensued. The following day, four of the men were arrested. Rustin and another black participant were taken into custody for sitting at the front of the bus, and two of the white participants were hauled in for defending them.

James Peck, of the Workers Defense League, affiliated with the reformist Socialist Party, went to pay bond for the men. He was attacked by a racist taxi driver, who struck Peck in the head. Despite the violence and repression, the remaining members of the group continued their southern trip for a fortnight, with black participants continuing to sit at the front of the bus and white activists at the back.

In March 1949, Rustin and two of the white men who had been arrested were convicted on trumped-up charges at the Hillsborough, North Carolina courthouse. They were sentenced to prison time, which was to be served on segregated prison gangs. The attacks on the convoy were carried out in defiance of the *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* Supreme Court decision of 1946, which had ruled against segregation on inter-state transport.

While it was small, the CORE trip would come to be described as the first of the "freedom rides," helping to inspire the mass civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s.

100 years ago: Irish provisional premier warns of civil war

On April 9, 1922, Michael Collins, the de facto Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State denounced those Irish nationalists who opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. This was an arrangement in which British troops were withdrawn and home rule was established, but only for 26 of the 32 counties, while the six northernmost counties, predominantly Protestant, remained under British rule. Ireland was kept as a member of the British Commonwealth and its officials were required to give an oath of loyalty to the British crown.

Collins had in mind the former president of the nationalist Dáil Éireann (parliament), Eamon de Valera, who had warned, "If the Treaty were accepted, the fight for freedom would still go on, and the Irish people, instead of fighting foreign soldiers, will have to fight the Irish soldiers of an Irish government set up by Irishmen."

In his speech Collins said, "Is it by civil war and the shedding of blood of our brothers that we can win peace and freedom?" Referring to de Valera's remarks, he said, "This is the language of treason, not patriotism," and added, "if civil war breaks out ... there is little doubt the British will return."

The meeting Collins addressed in Wexford had been attended by a large section of Irish politicians and the middle-class public who sought an accommodation with the British. Much of the audience had experienced delays in getting to the meeting by train, since tracks were torn up and armed men, presumably supporters of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which opposed the treaty, had prevented repairs to the tracks.

Also on April 9, a meeting of the anti-Treaty militants in Dublin had elected an executive committee and issued a statement of aims.

Collins would attempt to negotiate with the British to soften some of the terms of the agreement, but after the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson, a British military leader who held the rank of Field Marshall during World War I and a Unionist politician from northern Ireland who had played a leading role in supporting terror against nationalists there, the British refused to negotiate further.

The Irish Civil War, fought between the Provisional Government and IRA opponents of the Anglo-Irish Treaty was to begin in earnest in June.



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