This week in history: June 13-19

12 June 2022

25 years ago: Turkish military topples prime minister

On June 18, 1997, Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan resigned under threat of a military coup. The resignation underscored the mounting political instability in Turkey and throughout the strategic region straddling Europe and Asia.

Erbakan was the leader of the Refah, or Welfare Party (WP), an Islamist political movement which outpolled all of the secular parties in the December 1995 election. The previous July, it had formed a coalition government with the conservative True Path Party (TPP) led by former Prime Minister Tansu Ciller.

President Suleyman Demirel, acting on the wishes of the military, asked Mesut Yilmaz, leader of the secularist and right-wing Motherland Party, to form a new government. Supporters of both the WP and the TPP termed the move a presidential coup.

The ousted government was an unlikely parliamentary alliance. Ciller had previously portrayed her party as the bulwark against "the dark forces of fundamentalism." The WP, meanwhile, had brought corruption charges against Ciller. Members of the TPP had been tied to drug smuggling and organized crime, as well as right-wing terrorism. In exchange for the dropping of charges, Ciller backed Erbakan as prime minister.

The military command made clear its attitude toward the Erbakan government from the outset. Having seized power on three occasions since 1960, the generals indicated that they would use force to prevent what they defined as an Islamic fundamentalist challenge to Turkey's secularist institutions. The real fear of the generals was the emergence of any mass-based political movement challenging the army's predominant role in the political and economic life of the nation of 65 million people.

None of the political parties involved spoke for the millions of impoverished Turkish workers and peasants, who had been repeatedly uprooted by the economic transformation of the country and by the 12-year-old war against Kurdish insurgents in the southeast. Inflation of 80 percent only widened the gap between rich and poor, while social services deteriorated.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey no longer played the same role as a strategic bulwark of the NATO alliance. However, Washington had backed Turkey's attempts to gain influence over the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. It had sent Ankara $5 billion in military aid throughout the previous decade and promoted plans for an oil pipeline in Turkey which would undercut Russian hegemony in the region. At the same time, Turkey acted as a surrogate for Washington, providing military aid in Bosnia and intervening militarily in Iraq.

50 years ago: Watergate burglars arrested in Washington D.C.

On June 17, 1972, five men, James W. McCord Jr., Bernard Barker, Eugenio Martínez, Frank Sturgis, and Virgilio González, were arrested for breaking into the Democratic National Committee headquarters then located at the Watergate complex in Washington D.C. The arrests would trigger an investigation by the press that would eventually tie the burglars to a conspiracy led by President Richard Nixon to spy on his political opponents.

Of the five burglars, four were Cuban exiles involved in CIA plots against the Cuban government, including the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. The other, McCord, was an official of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) and formerly a CIA agent.

When arrested, the men had on them evidence that they were carrying out a spying operation, including equipment used to wiretap phones and cameras to take photographs of Democratic Party campaign documents. It was apparent at the time of the arrest that the burglary was part of a larger plot, but immediately the White House and FBI began a cover-up operation to prevent Nixon's leadership role in the spying enterprise from becoming known.

The truth gradually came to light as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, two reporters for the *Washington Post*, began investigating the break-in. Two days after the arrests, Mark Felt, then the third highest official in the FBI, contacted Woodward and began providing information from the FBI investigation of the burglary. Felt's identity as the source of Woodward and Bernstein's information was kept secret until 2005. Felt did not immediately provide the reporters with all of the evidence that he possessed. Rather, he held onto the most damning evidence that connected Nixon and other White House officials to the conspiracy until after the election to avoid aiding Nixon's Democratic opponent George McGovern.

After Nixon's reelection in November 1972, the long list of crimes against the Constitution and democratic rights became known to the public. Through both information provided by Felt and testimony from the Watergate burglars, it became clear that not only had White House officials ordered the attack on the Democratic National Committee, but Nixon kept an "enemies list" of political opponents, used the FBI and the IRS to persecute them and orchestrated the systematic illegal surveillance and disruption of antiwar groups.

The scandal would only expand when a Senate investigation into Watergate began in February 1973. After a desperate attempt to salvage his administration by firing the special prosecutor

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appointed by the Justice Department, Nixon would eventually be forced by the Supreme Court on July 30, 1974, to hand over taped recordings of conversations in the Oval Office that proved his leadership of the conspiracy and cover-up. Facing certain impeachment and conviction, Nixon would finally resign on August 9, 1974.

75 years ago: Henry Wallace warns of war between the US and the Soviet Union

On June 16, 1947, former Vice President Henry Wallace, who had been a cabinet member of the Truman administration until the previous September, warned that US policies were risking a war with the Soviet Union. He made the remarks during his final appearance in a speaking tour, which was attended by tens of thousands across the country.

Speaking in Washington, Wallace warned that the US and the Soviet Union were on a "suicidal course toward war and depression." He condemned the Truman Doctrine, unveiled several months earlier, under which the US had pledged to intervene in any part of`the world to defend "freedom." Wallace noted that in practice the doctrine meant a global confrontation with the Soviet Union. He pointed to the rapid development of nuclear weapons by both states which risked a catastrophe.

Wallace drew a relationship between attacks on the working class domestically and the aggressive US foreign policy. The Taft-Hartley bill, legislation aimed at crippling organized labor, was "of one piece with the Truman doctrine."

Pointing to the ongoing signs of global economic instability following World War II, Wallace said that if no agreement was reached between the US and the Soviet Union, the alternatives would be that "when depression hits, we can either let Russia save us with large purchases of goods at depression prices or we can manufacture a war as an escape from depression and to ward off any moves towards socialism which might be undertaken in a time of crisis."

Wallace had been President Harry Truman's Secretary of Commerce from March 1945, having been Franklin Roosevelt's vice president for four years, until Truman replaced him on the Democratic ticket in 1944. Truman demanded Wallace's resignation in September 1946, after he delivered a speech warning against the calls for a confrontation with the Soviet Union emanating from within the administration.

The *Militant*, then the Trotskyist publication in the US, noted that the substantial audiences at Wallace's speaking tour showed mass sentiment for a new political party. This was also reflected in hysterical, anti-communist denunciations of Wallace by Truman and the big business media.

At the same time, the *Militant* noted that Wallace's speeches had the character of a warning to the ruling elite of the potentially disastrous consequences of the policies they were embarking upon, from a devoted supporter of the capitalist system. Wallace continued to promote the fraud that the Democratic Party could be reformed. He defended the interests of American imperialism, complaining primarily that the aggressive program of the Truman Doctrine risked undermining those interests by provoking a disastrous war.

100 years ago: Scientists announce discovery of Vitamin D

On June 18, 1922, biochemist E.V. McCollum and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University's School of Hygiene and Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland, announced the isolation of Vitamin D.

Vitamins—organic compounds that are essential for the function of the metabolism of organisms—were themselves a recent discovery. Scientists had identified Vitamins A, B and C in the previous decade, and scientists understood that some diseases were caused by the absence of vitamins in the human diet. A lack of Vitamin C, for example, had been identified as the cause of scurvy.

McCollum told the press, "Recently my assistants and I have demonstrated the existence of a fourth vitamin that is associated with bone growth." He and his colleague had discovered that certain diets produced rickets in rats. He eventually found that both sunshine and cod liver oil prevented the development of rickets.

Rickets was a common disease in children which caused bone deformities, including bowed legs and spinal curvature. The discovery that cod liver oil could prevent rickets was underscored by McCollum: "Physicians have long believed that cod liver oil has a therapeutic value in the treatment of rickets, and in the studies referred to, this oil was found to exert a decided protective action in preventing the onset of rickets when the dietary conditions were favorable for its occurrence."

For the next generation of American children cod liver oil, notorious for its unpleasant taste, became a common dietary supplement, and particularly after American physician Harry Steenbock developed a process in 1923 by which milk could be fortified by Vitamin D, rickets was almost completely eradicated in the United States.

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