

This week in history: January 16-22

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

15 January 2023

25 years ago: Drudge Report breaks Clinton-Lewinsky affair

On January 17, 1997, the Drudge Report, a right-wing news site, broke the story of US President Bill Clinton's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. This affair was used as a pretext for Clinton's impeachment and resulted in shifting the framework of American politics further to the right.

The breaking of the Lewinsky affair marked a coming together of the long-running Whitewater investigation and a sexual harassment lawsuit by Paula Jones against Clinton, which was used by independent counsel Ken Starr to broaden the scope of the investigation he oversaw.

Jones first came to public attention in an article in the *American Spectator* magazine, which did not name her but described an interaction with Clinton. She first brought her lawsuit in 1994 and it was elevated to the Supreme Court in 1997.

Both Whitewater and the Jones cases were under the direction of right-wing Republicans with close ties to Christian fundamentalist and other extreme-right groups, whose fanatical hostility to Clinton was not assuaged by his administration's alliance with congressional Republicans to slash domestic social programs and eliminate welfare.

Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr was a longtime Republican Party activist who was appointed to the federal Appeals Court by Ronald Reagan and then named Solicitor General by George Bush. The selection of the top courtroom representative of the Bush administration to head the probe of the Clinton administration was made by a judicial body dominated by Republican appointees.

Linda Tripp, a personal friend and confidante of Lewinsky, tape-recorded conversations with her and turned them over to special prosecutor Kenneth Starr. Tripp made contact with Lucianne Goldberg, a New York literary agent who was looking for a former White House employee to supply inside dirt on the Clinton administration. They were introduced by a mutual friend, conservative columnist and television commentator Tony Snow, who had met Tripp when both worked in the Bush White House in 1992.

It was Goldberg who urged Linda Tripp to begin tape-recording her conversations with Lewinsky. She subsequently arranged for a meeting between Tripp and Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek* magazine in the fall of 1997 at the Washington home of her son. At that meeting Tripp discussed the content of her conversations with Lewinsky and offered to play one of the tapes for the reporter.

While many anticipated Clinton's immediate resignation, he initially denied the affair, but later publicly admitted it and declared that his private and public lives were separate. The right-wing campaign resulted in the 400-page "Starr report" released in September 1998, an obscene

recounting of every sexual encounter between Clinton and Lewinsky, delivered to the House of Representatives and used as the basis for impeachment.

50 years ago: US Supreme Court issues *Roe v. Wade* decision

On January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court issued the *Roe v. Wade* decision regarding the right to an abortion. The 7-2 decision found that individual states do not have the right to restrict access to abortion and overturned laws banning the medical procedure.

Previously, individual state governments had been able to pass laws limiting access to abortion. Before *Roe v. Wade*, abortion was illegal in 30 states, with access heavily restricted in the other 20, where it was allowed under certain exceptions. Only four states had existing legislation that fully complied with the new rules set by the court decision.

The case stemmed from an attempt by Norma McCorvey, whose name was changed to Jane Roe in the court proceedings, to seek an abortion, which was illegal under any circumstances in Texas, where she lived in 1968. McCorvey sued the state of Texas, represented by District Attorney Henry Wade, for denying her the ability to terminate her pregnancy. After a three-judge panel ruled in favor of McCorvey but refused to issue an injunction to block the state's abortion ban, both sides appealed the case to the Supreme Court.

In the decision, the court's majority sought to create standard criteria that state governments must follow when passing abortion legislation. The court established that in the first three months of pregnancy the states cannot interfere in any way with access to abortion. In the next six months the states could regulate abortion but only if laws are "reasonably related to maternal health." The court allowed states to totally restrict abortion in the final 10 weeks of pregnancy except in cases where the life of the mother is at risk.

While the court's ruling dramatically expanded abortion access in the United States, it fell short of establishing abortion as a legal right. The *Roe v. Wade* majority opinion, written by Justice Harry A. Blackmun, stated that under the 14th amendment and prior court precedent citizens had a "right to privacy" that is "broad enough to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy."

Blackmun also threw out the idea, as argued by the lawyers for the state of Texas, that human life begins at conception. "We need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins. When those trained in the respective disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus, the judiciary, in this point in the development of man's

knowledge, is not in a position to speculate as to the answer,” he stated.

But in allowing for states to retain a significant degree of control over abortion access after the first three months of pregnancy, Blackmun specifically rejected the idea that abortion in itself is a fundamental right. He wrote that in regards to the idea that a woman is “entitled to terminate her pregnancy at whatever time, in whatever way and for whatever reason she alone chooses... with this we do not agree.”

The rules for abortion access provided by the *Roe v. Wade* ruling stood for just under 50 years. Gradually, various court cases whittled away the standards provided by the 1973 decision. On June 24, 2022 in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, the Supreme Court totally reversed the *Roe* decision, returning full power to regulate abortion to state governments. Since then one-third of American women have lost access to abortion.

75 years ago: UN brokers uneasy ceasefire between Indonesia and the Netherlands

On January 17, 1948, representatives of the Netherlands and the Republic of Indonesia signed the Renville Agreement. The document would provide for an unstable truce between the Dutch, seeking to reconquer an old colonial possession, and Republican forces fighting for independence. The deal would rapidly unravel, resulting in a resumption of hostilities within months.

The talks were held in the context of Indonesia’s uncertain status in the wake of World War II when Japan had occupied the sprawling archipelago. With Japan’s military defeat in 1945, a power vacuum emerged. The Dutch, with the support of the other imperialist powers, rapidly moved to reestablish control. In August of that year, bourgeois-nationalist leaders led by Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta proclaimed independence.

The move, supported by more radical forces, including workers and poor peasants, resulted in the establishment of a Republic in August 1946. This was met by the Dutch with war. Brutal and lopsided fighting would ensue, including repeated massacres and scorched-earth operations.

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In November 1946, the British had brokered the Linggadjati Agreement. In it the Netherlands recognized the de facto authority of the Republic over Java, Madura, and Sumatra. But the deal also gave large swathes of the archipelago to the Netherlands. It also provided for the establishment by 1949 of a supposedly loose federative state that would be headed by the Dutch monarch.

Denunciations of the agreement as a cave-in by Sukarno and Hatta were lent credence by the rapid breach of it by the Netherlands. In July 1947, the Dutch launched a major offensive aimed at destroying the Republic and securing control over its resource rich areas. The Dutch made substantial headway, but their brutal assault was also subjected to international condemnation and a ceasefire was proclaimed in August 1947.

In the lead-up to the Renville Agreement, the Dutch rejected calls for a troop withdrawal, including from areas near Republican-controlled sections of the country. Their representatives made provocative threats of another offensive. Negotiations for the deal began in December, on board an American warship, the USS Renville.

The agreement confirmed the Dutch territorial gains made in the 1947 offensive. It granted the Netherlands de facto sovereignty prior to the formation of a federated state. The Indonesian nationalists gained only an understanding that there would be a plebiscite in the Dutch-controlled

portions of Java, Madura, and Sumatra, which would supposedly permit the population to decide whether it wished to be under the Republican government in those islands.

Even this provision was rapidly breached. The Dutch would proclaim their own state in Sumatra, including those areas under Republican control. After a continuous diplomatic and political campaign to marginalize the Republican government, the Dutch would in December 1948 launch an offensive aimed at seizing its capital of Yogyakarta. That would mark the end of the bankrupt attempts of the bourgeois nationalists to come to a modus vivendi with the Netherlands, resulting in a new stage of what became known as the Indonesian National Revolution.

100 years ago: Klaipeda Revolt in Lithuania ends

On January 16, 1923, ethnic Lithuanian rebels secured the Klaipeda region, a strip of land along the Baltic Sea between then-German East Prussia and Lithuania.

In the aftermath of World War I and the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations had detached the region, which had almost equal numbers of German and Lithuanian speakers, from Germany and made it a mandate under the control of the League’s Council of Ambassadors. Lithuanian nationalists had claimed the region, also known as Memelland and as Lithuania Minor, as a part of Lithuania since the 19th century.

The government of the bourgeois Lithuanian Republic had secretly helped to prepare the revolt in December when it established the Supreme Committee for the Salvation of Lithuania Minor to organize the revolt in Lithuanian villages and in the city of Klaip?da (Memel).

The revolt began on January 10, when troops entered the region from Lithuania and met up with local volunteers. The rebels controlled the region by the next day except for the city of Klaip?da, which was defended by 250 French troops, 300 German policemen and a group of volunteers. The rebels defeated the defenders in a gunfight on January 15, and a ceasefire was signed with French troops confined to their barracks. On January 16, a Polish ship entered the city’s harbor with French reinforcements but soon left because the ceasefire was in effect. France and Poland protested the takeover but held off from military action fearing a reaction by the Soviet Union.

The region had strategic importance for Lithuania since Klaipeda would be its only outlet to the Baltic Sea. Poland had an interest in controlling the harbor of Klaipeda but in the aftermath of the revolt, Lithuania rejected any Polish interference, particularly since the Poles had annexed the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, in 1920. In 1924, the League of Nations had arranged treaties with the local states that made the Klaipeda region into an autonomous part of Lithuania.



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