

This week in history: February 20-26

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.

19 February 2023

25 years ago: Clinton administration shocked by antiwar sentiment at Ohio event

On February 20, 1998, a trio of top foreign policy officials, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger and Secretary of Defense William Cohen, traveled to Ohio State University, where they addressed a large and—they thought—thoroughly vetted town hall audience to promote the bombing of Iraq. The event erupted with anger and opposition to the widely unpopular attack.

The hostility of the largely student audience to the Clinton administration's war measures was a shock to the three top officials. The rally became known from the initials of their last names as the "ABC" event, and it became a byword for what *not* to do, in order to avoid an outpouring of opposition similar to the antiwar teach-ins during the Vietnam War, 30 years before. After this experience, there was never again another such public event, in any subsequent administration, to explain war policies to a large popular audience.

The debacle came despite tight security measures. Guards were stationed throughout the arena to deal with disrupters. During commercial breaks security officers rounded up some of the more vocal hecklers and removed them from the arena. One student who displayed a placard opposing the bombing of Iraq was thrown to the floor, handcuffed and arrested for trespassing and resisting arrest.

CNN and the Clinton administration worked together in the selection of the audience which was to attend the forum. No one was permitted to enter the arena without a special pass that had been issued beforehand. No passes were available on the day of the meeting.

The overwhelming majority of those in attendance were effectively excluded from the proceedings, as only attendees with a certain kind of special pass were even allowed to raise questions, unless attendees chose to shout to make their opinions known to the speakers and the television audience. One student with Ohio State University Ethnic Student Services said that those invited from his organization first had to submit a list of questions to CNN. Albright personally telephoned a representative of the group and asked for the questions they would be posing.

Just before the start of the meeting, a CNN representative polled those with special passes to find out who wanted to raise questions. All potential questioners were then interrogated individually to determine the nature of their question and how it would be phrased. Each individual was then assigned to sit in a specific location where he or she could be monitored by CNN officials. CNN further stipulated that no one would be allowed to bring notes to the microphone.

When, prior to the broadcast, some in the audience booed Albright and Cohen, CNN moderator Bernard Shaw declared, "This is not a sporting

event." He went on to instruct those waiting to ask questions to be brief. "Just questions, no speeches," he ordered.

During one of the first commercial breaks Shaw confronted a man who had been protesting his exclusion from the microphone. Shaw shouted, "This is a 90-minute program and I am not going to allow you to disrupt it." Security then escorted the man outside, although he later returned and asked the final question of Secretary Albright.

When the initial questions took a sharply hostile tone, CNN took a commercial break to regroup. "Why bomb Iraq when other countries have committed similar violations?" one person asked, to the eruption of shouts of agreement from the audience. The two moderators then began taking questions from telephone callers. These could be more carefully screened, with the result that every telephoned comment or question was either in support of Clinton's policy or suggested even more aggressive military action against Iraq.

50 years ago: Israel shoots down Libyan passenger jet, killing 108

On February 21, 1973, the Israeli Air Force shot down Libyan Arab Airlines Flight 114, killing 108 of the 113 passengers and crew aboard. The plane, a Boeing 727, was a civilian passenger jet. Most of the passengers were Libyan and Egyptian nationals, including Salah Masoud Busir, the former Libyan Foreign Minister. Also on board were two Germans, an American, and five French members of the flight crew.

LN 114 was flying a regularly scheduled route from Benghazi to Cairo. Due to a sandstorm the plane was blown off course as it entered the flight path to land at the Cairo airport. The storm caused navigation difficulties for both the pilots and Egyptian air traffic controllers, who lost their ability to track the plane. Later, the crew would realize that many of the plane's instruments, including radio communications, had failed.

The storm drove the plane off course by about 90 miles, pushing it into the Suez Canal area and the Sinai Peninsula. The Sinai and the eastern bank of the Suez Canal had been occupied by Israel since the Six-Day War with Egypt in 1967.

The flight was picked up by Israeli radar after it entered Israeli-controlled airspace. The military command immediately sent two F-4 Phantoms to intercept LN 114. The F-4 Phantom was an American-made fighter jet provided to Israel by the government of the United States.

LN 114's crew had mistaken the Israeli planes for Egyptian fighters and believed they were being escorted back to Egyptian airspace. The LN 114 pilots turned the plane around and began flying west towards Cairo again.

The Israeli pilots interpreted the change in course as an attempt to flee

and ordered LN 114 to immediately land. LN 114's crew, still believing that the fighters were Egyptian, attempted to use hand signals to indicate they must first cross the border before landing.

Considering the signals as a refusal of their order the Israeli fighters opened fire on the plane. The crew attempted to make a crash landing but the damage from the attack made piloting the craft impossible. LN 114 crashed into the desert as a flaming wreck, with fires trapping the passengers inside. It was just 12 miles from Egyptian airspace when it was shot down.

Libyan Foreign Minister Mansour Kikhia made the first official response to the attack, using it as an opportunity to promote Arab nationalism. "We consider these victims as martyrs of Israeli aggression," he said. "We are prepared to accept more sacrifices in the service of our cause of destiny."

Israel's prime minister Golda Meir feigned sympathy for those killed. In a statement on the incident she said, "The Government of Israel expresses its deep sorrow at the loss of life resulting from the crash of the Libyan plane in Sinai." But she placed the blame on the commercial pilots, saying that Israel "regrets that the Libyan pilot did not respond to the repeated warnings."

While Israel would voluntarily pay compensation to the victims' families, no attempt by the UN or any other international body was made to pursue criminal charges against Israel. The US criticized the attack but took no action to hold the Israeli government responsible.

75 years ago: Stalinist Communist Party seizes power in Czechoslovakia

This week in February, 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia secured effective state control, ousting its erstwhile coalition partners among openly capitalist parties and establishing what would remain for four decades a one-party state.

As with other Eastern European countries, Czechoslovakia had suffered the horrors of fascism during World War II, with a brutal Nazi occupation that included mass killings of Jews as well as political opponents. And like those other states, it was the Red Army of the Soviet Union that played the crucial role in Czechoslovakia's liberation in 1945. Over the ensuing several years, an unstable situation prevailed and capitalism remained.

In early 1948, the Communist Party was in a governing coalition with several other parties, including the nationalist Czech National Social Party and the country's social-democratic party. In early February, divisions emerged, with the coalition partners of the Communist Party accusing the Stalinists of carrying out a purge of the police and other elements of the state apparatus, aimed at securing its dominance.

On February 21, twelve cabinet ministers outside the Communist Party resigned their posts over these alleged infractions. They demanded that Czech National Social Party President Edvard Beneš rein in the Communist Party and ensure that the allegedly victimized police officials be reinstated. Beneš vacillated.

Meanwhile, the Communist Party mobilized its substantial popular support. Action committees under its control held major street protests, while its leaders threatened a general strike to bring down any government if Beneš did not hold the line. Within days he had capitulated, agreeing on February 25 to the formation of a new cabinet that would include Communist Party control over key ministries, including those related to security and the public services.

Over the ensuing weeks and months, the Communist Party would purge the state apparatus of elements that were oriented to the bourgeois-

nationalist parties, replacing them with its own personnel. Beneš would eventually leave the scene, with the Communist Party establishing full control over the levers of state power.

While the upheavals in February involved significant layers of the working class, the Communist Party was not moving against its former bourgeois allies because it wished to unleash a socialist revolution.

In line with the two-stage theory of Stalinism, whereby a democratic revolution would precede a socialist revolution, the Communist Party had rejected calls for working class power in Czechoslovakia at the end of World War II. Its leader, Klement Gottwald, had declared in 1945 that, "in spite of the favorable situation, the next goal is not soviets and socialism, but rather carrying out a really thorough democratic national revolution."

The shift in 1948 was instead a response to the Cold War. Washington had recently adopted the Marshall Plan, one aim of which was the penetration of US capital into Eastern Europe, and the Truman Doctrine, which sanctioned American imperialist intervention anywhere in the world in the struggle against "totalitarianism." The Stalinists were fearful that their bourgeois allies in Czechoslovakia would be drawn into these programs, undermining the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy in Eastern Europe, which Moscow viewed as a defensive barrier against any future western invasion.

100 years ago: British arrest Indian nationalist in Punjab

On February 26, 1923, British authorities arrested Kishan Singh Gargaj, one of the founders of the Sikh revolutionary Babbar Akali movement. He was held prisoner at Lahore and executed on February 26, 1925.

Babbar Akali emerged in 1921 from the nonviolent Akali movement, which sought to reform the control of Sikh temples in the Punjab in the northwest of the British Raj. The traditional leaders of the temples, the mahants, were widely viewed as British collaborators.

In April, 1919, British forces had perpetrated the Jallianwala Bhag massacre of 379 Sikhs protesting the extension of a law that allowed imprisonment without trial and indefinite detention in Amritsar. The killings fueled a spirit of rebellion in the Punjab, further inflamed by Gandhi's India-wide Noncooperation Movement, which had developed a mass base. The Akali movement attracted tens of thousands of adherents and, by 1921, had succeeded in wresting control of some temples from the religious authorities. Then yet another massacre took place, when over 130 protesters were killed by a mahant's guards at Nankana, in March 1921. Shortly thereafter the British began mass arrests of Akali leaders.

It was out of that experience, in August 1922, that Kishan Singh and his co-thinkers created the Babbar Akali movement, organized in clandestine cells with a wider group of sympathizers that supplied militants with food and safe houses. The Babbar Akalis created and circulated an underground newspaper and sought connections with anti-imperialist Hindus and Muslims in the Punjab. They carried out the assassination of government officials and British collaborators and engaged in confrontations with the police. Many of the Babbar Akalis, including Kishan Singh, were former soldiers and had fought in World War I.

By 1923, the British had put bounties on the heads of the Babbar Akali movement leaders. By April they began suppressing the movement in the countryside, arresting hundreds. Five other leaders of the movement were eventually executed along with Kishan Singh.





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