

This week in history: May 29-June 4

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.

28 May 2023

25 years ago: Kenneth Starr files brief with Supreme Court against Clinton

On June 2, 1998, Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr filed a brief with the US Supreme Court seeking the fastest possible investigation of US President Bill Clinton with an eye to his possible impeachment. The US Circuit Court of Appeals, acceding to his urgings for action on a “very expedited basis,” ordered the White House to file its appeal on the issues of attorney-client privilege and privilege for Secret Service agents by June 15.

The appeals court’s announcement, a day after the Supreme Court rejected Starr’s motion for it to bypass the lower courts and rule on the privilege questions directly, put a damper on White House claims of a legal victory. The court action made it clear that the offensive against the Clinton administration spearheaded by Starr’s investigation would continue at an accelerated pace.

Starr’s June 2 legal submission to the Supreme Court was the clearest statement to date that the aim of his investigation was to be the removal of Clinton from office. He wrote:

The nation has a compelling interest that this criminal investigation of the President of the United States conclude as quickly as possible—that indictments be brought, possible reports for impeachment proceedings issued, and non-prosecution decisions announced.

The media overwhelmingly echoed Starr’s claims that his investigation was a legitimate probe of serious criminal allegations, and that the defensive legal tactics of the White House were tantamount to an admission of guilt. With the withdrawal of Monica Lewinsky’s lawyer, William Ginsburg, news commentators then concentrated on speculation that the former White House intern’s new legal team would quickly negotiate an immunity deal with Starr, paving the way for Lewinsky to give grand jury testimony contradicting Clinton’s insistence that no sexual relationship existed between them.

Starr’s four-year probe was deeply undemocratic. The institution of the independent counsel, an unelected office with vast powers, was being used to effect far-reaching changes in the American

government.

50 years ago: Greek dictator proclaims a republic

On June 1, 1973, Georgios Papadopoulos, the head of the military Junta that had ruled Greece since the US-backed coup in 1967, announced that his government was formally abolishing the monarchy and that the junta was being transformed into a republic. In his proclamation Papadopoulos declared that he would take the title of president and remain in power until elections could be organized.

The announcement was prompted by a crisis in the leadership of the Greek military regime. Over the previous several months popular opposition to Papadopoulos began to emerge, with thousands of university students protesting against the suppression of democratic rights by the government.

Fearing the prospect of a popular revolt with revolutionary implications, Papadopoulos began entertaining the idea of introducing reforms to stave off this threat. These mild overtures however were fiercely opposed by the right-wing hardliners within the military. The week prior to the announcement of the republic there was an attempted coup against Papadopoulos by officers of the Greek Navy.

The Greek king, Constantine II, had been living in exile in Rome since Papadopoulos came to power in the 1967 coup. Despite this, the military junta had still officially recognized the monarchy represented in Greece by a junta-appointed regent.

Papadopoulos believed that Constantine had been behind organizing the Navy mutiny and took the opportunity to frame himself as an opponent of reaction, calling the King “an outdated leftover of past ages,” who had “collaborated with the reactionaries of all descriptions despite repeated warnings from the Government.”

But he was careful to add, “It was not the intention of the revolution to proceed to a radical change of regime.” And he clarified that the junta would have preferred to keep the king but was forced to dissolve the monarchy by Constantine’s actions.

The new constitution that came with the announcement of the republic changed little in the actual distribution of power in Greece. The office of the president maintained virtually all legislative, executive, and military control over the state. Papadopoulos told Greeks that a referendum on the new republic would be held on July

29, 1973 and that general elections would come within one year.

The announcement did little to placate the Greek masses who despised the brutal anti-communist repressions of the Papadopoulos regime. Especially after the July 29 referendum, which was widely seen as rigged by the government in favor of Papadopoulos, the protest movements grew rapidly.

In November, a state of revolt emerged centered around the Athens Polytechnic University. The revolt would spark the downfall of Papadopoulos, who would himself be ousted by Army officers in the midst of the crisis. In July 1974, military rule would end under both the pressure of mass calls for democracy and an invasion of Cyprus by Turkey.

75 years ago: Henry Wallace denounces US anti-communist legislation as fascistic

Speaking before a Senate Judiciary Committee on May 29, 1948, former vice president Henry A. Wallace denounced a major piece of anti-communist legislation as being advanced by “warmongers, fearmongers and hatemongers” in the American political establishment. Just three years after the end of World War II, Wallace warned that those advancing the measures could go down in history as the “American counterparts of Mussolini and Hitler.”

The denunciation bore particular weight, given that Wallace had been vice president in Franklin Roosevelt’s third term. He was speaking out against the Mundt–Nixon Bill, which had passed the US Senate on May 19. It was named after its Republican sponsors, representatives Karl E. Mundt of South Dakota and Richard Nixon of California.

The legislation would have compelled all members of the American Communist Party to register their political affiliation with the office of the US Attorney-General. As Wallace indicated, such a measure, undermining the First Amendment and other Constitutional protections of free speech and political affiliation, mirrored similar policies enacted previously by openly fascist regimes, before they carried out mass round-ups and killings of political opponents.

Nixon stated that the bill advanced “a new approach to the complicated problem of internal communist subversion ... It provided for registration of all Communist Party members and required a statement of the source of all printed and broadcast material issued by organizations that were found to be Communist fronts.” The *New York Times* noted that its proponents described the law as a means of “controlling the communists” and driving them “and their allies into the open.”

The legislation passed the House, while other potential measures, including the outright illegalization of the Communist Party, were discussed. The Senate passed over the bill.

Wallace had been the vice president of the US between 1941 and January 1945, in the Democratic Party administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. In that capacity, he had been involved in a host of attacks on democratic rights, including the persecution of the anti-war and Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, and a blanket ban on strike activity.

Wallace had fallen out of favor within Roosevelt’s Democratic Party, as it shifted to the right, and was supplanted as Roosevelt’s running mate in the 1944 election by Harry S. Truman, who

succeeded to the presidency when Roosevelt died only six months later. Truman’s administration was associated with the shift from the wartime alliance of the US with the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, to an aggressive Cold War policy, aimed at asserting the untrammelled global hegemony of American imperialism.

Wallace represented an increasingly marginalized faction of the ruling class that believed containing the working class in the US and internationally required a conciliatory attitude toward the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. He was therefore closely identified with the policy of alignment with Moscow.

100 years ago: Crowds in New Jersey town prevent Ku Klux Klan from speaking

On June 4, 1923, a crowd of 500, including blacks and whites, prevented a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) speaker from addressing a meeting in the New Jersey seaside town of Perth Amboy. The speaker, Reverend Oscar Haywood, a national figure of the Klan, originally from North Carolina, had set up Klan operations in New York City and was speaking at Perth Amboy’s Junior Order Hall to build the KKK organization in New Jersey.

A crowd began assembling outside, including prominent citizens as well as workers. Haywood had only begun speaking when hundreds of opponents, including blacks, Jews and Catholics entered the hall after an attempt to bar them. The crowd began heckling Haywood, and as some of its members approached the podium, police managed to clear the hall. Haywood fled into a back room with two policemen, and a riot ensued outside between Klan supporters and opponents.

In late August, over 100 men were to beat 30 Klansmen with clubs after another attempted meeting in Perth Amboy.

The KKK was a fascist organization that not only preached white supremacy and racial segregation, but was virulently antisemitic and anti-Catholic. Its main target was the working class. The Klan regularly menaced socialist workers, striking workers, and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The 1920s saw its largest growth, heavily concentrated in the Northern industrial states, with some estimates of a membership of 4 million.

It was responsible for numerous lynchings in the South, where it had first emerged in the 1860s after the defeat of the Confederacy as a paramilitary arm of the Democratic Party. The KKK’s close ties with the Democratic Party continued. By 1927 Oscar Haywood had returned to North Carolina and was elected as a Democrat to the state House of Representatives.



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