

This week in history: December 18-24

17 December 2023

25 years ago: US House of Representatives impeaches Clinton

On December 19, 1998, the United States House of Representatives voted 221-212 to impeach President Bill Clinton. The impeachment was the product of a right-wing campaign spearheaded by the Republican Party to remove a sitting president, shifting the entire American political establishment to the right.

In the aftermath of the vote, Rep. Richard Gephardt, the Democratic minority leader, warned that politics in the United States were approaching the level of violence. Commenting on the crisis, the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board published a commentary well worth reading today: “Is America drifting toward Civil War?”

The campaign against Clinton was a byproduct of right-wing hostility over his proposed health care “reform,” tepid and conservative as it was, originated by the Republican Party but embraced by sections of the liberal media, particularly the *New York Times*. The Whitewater investigation into Bill and Hillary Clintons’ investments, launched in 1994, ultimately triggered a political firestorm over Bill Clinton’s sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

The report on the Lewinsky affair in early 1998 by the Drudge Report 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.

Both Whitewater and the Jones lawsuit 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.

Most bourgeois political commentators anticipated Clinton’s immediate resignation. But he initially denied the affair, and later publicly admitted it, refusing to resign, and insisting 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 ultimately used as the basis for Clinton’s impeachment.

At every point, the Democratic Party, completely out of touch with the underlying political dynamics and misreading public opinion, responded to the attempted political coup against Clinton with pathetic moralizing, apologies and an utter refusal to investigate and expose the right-wing conspiracy. This cowardice on impeachment foretold their prostration before the theft of the 2000 election with the Supreme Court’s notorious decision in *Bush v. Gore*.

50 years ago: Prime Minister of Spain assassinated in Madrid

On December 20, 1973, Luis Carrero Blanco, the prime minister of Francisco Franco’s fascist government, was assassinated in Madrid by a bomb planted under the road that was detonated as his car passed over. The bombing was carried out by the Basque nationalist organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA).

Carrero was Franco’s long-time right-hand man and his handpicked successor. He had been appointed to become prime minister in June 1973 after it was determined that the sick and dying 80-year-old Franco could no longer manage the day-to-day operations of the government. Carrero was a notorious anti-communist who had been fiercely loyal to the fascist state since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Franco had hoped that by appointing Carrero prime minister the crumbling dictatorship would be able to stabilize itself and repress the growing struggles of the working class.

The crisis in the Spanish dictatorship was part of a collapse of the remaining European anti-communist dictatorships. Greece had recently seen mass demonstrations in Athens against the Papadopoulos regime. Similarly, in Portugal signs were emerging that the dictatorship would soon collapse.

Carrero’s assassins were three Basque youth, no older than 25. They joined the ETA amid a global upswing of nationalist guerilla movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Blocked from socialist theory and the lessons of history by bourgeois nationalist leaders, aided and abetted by the ex-Trotskyist Pabloite grouping, these nationalist movements like ETA drew in left-wing youth and sent them on adventurist, often terrorist, missions.

The ETA had planned the assassination of Carrero over many months after learning that his daily commute brought him down Claudio Coello Street in central Madrid. They rented an apartment along the route and began digging a tunnel stretching under the road where the bomb would be planted. Once Carrero’s car passed over the tunnel the bomb was detonated. Witnesses reported that the blast was so powerful that the car was sent over 35 meters into the air.

The following day the ETA claimed responsibility, but serious doubts remain about the ability of the group to carry out an attack of such a scale without assistance. Intense disagreements within the Spanish ruling elite existed over the direction of the state that would follow Franco’s death. Santiago Carrillo, the general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, wrote in his memoir, “It was clear to anyone with a minimum of experience in clandestine work that without important and very high level protection, the ETA members would have been arrested long before realizing their target.”

The more conservative elements like Carrero and Franco, who resumed the post of prime minister after the assassination, wanted no relaxation of the dictatorship and were in negotiations to restore the full powers of the monarchy. More liberal-minded representatives of the Spanish capitalists believed that the existence of the dictatorship invited revolution and that their interests could be better served by establishing a limited bourgeois democracy that would nonetheless protect the fascists from the retribution of the working class for their murderous crimes.

Carrero’s assassination was the beginning of the end of the dictatorship and accelerated the ongoing crisis of rule. The dictatorship lingered on

until the moment of Franco's death in November 1975, when the prearranged plans for a constitutional monarchy were set into motion.

75 years ago: Dutch launch surprise assault on Indonesian forces

On December 19, 1948, Dutch forces launched a surprise onslaught against areas of Indonesia that were under the authority of a Republican independence movement. The military attack was a flagrant violation of international law in deliberate defiance of a United Nations-brokered ceasefire and peacekeeping arrangement.

The Dutch offensive took place in the context of the continuing fallout from World War II, and a wave of mass anti-colonial struggles in its aftermath. Japan had overtaken Indonesia in that conflict. With its defeat, the Dutch, supported by the major imperialist powers, particularly Britain, immediately moved in to retake its old colonial possession. Intense fighting had occurred across the sprawling archipelago, with the Indonesian masses determined to secure their independence.

By late 1948, a highly unstable and tenuous power-sharing arrangement existed between the Dutch and the conservative-bourgeois Indonesian Republican leaders. A December 1947 UN deal, the Renville Agreement, had provided for steps towards a federative state. In the interim, the Dutch retained sovereignty, but the Republicans had nominal control over Java and Sumatra.

Throughout 1948, the Dutch chipped away at the deal. Their perspective was to establish other governing authorities outside Java and Sumatra, which would function as puppets of the Netherlands and dominate any future federative Republic. The issue was that these efforts lacked any mass base of support. The Dutch increasingly resorted to outright aggression.

On the morning of December 19, the Dutch launched their surprise attack. Thousands of paratroopers were dispatched to Yogyakarta, the temporary capital of the Republic. There was an intensive aerial bombardment, targeting all infrastructure associated with the Republic. The aim was to wipe out the newly-consolidated Tentara Nasional Indonesia, the Republic's national army, and to render any prospect of independence unviable.

Republican leaders including President Sukarno were caught unawares and were arrested. When the assault began, they had rejected calls from more radical independence fighters to flee the capital and join guerrilla bands fighting the Dutch. Over the preceding year, Sukarno and his close associates, such as Mohammad Hatta, had waged a brutal campaign against the radical nationalists, who opposed their concessions to the Dutch, including through purges and executions.

The Netherlands called off its offensive after a couple of days, amid a substantial international outcry. It had already achieved most of its objectives. The episode, and the paralysis of Sukarno and Hatta, demonstrate that later independence would not be the result of the actions of the Republican leaders. Instead it was the outcome of a mass movement from below, and the increasing weakness of the old colonial powers including the Netherlands.

100 years ago: American imperialism refuses to recognize USSR

On December 18, 1923, the American president, Calvin Coolidge responded to a letter from the Soviet government proposing to open negotiations to develop diplomatic relations. According to the *New York*

Times, "Under the president's instruction Secretary [of State Charles Evans] Hughes transmitted through the Consul at Reval [now Tallinn, Estonia] a communication to Tchicherin Soviet commissar for foreign affairs telling him that this government saw no reason for entering into negotiations for an agreement with the Soviet government."

The State Department issued a longer letter outlining the reasons that diplomatic relations with the Soviet republic were not possible, which noted, "most serious is the continued propaganda to overthrow the institutions of this country. This government cannot enter into negotiations until these efforts directed from Moscow are abandoned."

The next day, Hughes released a fabricated letter, allegedly from Gregory Zinoviev, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, to the Workers Party, the legal wing of the Communist Party in the United States, which had been driven underground by government arrests and harassment.

The letter was published in full by the *New York Times* as though it were genuine. The newspaper dutifully quoted Hughes' statement that "the Department of Justice has assured the Department of State of the authenticity of these instructions." The letter told the Workers Party, among other things, to create fighting units. "The members of the fighting units," the letter said, "in addition to all other matters must once a week be given instructions in shooting and receive some instruction in pioneer work (sapper [explosives] work) ... to prepare future leaders of the military forces of the party and faithful fighters during the social revolution."

In the January 5, 1924 issue of *The Worker*, the newspaper of the Workers Party, C. E. Ruthenberg, executive secretary of the Workers Party, denounced the letter as a forgery in his own letter to the US House of Representatives and Senate. *The Worker* also published the real letter of greetings from the Comintern, noting:

"... this official greeting still further exposes the joint frame up of the State Department and the Department of Justice at Washington in that it shows that the official correspondence of the Communist International ... against the silly and puerile fabrications of the Hughes offering. The bona fide greeting of the Communist International appraising the accomplishments of the Workers Party during the year and offering its advice for the future stands as a mighty monument of the practical political work for the whole working class."



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