

This week in history: January 22-28

21 January 2024

25 years ago: Colombia earthquake kills thousands

On January 25, 1999, a 6.2 magnitude earthquake struck the Colombian city of Armenia, killing nearly 2,000 people and leaving a further 4,000 injured. Approximately 3,900 people were declared missing.

The quake's epicenter was located just 15 miles west of Armenia in Valle del Cauca state. The quake also damaged towns and hamlets in neighboring Quindío, Tolima, and Risaralda states. Armenia, a city of 300,000 about 100 miles west of the capital Bogotá, absorbed the brunt of the quake. Two-thirds of the city's buildings were rendered uninhabitable and an estimated 180,000 people were made homeless. Many of the injured were turned away from overflowing hospitals and clinics. In the city's working-class neighborhoods, homes made of wood, decaying cement and cinder block, built on unstable ground, were flattened. Only the northern, wealthier section of the city was left largely unscathed.

In the aftermath of the disaster, thousands of working class and poor residents reacted in anger over delays in government relief. They ransacked food stores and other locations and clashed with soldiers and police in desperate search of food and water. President Andrés Pastrana responded by dispatching 2,000 soldiers and 700 extra police to the area.

Virtually no basic emergency aid reached the disaster areas in the earliest days after the earthquake. Relief agencies reported that food distribution systems broke down and that insufficient supplies were airlifted into the disaster zone. International aid pledges were minimal, including \$1 million from the European Union and \$10 million from the Inter-American Development Bank. The US provided blankets and plastic sheeting worth \$2 million.

Chants of "We want food, not bullets" were heard in some areas of the city where angry residents outnumbered police and soldiers, who responded by firing automatic assault rifles. Secret service agents from the notorious National Security Department (DIS) fired machine guns and pistols to stop the protesters. The government imposed a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew to prevent looting, even though it hindered rescue efforts.

Colombia, the third most populous country in Latin America after Brazil and Mexico, had a poverty rate of 52 percent. This was intensified by the restructuring program imposed by western financial institutions for the repayment of the country's \$20 billion-plus in foreign debt. In addition, the country had been hard hit by falling commodity prices, above all on its coffee crop, which accounted for \$2.1 billion, about half of the country's exports.

50 years ago: Nixon "plumbers" chief sentenced

On January 24, 1974, Egil Krogh was sentenced to two to six years in prison for his role as the head of the Special Investigation Unit, better known as the White House "Plumbers," the secret organization established by President Richard Nixon to spy on and discredit political opponents. Krogh plead guilty to "conspiracy against the rights of

citizens" for his authorization of the 1971 burglary of the office of Dr. Lewis Fielding, Daniel Ellsberg's psychologist.

Krogh was a longtime associate of former White House counsel John Ehrlichman, having worked for Ehrlichman's law firm before joining Nixon's 1968 campaign team and then the official White House staff. In 1971, Krogh was assigned by Ehrlichman to lead the Plumbers spy unit which was created immediately after the release of the Pentagon Papers by Ellsberg.

The Pentagon Papers demonstrated the government had been lying to the American population about the possibility to win the Vietnam War, as well as its total indifference to the lives of both Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers. Once made public, the documents helped fuel the already large and growing antiwar movement.

The release of the Pentagon Papers enraged Nixon, who first created the Special Investigation Unit specifically to spy on and discredit Ellsberg. The aim of the Plumbers was to "fix leaks" by terrorizing and making an example of Ellsberg in order to intimidate other potential whistleblowers from coming forward with information about crimes committed by the government.

By the time of the 1972 Watergate break-in at the offices of the Democratic National Committee, Krogh was removed as head of the Plumbers for his refusal to authorize an illegal wiretap. Most accounts by the bourgeois press present Krogh as possessing integrity for coming forward to admit his own guilt while others in the Nixon administration scrambled to save themselves.

However, it was not until after the break-in at Fielding's office that Krogh began expressing any reservations about his actions. He was just the first to realize the need to jump ship. The thuggish manner that the break-in was conducted made a full cover-up of the operation impossible.

The White House team had destroyed the office using mafia tactics, smashing open filing cabinets in a desperate attempt to find any "dirt" to be used against Ellsberg. Krogh admitted during his sentencing, "When I saw the photographs, I immediately felt that a mistake had been made." All charges against Ellsberg for theft and espionage related to the Pentagon Papers were dropped once news of the break-in, wiretapping, and other crimes against him were revealed.

Still, Krogh played his part in the conspiracy to cover up Nixon's role in Watergate and other crimes. Upon his sentencing Krogh claimed that he "received no specific instruction or authority whatsoever, regarding the break-in from the President, directly or indirectly." He added that the Plumbers were "established by the President, created by John Ehrlichman and I was put in command."

The day before Krogh's sentencing, Nixon made clear that at the time he still had no intention of resigning and would make no concessions to the impeachment inquiry. "I'm going to fight like hell" he told the press.

Sentenced to two to six years, Krogh would only serve four months in prison before being released. He was disbarred from practicing law in 1975, a ruling reversed in 1980.

In a 2007 memoir reflecting on his role as head of the Plumbers, Krogh wrote, "We believed then that these leaks constituted a national security crisis and needed to be plugged at all costs. But we were wrong, and the price paid by the country was too high."

He elaborated further, “The premise of our action was the strongly held view within certain precincts of the White House that the president and those functioning on his behalf could carry out illegal acts with impunity if they were convinced that the nation’s security demanded it.”

75 years ago: US-led court frees Franz von Papen, enabler of Hitler’s rise to power

On January 26, 1949, Franz von Papen was freed by a West German “denazification” court after a successful appeal against an earlier sentence of eight years’ hard labor for his role in the crimes of the Third Reich. Papen was one of several figures in the German political establishment most directly involved in the 1933 coming to power of Adolf Hitler.

The freeing of a figure so central to the rise of the Nazi regime was bound up with the shift in US foreign policy. Under conditions of the Cold War against the Soviet Union, it was increasingly employing the services of fascist and Nazi forces as part of its push to dominate Europe and the world.

A reactionary from a Catholic landlord family, Papen had served the German effort in World War I, including as a diplomat and spymaster in Washington. At the conclusion of the conflict, Papen entered the Landtag or parliament of Prussia as a Centre Party monarchist, with credentials in the repression of communists and socialists.

Amid the disintegration of the Weimar Republic following the 1929 Wall Street crash, Papen came to increasing prominence, as an elite figure pushing for the abolition of democratic governance. Papen welcomed the turn of German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning towards a form of extra-parliamentary dictatorship but urged him to suppress the Social Democratic Party and rely on the Nazis as a base of support, making more explicit his authoritarian rule.

On June 1, 1932, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Papen chancellor of Germany. The surprise decision, amid the unraveling of constitutional governance, was made at the recommendation of General Kurt von Schleicher, an aristocratic adviser. Papen’s administration presided over austerity, a coup against the Social Democrats in Prussia and the legalization of the paramilitary wings of the Nazi Party. Deeply unpopular and lacking any mass base, Papen was compelled to vacate the office, and was replaced by Schleicher.

The two had a major political falling out. In the intrigues and backroom plots that followed, Papen developed close relations with the Nazi Party and Hitler. On January 9, 1933, Hindenburg and Papen agreed to form a new government that would include Hitler. At the end of the month, that administration was formed with Hitler as Chancellor and Papen as Vice Chancellor.

Papen supported Hitler’s crackdown on opposition, including the effective dissolution and mass repression of socialists and communists. He was sidelined in the Night of the Long Knives of 1934, when Hitler moved to consolidate full power and oust potential rivals, including within the Nazi Party. But Hitler never moved decisively against Papen, and he occupied a series of diplomatic and ambassadorial posts, including during World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust.

Papen’s 1949 appeal claimed that he had been incorrectly convicted of being a “main offender” in the crimes of the Nazi regime, and sought to be demoted to the status of an “offender in the second degree.” A court order for the confiscation of his substantial property was rescinded, he was fined 2,000 pounds and allowed to walk free. While one proviso barred him from holding public office again, von Papen resumed public activities, including with writings justifying the role he had played.

100 years ago: Oil tycoon admits to bribing US cabinet member

On January 24, 1924, in testimony before a hearing on the Teapot Dome oil lease scandal before the Senate Committee on Public Lands and Surveys, Edward Doheny, the owner of the Pan American Petroleum and Transport Company (PAT), admitted that in 1921 he gave Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall a no-interest loan of \$100,000 (about \$1,826,000 today), in return for the lease of 32,000 acres (13,000 hectares) of federal land. The corruption of Fall was only the most notorious of the many scandals involving the administration of President Warren G. Harding, who died in office in 1923, before the worst of them came to light.

The area leased, without bidding, the Elk Hills Naval Petroleum Reserve near Taft, California, was to be used for oil prospecting by PAT which owned oil fields in the US, Mexico and Venezuela. Fall had given similar rights to the Teapot Dome oil reserve in Wyoming next year to Harry F. Sinclair of Mammoth Oil. In total, Fall received about \$404,000 (about \$7,376,510 today) in bribes in return for prospecting rights from the two oil magnates.

The affair had come to the attention of the public after journalist Carl Magee raised questions about the appearance of sudden wealth by Albert Fall in the *Albuquerque Tribune*. Fall had been a senator from New Mexico. Shortly after that, a Wyoming oil prospector complained to his senator that the Teapot Dome lease to Sinclair had been awarded unfairly.

A Senate investigation eventually came under the leadership of Republican Senator Robert La Follette, whose office was burglarized during the investigation. Records related to the case also disappeared mysteriously, and Fall looked to be innocent—despite his lavish spending—until 1924 when evidence of Doheny’s bribe came to light. A series of civil and criminal trials ensued over the next few years.

Edward Doheny was never found guilty of a crime, and Harry Sinclair was sentenced to six years in prison where a further scandal ensued after he was given preferential treatment. Albert Fall was sentenced to a year in federal prison.

The Teapot Dome affair was perhaps the best-known example of federal corruption before the Watergate scandal of 1972-74 which ended the administration of Richard Nixon.



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