

This week in history: February 12-18

11 February 2024

25 years ago: Bill Clinton acquitted in impeachment trial

On February 12, 1999, the US Senate voted to acquit US President Bill Clinton in the impeachment trial over lying about an extramarital affair with White House staffer Monica Lewinsky, which had been set into motion by the Republican Party as a means of undoing the previous two elections.

Clinton's victory was followed by self-congratulatory declarations, hymns to bipartisanship, compliments on the senators' sagacity and variations on the theme that the proceedings had once again demonstrated how well "the system works."

In the end, 50 Republican senators voted to convict and remove the president on one trumped-up article of impeachment, and 45 voted for the other—far short of the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds majority. The quasi-constitutional putsch would have succeeded were it not for the overwhelming opposition among the broad masses of the American people. Popular opposition prevented the Senate from consummating the coup by convicting and ousting Clinton.

Leading figures in two branches of the government—Congress and the judiciary—were deeply implicated in the witch-hunt led by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the ensuing impeachment drive. Virtually no resistance to this conspiracy emerged from within the institutions of American bourgeois democracy, least of all the so-called "free press."

According to excerpts published in the *New York Times*, Senator Charles Schumer alluded to the erosion of democratic institutions revealed by the impeachment crisis, admitting that "for the first time, I've had doubts about whether our Governmental institutions can withstand the rancorous currents of the present political climate."

The New York Democrat outlined in blunt terms the efforts of a "small group of lawyers and zealots in organizations like the Rutherford Institute [which financed the Paula Jones suit]" to manufacture a sex scandal and use it to bring down the Clinton administration. "What is so profoundly disturbing," he said, "is not that this small group of Clinton-haters hatched this plan. It's that this group—or any group equally dogmatic and cunning—came so close to succeeding." Schumer acknowledged that the plot would have succeeded were it not for the overwhelming opposition of the public. "The American people have saved us from ourselves," he said.

Such remarks, few and far between, were reserved for the inner sanctum of the Senate chamber, once it had been cleared of the public and the press. None of the scores of senators who made the post-trial rounds of TV interview programs—Schumer

included—uttered a word about the right-wing conspiracy that underlay the impeachment process.

50 years ago: Wounded Knee trial of American Indian Movement leaders opens in St. Paul

On February 12, 1974, the trial of Russell Means and Dennis Banks opened in St. Paul, Minnesota. The two men were leaders of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and had taken part in the armed occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota the year prior.

For a period of about two months in late February to early May 1973 about 200 members and supporters of AIM seized control of the small town of Wounded Knee. The purpose of the occupations was to protest the poverty conditions and corruption of the local government on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and the treatment of native communities by the federal government.

The months-long standoff saw a blockade of the town with FBI and US marshals stopping shipments of food and other supplies to starve out the AIM protest. There were frequent gunfights during the standoff, with federal agents regularly firing sniper rifles at the AIM demonstration. Two AIM members were killed during the Wounded Knee occupation and 14 others wounded.

When the occupation ended, over 1,200 people were arrested. Essentially anyone found connected to AIM or the protest was rounded up. The government, hoping to make an example of Means and Banks as leaders of AIM, leveled 11 criminal charges against them.

On the opening day of the trial, the presiding Judge, Fred Nichols, ejected three attorneys for the defense, including William Kunstler, famous for defending the Chicago Seven anti-war protesters, for attempting to defend the right of Dennis Banks to make an opening statement. Banks chose to make several political points in his statement, comparing the treatment of Native Americans on reservations to those of Nazi Germany's police state and denouncing the American government for ignoring earlier peaceful requests to address the conditions at Pine Ridge.

When Banks attempted to explain to the jury that bias and mistreatment of Native Americans near the reservation was so widespread that the trial had to be moved outside of South Dakota, Judge Nichols interrupted him and refused to allow him to finish his statement. When three of the defense attorneys rose to defend their client, the judge ordered them dragged out of the courtroom.

Despite what was clearly an attack by the court to silence and intimidate the defense, the trial would reveal overwhelming

evidence of government misconduct in persecuting AIM. It emerged, for example, that the FBI had suppressed or tampered with evidence and illegally spied on and surveilled AIM members in various forms, including by warrantless wiretapping. In one instance, the prosecution produced a coached witness who testified that he observed criminal actions by the defendants; it was quickly revealed that the witness himself was imprisoned in the Pine Ridge jail at the time of the supposed crimes.

After a lengthy trial stretching nine months, Judge Nichols dismissed all the charges against Banks and Means on the grounds that the government acted illegally in prosecuting the case. In a statement, Nichols was forced to admit that the actions of the federal government in pursuing AIM had “polluted the waters of justice.”

75 years ago: Asbestos miners strike in Quebec, Canada

On February 14, 1949, at the stroke of midnight, asbestos miners in Quebec, Canada walked off the job in an indefinite strike that would begin a dispute that lasted for more than four months. The strikers were from four mines in the Eastern Townships of the province, including the town of Asbestos, which shared the name of the toxic substance that was extensively mined in the region.

The stoppage was motivated by intolerable work conditions, not dissimilar to those that existed in Victorian England. Strikers demanded a 15-cent an hour general wage increase, a 5-cent rise for onerous night work, penalty rates for weekend and holiday shifts and the regular removal of asbestos dust from inside and around the mines.

Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis, a fervent anti-communist, responded to the strike with intense hostility, declaring it as illegal and raising the specter of socialism. Duplessis’ far-right administration was fearful that the walkout could become a focal point for a broader movement of the working class, and a challenge to the province’s antiquated and regressive labor system in which workers were denied the most basic rights.

As the strike progressed, it became increasingly explosive and violent. In March, one of the mines hit, owned by the American corporation Johns-Manville, hired strikebreakers to resume operations. There were clashes between as many as 5,000 strikers and the scabs. A railroad track being used to continue work at the mine was bombed with dynamite and in another incident, strikers overturned a jeep to prevent work from proceeding.

In May, strikers sought to blockade the Johns-Manville mine and were met with intense repression. That included threats by police to use live fire against them, followed by mass arrests and roundups.

The onslaught was used by the bureaucrats of the National Federation of Mining Industry Employees and the Canadian Catholic Federation of Labour to shut down the dispute and force a return to work. The companies agreed to a token pay increase, well beneath the initial demand, rejected calls to improve conditions and refused to rehire many of the strikers.

100 years ago: Artist George Grosz fined for obscenity by Berlin court

On February 16, 1924, a Berlin court fined German artist George Grosz 6,000 reichsmarks (about \$25,000 today) for his *Ecce Homo*, a printed collection of 84 drawings and 16 watercolors.

The artworks portrayed the society of the Weimar Republic as corrupt and obscene, depicting the rich seeking out prostitutes. About three-fourths of the drawings are erotic in nature—the German court objected to the rendering of genitalia. Others depict capitalists, or mock German nationalism. It is some of Grosz’ most excoriating work and, in the eyes of many viewers today, what it portrays is synonymous with decadence and social decline.

The court was no doubt also displeased with the reference of *Ecce Homo* (Latin: “behold the man”) from the scene in the New Testament in which the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, presents Jesus Christ to a hostile crowd shortly before the crucifixion. Works depicting the *Ecce Homo* scene had been painted by masters such as Titian, Rubens, Caravaggio and others.

Grosz would later be tried for blasphemy for some of his other works.

Grosz was among the many European artists who had been radicalized by the World War and the Russian Revolution of 1917 and had turned to the communist movement. He was influenced by the Dadaist movement and was closely associated with the German painters of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement, which included artists such as Max Beckman and Otto Dix.

When asked by the judge during the trial, “Is it the particularly Philistine or bleak, naked, and dreary aspect that you mean to draw?” Grosz answered, “my whole conception of the world is very much opposed to that of the public prosecutor, it is considerably more negative and skeptical. I see things as I have depicted them.”



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