

This week in history: July 29-August 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 July 2024

25 years ago: NASA ends successful Lunar Prospector mission

On July 31, 1999, NASA crashed the Lunar Prospector spacecraft into the Moon to end its successful mission to detect frozen water on the lunar surface.

The Lunar Prospector was launched in January 1998 on a 19-month journey as part of NASA's Discovery program. The \$63 million mission's objective was to circle the Moon at an altitude of 62 miles in an orbit crossing the poles. Previous missions concentrated on narrow equatorial orbits, which left approximately 75 percent of the surface geology insufficiently mapped.

Before the Lunar Prospector, the last mission to the moon was by Apollo 17 in December of 1972. The Soviet Union's moon orbiter program ended in 1976. In January 1990, Japan sent its Hiten orbiter to the moon. The Galileo spacecraft, which was sent to Jupiter in 1991, made some observations of the moon on its way. But for a quarter-century, Earth's moon had been largely abandoned in favor of exploring other planets and their moons.

The Lunar Prospector orbited around the moon and discovered evidence of frozen water in craters through a Neutron Spectrometer, one of its five scientific instruments. The spectrometer was designed to detect neutrons that escape the lunar surface as a result of cosmic-ray bombardment. Based on this data, scientists were able to estimate that around 800 billion gallons of lunar ice may exist on the surface of the moon.

The other tools included a Gamma Ray Spectrometer, a Magnetometer, an Electron Reflectometer, an Alpha Particle Spectrometer, and a Doppler Gravity Experiment. The Gamma Ray Spectrometer was designed to record gamma rays. The Alpha Particle Spectrometer was damaged during the launch, but the data it recorded was later recovered. It was designed to detect outgassing events (the emission of gases like carbon dioxide), which are believed to be the result of low-level volcanic and tectonic shifts on the moon.

Information from the mission helped in the construction of a map of the surface composition of the Moon.

50 years ago: US House Judiciary Committee advances Nixon impeachment

On July 30, 1974, the Judiciary Committee of the United States House of Representatives approved bringing articles of impeachment against President Richard Nixon for his involvement in and subsequent cover-up of the June 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Convention headquarters located at the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C. A date of August 19 was set to begin the impeachment.

The Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment against the President. They charged:

1. That the President's agents burglarized the DNC headquarters and that he used the powers of the presidency to block an investigation and charges against those involved.

2. That Nixon "has repeatedly engaged in conduct violating the constitutional rights of citizens, impairing the due and proper administration of justice and the conduct of lawful inquiries."

3. That Nixon repeatedly disobeyed orders of the US Congress to answer subpoenas and provide evidence relating to the Watergate affair.

A fourth charge against Nixon for the illegal invasion and bombing of Cambodia in 1970 was also proposed by the Judiciary Committee but was rejected and not brought to the House floor.

The House committee decided to move forward with impeachment after the Supreme Court forced the White House to hand over tape recordings which contained evidence of Nixon's leadership in the Watergate scandal. The taping system, which had been set up by Nixon's own order to automatically record conversations in the Oval Office, revealed that he had planned to use the CIA to present false claims to the FBI that an investigation into Watergate would threaten national security.

Despite there being an 18-minute gap in the tapes where evidence was erased of a particularly critical discussion, the hundreds of hours that survived exposed that the president had been blatantly lying to the public about his knowledge and involvement in the affair. Nixon was both aware of the break-in plot and took every effort possible to delay and block an investigation into the crime.

In the months leading up to the impeachment charges, the US Senate had begun an investigation into Watergate, issuing subpoenas both for White House staff to testify and for the White House to hand over evidence, most importantly the tape recordings.

At every turn Nixon flouted the congressional investigation, claiming a fabricated principle of "executive privilege." Nixon argued that the president is immune to orders of Congress, at his own

discretion, if “national security” is concerned.

The case would go to the Supreme Court. On July 24, 1974, in *United States v. Nixon*, the Court ruled against the president, writing, “when the ground for asserting privilege as to subpoenaed materials sought for use in a criminal trial is based only on the generalized interest in confidentiality, it cannot prevail over the fundamental demands of due process of law in the fair administration of criminal justice.”

Even after the impeachment charges were approved by the committee it appeared that Nixon might still challenge the charges and attempt to remain in office. However, once the White House tapes were finally made public on August 5, a high-level Republican delegation visited the White House and made it clear that he could not survive a Senate trial. He would resign as president a few days later on August 9, 1974, before the House could proceed with impeachment.

75 years ago: Yangtze incident ends with flight of British warship

On July 30, 1949, the British warship HMS Amethyst fled under cover of darkness after a three-month confrontation with forces of the People’s Liberation Army, during the final stages of the Chinese Civil War.

The Amethyst came under fire on April 20, 1949 as it sailed up the Yangtze River from Shanghai towards Nanking, the capital of the right-wing pro-imperialist regime of the Kuomintang, headed by Chiang Kai-shek. The sloop was riddled by dozens of artillery rounds, killing its commander and some 22 sailors overall. It was grounded and half of its surviving crew abandoned the ship and fled by small boats to the south shore of the river, where Kuomintang forces were still in control.

Several efforts by other British vessels to relieve and refloat the Amethyst failed as a result of the gunnery of PLA forces on the north shore of the Yangtze. The Communist Party-led forces insisted that the British navy had no right to sail in China’s internal waters, calling it an effort to continue with the “gunboat diplomacy” practiced by the imperialist powers for nearly a century in China.

On April 30, the Chinese Communist Party formally demanded that all the remaining imperialist forces from Britain, France and the United States should leave China. Although the Amethyst was refloated, the PLA continued to block its withdrawal and prevent its resupply unless the British admitted they had provoked the incident.

On July 30, the Amethyst made a night-time escape attempt using a passenger ship carrying Chinese refugees to screen its departure. The PLA forces detected both ships, challenged them, and the Amethyst opened fire and fled down the river, while the passenger ship was sunk with many civilian deaths.

The warship subsequently sneaked past two PLA forts in the dark and rejoined the British fleet near Shanghai. In its entirety, the episode was a humiliation for British imperialism. Chinese general Peng Dehuai later declared: “The era when Imperialists take over a piece of Asia by simply stacking a few guns, is over and never to return.”

100 years ago: China protests limit on immigration to Japan

On August 2, 1924, the Chinese republican government in Beijing filed its seventh formal protest to Japan over its exclusion of Chinese immigrants. The Chinese noted that the immigration of Chinese laborers was particularly egregious because Japanese workers were free to come to China to work. The protest further accused the Japanese government of reneging on verbal assurances that Chinese workers would be allowed into Japan.

The Japanese Foreign Office and the Ministry of Home Affairs responded that there was no basis for the Chinese claim although the agencies admitted that local authorities did turn back unskilled laborers to prevent vagrancy, particularly in the aftermath of the 1923 earthquake which had caused unemployment to rise.

The Japanese immigration restrictions came in the context of a massive nationalist campaign against the American immigration restrictions under the Immigration Act of 1924 which put a complete halt on Japanese immigration to the United States. Mass demonstrations had been held throughout Japan for months with calls to boycott American goods.

On August 3, the Japanese ambassador of the United States, Masanao Hanihara, told the press on his return to Yokohama that he had not erred in warning the US government of “grave consequences” over the provisions of the exclusion of Japanese in the US Immigration Act. Hanihara, in response to a question, said he was not sure if the American public understood the true feelings of the Japanese people about the immigration restrictions.

The two incidents were indications of the stirring of a more aggressive imperialist spirit in Japan and imperialist tensions more generally. Japan, which did not want to be treated like a second-rate power by the United States, was fully prepared to treat China as a subordinate state.

Japanese immigration, perhaps more accurately characterized as colonization, continued in China’s Shandong province, where Japanese interests continued to own and build large transportation infrastructure.

In only two years, the assumption of the throne by Crown Prince Hirohito (the “Showa” period) would mark a turn toward more open imperialist ambitions, which would result in the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the horrific assault on China after 1937, as well as broad attacks on the democratic rights of the Japanese working class.



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