

This week in history: November 3-9

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

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25 years ago: Bush-Gore election provokes crisis

As polls closed on Tuesday night, November 7, in the 2000 US presidential election, Republican George W. Bush, the governor of Texas, and Democrat Al Gore, the sitting vice president, were locked in a neck-and-neck race, separated by some 18,000 votes across five key battleground states, though it was clear that Gore had won the nationwide popular vote, with a lead of well over 500,000 votes.

The outcome hinged on late returns and recounts in Florida. Early in the evening, several networks initially called Florida for Gore, then retracted the projection as new vote returns came in. By early Wednesday morning, November 8, the count suggested a narrow lead for Bush. Around 2:15 a.m., Fox News became the first network to call the state for Bush—its call made by John Ellis, Bush's cousin, who was overseeing the network's decision desk. Other networks quickly followed, before then rescinding their calls as the margin shrank to mere hundreds of votes.

Amid this media whiplash, Gore had telephoned Bush to concede. But as updated tallies showed Bush's margin shrinking, Gore called Bush a second time from Nashville to retract his concession, noting that the contest was now "too close to call" and that Florida law required an automatic recount.

Within hours, both campaigns dispatched teams of lawyers and advisers to Florida as controversy grew over "hanging chads," ballot irregularities, and disputes over absentee and overseas ballots.

On Wednesday and Thursday, November 8-9, focus turned to the recount process. Automatic machine recounts revealed that Bush's Florida lead had dwindled to fewer than 1,000 votes out of nearly 6 million cast statewide. Widespread voter disenfranchisement quickly became evident. In heavily Democratic Palm Beach County, thousands of voters—disproportionately elderly and working class—were misled by the chaotic "butterfly ballot," resulting in thousands of invalidated or miscast votes. In predominantly African American precincts, outdated machines, spoiled ballots, and improper purges of voter rolls deprived citizens of their franchise.

"Protesters" gathered outside county courthouses to oppose the recount. These were not local residents but Republican political operatives—congressional aides, party staff, and campaign workers flown into the state to pressure officials to halt manual recounts in Democratic-leaning counties. Their intimidating presence, later dubbed the "Brooks Brothers" riots, signaled that the Bush campaign was prepared to mobilize extra-legal pressure as well as legal challenges to preserve the narrow lead shown in the machine counts and to stop the counting of ballots.

By Friday, November 10, Bush declared victory, citing his narrow state-certified total, while Gore called for continuing hand recounts.

Analyzing the election results *World* real time, *WSWS.org* wrote on November 9, "For the first time in more than 125 years, a national election has produced a disputed result... the inconclusive and tainted outcome has created a constitutional crisis for which there is no easy solution, and has deeply compromised the entire political setup" and argued that "the crisis of the 2000 elections reflects the growth of social contradictions to such a point of intensity that they can no longer be adjudicated within the existing political and constitutional framework." Then, on November 10, we wrote, "The brazen attempt of the Bush campaign to declare victory ... exposes its utter contempt for the democratic rights of the American people," and further:

[I]t must be understood that the present crisis expresses, in the final analysis, the fragile state of American democracy. The breakdown of traditional democratic norms—expressed first in the impeachment crisis and now in the tainted election—reflects the tremendous divisions and tensions in American society... In a country whose social structure is defined by a staggering and historically unprecedented level of social inequality, with nearly half the nation's wealth concentrated in the hands of two percent of its population, democratic forms of rule cannot long survive.

50 years ago: Morocco's monarchy orchestrates "liberation" march in Sahara

On November 6, 1975, the Moroccan monarchy of King Hassan II staged the so-called "Green March." In a massive, state-managed operation, approximately 350,000 Moroccan civilians were transported to the southern border to cross into the Spanish-administered colony of Western Sahara.

Carrying the Moroccan flag, Qur'ans, and portraits of the king, the marchers advanced several kilometers into the desert territory, halting before Spanish minefields that guarded the border area. To give a sense of the reactionary character of the march, the organizers led chauvinist chants of "the Sahara belongs to us!," disregarding the native Sahrawi people, who had long been oppressed by Spain.

Presented to the world as a peaceful, popular reclamation of "historic" territory, the march was a carefully orchestrated political maneuver. The state-directed chauvinist campaign had been planned for months by the monarchy to bolster its own legitimacy and secure the immensely valuable economic resources in the Spanish held territory. The logistical

operation—moving 350,000 people and providing food, water, and fuel—was a massive, centrally planned military-style operation.

Spain, which had occupied Western Sahara since the late 19th century, was then in a state of crisis. Its dictator, General Francisco Franco, was on his deathbed and the fascist government was nearing total collapse with major working class opposition developing. With the loss of the territory clearly inevitable, the Spanish regime was eager to exit its African colony without a costly war.

The march provided the political opportunity for its capitulation. Within days, on November 14, Spain signed the Madrid Accords with Morocco and Mauritania, agreeing to a tripartite administration that partitioned the territory.

The accords left no governing role for the indigenous Sahrawi people who had been in a struggle for national self-determination and the establishment of their own state. The Sahrawi independence movement, the Polisario Front, rejected the Madrid Accords and launched an armed struggle, first against Spain and then against the new Moroccan and Mauritanian occupiers.

This regional annexation was fully supported by the major imperialist powers. Both Washington and Paris backed their client, King Hassan II. They preferred a stable, pro-Western monarchy in control of the territory to allow access to the rich resources. Control of the region by the Polisario Front, which was backed by regional rival Algeria, would be a major obstacle for French and US capital.

The consequences of Madrid Accords and the spectacle of the Green March that proceeded it have been decades of war, the construction by Morocco of the “Berm,” a 2,700km fortified sand wall, and the establishment of vast Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, where tens of thousands remain today.

75 years ago: Battle of Pakchon marks the conclusion of China’s “First Phase Offensive” in the Korean War

On November 5, 1950, imperialist forces from the United Nations Command engaged with a division of troops from China’s People’s Volunteer Army (PVA) around the North Korean village of Pakchon. The battle was one of the earliest of the Korean War that involved China, which began its participation in the war 10 days earlier during its “First Phase Offensive.”

After UN forces captured Pyongyang in late October, US-led forces continued marching north towards the Yalu River close to the Chinese border. In response, Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong ordered the PVA—a force drawn from the People’s Liberation Army but formally separate to avoid declaring war on the United States—to secretly cross into Korea. Their early engagements were in Onjong and Unsan, where the PVA overran US and South Korean troops, halting their northward advance to the Yalu River.

The opening moves of the Battle of Pakchon involved PVA troops, with support from the Korean People’s Army (KPA), attempting to consolidate their surprise victories and cut off the withdrawing UN troops from the south. Around 1,500 PVA-KPA troops pushed back elements of the US 24th Infantry Division by two kilometres before striking at the rear of the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade.

The following counterattack by Australian troops of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR) involved the capture and holding of a well-defended hill by 300 soldiers. Hours of fighting resulted in 14 Australians and approximately 200 PVA troops killed, before a withdrawal of PVA troops. The fighting concluded China’s 10-day surprise advance, as it was unable to secure a breakthrough victory at Pakchon which would have threatened a complete cutoff of withdrawal routes for the US-led forces.

The Battle of Pakchon marked the end of China’s First Phase Offensive in the Korean War, which halted the northward advance of UN forces that had begun in September. The subsequent Second Phase Offensive in late November forced the imperialist troops to retreat entirely from North Korea over the next month, falling back to the 38th parallel and taking up a defensive position.

100 years: Plot to assassinate Benito Mussolini foiled

On November 4, 1925, Italian police broke into a room at Rome’s Hotel Dragoni in which Tito Zaniboni, a former Socialist parliamentary deputy, had set up a sniper’s nest with the intention of assassinating fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, who was scheduled to speak from a balcony at the Chigi Palace across the street. A fascist army officer, Luigi Capello, was also arrested a few days later.

Newspapers, including the *New York Times*, carried stories that the assassination was meant to start an uprising against the fascist government across Italy. But many historians believe that Mussolini engineered the attempt to intensify political repression of his opponents.

This is exactly what happened. Tens of thousands of fascists had been called to a mass rally by the fascist press to support the dictator immediately after Zaniboni’s arrest was made public that day. Uniformed fascist paramilitaries appeared and the crowd shouted, “We want Zaniboni’s head” and “Down with the Socialists!” Mussolini spoke to the crowd and warned them against precipitous actions.

The next day the Unitary Socialist Party, to which Zaniboni had belonged, was illegalized and its press banned, supposedly to stop reprisals from fascists. At the end of December, legislation was passed that officially granted Mussolini supreme executive power. State employees were forbidden from belonging to organizations that deviated from official fascist politics. One historian writes that after the arrest of Zaniboni, “Fascist reaction was immediate and brutal whether at the level of direct action against its most prominent opponents in a large number of provinces and cities or at the parliamentary and legislative level.”

It was because of this legislation that the Marxist political and theoretician Antonio Gramsci was arrested and imprisoned in 1926. Zaniboni, who had earlier sympathized with fascism, was later rehabilitated by Mussolini.



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