

This week in history: September 2-8

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.

1 September 2024

25 years ago: Puerto Rican nationalists released from prison

On September 7, 1999, 11 Puerto Rican nationalists, among the longest-serving political prisoners in America, were released after agreeing to the terms of a clemency offer from President Bill Clinton. Their attorney said that the prisoners had agreed to the conditions imposed by the White House, after initial reluctance, in the face of a campaign by police, prosecutors and right-wing politicians, joined in by Hillary Clinton, to demand the rescinding of the clemency offer.

The clemency imposed significant restrictions on the political freedom of the prisoners. In addition to signing statements renouncing violence and agreeing not to join any organization advocating violence, they were effectively barred from participating in ordinary political life. One of the cruelest restrictions was a ban on associating with “known felons,” a provision which automatically barred any of those released from meeting each other. Two of the prisoners were sisters—they required special permission from Washington to visit each other; and another was the stepmother of a nationalist prisoner, who remained in jail.

The FBI and the Justice Department were given the power to oversee the prisoners’ parole, including random drug testing and monitoring of compliance with the pledge to renounce violence. Jan Susler, the prisoners’ attorney, said that Puerto Rican civil rights and legal defense groups set up their own monitors to forestall such action by the federal police agencies.

All 16 prisoners and ex-prisoners were supporters of the Armed National Liberation Front (FALN) and the Puerto Rican People’s Army (EPB), also known as the “Macheteros,” which carried out a series of bombings and other armed attacks on US government offices and military installations in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The jailing of the FALN prisoners was one of the most savage and remorseless acts of repression of that period. No evidence was presented linking any of the defendants to specific acts of violence. All were convicted of conspiracy and sedition charges after brief trials in which they refused to participate, on the grounds that they did not recognize the authority of the United States government. The sentences imposed ranged from 35 years to a staggering 105 years in prison for Luis Rosa, a 19 year old just out of high school.

Most of the victims of this judicial witch-hunt were students, teachers and other professionals, many of them active in Puerto Rican neighborhoods and cultural affairs in the city of Chicago, where the

trials took place. All remained intransigent opponents of American imperialism throughout their long terms in federal penitentiaries.

50 years ago: Ford pardons Nixon

On September 8, 1974, recently installed US President Gerald Ford issued a full pardon to former President Richard Nixon to protect him against any form of prosecution for the crimes he committed related to the Watergate scandal while in office. The decision was made not only to protect Nixon but to shield the entire US ruling establishment whose conspiracies against the basic rights of the working class stood to be exposed by a public trial.

Ford became vice president after he was selected by Nixon to replace Vice President Spiro Agnew, his two-time running mate, after Agnew was forced to resign for accepting bribes from Maryland contractors, some delivered to him in cash while he was vice president. Ford announced the pardon in a televised address to the public. In his speech he referred to the criminal actions of the Nixon administration as “an American tragedy in which we have all played a part.” He continued, “It could go on and on, or someone must write an end to it. I have concluded that only I can do that, and if I can, I must.”

To justify his decision, Ford argued that as a former president, Nixon would be unable to receive an unbiased trial and that “ugly passions would again be aroused ... our people would again be polarized in their opinions. And the credibility of our free institutions of government would again be challenged at home and abroad.”

In other words, Ford believed that the opinion of the vast majority of the population, which was that Nixon must be held accountable for his crimes, was irrelevant and that the interests of the capitalist state outweighed the democratic rights and concerns of the working class.

Ford made several statements in which he acknowledged the desire of the population to see justice carried out, but that he would not allow the will of the majority to motivate his decision. He remarked that he had “to consider the opinions of my countrymen and to take counsel with my most valued friends. But these seldom agree, and in the end, the decision is mine.” Later he added, “I cannot rely upon public opinion polls to tell me what is right.”

After the announcement of Nixon’s pardon, the US predecessor to

the WWS, *The Bulletin*, analyzed the decision and clarified the true motivations. In a statement published September 10, *The Bulletin* stated:

A public trial of Nixon would inevitably shed light on all the elements of the Watergate conspiracy that big business wants so desperately to cover up. The relation between Nixon and the military, which apparently included discussions on the possibility of a coup to prevent impeachment, would come out in a trial and expose the actual preparations for dictatorship being made behind closed doors.

75 years ago: MacArthur hails progress in Japan amid escalating Cold War offensive

On September 2, 1949, General Douglas MacArthur, head of the American military's Far East Command and military ruler of Japan, issued a lengthy statement marking four years since the US defeat and occupation of Japan in World War II. MacArthur's statement was not simply a historical retrospective but formed part of a broader intensification of US Cold War measures directed against the Soviet Union and the Chinese Revolution.

MacArthur claimed that Japan had "fully and faithfully" complied with US occupation, meriting consideration of a peace treaty and a turn towards governance independent of the American military. The period since the war had been "fruitful years in terms of human progress," MacArthur claimed, with Japan "advanc[ing] steadily and progressively along the road of spiritual regeneration and physical reconstruction."

In reality, the war had concluded with the US dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, war crimes aimed primarily at intimidating the Soviet Union and signaling the US determination to become the hegemonic world power. The US had then established an effective military dictatorship over the devastated country, headed by MacArthur. In collaboration with the remnants of the Japanese state, the US military regime had cracked down on widespread opposition, including major strikes and protests over food shortages and a social crisis.

The US drafted a new constitution, providing for limited bourgeois democracy. It maintained the emperor as a symbolic head of state, despite the central involvement of the monarchy in the war crimes committed by Japan in World War II. The US increasingly moved away from nominally holding Japanese war criminals to account, as it collaborated with elements of the old state bureaucracy. This week in September 1949, Admiral Soemu Toyoda, who had been a senior commander of the Japanese navy as it laid waste to much of the Indo-Pacific, was acquitted of war crimes charges entirely.

MacArthur's depiction of Japanese progress came a day after he told US newspapers that there should be a push to defeat the Chinese Revolution, which was making major advances. "What would do most good now would be a ringing announcement that we would support everyone in China and the Far East who is fighting Communism," he declared. The Soviet Union protested the US moves towards a peace treaty with Japan, warning that the intention was to revive Tokyo as a bulwark against Moscow. In response, US officials, backed by British

and NATO representatives, declared that they would proceed without reference to Soviet demands.

100 years ago: Saudi forces massacre 300 civilians near Mecca

On September 3, 1924, troops of Abdulaziz ibn Saud, the most powerful warlord in the Arabian Peninsula, massacred 300 civilians in the city of Taif, about 40 miles (65 km) east of Mecca, as a part of his conquest of the territory he named after his family, Saudi Arabia.

Taif and Mecca were in the western part of the peninsula known as the Hejaz. Forces of the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire who were funded and supplied by British imperialism, had taken the region in the aftermath of the collapse of Ottoman authority, and set up the Kingdom of Hejaz, which was ruled by Hussein bin Ali, a member of the Hashemite dynasty that governs Jordan a century later.

A Wahabi (the sect of Islam to which the Saud family belonged) militia, known as the Ikhwan, besieged the city and after Hussein's forces withdrew, entered Taif and carried out the massacre. Part of the motivation may have been that a portion of the population belonged to confessions of Islam that the Wahabis regarded as heretical. In earlier times, Taif had a substantial Shia population, a sect that remains oppressed by the Saudis today.

Ibn Saud took the opportunity to expand his base in the central region of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Nejd, largely because the British had stopped arming and funding Hussein after he declared himself Caliph (religious leader of all Muslims) in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

By 1925 Ibn Saud had set up a new polity that comprised most of central and west Arabia, called the Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd, which was renamed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. In 1938 substantial oil reserves were discovered in the kingdom, and Abdulaziz, who lived until 1954, made a close alliance with American imperialism that has been maintained by his successors in the House of Saud, which continues to rule the kingdom.



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