

# This week in history: March 2-8

2 March 2015

[25 Years Ago](#) | [50 Years Ago](#) | [75 Years Ago](#) | [100 Years Ago](#)

## **25 years ago: Iran-Contra trial of Admiral Poindexter begins**

March 5, 1990 was the first day of the trial of the high-ranking Reagan administration official, retired Admiral John M. Poindexter, on charges in the Iran-Contra affair. Poindexter served as national security advisor from late 1985 through late 1986, a period when the Iran-Contra crisis was at its height. He faced five felony counts: one of conspiracy, two charges of obstructing Congress and two of lying to Congressional committees.

On March 2, Poindexter's predecessor as national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, was given a two-year suspended sentence and fined \$20,000 after pleading guilty to misleading Congress on the Iranian arms scandal.

Before Poindexter's trial, Reagan gave a secret videotaped deposition. Because Poindexter had already testified to Congress under immunity that he destroyed documents verifying shipments of Hawk missiles to Iran, the strategy of his defense attorneys was to block him from testifying in his own defense where he could perjure himself over questioning of the arms sales.

Since Lt. Col. Oliver North was acquitted of several counts in his 1988-89 trial, claiming he was acting under the orders of his superiors, Poindexter sought testimony from Reagan that, as president, he was aware of the operations. North was the first witness for the prosecution. The defense team unsuccessfully sought to prevent him from testifying in order to block damaging testimony that had already been given before Congress, that North had witnessed Poindexter destroying the documents.

If convicted on all five counts, Poindexter could have been sentenced to up to 25 years in prison.

[top]

## **50 years ago: Police assault Selma-to-Montgomery March**

On March 7, 1965, Alabama state police and Dallas County Sheriff deputies carried out a bloody attack against civil rights demonstrators on the outskirts of Selma. The assault was ordered by Democratic Governor George Wallace, who had issued a decree banning civil rights groups from staging a march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery to rally support for increased voter registration for blacks.

The marchers were halted by a line of police in riot gear as they crossed the Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River to begin the 50-mile trek to Montgomery. When the black workers and youth courageously ignored the orders of the police major to return home, the troopers charged into the crowd, beating the marchers without regard to age or sex. Seventeen protesters were hospitalized and another 40 required emergency medical treatment.

Deputies and a vigilante posse armed with pistols and riot guns pursued the demonstrators to the black working class district around Brown Chapel, where the march had originated, terrorizing the neighborhood for over an hour. Deputies were, however, routed by a hail of bricks and bottles when they attempted to storm the chapel itself.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., leader of the Selma voting rights campaign, had been informed in advance of Governor Wallace's plans to stop the march and chose to remain in Atlanta. He returned two days later with a large contingent of liberal ministers to lead a carefully stage-managed march that was peacefully dispersed. The Selma attack prompted large sympathy demonstrations in major cities throughout the country. In an attempt to defuse the growing anger in the working class, the Johnson administration, with the support of Democratic Party liberals, announced plans to submit emergency voting rights legislation to Congress.

[top]

### **75 years ago: Finland capitulates to Soviet Union**

On March 5, 1940, the government of Finland notified the Soviet Union that it would accept Moscow's terms to end the Winter War, two days after the Red Army moved on Viipuri, Finland's second largest city. On March 6, Finnish emissaries were dispatched to Moscow to conclude a peace.

Sweden played a key diplomatic role as an intermediary, first in discussions on a possible armistice, then on the terms for a longer-term settlement. The Swedish bourgeoisie feared for its own status, sandwiched between the war demands of Hitler's Germany, to which it was tied economically, and the Red Army, whose troops would be on its borders in the event of a complete collapse of Finland.

The 105-day struggle came to a close with Finnish forces finally overwhelmed by the Red Army. Finland would cede border territory to the USSR in the northern, central and southern portions of the country. Also handed over were islands in the Baltic Sea to serve as naval bases for the military defense of the approaches to Leningrad.

But Stalin dropped the goal set early in the war of "sovietizing" Finland. In the largest migration in Finland's history, 400,000 Finns evacuated those areas surrendered to the USSR, revealing the masses' profound distrust of Stalinist rule.

There was also tremendous disillusionment with the war in the USSR. Wounded Soviet soldiers returned with horror stories about the slaughter in Finland, which claimed up to a million lives. When the Red Army soldiers taken prisoner by the Finns were released at the end of the conflict, Stalin had many of them murdered out of fear their discontent with Soviet and Red Army leadership would find an expression inside the army.

In the face of widespread Finnish hostility and even ridicule, the Moscow bureaucracy in the meantime had relegated to obscurity their puppet Finnish government in Terijoki under the leadership of local Stalinist leader Otto Kuusinen.

[top]

### **100 years ago: Greek prime minister resigns over war policy**

On March 6, 1915, Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos resigned following a conflict with King Constantine and other sections of the Greek ruling elite over the nation's involvement in World War I. In the days before his resignation, Venizelos had committed three divisions of the Greek military to join the Allied campaign in the Dardanelles, directed against the Ottoman Empire, a move vetoed by the King.

Venizelos, a longtime liberal politician who became prime minister in 1910, led Greece through the two Balkan Wars, first against the Ottoman Empire, then against Bulgaria, which resulted in a significant expansion of Greek territory, adding Crete, Thessaloniki, part of Macedonia and the northern Aegean coast to within a few miles of Istanbul.

With the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, foreign policy divisions within the Greek ruling elite came to the surface. In an attempt to win Bulgaria to the side of the Allies, British authorities had arranged for areas of Serbia and eastern Macedonia to be ceded to the country, calling for Greece to support the arrangement. Venizelos had agreed with the proposal, but King Constantine, who was fiercely anti-Bulgarian, had rejected it. The differences over foreign policy within the establishment were so sharp that they became known as the "national schism."

With the launching of the assault on the Dardanelles, controlling the critical waterway to the Black Sea and Russia, the Allies had again attempted to win support for the war effort from Greek and Bulgarian authorities. Venizelos favored support for the allies, viewing it as a necessity given Anglo-French naval dominance in the Mediterranean.

King Constantine, and other sections of the Greek elite wanted Greece to establish a neutrality that would be favorable to the war effort of the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary. Constantine appointed Dimitrios Gounaris, a right-wing populist who oriented towards Germany, as Venizelos' successor.

[top]

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