

This week in history: September 28-October 4

28 September 2020

25 years ago: O.J. Simpson acquitted in murder trial

On October 3, 1995, retired American football star O.J. Simpson was acquitted of the murder of his former wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ron Goldman. A year earlier, the pair had been found brutally stabbed to death outside the Simpson home in Brentwood, Los Angeles.

Simpson rose to fame in the 1970s as a college and professional running back. He and Brown married in 1985 following his retirement as an athlete. Their marriage was highly publicized as toxic and “mutually obsessive,” including multiple reports of spousal abuse. They divorced in 1992 and briefly reunited before a final separation the following year.

An estimated 100 million people internationally listened into the announcement of the verdict. The “Trial of the Century,” as it was dubbed in the media, was wildly sensationalized by the press and presented primarily through the lens of race. The 1992 Los Angeles riots had occurred just a few years prior, in which the police officers responsible for the videotaped beating of an African American motorist, Rodney King, were acquitted of excessive force, sparking mass outrage in the population. Concerns were voiced that a “guilty” verdict for Simpson would have a similar outcome.

Contrary to the media presentation of the Simpson case, it only further underscored the fundamental class divide in the United States—as well as the diseased character of popular culture.

The conclusion of the trial set the stage for obscene commercialism. Johnnie Cochran, one of Simpson’s attorneys, signed a multi-million-dollar book contract. Simpson himself attempted to cash in on his acquittal, allegedly accepting \$600,000 to claim authorship of a ghost-written book entitled *If I Did It: Confessions of the Killer*, in which the details of the murders were outlined. A series of paid television interviews were also lined up for the star, although they were largely canceled.

The *International Workers Bulletin*, the American predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, wrote at the time: “In its own grotesque way, the trial was a stark reaffirmation of the class principles, values and ideology that govern American society. From the very beginning it was obvious that everything and everyone involved in this so-called Trial of the Century would be debased and dishonored by the avalanche of money and the media sensationalism that followed in its destructive path... Far from representing a legal or social milestone, the acquittal of O. J. Simpson merely confirms that everything in America has a price-tag on it.”

50 years ago: Egyptian President Nasser dies

On September 28, 1970, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of

Egypt since 1956, died unexpectedly of a heart attack. The sudden death of the most prominent representative of pan-Arab nationalism and the head of state of the most populous Arab nation was a major international event and led to immediate unrest.

Thousands of Arabs in various countries poured into the streets to mourn Nasser’s death. As many as 75,000 marched in Jerusalem. In Beirut, the mass gatherings turned violent and over a dozen were killed in chaotic mass gatherings. When Nasser’s funeral was held on October 1, millions of Egyptians came out to witness the funeral procession.

Nasser came to power following the 1952 military coup of the Free Officers Movement. While he did not officially become president until four years later, Nasser was a central figure in the overthrow of the British puppet King Farouk. Key to Nasser’s rise to power was the Stalinist Egyptian Communist Party, which backed Nasser even as Egyptian communists were imprisoned by the new regime.

Nasser understood that the base of his support, the Egyptian bourgeoisie, was still relatively weak after decades of subordination to British interests and could not crush the working class outright. In order to maintain his new position and bring stability to his government, Nasser carried out a program of limited economic and social reform. Under Nasser, the Egyptian GDP averaged a growth rate of 4 percent per year due to a large expansion of industrialization. Egypt’s population nearly doubled during this time, going from about 20 million in 1952 to over 40 million by the end of the 1970s.

A major component of Nasser’s legacy was his promotion of a pan-Arab movement opposed to Israel. In 1956, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal prompting an invasion of Egypt by the United Kingdom, France, and Israel. While his military fared badly, Nasser was able to hold onto the Suez Canal and gain international recognition for its control, when the Eisenhower administration intervened to oppose the British-French adventure.

This event and others, including a close alliance with the Soviet Union and his support of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), allowed Nasser to present himself as a leading anti-imperialist figure on the world stage. However, his bourgeois-nationalist orientation quickly reached its political limits.

Nasser was never able to realize an effective unity with a single Arab state, after the abortive union with Syria and catastrophic efforts at “unity” with Yemen. After the devastating losses suffered in the 1967 Six Day War by the Arab coalition against Israel, the pan-Arab movement fell apart. The Arab countries splintered, with some hoping to make deals with Israel and the United States that would most benefit their individual national

interests.

This came to a head in September of 1970 when a one-sided conflict, known as “Black September,” broke out between Jordan and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which was allied with Syria. The war was a crippling blow against any remaining belief in a united Arab bourgeois nationalist solution to imperialism.

On September 27, just one day before his death, Nasser hosted an emergency conference of Arab leaders in Cairo, boycotted by Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and Morocco. Nasser was nonetheless able to broker a ceasefire between Yasser Arafat of the PLO and King Hussein of Jordan. Only hours after the conference officially concluded Nasser suffered his fatal heart attack. Nasser would be replaced by Vice President Anwar Sadat, who would pursue a policy of rapprochement with the US and Israel.

75 years ago: US General Patton demoted after opposing “denazification” in Germany

On September 28, 1945, US General George S. Patton was removed from his position as military governor of Bavaria in Allied-occupied Germany. A week later, he was relieved of command of the US Third Army, and dispatched to the town of Bad Nauheim, where he was to oversee a small military division working on a history of the Second World War in Europe.

The demotion followed a public controversy earlier in September, when it became public knowledge that former Nazi Party officials held prominent posts in Bavaria, under Patton’s leadership. Patton responded to the anger that resulted, by dismissing the need for “denazification,” the Allied doctrine which nominally called for the removal of Nazi officials from their posts, the prosecution of those guilty of war crimes and the construction of a new civil administration.

Patton compared the differences between the Allied powers and the Nazis, whose genocide of the Jews and other minorities was becoming known, to the conflicts between the Democratic and Republican parties in the US. He sought to justify his collaboration with Nazis, by asserting that most experts familiar with infrastructure and civil management had no choice but to join Adolf Hitler’s party.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Military Governor of the US Occupation Zone in Germany, had several sharp exchanges with Patton after the latter’s comments caused widespread anger. When Patton refused to resign from his positions, Eisenhower took action against him.

Eisenhower’s move was motivated by fears that Patton’s comments undermined the stated rationale for the Allied occupation and *de facto* military rule of Germany. There were also concerns that Patton’s statements would inflame mass anti-fascist sentiment throughout Europe that could reverse efforts to maintain capitalist rule in Greece, Italy, France, and Germany itself.

While Patton’s remarks have been attributed to increasingly erratic behavior, potentially associated with brain damage, the reality is that his defense of collaboration with Nazis was official policy. In the aftermath of the war, the US and Britain would seek to prevent any reckoning by the working class with the fascist forces that had laid waste to Europe over the preceding years. In Italy and Germany, Fascist and Nazi officials were able to escape

justice to South America, through “ratlines” often coordinated by the Catholic Church. Others remained and were able to return to prominent positions in public life.

The first edition of *Brown Book: War criminals and Nazis in the Federal Republic* —in government, business, administration, the army, the judiciary and science, published in 1965, would document the former Nazi membership of 1,800 business leaders, politicians and senior officials of the Federal Republic of Germany.

100 years: Chicago “Black Sox” baseball scandal begins

On September 28, 1920, in what came to be one of professional sport’s most infamous scandals, seven players and one former player from the Chicago White Sox baseball team were indicted by a Cook County, Illinois grand jury for entering into a conspiracy with organized crime figures to deliberately lose games in the 1919 World Series in return for money.

The team’s owner, Charles Comiskey, supplied the Cook County prosecutors with evidence that the players had “thrown” some of the games to the opposing team, the Cincinnati Reds. One player confessed to the grand jury on the September 28 and the charges were brought.

In what became known as the “Black Sox” scandal, agents of New York mobster Arnold Rothstein allegedly paid seven of the players \$5,000 each (about \$75,000 in 2020 dollars) and the player who had arranged the conspiracy, Chuck Gandil, received \$35,000 (about \$516,000 in 2020 dollars).

White Sox players were underpaid and deeply resented Comiskey for it. Professional baseball players were not allowed to collectively negotiate contracts and were prevented from playing on another team if they rejected the contract offered to them.

Although the players were acquitted in a 1921 trial, they were banned for life from playing professional baseball and still cannot be admitted today to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Historical research indicates that all the players probably had some involvement in the conspiracy, though some maintained their innocence.

The scandal shook American sports and more generally, American society. Rumors and accusations of games thrown to gamblers abounded in 1920. To many it was confirmation that the United States was soaked in corruption and that the power of money tarnished every aspect of life.

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