Eisenhower, Eden and the Anglo-American ‘Special Relationship’
During the Suez Crisis

JEREMY J. ROTHWELL
Washington College

"Under all the circumstances I have laid before you, a greater responsibility now develops upon the United States. We have shown, so that none can doubt, our dedication to the principle that force shall not be used internationally for any aggressive purpose and that the integrity and independence of the nations of the Middle East should be inviolate. Seldom in history has a nation's dedication to principle been tested as severely as ours during recent weeks."

This sweeping declaration dripping of Wilsonian interventionism and moralism was delivered by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to Congress in January of 1957 in defense of his startling rebuke of two of the nation’s most important allies: Britain and France. Only weeks before, in one of the most controversial decisions of his career, President Eisenhower had orchestrated an overwhelming vote in the United Nations General Assembly demanding that Britain and France immediately withdraw their military forces from Egypt (Kissinger 542). This action, coupled with the American threat to sell its currency reserves of British Pounds and Sterling bonds, thereby causing a collapse of the British currency, British and French forces had little choice but to reluctantly withdraw their forces in the face of international humiliation.

The repercussions of President Eisenhower’s actions were profound, and extended far beyond the boundaries of Egypt. In discrediting its two closest allies for engaging in imperialistic behavior, President Eisenhower laid the groundwork for America’s increased involvement in the protecting of “free” nations in every region of the world. Before the Suez Crisis, the United States could rely on Britain to use its power and prestige in protecting the balance of power in the Middle East (Kissinger 549). Afterwards, it would be left to shoulder that burden, at times using military force, which ironically it had previously railed so furiously against. Furthermore, President Eisenhower sought Congressional approval for the wide-ranging authority to respond to future acts of foreign aggression with military force if necessary. While many disgruntled Senators and Congressmen complained of handing over a blank check to the President, the measure easily passed because Congress recognized that to do otherwise would be interpreted as weakness in the eyes of the Soviets (White 1). The aftermath would mark the height of Presidential leadership and influence during the Cold War, and paving the war for the country’s military buildup in Vietnam during the 1960’s (Rosati & Scott 89).

In hindsight the Suez Crisis could have been resolved in a more peaceful and positive manner for Western interests had the United States acted with more foresight and

understanding towards the crisis. France and surely Great Britain would not have felt compelled to link with the Israelis in invading the canal-zone had the United States brought greater economic and diplomatic pressure to bear upon Egypt to agree to some measure of international control of the Suez Canal. American actions and inactions in the crisis highlight a series of reoccurring themes of its foreign policy: (1) The inability to comprehend and understand the sometimes different, but no less important, national interests of even its closest allies (2) The inability to rectify its own national interests in “containing Communism” or “fighting the global war on terror” to meet the complex issues surrounding Arab politics in the Middle East.

While the United States was comparatively a new arrival on the Middle East scene; Russia, France and especially Britain had been jockeying for power in the region for more than a century. Amide a decaying Ottoman Empire, Britain and France at the Conference of Constantinople of 1888 secured their dominance in the region by declaring the Suez Canal and Egypt more broadly as a mutual protectorate. While Britain would technically remain the occupying force, both countries agreed to guarantee free passage for all nations through the Suez Canal (Epstein 11). It would become second only to India as a jewel of the British Empire acting as the vital trade link to the colonies of the Far East. The end of the First World War brought the height imperial influence as Britain and France filled the vacuum caused by the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Britain and France somewhat haphazardly carved new territories (classified as protectorates) out of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. Britain controlled Egypt, Palestine, Iraq and Jordan while the French ruled Syria and Lebanon.

In the interwar years, Britain gradually conceded political autonomy in the region with the granting of independence to Egypt in 1922 and to Iraq in 1932 in the face of growing Arab nationalism. Britain did however retain its bases in Cairo and Baghdad respectively with sizable garrisons in each (Epstein 13). Furthermore, the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, had in 1936 signed an alliance whereby withdrawing all soldiers from Cairo and Alexandria to the canal-zone as a means of cooling Arab dissent (Nutting 371). While there was a brief resurgence of Anglo-French military activity in the region during the Second World War in an effort to protect the vital supply route of the Suez Canal, the movement towards political autonomy gradually continued in the post-war era. Syria and Lebanon gained their independence in 1946 while Jordan followed suit in 1948. Modeling partly on the Raj in India, Britain established moderate constitutional monarchies in Egypt, Jordan and Iraq with militaries run largely by European officers. John Bagot Glubb who commanded the Arab Legion (Jordanian Army) from 1939 to 1956 remarked, “I have always referred to the instinctive mutual sympathy which often seems to draw British and Arabs together, even when political relations are bad (Epstein 23-24).” Thus in spite of increasing nationalist sentiment, the British remained on favorable terms with the Arab nations and the dominant force in the region.

A more difficult situation presented itself in the case of Palestine. In November of 1917, the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour sent a letter to Baron Rothschild noting a policy decision by the cabinet to create a Jewish “homeland” in Palestine. While the specific reasons for doing so remain unclear, many scholars argue that this gave Britain the pretext for maintaining a significant military force on the east bank of the Suez Canal under the guise of enforcing a “mandate” (Nutting 291). For the first two decades a slow but steady migration of Jews took root in Palestine. However, with the
end of the Second World War, a renewed Zionist fervor swept the world scene as hundreds of thousands displaced and persecuted Jews demanded entry to Palestine. President Harry Truman forcefully endorsed a proposal to allow 100,000 West German Jews immediate entry to the utter chagrin of the British Labour Government. The Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, flatly rejected all such demands on account that it would be highly detrimental to Anglo-Arab relations in the region (Northedge 105-108).

Bevin, to his credit, could point out that such an act would run contrary to established British policy in the region. This sentiment was echoed by Balfour himself in a letter to the Sherif Hussein in March of 1918:

“A Jewish settlement in Palestine would only be allowed insofar as would be consistent with the political and economic freedom of the Arab population.” (Nutting 293)

Truman, however, had little patience for Britain’s “imperialist” rhetoric, and together with the Soviets pushed an agenda through the United Nations General Assembly to partition Palestine into a separate Jewish and Arab state. Britain was among the ten (mostly Commonwealth) nations who abstained from voting for the creation of a Jewish state thus bringing an end to the British mandate in Palestine in May of 1948 (Northedge 114-115). American prestige in the Arab world was further tarnished a year later when the United States formally recognized the state of Israel.

When Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected President in 1952, he initially deferred to the British in Middle Eastern affairs due to their experience and prestige in the region. In an effort to restore a semblance of stability to the war-torn region, Eisenhower delicately distanced himself from any Israeli cooperation while at the same time refusing to sell their Arab neighbors (especially Egypt) any offensive military weapons (Shlaim 181). Initially, the Anglo-American relationship seemed to work well as both powers worked cooperatively in the covert operation AJAX to topple the Iranian nationalist Mohammed Mossedeq regime and restore the Shah to power (Epstein 29).

Affairs in Egypt proved however to be more complex. In 1952 Muhammad Naguib and Colonel Gamel Nasser staged a coup to overthrow the British-sponsored monarchy of King Farouk I. Nasser would in fact overthrow Naguib a year later to become the emerging leader of the militant wing of Arab nationalism. While Nasser provided for a safe passage of the disposed King and promised not to threaten British properties and citizens in Egypt, he was soon threatening British hegemony in the region. He was hostile to the continued military presence of Britain in Egypt and Sudan. Furthermore, he was directly sponsoring nationalistic revolts in Jordan against the British supported monarch and against the French regime in Algeria. To cool tensions, the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden tactfully arranged the Suez Base Agreement of 1954 whereby Britain would withdraw all troops from Egypt by 1956, while keeping a token civilian force to maintain their bases in the canal-zone (Craig & Loewenheim 183). The hawkish Prime Minister Winston Churchill was furious in what he perceived as the whole sale appeasement and surrender to Nasser. Eden, however, was firm in arguing that it cleared an “unnecessary irritant” impeding Anglo-Egyptian relations (Craig & Loewenheim 183).
Anthony Eden saw another opportunity to improve relations over the construction of the Aswan Dam on the headwaters of the Nile River. Nasser sought to build this dam to provide electricity to millions of his countrymen while also to provide irrigation to more than million acres of farmland. Eden in conjunction with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles put together a deal whereby Britain would provide $80 million, the United States $130 million and the World Bank $200 million to finance the massive project. Nasser, however, balked at the offer for the Americans stipulated that they must not accept funding from any Communist nation for the project (James 447-448).

In the meantime, Nasser approached the Americans about securing a deal for arms and tanks for the Egyptian military. The Americans flatly refused on the basis that that Egypt was openly hostile to Israel, arguably the most important American ally in the Middle East (Craig & Loewenheim 176). Nasser in turn looked to the East for help. Through Soviet goodwill, he was able to facilitate an arms deal through Czechoslovakia in September of 1955. Furthermore, Nasser in May of 1956 formally recognized the People’s Republic of China which in turn infuriated both Secretary of State Dulles and President Eisenhower. Convinced that Nasser was both dangerous and unpredictable, President Eisenhower withdrew all American funding for the Aswan Dam (Kingseed 39).

Anthony Eden, who was by now Prime Minister, was concerned at the breath of the rejection although he was equally distraught at being crossed by Nasser. The British Cabinet considered funding the project on their own accord, but recognized that unlike the United States, Britain was in no shape economically to fund such a project unilaterally (James 447-448).

The withdraw of American monies by the Eisenhower administration underscores the misapprehension of both Nasser and the Arab world more generally. Put bluntly, Eisenhower failed to realize that Egypt and its Arab neighbors feared a rearmed Israel far more than the nuclear-armed Soviet Union. Moreover, on an alternate note, it vividly foretells of Nasser’s own political deftness in playing each superpower off one another to his own benefit. As Kissinger explains, Nasser’s “main bargaining chip was the Cold War itself (Kissinger 532).”

Nasser nonetheless was stunned and taken completely by surprise. He felt as though he had been humiliated, particularly by the United States, and was very anxious to return the favor. He searched for options, but recognized that there was little he could do to the United States. Britain, however, was a different matter, and on July 26th Nasser without any warning nationalized the Suez Canal and occupied it by military force. His reasoning for doing so was that without Western assistance he needed to find an alternate source of funding for the construction of his dam project.

The reaction in London and Paris was of rage and disgust. Anthony Eden immediately formed an inner cabinet known as the “Egypt Committee” of his most trusted advisors; including his Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, the Lord President of the Council (and Eden’s former deputy Foreign Secretary), Lord Salisbury, and the Minister of Commonwealth Relations, Lord Home who collectively argued for immediate military action (Kingseed 43). However, they eventually decided against immediate action after the three respective military chiefs of staff made absolutely clear that such action was impossible given the inadequacy of British forces in the region (Britain had faithfully followed through in its side of the bargain by removing its troops from the region’s primary base in the canal-zone). In conjunction with the Labour Leader Hugh Gaitskell,
Anthony Eden joined in harshly condemning Nasser’s actions while conceding that Britain will consult its allies before taking action. However, the American charge d’affaires in London, Andrew B. Foster, duly reported directly to President Eisenhower that the atmosphere was for military intervention (Kingseed 43). The British newspapers were in fact condemning Eden for in fact not immediately responding with military force.

In Paris the situation was even more desperate. The French government was strongly anti-Nasser even before the nationalization, attributing its problems in Algeria to Nasser’s influence. The French Assembly voted the following day 416 – 150 for the immediate use of military force whereby the Foreign Minister, Christian Pineau offered Britain two French infantry divisions for immediate operations in Egypt (Kingseed 44). As in the case of London, the American Ambassador Douglas Dillon immediately cabled President Eisenhower explaining the breadth and urgency of the situation.

In responding to the impending crisis President Eisenhower immediately established himself as the dominant force in framing the American policy objectives, and would continue so for the next four months of negotiations leading up to the actual Anglo-French invasion in November. Rather than call a meeting of his cabinet and the National Security Council, President Eisenhower relied (as did Eden) on a small group of top lieutenants and close advisors to set forth the response and policy (Kingseed 44). As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was on a diplomatic mission in Argentina and wasn’t set to return for another week, Eisenhower consulted primarily with Under Secretary of State Robert Murphy, Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles, and Defense Liaison and Staff Secretary Colonel Andrew Goodpaster (Kingseed 47-48). Initially, it was agreed that British and French military intervention should be avoided at all costs, and that an international conference be held within a couple of weeks. Eisenhower’s overriding strategy was to contain the incident and prevent an intervention by the Soviet Union. To his great credit Eisenhower himself never lost sight of or deviated from that specified policy outcome.

With an initial policy in place, Eisenhower immediately cabled Eden his response to the crisis while at the same time dispatching Robert Murphy to cool the tempers in London. Furthermore, he delegated Vice President Richard Nixon to inform Congressional leaders of the situation as well as the administration’s response (Congress being on summer recess). However, while Eisenhower and especially Dulles worked strenuously to keep Congress abreast of the situation and to cultivate a bi-partisan consensus in support of the administration’s positions, it should be noted that Congress was kept informed not consulted. Both Eisenhower and Dulles had recognized the failure of the Truman administration to maintain a consensus during the Korean crisis, and were determined not to repeat the same mistake (Craig & Loewenheim 14-143). However, given the crisis of the situation, Eisenhower’s personal popularity and his non-partisan approach to foreign policy at the height of the “Consensus Era;” it is perhaps not surprising that Congress followed the lead of the administration and accepted their secondary role in the course of impending events (Rosati & Scott 84-85).

Meanwhile, President Eisenhower called a meeting of the National Security Council where he formally outlined his strategic policy objectives in the conflict. These objectives included:

1. To ensure the smooth and efficient operation of the Suez Canal
(2) To establish an international agency to operate the Suez Canal
(3) To repair the deteriorating Anglo-French relations
(4) To exert diplomatic/economic pressure to resolve conflict by peaceful means

Throughout the next four months he called a total of seventeen meetings of the National Security Council to deal with the impending crisis. Relying on his experience as Supreme Allied Commander, President Eisenhower and his very inner ring of advisors drafted the strategy leaving it to his field commanders (the complex web of executive agencies and departments in this case) to implement that strategy. Eisenhower used the NSC as the mechanism to ensure proper implementation of that strategy (Rosati & Scott 121-122). He for example directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff who in turn called upon the Joint Strategic Plans Committee to prepare a study outlining the military and economic options open to the United States if Britain and France did in fact use military force. While the study recommended various economic and diplomatic efforts to be taken, the Joint Chiefs all called for greater military support to Britain and France. Eisenhower reminded them that it would be against stated strategic policy objectives (Kingseed 50-51). In addition, Eisenhower ordered the State Department to study the legal validity of Nasser’s seizure of the canal. They reported back that since the Suez Canal Company was technically an Egyptian-chartered company, it was within a nation’s power to exercise their right of eminent domain. Eisenhower would use this legal opinion to exert greater diplomatic force on Britain and France to dissuade them from using military intervention. Lastly, he used the NSC to draft a credible international agency to operate the canal.

Within another week, Eisenhower dispatched John Foster Dulles to Europe to convince the French and British to agree to an international conference of twenty-two nations to peacefully resolve the crisis. Throughout the course of the crisis, Dulles remained the administration’s voice throughout the world, and as such was the only member to be given any degree of discretion in acting in what he believed to be the administration’s best interest. This would however, have dire consequences as events unfolded in the coming months following nationalization of the canal. Like Eisenhower, his influence on the course of events was based as much on personality and leadership style as on institutional designs of the executive branch and his office as Secretary of State. While he served as a junior advisor under Secretary of State Robert Lansing at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, his political involvement in foreign affairs started with his appointment as an American delegate the UN Conference in 1945. He thereafter served in the State Department and was responsible for the formation of post-war Japanese-American diplomatic relations in the late 1940’s. Born the son of a Presbyterian minister, he would become widely known for his Calvinist beliefs and sense of absolute moralism that would greatly influence his work in foreign affairs. He railed against the despotism of the Communists nations and Imperialism with equal vigor. A public stance that often was a source of intense friction with Britain and France even before the Suez Crisis. Eisenhower once harshly scolded Dulles during a NSC meeting in 1954 for being “too hard on Whitehall,” referring to his harsh anti-colonialism rhetoric (Marks 27).

Furthermore, Dulles had a reputation for being highly ambiguous in his workings with foreign leaders. To his credit, when dealing with Soviet, Chinese and Korean dictators this was a very useful asset in order to keep them guessing and off balance to
deter acts of aggression. However, when dealing with allies this was very detrimental and in the case of the Suez Crisis it was outright dangerous. In 1954, for example, during the height of the Indochina crisis he met with the Commonwealth countries one at a time in support of a regional defense organization. However, he failed to realize that these Commonwealth officials, although representing different nations, worked very closely together. They quickly learned that he offered different terms and conditions to every country involved thus losing a deal of credibility (James 360). When conducting relations with Anthony Eden and other British officials during the Suez Crisis, especially at the London Peace Conference, he gave mixed signals as to the likely American response of Anglo-French military intervention in Egypt (Epstein 68). In an August 1st letter to Anthony Eden, Dulles wrote:

“A way had to be found to make Nasser disgorge what he was attempting to swallow. We must make a genuine effort to bring world opinion to favor the international operation of the canal. It should be possible to create a world opinion so adverse to Nasser that he would be isolated. Then if a military operation had to be taken it would be more apt to succeed and have less grave repercussions than if it had been undertaken precipitately.” (Eden 437)

This presented a differentiation and muddied interpretation of Eisenhower’s stated policy objective to resolve the crisis without resorting to force. This is further reflected in a September 3rd telegram to Eden from Eisenhower, “American public opinion flatly rejects the thought of using force, particularly when it does not seem that every possible peaceful means of protecting our vital interests has been exhausted without result;” and at a press conference on the same day where he declared, “we are committed to a peaceful settlement of this dispute, nothing else” (Verbeek 102). Yet just five days later Dulles cabled Eden to clarify, “the President did not exclude the use of force in the last resort” (Verbeek 104). To those like the British who were looking from the outside in, who was really making American foreign policy? In one of the worst misjudgments of his career, Anthony Eden interpreted these signals to mean that the United States would stay on the sidelines, or, at most issue a reprimand (Craig & Loewenheim 189). This was perhaps understandable given Dulles’ harsh anti-Communist rhetoric and also because he had in a sense ran the administration’s foreign policy when Eisenhower was in the hospital for much of 1954. Little did the British know that while Dulles was the voice of the administration’s foreign policy in the world arena, it was Eisenhower who was in effect the true policy maker.

At the opening of the London Maritime Conference on August 16th of twenty-two countries, Dulles proposed the creation of an international body to operate the canal that would take into equal account the importance of the canal as an international waterway and Egypt’s own sovereignty. This received enthusiastic support from both France and Britain, and passed on a vote of 18 to 4 without the support of the Soviet Union, India, Ceylon and Indonesia (Freiberger 169). This seemed to be the embodiment of Eisenhower’s four guiding principles of American policy objectives in the arena, but Dulles and Eisenhower stopped prematurely short that would in effect cause events to spiral out of their control.
First of all, Dulles refused to present the eighteen-power proposal himself to Nasser, which Eden astutely assumed would have far greater pull in forcing Egypt to accept Western demands. In his place, Eden and the other eighteen nations appointed the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies to present the proposal to Nasser. Furthermore, Eisenhower refused to even send an American representative along with the Menzies delegation to Nasser on the basis that while it was “tough for the British and French, it was not the issue upon which to try and downgrade Nasser” (Freiberger 170). To throw salt on an already open wound regarding Anglo-American relations, Eisenhower publicly states that the United States would not resort to force to settle the crisis (see previous statement at press conference) on September 3rd, the same day that the Menzies delegation presented the eighteen-nation proposal. Eisenhower defended his statement on the premise that he did not want an Egyptian rebuke to be used as a pretext for Anglo-French military intervention (Freiberger 170). On the surface this seems to be a very reasonable proposition, but it fails to account for the fact that it weakens the position of the delegation to bring Nasser to the bargaining table and accept some measure of international control of the canal. This was duly noted at a press conference on September 13th:

“Mr. Secretary, with the United States announcing in advance it will not use force, and with Soviet Russia backing its propaganda, does that not leave all of the trump cards in Mr. Nasser’s hands?” (Kissinger 539)

Without at least the threat of force on the table, Eisenhower thus inadvertently undermined his own policy objectives by confiding to Nasser that a rejection of international control would bring no American-backed reprisal. In this sense, why would Nasser even consider accepting the eighteen-nation proposal when he knew that the British and French would be hamstrung to respond militarily without the express backing of the United States?

Secondly, the United States adamantly refused to apply the needed economic pressure to force Nasser to concede to international control of the Suez Canal. On July 28th (two days following nationalization) the British government froze all of Egypt’s sterling assets followed by France a day later and the United States on the 31st (Nutting 48). However, while Britain and France refused to pay the canal shipping tolls to Egypt, the United States dutifully paid all fees to the new Egyptian Canal Authority. In a pitiful choice of words, Dulles lamely explained that, “this would lead to difficulties with the United States Treasury over the control of Egyptian government holdings” (Verbeek 95). Dulles viewed the withholding of American toll monies as too close an association to Anglo-French Imperialism (Coblentz & Drummond 173). With her sterling balances in London frozen, and her trade with Western Europe paralyzed, Egypt was hard pressed to stay fiscally solvent. The only major source of income remained the collection of shipping tolls from the Suez Canal. British and French shipping collectively represented 65% of all canal traffic which was currently denied to Egypt by their corresponding refusal to pay such tolls to any Egyptian-run authority (Nutting 73-74). American shipping (and American companies flying under the flag of Panama and Liberia) represented more than 25% of total canal shipping, and had this toll revenue been denied to Nasser he would have been forced to concede to international control or face a national bankruptcy (Nutting 59). The decision to continue paying shipping tolls remains possibly
the most significant missed opportunity to bring about any peaceful resolution the conflict. The Eisenhower administration simply failed to adequately realize the importance of such action to the furthering of its own stated policy objectives.

It is hardly surprising, all things considered, that Nasser chose to reject the eighteen-nation proposal on September 9th. The British Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd then recommended that the issue be taken before the United Nations Security Council, but was checked by the United States (Nutting 59). On August 31st the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold McMillan, and Lord Salisbury met with the American Ambassador Winthrop Aldrich to discuss the possibility of referring the dispute to the United Nations in the event that Nasser rejects the eighteen-nation proposal. However, Aldrich relayed Dulles’ strong objections to such a proposal on the basis that it could conceivably bring into question the American ownership of the Panama Canal (Verbeek 95). Other than once again confirming American selfish instincts in their inability to support its own allies, this line of argument completely discredits American claims to be resting on the moral high ground. Referring to Anglo-French ownership of the Suez Canal as “colonialism” or “imperialism” while regarding its own ownership of the Panama Canal as merely the protection of its own “national interests” reeks of hypocrisy.

Eden and his cabinet agreed to avoid the United Nations for the time being in an effort to avoid a situation where their conservative Arab allies (Jordan, Iraq etc) having to take difficult stands in the international public scene at the risk of inciting domestic irritation (Verbeek 85).

In an effort to forestall any possible Anglo-French military intervention, Dulles then proposed the creation of a user’s association to act as a bargaining chip to force Nasser to make concessions. Despite French opposition, Eden supported the measure in the vain hope that it signaled a possibility that the United States would finally concede to withholding toll fees from Egypt. Furthermore, Eden reasoned that if he supported the user’s association and it failed, that Dulles would finally support a British initiative in the United Nations (Freiberger 174-175). Both assumptions would sadly prove to be false. At a second conference of maritime nations held in London on September 19th, Eden and Lloyd repeatedly attempted to insert a clause in the forming of the Suez Canal User’s Association stipulating that the member nations pay the canal dues to it and not Egypt. Dulles consistently vetoed any such proposal, preferring instead a voluntary provision (Nutting 64). He, however, failed to realize that this would essentially render the SCUA useless, and merely maintain the status quo which was completely unacceptable to both Britain and France. Selwyn Lloyd recalled the proceedings as, “a ghastly day with all the worst possible expectations turning up. Dulles pulled rug after rug from under us and watered down the canal association till it was meaningless (Verbeek 108).”

Press statements by both Eisenhower and Dulles in these weeks further inflamed Anglo-American mistrust and disdain. As Kissinger notes, “Dulles balanced his schemes for international control of the canal with some statement emphatically abjuring the use of force, which practically invited Nasser to reject them (Kissinger 536).” Eisenhower in responding to a reporter’s question concerning any possible Anglo-American-French military intervention remarked:

“This country will not go to war while I am occupying my present post unless Congress declares such a war. We established the United Nations
to abolish aggression and I am not going to be party to aggression
(Freiburger 175).”

Eisenhower hypocritically of course left out the fact that his administration had actively discouraged any Anglo-French proposal to refer the matter to the United Nations on account his nation’s own selfish ownership of the Panama Canal. Two days later Dulles went even further by retorting that in the event that Nasser uses force over the canal, “we do not intend to shoot our way through,” and boldly went as far to declare that, “I did not get any impression that there was any undertaking or pledge given by him (Eden) to shoot their way through the canal (Nutting 62).” These disingenuous, diplomatically dangerous remarks, however, paled in comparison to Dulles’ bombshell delivered at a press conference on October 2nd:

“There is talk about ‘teeth’ being pulled out of it. There was never any ‘teeth’ in it if that means the use of force… There is some difference in the approaches to the Suez Canal problem. The difference relates perhaps to some rather fundamental things. In some areas the three nations are bound together by treaties such as the Atlantic Pact area… Other problems relate to other areas and touch the so-called problem of colonialism in some way or another. On these problems the United States plays a more independent role (Dale 8).”

This reckless display of backstabbing anti-colonialism rhetoric succeeded in fracturing the long cherished Anglo-American special relationship. Mutual distrust had reached a boiling point, and Eden now set out on a course with France independent to and in spite of Dulles and the Eisenhower administration.

These statements show the depth of misunderstanding existing between the British and American governments. Foremost, Eisenhower failed to grasp the importance of the Suez Canal to the European economy, the British and French in particular. In 1955, 2/3 of all oil in Western Europe passed through the canal while more than a 1/3 of all shipping in the canal was British (James 460). Britain for example had a mere six weeks of oil reserves at the time of the crisis. To his credit, Eden accepted Eisenhower’s argument that the nationalization of the canal was within the legal authority of Egyptian sovereignty. It amounted to in fact nothing more than Egypt buying out the stockholders (Britain and France). What Eden found so incredibly disparaging was the fact that Nasser had just two years previously signed a treaty that bound Egypt to uphold the Constantinople Convention of 1888: that the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company be allowed to operate the canal until its terms were set to expire in 1969. The 1954 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty was the culmination of more than two years of intense negotiations and concessions on both sides, and while Britain had dutifully evacuated the military bases in the canal zone, Nasser repudiated his side of the bargain. For a nation dependant upon international trade for its livelihood such as Britain, this mode of behavior was completely unacceptable. As Eden articulated, “a man with Colonel Nasser’s record should not be allowed to have his thumb on our windpipe (Verbeek 83).” The Permanent Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick during the crisis explained the importance superbly:
“If Middle East oil is denied to us our gold reserves will disappear. If our gold reserves disappear, the sterling area disintegrates. If the sterling area disintegrates and we have no reserves, we shall not be able to maintain a force in Germany, or indeed, anywhere else. I doubt whether we would be able to pay the bare minimum necessary for our home defense. A country that cannot pay for its defense is finished (Lyle 225).”

This scenario seems all the more frightening (at least in the eyes of the British and French) when you consider an entry in Eisenhower’s diary on August 8th 1956. Here he privately admitted that his own intelligence sources confirmed that Nasser expected to make $100 million a year in tolls. Under the former conditions of the Constantinople Convention of 1888, yearly tolls provided roughly $17 million to Egypt as a “ground rental” while the remaining $35 million went to the jointly held canal company. From this assertion, it can be assumed with reasonable foresight that Nasser fully intended to increase toll revenues by as much as 100% (Ferrell 329). It was with this horror lurking in the background that the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan bitterly noted to the American Under-Secretary of State, Robert Murphy, “Britain cannot afford to become a second Netherlands (Verbeek 87).”

Meanwhile, On October 5th, Anthony Eden and the French Prime Minister Guy Mollett took the matter to the United Nations Security Council without the expressed blessing of the Eisenhower Administration. Selwyn Lloyd presented an Anglo-French sponsored resolution based upon the following six principles for use of the Suez Canal:

1.) There should be free and open transit through the Canal without discrimination, overt or covert.
2.) The sovereignty of Egypt should be respected .
3.) The operation of the Canal should be insulated from the politics of any one country.
4.) The manner of fixing tolls and charges should be decided by agreement between Egypt and the users.
5.) A fair proportion should be allotted to development
6.) In case of disputes, unresolved affairs between the Suez Canal Company and Egypt should be settled by arbitration.

To the surprise of many, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Fawzi agreed with all of the above stated principles and was willing to compromise as to the manner in which they would be implemented. For the first time since the start of the crisis, the Egyptian government had conceded to allowing user participation in the operation of the canal. There now at long last seemed to be a foundation in which to build a negotiated settlement.

It is curious to note the reasons as to why the Egyptians had made a sudden about face. Sir Anthony Nutting argues first and fore-most that economic sanctions placed by Great Britain and France were gradually strangling the Egyptian economy. While Nasser may have hoped for substantial monies from the Soviet Union and China, he received no such aid from the former and only a scant £1.6 million from the latter. Secondly, the
Indian government had been for months applying a great deal of pressure on Egypt to accept some form of user participation in the canal. India had duel self-supporting interests to avoid an escalation to the crisis: as a member of the Commonwealth, India was a major trade partner with Great Britain, but was also the co-leader with Egypt of the non-aligned nations and as such did not want to see its most important ally fall by the wayside. Thirdly, oil-rich Arab countries like Iraq and Saudi Arabia were furious for not having been consulted beforehand of the nationalization, and applied pressure for Nasser to relent since it placed the sale and transport of their oil to Western Europe in jeopardy. Lastly, other Arab nations like Jordan and Syria were equally bitter, because the nationalization had further provoked Israel to embark on a series of ambitious border raids. Thus, after nearly three months Egypt had grudgingly come to the bargaining table in spite of American inaction in the arena.

A few days later, the United Nations Secretary General, Dag Hammerskjold called a secret meeting of the foreign ministers from the selected parties to work out the details for a plan of implementation. The Egyptians still rejected a like proposal of the eighteen-nations variety which called for full internal control, they would agree to some variant (Nutting 77-78). Lloyd and Fawzi were in turn able to come to a rough agreement that the canal would be run as a partnership between the Egypt and the user’s association. However, the French Foreign Minister, Christian Pineau refused to sign on to any such agreement, and eventually Anthony Eden failed to support to revised proposal largely because he felt it was too little and too late (Nutting 78). If there was ever a time for American leadership this was surely the time, but Dulles and Eisenhower had simply lost the faith and confidence of their closest allies. When Britain and France belatedly called a vote to accept the eighteen-nations proposal (which Egypt had rejected), the United States voted in unison as a belated measure to restore Western solidarity, but the measure was vetoed by the Soviet Union. Had the United States likewise refused to pay the canal tolls, Egypt would likely have come to the bargaining table long before October, or they may have even grudgingly accepted the eighteen-nation proposal. Regardless, had the United States exerted diplomatic pressure on either the Soviet Union or Egypt, the veto may have been avoided in the Security Council.

Events then took a bizarre twist the day following the rejection in the Security Council when General Maurice Challe of the French Army presented a top secret plan to retake the Suez Canal by force. The plan had been in planning since mid September when an Israeli delegation flew to Paris to coordinate a joint Franco-Israeli operation against Egypt (Verbeek 114-115). The French Interior Minister, Bourges Manoury obtained cabinet approval for the plan on September 19th, but the Israelis refused to go forward with the operation unless the British agreed to the plan (as they were the only country in the region with a sufficient air force to counter the Russian equipped Egyptian air force). The plan called for the Israeli forces to invade the Sinai whereby Britain and France would intervene as a police force to protect the canal. Surprisingly, Eden whole heartedly endorsed this plan of action. The Egypt Committee of cabinet ministers approved the plan on the 17th of October followed by the full cabinet of the 25th (Verbeek 118). Israel sparked off hostilities on the 29th of October and the rest has settled to history as Britain and France were brought to bear under pressure from the United States to capitulate.

It seems incredibly odd, especially in hindsight that Eden and the British cabinet ever consented to such a plan. After all, this was possibly the most single-handily
example of Imperialistic gun-boat diplomacy since Lord Wolseley invaded Egypt and defeated them at Tel el-Kebir in 1882. Anthony Eden was by no means an Imperialist in the mold of Churchill. As early as 1931 while serving as Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, he had strongly supported Stanley Baldwin and Lord Halifax in bringing about an agreement for granting India gradual independence (James 107). Furthermore, he fully supported the efforts of the Labour Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, who in 1945 decided to withdraw British troops from Iran on the premise that British influence in the domestic politics of Arab nations would have a detrimental effect on British influence in the Middle East. Eden in fact argued on the floor of the House of Commons:

“The last thing we want is a reoccurrence of the practice of spheres of influence and matters of that kind which were in Persia long ago, and which made us so intensely unpopular in that country for a generation (Verbeeck 74).”

As Foreign Secretary three times from 1935 to 1955, Eden had strenuously worked to improve Anglo-Arab relations and create a spirit of mutual goodwill and understanding. Remember that it was Eden who at great political cost had convinced Winston Churchill and the Conservative back-benchers to withdraw all British troops from Egypt in 1954. He went to great lengths to meet Nasser half way, but saw his nationalization of the Suez Canal as yet another treaty renunciation in a very long list of treaty renunciations. Nasser was furthermore inciting nationalist revolts in Jordan, Iraq, and Syria and threatening Britain’s interests in the region. While Eisenhower would argue that Britain was merely trying to retain its colonial influence, I would argue that all of these countries were governed by moderate constitutional monarchies with favorable relations to the West. As a British administrator in Kuwait remarked at the time of nationalization, “It is merely necessary to bark loudly and lengthily enough to make the British go away (Lindamen & Ward 289).” Taken in this light, it seems reasonable (especially considering the Lebanon Crisis two years later) for the British to take a hard line to protect their own economic interests.

What is perhaps far more puzzling was that Eden chose to convolute with the French and Israelis on such an ill-fated scheme. When Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, Eden was in fact dining at Chequers with Nuri es-Said, the tough and veteran Iraqi Prime Minister, and King Faisal of Iraq. Nuri es-Said is known to have told Eden that this act required a firm response, possibly even armed force, but to at all costs avoid any cooperation with France and Israel for it would be a great detriment to Anglo-Arab relations (Nutting 47-48). The reasons for avoiding any convoluting with the Israelis were obvious for much of the Arab population viewed its creation as the vanguard of Western Imperialism. Britain had in the post-war period walked a very fine and delicate line to disassociate itself with the United Nations Mandate and the subsequent creation of Israel. Eden, likewise, continued this practice by consistently refusing arms requests and any diplomatic overtures by Israel during his term as Foreign Secretary under Churchill. Furthermore, in a well-publicized speech at Guildhall on November 9th 1955, Eden called on Israel to make territorial concessions as to revert to the original boundaries of the 1947 UN partition (Northedge 222). In early October of 1956 when the crisis was being negotiated in the UN Security Council, Israel raided a number of Jordanian villages
killing more than hundred Arabs. Eden in turn threatened to invoke the 1948 Anglo-
Jordanian Defense Treaty by committing British paratroopers in addition to prodding 
Nuri es-Said to send an armored brigade from Iraq if Israel did not alter her stance 
(Nutting 86). In his Journal entry dated October 15th, Eisenhower found it peculiar that 
Britain was prepared to go to war with Nasser, yet go to war with Israel over the defense 
of another Arab country (Ferrell 331). It was instances such as these that helped to restore 
confidence and trust between the Arabs and British, yet only a few days later, Eden 
completely reversed course by agreeing to join in secret military operations with a nation 
it nearly went to war with a week prior. At the first meeting of the Egypt Committee 
Harold Macmillan had suggested that Britain involve Israel in the negotiations only to 
meet a stern rebuff by Eden (Verbeek 82). Eden would in fact refuse to consider any 
Israeli involvement until October 14th when he endorsed the Challe plan to his grave 
consequence.

As Nuri es-Said proclaimed, the British had equally every reason to disassociate 
themselves with France as well in resolving the crisis. The French had proved extremely 
unpopular with much of the Arab world when they forcibly evicted King Feisal from 
Damascus in 1920 after they had previously made assurances of his rights to self-
government (Nutting 296-297). In addition, France had actively supplied Israel with 
modern arms and aircraft since its independence in 1948. Most importantly though, the 
French lacked the sort of pragmatic approach used by the British in the region, and 
instead relied upon shear brut force as witnessed in their long brutal guerilla war in 
Algeria from 1954 – 1962. All of these factors resulted in inflamed tensions between 
France and the Arabs; a thought that was not lost by Anthony Eden and the British 
Foreign Office. It should be noted that in spite of their mutual differences and 
misunderstandings, Eden and his ministers negotiated directly with Dulles and 
Eisenhower without involving the French ministers. France nearly used force against 
Egypt in September when Eden had accepted Dulles proposal for a user’s association 
without consulting or even informing Mollet or Pineau (Verbeek 114). It was only after 
the circular and evading proposals coupled with the disingenuous and anti-colonialist 
rhetoric by Dulles and Eisenhower did Eden turn against the once sacred Anglo-
American “special relationship” to ally itself with France and Israel.

Regardless, the involvement of France and Israel in the military operation against 
France would signal a sharp deterioration in Anglo-Arab relations. King Hussein of 
Jordan was forced to revoke the 1948 mutual defense treaty or risk inciting popular 
revolt. A British administrator at the Foreign Office remarked that, “it is difficult to see 
how in the face of an accepted and unquestioned view that we acted in collusion with 
Israel, we can hope to maintain our previous close relationship of confidence and trust 
with our Arab allies.” The British Ambassador to Iraq was even more callous:

“The action of Her Majesty’s Government, because it was linked with 
Israel, placed the King and Crown Prince and all those in Iraq who had 
actively pursued a policy of friendship with Britain, not only in the 
greatest political difficulty but in danger of their lives, and imperiled the 
continued existence of the regime and monarchy (Lindaman & Ward 
288).”
This statement would prove painfully correct as both King Feisal and Nuri es-Said would be brutally murdered in a military coup in July of 1958, less than two years after Suez.

Meanwhile, the Anglo-French-Israeli conspiracy seemed merely to confirm American engrained preconceptions that the invasion marked as an ill-advised effort by two former Great Powers embarking on another Imperialist adventure against a weaker nation. This manner of thinking is clearly reflected in Richard Nixon’s electrifying speech in Hershey, PA on the 4th of November when he referred to Eisenhower’s rebuke of Britain and France in the United Nations as:

“America’s second declaration of independence...For the first time in history we have shown independence of Anglo-French policies towards Asia and Africa which seem seemed to us to reflect the colonial tradition. That declaration of independence has had an electrifying effect throughout the world (Lyle 425).”

Such noble speeches had the effect of rallying the electorate around their “peace candidate,” Dwight D. Eisenhower, but only acted to distort their own preconceived notions about the Suez Crisis. Nasser and his fellow Arab nationalists were nothing even close to the equivalent of the American Founding Fathers fighting for the ideals of republican government. The American diplomat George Kennan held a far more scathing appraisal of the crisis than did Nixon:

“We have fumbled on certain occasions; and our friends have not turned against us. Moreover, we bear a heavy responsibility for the desperation which has driven the British and French Governments to this ill-conceived and pathetic action (Lyle 426).”

It should be duly noted that Dulles reasonably pointed out that to acquiesce to the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion would have given Chaing Kai-shek in Taiwan and Syngman Rhee in South Korea a similar green light to proceed with military operations against Communist China (Coblentz & Drummond 176). However, this still leaves the seemingly indefensible position of failing to apply economic pressure upon Nasser which would have in all likelihood brought him to the bargaining table far earlier and led to a peaceful solution to the crisis. Instead, Dulles mistakenly viewed the withholding of canal toll fees as being too closely associated with British Imperialism. The French Foreign Minister Pineau remarked:

“Perhaps the greatest criticism of Dulles is that he doesn’t put himself in the other person’s shoes... Each time we got down to concrete talks of what Dulles’ solutions would mean, he abandoned us as things progressed. He actually achieved precisely the opposite of he sought. That is he virtually obliged us to resort to force (Coblentz & Drummond 178).”
In the end, none of Eisenhower’s four stated policy objectives were achieved during the crisis; largely I would argue on the inherent lack of pragmatism and mutual understanding by his own Administration.

While Eden had none of Eisenhower’s skills in administration or Churchill’s in communication and debate, he was arguably the world’s foremost expert in diplomacy and foreign affairs. He was someone who spoke seven languages and negotiated with Nasser in Arabic (James 398). The United States would eventually come around to Eden’s views, but only after Eisenhower had humiliated Britain and fractured Western solidarity. John Foster Dulles somberly remarked to the French Foreign Minister in 1958 that concerning the Suez Crisis, “we were wrong and you were right (Marks 73).

Eisenhower and Dulles belatedly recognized that without Britain to promote the Western interests in the Middle East, the United States would be forced to fill the political vacuum or risk turning affairs over to the Soviet Union. In July of 1958 a Nasser-inspired military coup toppled the pro-British regime of Nuri es-Said in Iraq, while public revolts spread across the region. King Hussein of Jordan dutifully requested immediate British military support while President Chamoun of Lebanon told the American ambassador that, “he would be a dead man and Lebanon an Egyptian satellite unless the American sent troops (Shulzinger 259).” Eisenhower responded by sending 14,000 marines while Britain likewise sent 4,000 paratroopers to quell the resistance in Jordan (Alin 14). This was done under the guise of “containing Communism,” but many onlookers found the situation, “hardly distinguishable from that which the British had just been forced to relinquish (Shulzinger 261).” It is perhaps equally unsurprising that the new British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, retorted to Eisenhower, “you are doing a Suez on me.” Nasser, however, recognized this new-found threat as early as January of 1957:

“Anyone who believes the Arab people would accept American influence or Soviet influence as a replacement for British or French influence does not realize that the Arabs are determined not to allow their countries to become a field of foreign influence, cold war or shooting war. We ascertain that any vacuum in this region will be filled by Arab nationalism.”

---

Works Cited


