Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956
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INTRODUCTION

The Suez Crisis of 1956 was a confrontation between Britain, France, and Israel on one side and Egypt on the other, during the height of the Cold War. The crisis resulted from the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in July of that year, continuing through the fall and culminating in a joint Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula in October, and the forced withdrawal of coalition forces by the end of the year. The invading nations endured tremendous pressure to withdraw from both sides of the Cold War divide. Particularly, economic pressure from the United States and President Dwight D. Eisenhower convinced Britain to lead a withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula after initial victories. Eisenhower's intervention on the side of Egypt, against America's traditional allies, particularly Britain and France, stemmed from a deep personal dislike of and discomfort with colonial imperialism, and frustration that his European allies had seemingly returned to their old colonial ways. Domestic political concerns also influenced Eisenhower's decision-making process; in an election year, and with Democratic opponent Adlai Stevenson bidding for favor with a staunchly peace-oriented campaign, Eisenhower felt that American intervention would position the United States as an honest broker determined to achieve and maintain a peace of strength. The intervention of the United States, in concert with the threat of intervention by the Soviet Union, resolved the crisis, and destroyed any remaining credibility Britain and France retained after the Second World War as imperial powers.

A HISTORY OF THE SUEZ CANAL

It is impossible to discuss the Suez Crisis without understanding the history of the Canal. During the Age of Exploration and throughout the ensuing centuries, European courts dreamed of building a waterway through the land bridge linking Africa to Asia. Long, dangerous voyages around the Cape of Good Hope at Africa's southern end inhibited trade and military conquest; for example, a voyage from Liverpool in England to Calcutta in India took 11,600 miles and many harrowing weeks. The first attempt to pierce the land bridge came in the late 1790s; revolutionary France, then locked in the latest of its series of wars with Great Britain, saw a chance to gain a critical military and commercial advantage over its perennial rival. The Directory (France's plural executive at the time,) ordered general Napoleon Bonaparte to "take all necessary steps to ensure the free and exclusive use of the Red Sea by French vessels." Bonaparte chose to investigate the possibility of constructing a canal across the land bridge, and the Directory empowered Bonaparte to execute its construction if feasible. Due to using an ancient miscalculation of the levels of the Mediterranean and the Red Seas, Bonaparte's engineer declared the infeasibility of a canal, and the French dropped the project.[1]

The idea of a Mediterranean-Red Sea canal did not die, however. By the mid-nineteenth century, conditions were just right to begin construction. A former French diplomat, Ferdinand de

[1] Donald Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America Into the Middle East* (New York: The Linden Press/Simon and Schuster, 1981) 15-16.

Lesseps, whose diplomatic posts had included Egypt, gained a number of key land concessions from his old friend, the *khedive* (ruler) of Egypt, Mohammed Said, beginning in 1854. After a colossal effort, including the partial use of Egyptian forced labor, the Suez Canal opened for business on November 17, 1869, with de Lesseps himself escorting the Empress Eugenie, consort of Emperor Napoleon III of France, through the canal on the imperial yacht. Originally granted 44% of Suez Canal Company stock, in 1875, the Egyptian government found itself compelled to sell its stake to the British for £4 million to meet debts incurred by operating the canal and the khedive's own profligate spending. The sale did not rescue Egypt's spiraling economy, the khedive soon declared bankruptcy, which forced him to cede economic control to Britain and France in exchange for foreign aid. Fuming over the insult to their country, an Egyptian army officer, Colonel Ahmed Arabi, instigated a revolt against the khedive in 1881. The British government sent an expeditionary force to Egypt, which successfully crushed the revolt in 1882. For the time being, stability returned to Egypt, but the lingering resentments remained bubbling under the surface, as British troops showed no sign of leaving.[2]

Six years after the British occupation of Egypt began, the great powers of Europe and the Egyptian government concluded the Convention of Constantinople, which guaranteed the free use of the canal, save for any restrictive measure deemed necessary by the khedive for the defense of Egypt. As historians Anthony Gorst and Lewis Johnman explain, this effectively included any measures deemed necessary by the British, and they invoked this clause several times over the course of their presence in Egypt, including during both world wars. The French unofficially ceded political interest in the governing of Egypt, content to exert influence through the Suez Canal Company.[3] Not until 1922 did the United Kingdom concede conditional independence under a pliable king controlled by London. The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty officially codified the conditions of Egyptian independence: in exchange for the withdrawal of British troops from Egypt (except those needed to protect the canal), the British claimed the right to control the security of the canal, the right to reoccupy the entire country in the event of war, and the right to protect "foreign interests and minorities" in Egypt. Britain had the right to invoke these conditions as they saw fit, with or without consultation of the Egyptian government. Indeed, Britain, desperate to keep the vital link to their overseas empire and its resources, did invoke these rights during the Second World War. British troops reoccupied Egypt and forced King Farouk to either accept a government headed by a prime minister of their choosing or renounce his throne. The king accepted the new government, dealing a major blow to the long-term future of the Egyptian monarchy, and reigniting the old resentments of the Egyptian people at the arrogance of Britain's imperialism.[4]

After the Second World War, Britain found itself in a quandary. To paraphrase Dean Acheson, United States Secretary of State under President Harry S. Truman, she had lost her empire and now sought a new role in the world.[5] As the British Empire lost its crown jewels, India and Pakistan, in the late 1940s, the long-simmering differences and resentments between Britain and Egypt reached the boiling point. By early 1950, talks aimed at bringing about the withdrawal of British troops from the Suez Canal Zone had stalled. The British Foreign Office, to prod the Egyptians to conciliation, canceled an order for jet fighters and tanks that the Egyptians had already purchased. In response, Egyptian prime minister Nahas Pasha, the very same prime minister London had forced on King Farouk eight years earlier, denounced the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and called for the immediate evacuation of British troops. Talks went on through the first half of

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[2] Ibid, 16-18.
[3] Anthony Gorst and Lewis Johnman. *The Suez Crisis*. (London: Routledge, 1997) 3-6.
[4] Ibid, 6-9.
[5] Dean Acheson. "Speech to the Military Academy at West Point." (United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, December 5, 1962.)

1951, with the Egyptians continuing to insist on immediate evacuation, which the British declined to do until Egypt agreed to a regional defensive pact. Egypt broke off the talks after a "bellicose speech" on July 30, 1951 by the British Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison in the British parliament. Just over two months later, King Farouk announced to the Egyptian parliament that his abrogation of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. Before another year passed, Farouk would be deposed by a group of army officers headed by General Mohammed Naguib and Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser in July 1952.[6] General Naguib himself would be eased out of power by the spring of 1954, with Lieutenant Colonel Nasser succeeding him, confirming that which most observers already knew: the true power in the Egyptian government lay with Nasser.[7]

NASSER COURTS BOTH SIDES

Nasser had not yet secured his hold over Egypt, however. He needed arms to maintain strength against Israel, which had humiliated Egyptian forces during the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 and, in February 1955, launched a commando raid on the Egyptian-held Gaza Strip. Nasser did not hesitate to play the two superpowers off each other to acquire the arms that he wanted. He first approached the United States. Speaking to U. S. ambassador to Egypt Henry Byroade, Nasser made a request for $28 million in American arms, which would have included "medium-sized tanks and B-26 aircraft."[8] When U. S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower saw Nasser's request, he expressed surprise. "Why, this is peanuts," he exclaimed to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Yet the administration did nothing to follow up on Nasser's request. Not willing to take political risks in angering pro-Israel factions in the United States Congress, and not believing Nasser seriously intended to negotiate with the Soviet Union, the American administration dragged its feet and set conditions for the acceptance of aid.[9] Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, the British ambassador to Egypt, thought the Americans had made a terrible mistake in turning a deaf ear to Nasser's pleas. "Nasser lost patience," Trevelyan explained, and, still concerned with securing his hold on power and maintaining strong defenses against Israel, felt he had no other choice than to open up talks with the Soviets.[10] The Soviets, keen to exploit any opportunity to gain an advantage over the United States, eagerly agreed to Nasser's request for arms in exchange for a payment of Egyptian cotton. Indeed they exceeded his request substantially: the equipment sent to Egypt, which included 100 MiG fighters, 200 tanks, and jet bombers, with an estimated value of between $90-250 million, far more than Nasser's original request of $28 million.[11] As Eisenhower and Dulles saw it, Nasser's deal with the Soviets constituted clear and distressing evidence of Moscow's intentions to establish domination in the Arab world.[12] The announcement on September 27, 1955 of the arms deal with the Soviets, with Czechoslovakia as the intermediary, came only three days after President Eisenhower had suffered a serious heart attack while on vacation in Denver, Colorado.[13]

Initially misdiagnosed as a "digestive upset," Eisenhower's heart attack came at a time of relative quiet, notwithstanding the arms deal between Egypt and the Soviets. The federal government continued to operate as normal, with Congress out of session, and no other urgent foreign or domestic business needing the president's attention.[14] Despite the initial misdiagnosis of

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[6] Steven Z. Freiberger. *Dawn over Suez: the Rise of American Power in the Middle East, 1953-1957*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992) 55-57.
[7] Ibid, 70-71.
[8] Ray Takeyh. *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine: The US, Britain and Nasser's Egypt, 1953-57*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) 81.
[9] Jean Edward Smith. *Eisenhower in War and Peace*. (New York: Random House, 2012) 688.
[10] Neff, 72-73.
[11] Takeyh, 81-82.
[12] Cole C. Kingseed. *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1995) 32.
[13] Clarence G. Lasby. *Eisenhower's Heart Attack: How Ike Beat Heart Disease and Held on to the Presidency*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997) 73-77.
[14] Smith, 676-678.

the president's condition, Eisenhower went on to make a full recovery. But in early 1956, the completeness of his recovery remained questionable enough to justify speculation about Eisenhower's future as president. At the time of the heart attack, the *New York Times* ventured its "almost certain" belief "[that] the stricken president [would retire] at the end of his first term." Informed political opinion concluded that Vice President Richard Nixon would be the Republican standard bearer in 1956. On the Democratic side, former Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson saw his chances of being elected in November as greatly improved with Eisenhower potentially out.[15] Eisenhower, however considered Nixon and Stevenson, among others, as unsuitable to take his place, and announced on February 29, 1956 that he would accept nomination by the Republican National Convention in August.[16]

After Egypt and the Soviet Union concluded their arms deal, American diplomats finally realized the failure of its approach to Nasser. Secretary of State Dulles conceded that he found it "difficult to be critical" of Nasser for seeking weapons that he needed to defend Egypt. But insuring Egypt's security with weapons was only one part of Nasser's agenda for consolidating his power. Setting a broad national goal for the Egyptian people to rally behind seemed a good way for Nasser to further secure his position. One such project, the Aswan High Dam, needed to irrigate over 1 million acres of new agricultural land to catch up with Egypt's rapidly growing population, would provide electric power for half of Egypt, flood control for the notoriously flood-prone Nile River, and create a large reservoir in the form of a 350-mile long lake. [17] The British and American governments saw an opportunity to counter the Soviet arms sale to Egypt. Both governments decided to make a joint offer to Egypt to fund the dam together with the World Bank and local contributions from the Egyptian government, in total, a $1 billion project. An initially enthusiastic Eisenhower asked Dulles, "is there any reason not to go all out for the dam in Egypt?"[18] On December 16, 1955, the governments finalized the initial aid package and sent World Bank president Eugene Black to convey the offer to Nasser. Black and Nasser reached broad agreement on most points by mid-February, but continuing opposition by southern members of the U. S Congress and by the diplomatic establishment of both Britain and the United States caused Eisenhower and Dulles to back off their previous support. They began setting new conditions to try to ease Nasser away from the deal.[19]

Meanwhile, in June 1956, President Eisenhower suffered a serious attack of ileitis, and underwent an operation to correct the serious intestinal condition. More complicated than his recovery from his heart attack the previous fall, the operation left him on the sidelines of foreign policy. He delegated responsibility to the secretary of state, Dulles, to handle foreign affairs in the interim. According to Black, this may have been a mistake. Dulles could be considerably abrasive in his dealings with others and did not tolerate the concept of diplomatic neutralism as much as Eisenhower did. The decision by Nasser to recognize the communist People's Republic of China in May had set Dulles over the edge.[20] Nasser, meanwhile, had sent his ambassador to the United States, Ahmed Hussein, to Washington to notify Dulles that Egypt accepted all the new conditions set for the aid package but Dulles found this inadequate. At their July 19 meeting, Dulles advised Hussein that the American government would withdraw its offer of financial support for the Aswan Dam.[21] Unwisely, after the meeting, Dulles released a press statement calling into question Egypt's

[15] James Reston, "Nixon is Considered in Forefront for '56." *New York Times*, September 26, 1955.
[16] Smith, 680-683.
[17] Neff, 124-125.
[18] Smith, 689.
[19] Ibid, 690.
[20] Ibid, 690-691.
[21] Neff, 261.

financial ability to carry out the Aswan Dam project. The Secretary of State's remarks enraged Nasser, especially a passage which Nasser took as incitement to Egyptians to topple his regime: "The United States remains deeply interested in the welfare of the Egyptian people."[22] The condescending tone of the release infuriated him and he considered the rebuff a grave public insult. Once the American government withdrew its offer, the British government quickly followed suit.[23] World Bank president Black considered the handling of the Aswan High Dam project by John Foster Dulles to be extremely poor: "It's just as if you went to the bank and asked the bank to lend you some money. They might say we won't lend you any money. You don't put it in the newspaper that your credit is no good."[24] Soon, Nasser would get his retaliation.

NATIONALIZATION

The announcement on July 26, 1956 by Nasser of Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal hit the world like a shock wave. Breaking off a formal dinner for the King of Iraq, British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden immediately called an emergency cabinet meeting. Eden then issued a denunciation of Nasser's act, in which French premier Guy Mollet quickly joined. The British and French press reacted with predictable rage and belligerence, demanding the immediate reoccupation of the canal.[25] The nationalization of the canal similarly caught the American government off guard, but their reaction bore stark contrasts to the reactions of Eden and Mollet. With Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on the last leg of a series of South American state visits, President Eisenhower had a relatively free hand in conducting foreign policy during the initial stages of the crisis. Eisenhower, well-known for his short temper on trivial matters, reacted evenly to the news of Nasser's nationalization of the canal. A cable from Andrew Foster, the American chargé d'affaires in London, made it all too plain that Eden had a military response in mind. Eisenhower read the cable with an almost eerie calm. Nationalizing the canal "was not the same as nationalizing oil wells… [which] exhaust a nation's resources." Eisenhower likened the canal to a "public utility," which built up national resources for the benefit of many.[26] The president, using a preferred method carried over from his days as Supreme Commander of Allied forces during the Second World War, quickly convened a small group of advisers to consult with him on the emerging crisis. Acting Secretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr., son of the ex-president, represented the absent John Foster Dulles. Allen Dulles, director of Central Intelligence (and Secretary Dulles' brother), and defense liaison officer Colonel Andrew Goodpaster rounded out the group. Following their first discussion, Eisenhower directed an official statement on behalf of the American government be released expressing the president's personal concern, but not to give any indication of what the United States may do in reaction to Nasser's action.[27]

Eisenhower, though appreciating the tenseness of the situation "did not view [it] as seriously as did [Prime Minister Eden]." Determined to exhaust all diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis, Eisenhower immediately agreed to a tripartite conference of the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and the United States proposed in a cable by Eden. Not willing to part with Acting Secretary Hoover in the continued absence of Secretary Dulles, the president sent Deputy Under Secretary of State Robert Murphy to the conference. The president directed Murphy to discourage the hotheaded French and British governments from a military response. Such a response, Eisenhower feared,

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[22] Associated Press, "Text of Nile Dam Statement." *New York Times*, July 20, 1956.
[23] Neff, 262-263.
[24] Eugene R. Black, interview by David Horrocks, May 13, 1975. Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS. 14-15.
[25] Kingseed, 42-44.
[26] David A. Nichols. *Eisenhower 1956: The President's Year of Crisis: Suez and the Brink of War*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011) 133-134.
[27] Kingseed, 45-46.

would only turn world opinion against the West and be of questionable use in achieving a satisfactory solution. Initially, Eisenhower had reason for hope; Murphy arrived in London on July 28, 1956 to find the attitudes of the British foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, and his French counterpart Christian Pineau to be restrained, but firm.[28] Behind the restrained façade, however, Britain and France still favored a military solution to the crisis, as Murphy came to realize all too soon. In discussions the next day with British Chancellor of the Exchequer (analogous to the United States Secretary of the Treasury) Harold Macmillan and retired Field Marshal the Earl Alexander of Tunis, Murphy learned that British believed that "Suez was a test which could be met only by the use of force," and that the French government "saw eye to eye with the British…and that they were prepared to participate in a military operation." Murphy, drawing on his years of friendship with both Macmillan and Lord Alexander and believing in their sincerity, dashed off a report to Eisenhower. Eisenhower, at his home in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, read that both the chancellor and field marshal had firmly made their decision and were "serene in the belief that they have decided wisely." On Monday morning, July 30, 1956, Murphy had the president's response: Secretary Dulles, now back from South America, would fly to London after consulting with Eisenhower.[29]

EISENHOWER AND DULLES SEEK A DIPLOMATIC SOLUTION

Meanwhile, events moved quickly. Britain and France froze Egyptian assets, and Eden built up support in Parliament for harsher actions against Egypt.[30] On Tuesday, July 31, Dulles arrived for consultations with Eisenhower. He carried with him cables from Eden and Macmillan declaring their intention to "break Nasser" and initiate hostilities at the earliest opportunity, within six weeks. Their determination appalled Eisenhower. "Such a decision – contradictory to what we had understood – was, I thought, based far more on emotion than on fact and logic." Eisenhower knew that he could not support any joint military action on the part of Britain and France against Egypt, and that public opinion would not support it either.[31] Dulles agreed. Briefing Vice President Richard Nixon by telephone, the secretary of state noted that "the British and French are really anxious to start a war and get us into it. I'm doing the best I can to make them realize they may have to do it alone." Dulles had congressional opinion to consider as he prepared to go to London. A nearly apoplectic Democratic Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana decried Nasser's action in a phone call with the secretary of state. He urged Dulles to collaborate closely with Britain and France in taking "determined action" against Nasser. Mansfield's opinion seems to have been a minority one; conversely, Republican Senate Minority Leader William Knowland of California agreed with Eisenhower that American public opinion would not support military intervention.[32]

After his consultation with Eisenhower and the crisis group, Dulles left for London, bearing a letter from the president addressed to Prime Minister Eden. Eisenhower minced no words. All diplomatic options had to be exhausted before Britain and France could entertain a military response. He called for a conference of the signatories to the 1888 Convention of Constantinople to attempt to resolve the crisis, and warned that if Eden resorted to the use of force against Egypt, alone or with others, he could not rely on automatic American support, military or otherwise, since Congress, then adjourned, would have to approve such action. Eisenhower cautioned that congressional support would not come unless "every peaceful means of resolving the difficulty had previously been exhausted." Without such overtures, the president warned Eden, American public

[28] Dwight D. Eisenhower. *The White House Years: Waging Peace 1956-1961.* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965) 36-38.
[29] Neff, 284-285.
[30] Ibid, 285.
[31] Eisenhower, 40.
[32] Neff, 285.

opinion could quickly turn hostile toward Britain and France, and undermine the credibility of America's traditional allies.[33] Upon his arrival in London, Dulles duly presented the president's letter to Eden. Eden, determined to use military force, did not grasp Eisenhower's obvious message: he did not consider the nationalization of the Suez Canal worth a war. The prime minister heard and read only what he wanted to hear and read, and rather bizarrely, interpreted Eisenhower's letter pleading the case for an international diplomatic resolution, and Dulles' reinforcement of the president's views as support for the use of force. Steven Freiberger writes that Eden and Dulles had different definitions of "genuine efforts… [at] negotiation." "While the United States regarded negotiations as a satisfactory solution, the British saw them as a stalling tactic until force could be used." Under this assumption, Eden and French foreign minister Pineau agreed with Secretary of State Dulles to convene an international conference in London on 16 August. Meanwhile, Anglo-French preparations for war continued.[34]

Eisenhower and Dulles hoped to use negotiations and conferences as a means to delay any military action until diplomacy could be exhausted. Eden and French premier Guy Mollet hoped to use negotiations which they believed were doomed to fail as a *casus belli* against Nasser. Eisenhower and Dulles understood what Eden and Mollet and their governments failed to understand – "by the end of July the British and French had already lost the game…'the world had already accepted the nationalization of the canal as a fait accompli.'"[35] Nasser had taken great pains not to impair traffic through the canal, in accordance with the 1888 Convention of Constantinople.[36] As the situation developed, a major pretext for military action – that the Egyptians could not efficiently operate the canal – became moot. Public opinion outside Europe appeared to be that Egypt had done nothing illegal in nationalizing the canal, and concurred with Eisenhower on the impropriety of an armed conflict. Eden stubbornly held to his conviction of the necessity of a military response, should Nasser reject any proposal that emerged from the upcoming London conference. As Dulles sought to forestall armed conflict in his discussions in London, he discovered strong British and French support for an international body that would operate the canal, rather than be simply an advisory committee, which Dulles had proposed in a meeting with congressional leaders in Washington before his departure. He expressed this proposal in his opening speech at the London conference on August 16, a speech in which he also lashed out at Nasser for acting in the service of "Egyptian national purposes" only. Dulles' apparent support and understanding of their position satisfied the French and British, but not Eisenhower.[37] Nevertheless, the president sent his approval of Dulles' proposal as a means of putting the canal in international hands while respecting the rights of the Egyptians. The proposal carried by a vote of 18-4, with the Soviet Union, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Indonesia in opposition. Eden tried in vain to convince Dulles to personally convey the proposal to Nasser in Cairo, but Dulles, careful to state that the conference did not intend to force its decisions upon Egypt, refused to head the mission. Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies agreed to serve after consulting with his home government in Canberra. The London conference came to a close on August 23, the same day that Eisenhower accepted nomination by the Republican National Convention for a second term in San Francisco, California. But the crisis remained unresolved.[38]

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[33] Ibid, 286-287.
[34] Freiberger, 164-166.
[35] Ibid, 166.
[36] Neff, 283-284.
[37] Freiberger, 167-168.
[38] Nichols, 155-157.

EDEN AND MOLLET STAB EISENHOWER IN THE BACK

The newly re-nominated president felt he had every reason to feel he and Secretary of State Dulles had succeeded. Immediate use of force by the British and French had been taken off the table, and on September 3, Prime Minister Menzies of Australia arrived in Cairo to present the London conference's proposal to Nasser. However, rumblings from both Eden and Mollet that they still considered armed conflict inevitable and were continuing military preparations distressed Eisenhower. Had the president known the true extent of his allies' machinations at this point, distress may have been the mildest word to describe his reaction. On September 1, French admiral Andre Barjot, the deputy commander of the proposed joint expeditionary force, conveyed to the Israeli military attaché in Paris an invitation to take part in the Anglo-French operation. This being unknown to Eisenhower, his greatest concern remained the contradiction between the public willingness of his European counterparts to await the results of the Menzies mission to Cairo, and the overwhelming intelligence that the French and British governments had no intention of allowing diplomacy a chance to work. Dulles had already reported to the president that Eden, Macmillan, and Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd all indicated to him that, unless Nasser accepted the proposal of the London conference by September 10, it would be too late to reverse military preparations. The secretary of state noted fervent and unified public opinion in France in favor of retaking the canal, much more fervent and unified than public opinion in Britain. Despite the British government's continuing preparations for war; the leader of the opposition, Hugh Gaitskell of the Labour party, opposed military intervention unsanctioned by the United Nations. In the United States, public opinion closed ranks behind the president and Dulles' leadership; the congressional leadership strongly supported their actions, the previously bellicose Democratic Senator Mike Mansfield publicly praised Dulles for "stopping the rush toward aggressive action on the part of France and England."[39]

However, the Menzies mission was doomed to failure. Nasser would never agree to ceding control of the canal back to an international consortium; "collective colonialism" by the back door. The British and French knew this and wanted to use this refusal as a pretext for invasion. Menzies did not help his case when he clumsily intimated that refusal to accept the London conference proposal would end in "trouble." "You are threatening me," Nasser responded evenly. "Very well, I am finished. There will be no more discussions. It is all over."[40] Eden, in a letter to Eisenhower written as the Menzies mission fell apart, returned to a favorite theme: Nasser was an Arab Hitler bent on domination of the Middle East. "In the 1930s Hitler established his position by a series of carefully planned movements," Eden wrote. "These began with the occupation of the Rhineland and were followed by successive acts of aggression against Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the West." If the international community allowed Nasser to "get away with" nationalizing the Suez Canal, Eden asserted, his enhanced prestige would enable him to foment revolutions around the Middle East.[41] Eisenhower, smarting at the insinuation that American resistance to action against Egypt constituted a repudiation of NATO, affirmed his commitment to the alliance, but decried the "extreme" British and French approach to the crisis. Eden proposed an international "users' association" which would supervise the canal, and pay a portion of the canal tolls and fees to Nasser for use of the canal, but in reality would simply be a mechanism to retake the canal. Nasser immediately laughed off the idea as ridiculous on its face, and in turn proposed a users' association of the port of London.[42]

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[39] Kingseed, 68-70.
[40] Ibid, 71-72.
[41] Sir Anthony Eden to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 6 September 1956, in *The Eden-Eisenhower Correspondence, 1955-1957*, ed. Peter G. Boyle (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 165-166.
[42] Kingseed, 73.

Dulles, his health becoming precarious, in an effort to buy time, requested a second London conference for September 19 to discuss and launch the users' association proposed by Eden. On that day, the president received a National Intelligence Estimate that concluded clearly that the opposition of the United States remained the key obstacle to Anglo-French military operations against Egypt. While true, the problems of readying the military establishments of Britain and France were more problematic than previously planned for. Britain and France also lacked a strategic base from which to launch military operations; the nearest available site being the British possession of Malta, a thousand miles away from Egypt in the Mediterranean Sea. The would-be belligerents needed a better way in. They would find it, but it would cost them. The double cross of Eisenhower had begun.[43]

ISRAEL COMES ON BOARD

In a completely and totally unexpected move, the British and French governments on September 23 appealed to the United Nations Security Council to discuss the developing crisis. The news enraged John Foster Dulles. He knew that the appeal to the Security Council was nothing more than Britain and France engineering yet another pretext for war. Eden and the British government, now wholly dedicated to "full-scale deception of Eisenhower," sent the urbane and witty Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan, to the White House to conduct a charm offensive on the president. While Macmillan played his part in the grand deception, Eden and Foreign Secretary Lloyd made a secret flying visit to Paris on September 26 to discuss preparations and a new launch date for invading Egypt. Then Israeli foreign minister Golda Meir and army chief of staff Moshe Dayan arrived in Paris on September 29 to begin planning for their part in the operations against Egypt. Meanwhile, the mobilization of British and French forces gathered steam; by September's end, 80,000 soldiers, sailors, and pilots and a two-hundred strong fleet of warships had gathered at Malta. Eisenhower and Dulles, in a meeting on October 2, reviewed the distressing situation. The secretary of state expressed his doubt that the British and French really desired a peaceful settlement, taking into account the buildup of forces at Malta and the launch of the Suez Canal Users' Association, with the bellicose British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd installed as chairman. Eisenhower made his position crystal clear: the United States could not have anything to do with or be seen as endorsing either military action against Egypt or a potential coup attempt against Nasser.[44]

As Eisenhower and Dulles took stock, the French continued their efforts to bring Israel into the coalition. The Israelis, represented by Meir and Dayan, and the French, represented by Foreign Minister Pineau and Defense Minister Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury, held secret discussions that went on for two days at the home of Bourgès' military aide on the outskirts of Paris. The United Nations debate held up the invasion until at least mid-October, and Eden "was being held back" by Eisenhower and "mounting opposition" within his own Cabinet. In the event unreliable Britain – "perfidious Albion" – backed out, Pineau wanted to know, could France count on the Israelis to join in war against Egypt? Meir and Dayan immediately agreed, and the army chief of staff urged war as soon as possible. The Egyptians had not yet become familiar with the arms procured from the Soviets, Dayan noted, and better to attack before they could familiarize themselves. The French quickly agreed to provide more arms to the Israelis in preparation, and Meir and Dayan returned to Israel ready for war before the end of October. Dayan conferred with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion on his return, and despite Ben Gurion's preference for attacking with reliable

[43] Nichols, 167-170.
[44] Ibid, 171-172.

knowledge of Britain's participation, the prime minister set aside his misgivings and endorsed Dayan's mobilization of the Israeli military.[45]

France need not have worried about Britain's willingness to attack. Eden's determination to retake the canal by force and rid himself of Nasser once and for all remained rock solid. The Security Council meeting resulted in a six-point resolution which, in large part, simply recapitulated the proposals of the London conferences of August and September. As Eden hoped, the Egyptians balked, the Soviets vetoed the resolution, killing it in the council, and gave the British prime minister another pretext for war. By vetoing the resolution, the Soviets' move made Nasser "appear as a Communist partisan; opposition to [Nasser] was opposition to Communism." Dulles and Eisenhower believed that the strategy of stalling for time had shown results, and that the worst of the crisis may have passed; Dulles convinced himself that plans for war were now "withering on the vine." A sudden, massive attack by Israel against the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan now shifted attention away from the Suez. Anxious to save his throne, Jordan's King Hussein requested Britain enter the conflict on his side, in accordance with established treaty obligations. Eden, increasingly erratic due to illness and overreliance on medication, nonetheless understood that entering the conflict would activate the tangled web of alliances in the region, which could potentially pit Britain and Jordan against France and Israel, the two nations with whom Britain would attack Egypt. Eisenhower directed Dulles to make clear his displeasure with Israel and to cease attacks against Jordan. But U-2 spy plane missions continued to show the Israeli military in a state of mobilization; American intelligence officials thought Israel had mobilized against Jordan. In reality, Israel had mobilized against Egypt. France and Israel now included Britain in the secret plotting at a meeting at the prime minister's country residence, Chequers, on October 14. French major general Maurice Challe and minister of labor Albert Gazier laid out the plan for an Israeli attack across the Sinai Peninsula, then subsequent intervention by Britain and France at the canal in order to achieve a cease fire. Israeli aggression would provide the justification for Anglo-French action. "Thrilled at the idea," remembered General Challe, Eden immediately signed on, despite growing opposition in Britain, both in and outside the government.[46]

The deception of the American government continued. Both the British and French foreign ministers lied to their respective American ambassadors resident in London and Paris when they downplayed the likelihood of conflict in the final weeks of October. The two governments then began to impose new conditions before they would negotiate with the Egyptians, undermining the next round of talks scheduled to begin October 29. In extreme secrecy, British, French, and Israeli delegations descended on Sèvres, a suburb of Paris, to sign a secret diplomatic protocol. The protocol provided for an Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula on October 29, the date anticipated for the resumption of negotiations, to be followed by an Anglo-French ultimatum to Israel and Egypt to cease hostilities and accept joint occupation of the canal. Upon the expected rejection of the ultimatum by Egypt, bombardment would begin on October 31, to be followed by the landing of troops. Eisenhower, Dulles, the American ambassadors to Britain and France, the American diplomatic establishment and the intelligence community all remained unaware of this step. Allen Dulles and his Intelligence Advisory Committee assumed that there was no reason to immediately update their intelligence estimates, as no action seemed imminent. In its report, "almost as an afterthought, that the FBI had picked up a rumor that an unnamed country 'was considering the initiation of military action against Nasser,'" but somehow no one followed up on this lead.

[45] Neff, 322-326.
[46] Ibid, 328-337.

Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles found it inconceivable that the British and French would act at this point, certainly not with the American presidential election two weeks away.[47]

EISENHOWER ACTS TO RESOLVE THE CRISIS

By October 28, however, American intelligence finally caught on to the collusion between the French and Israelis, noting the more numerous than usual French aircraft among the ranks of the Israeli air force. The American ambassador to Paris, Douglas Dillon, passed along intelligence received through a high-ranking French minister that Britain, France, and Israel would attack Egypt, but following the presidential election in the United States. By the morning of October 29, Secretary Dulles was convinced that the French "concerted with [the] Israelis to provide action [leading] to [an] Israeli war against Egypt" with the participation of Britain and France. Infuriated at the duplicity of his allies, Eisenhower issued stern warnings to Eden and Premier Mollet to pull back. His warnings came too late.[48]

On October 29, right on schedule, Israeli paratroopers dropped into the Sinai Peninsula. Nasser, thinking the Israelis were embarking on one of their frequent retaliatory strikes, was completely caught unaware. The next day, again, right on schedule, Britain and France issued the ultimatum calling for Egyptian withdrawal to ten miles from the canal and a cease fire. Yet again, according to plan, Nasser predictably rejected the ultimatum out of hand, telling the British ambassador Sir Humphrey Trevelyan that the Israelis were the guilty party; he had no intention of withdrawing from his own territory. On October 31, aerial bombing of Egyptian military positions began. Eden put off the landing of the bi-national force until November 5, due to stiff opposition encountered from the American delegation in the United Nations and his fast-crumbling political support in Britain.[49] The Labour opposition charged Eden with using the Israeli incursion as a pretext for retaking the canal, which Eden disingenuously denied. Though Eden's Conservative party held a sizable majority in the Commons, his government only just survived a vote of no confidence in the House of Commons.[50]

Eisenhower faced the decision of what to do in order to restore peace in the Suez. On October 30, the American ambassador to the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., presented a resolution in the Security Council calling on Israel to withdraw from the Sinai and requesting that member states of the UN "refrain from using force" in the region. The resolution failed, vetoed by France and Britain, who then announced that they had issued an ultimatum to Israel and Egypt – in accordance with the secret protocol of Sèvres. Though the UN General Assembly subsequently approved the resolution, and Egypt and Israel agreed to cease fire, this action had little impact on British and French war plans. Stymied, Eisenhower and the ailing Dulles looked for other ways to force an end to the crisis. They embraced the idea of a United Nations peacekeeping force, proposed by Lester Pearson, Canadian ambassador to the UN, and the General Assembly approved a resolution establishing such a force on November 2.[51] In the early morning of November 3, however, Dulles was rushed to hospital, where doctors removed a cancerous tumor in his colon, leaving Dulles on the sidelines for the remainder of the crisis with Herbert Hoover, Jr. taking his place as Acting Secretary of State.[52]

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[47] Nichols, 186-190.
[48] Freiberger, 185-186.
[49] Ibid, 187-188.
[50] Eisenhower, 78.
[51] Freiberger, 189-193.
[52] Nichols, 233.

The Americans also found that manipulating Britain's economy would most likely be the most effective way to persuade Eden to back off. Critical to Britain's economic stability was the matter of its currency. The pound sterling was pegged to the American dollar at a rate of $2.80. This meant that the British Exchequer required adequate gold reserves to keep the value of the pound stable.[53] By November 2, Britain had already lost $50 million in gold reserves since the conflict began, on top of a loss of $141 million in September and October, and market speculation against the pound spiked as British paratroopers entered Egyptian airspace. On November 5, acting Secretary Hoover reported to Eisenhower that Syrian sabotage in support of Egypt had cut off the supply of oil from the Middle East, creating further pressure on Britain. Harold Macmillan, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, increasingly worried about the question of the gold reserves, approached the International Monetary Fund with a request to withdraw the British contribution to the Fund. Macmillan received a blunt "no." The US, the "largest depositor" in the IMF and thus holding veto power, refused the withdrawal at Eisenhower's direction until Britain agreed to a cease fire. Macmillan felt he had no other choice than to recommend to Eden and the Cabinet acceptance of the UN cease fire resolution. Combined with the fear of Cabinet members of Soviet intervention in the crisis, which threatened to explode the conflict into a nuclear war, the impending financial crisis helped persuade Eden, his policy bankrupt and his reputation as a skilled diplomat and statesman now in shreds, to accept the cease fire the evening of November 6. Eden then telephoned Guy Mollet in Paris and recommended he follow suit in accepting the cease fire.[54]

WITHDRAWAL

The question now was how to manage the withdrawal of British and French forces from Egypt. Eden, recuperating from the strain of events in Jamaica, his health having almost completely broken down, had been sidelined in favor of Chancellor Macmillan and Rab Butler, the leader of the Conservative party in the House of Commons, who began to jointly run the British government in Eden's absence.[55] Macmillan and Butler, working with Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd, negotiated withdrawal from Egypt with the American ambassador to London, Winthrop Aldrich, Eisenhower, and the recovering Dulles. On December 3, Eisenhower expressed discomfort that the British had not committed to a firm date of withdrawal and transference of military control to the United Nations peacekeeping force. However, Dulles convinced the president of the sincerity of British and French intentions to withdraw, and to waive any objections to withdrawal of funds from the IMF or loan money from the Export-Import Bank as a sign of good faith. To this, Eisenhower agreed, and Macmillan announced in the House of Commons on December 4 that the United States Treasury Department "would recommend to Congress that it immediately waive $143 million in interest payments on a World War II loan," due to be paid by December 31. On December 22, 1956, the last British and French troops left Egypt.[56]

CONCLUSION

Eisenhower's success in resolving the Suez Crisis of 1956 is recognized as a pivotal moment in world history. The old imperial powers, dominant in the region for hundreds of years, gave way to new, more powerful, more ideological competitors. Britain and France failed to understand that, as a result of the ongoing decolonization process, their foreign policy had to adapt and evolve to meet modern needs and their new roles as middle powers. Eisenhower understood this intrinsically. As a man with a natural American antipathy toward colonialism and sympathy with underdogs, he knew

[53] Ibid, 251.
[54] Neff, 409-413.
[55] Nichols, 268.
[56] Ibid, 273-274.

that self-determination and sovereignty were inviolable concepts in the modern world. He understood that in an ideological battle with the Soviet Union, the United States had no alternative but to compete for favor with and protect the sovereignty of smaller nations, even when the nation in question was one with whom the United States had serious disagreements, such as Nasser's Egypt.

Eisenhower also understood that there was no chance at meaningful and lasting peace outside of the United Nations, which is why the collusion between Britain, France, and Israel that resulted in the secret protocol of Sèvres infuriated him so. Eisenhower's actions, with his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, strengthened the United Nations and established a model for leaders to follow in the future. In his second inaugural address, delivered on January 21, 1957, mere weeks after the withdrawal of British and French forces from Egypt, Eisenhower set out his vision: "We look upon this shaken Earth, and we declare our firm and fixed purpose — the building of a peace with justice in a world where moral law prevails…there must be justice, sensed and shared by all peoples, for, without justice the world can know only a tense and unstable truce. There must be law, steadily invoked and respected by all nations, for without law, the world promises only such meager justice as the pity of the strong upon the weak. But the law of which we speak, comprehending the values of freedom, affirms the equality of all nations, great and small. Splendid as can be the blessings of such a peace, high will be its cost: in toil patiently sustained, in help honorably given, in sacrifice calmly borne."[57] Such is the vision to which humanity continues to aspire.

[57] Dwight D. Eisenhower. "Second Inaugural Address." (Washington, DC, January 21, 1957).