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**The Suez Crisis, 1956**

Professor Vernon Bogdanor

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the second of six lectures on post-War political crises in Britain. This lecture is on the Suez Crisis of 1956, a crisis that began with the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company, in which Britain and France had a controlling interest, in July 1956 by Egypt’s leader, Colonel Nasser. It led to military action by Britain and France, in collusion with Israel, at the end of October 1956, and that military action failed largely because of the opposition of the United States.

Suez was the most divisive foreign policy issue in British politics since the War, exceeded only since then perhaps by the Iraq War, and it led to furious arguments between families and friends, and it also led to the most serious breakdown in Anglo-American relations since the War and displayed, for all the world to see, British weakness when faced with the opposition of the Americans, and so it was, from this point of view, a turning point in British post-War history.

In my last lecture, on the National Health Service, I said the crisis of 1951 was a pointer to the whole future of the National Health Service and the problem of running a health service, free at source, for which demand was, in theory, unlimited. Today, I want to show that Suez was a pointer to the future of international relations and the threat to world order posed by radical third-world nationalist leaders, but we can only understand Suez if we look at the context of the times.

The world of 1956 was a very different world from that of today, and during the immediate post-War years, Britain saw herself not primarily as a European power, which perhaps she does now, but as a global power, a super-power, with worldwide interests. We were still an imperial power, though admittedly an imperial power in the process of winding down our commitments, and this was symbolised by the granting of independence to India and Pakistan in 1947. But the African Empire remained largely intact, with a single exception of The Sudan, which had gained its independence in 1954, largely through the influence of Sir Anthony Eden, who was Prime Minister during the Suez Crisis.

Some people, in thinking about Suez, think of Anthony Eden as an imperialist, but he appreciated that the era of imperialism was over and that it was no longer possible in the modern world to rule over others without their consent. That, indeed, was the general view of what might be called the British Establishment. But we still thought that we could retain our global influence in other ways: firstly, by holding onto a ring of strategic positions, such as the Suez Canal; and secondly, by ensuring that there were friendly governments in areas of strategic importance, such as the Middle East, and after the withdrawal from India, the Middle East, and particularly Suez, were even more important to Britain because of the link with Asia and Australia that it provided.

In the Middle East, the Arab countries were not colonies in the sense that they were ruled directly from Britain, but they were mostly, at that time, ruled by friendly and subordinate governments which were, so to speak, advised by the British, and that policy came under great pressure after World War II.

The first problem came in Palestine in 1947, which the British evacuated and handed over to the United Nations to deal with because Britain was too weak to resolve the problems, and one of the few things uniting Jews and Arabs in Palestine was hostility to Britain. The Arabs were hostile because of the Balfour Declaration and Jewish immigration to Palestine; Israel because she saw the British Government as pro-Arab. In the Arab world, hatred of Britain was particularly strong in Egypt because of the long British occupation there.

When the British withdrew from Palestine, there was a war, in 1948, in which the Arabs, led then by Egypt, sought to destroy Israel, but in fact it ended with an Israeli victory and a ceasefire, though none of the Arab States recognised Israel and said they were still in a state of war with her. The West, for once perhaps in that area, had a united response to the problems, which the Americans tried to raise in the Suez Crisis, and that response was in the form of the Tripartite Declaration of 1950, of Britain, France and America, and they said, together, they would preserve the status quo in the region and come to the aid of any country attacked by another, and that they would also control the supply of arms to both sides, so that no side would be able to achieve a superiority over the other one. So, Palestine was the first pressure point.

The second was Iran, in 1951, when a radical nationalist government nationalised the British oil company, and that occurred in the last days of the Labour Government. The Labour Government thought of using force but, by contrast with Suez, did not do so, in large part because the Americans were opposed to it. But the British troops guarding the oil refinery at Abadan were ordered out, and they then went to Suez as a fall-back position, and I think the success of the Iranians probably did encourage the Egyptians in 1956 to tweak the lion’s tail, as it were, a bit further.

But then the rise of Egyptian nationalism caused further problems to Britain. In 1952, there was a revolution in Egypt. The monarchy was removed and an army junta took power, which rapidly came to be controlled by Colonel Nasser, who established a dictatorship in Egypt. This posed new and very difficult problems for Britain, which had had a close relationship with Egypt from imperial times, largely due to the need to control, as Britain saw it, the Suez Canal.

In 1875, Disraeli had bought shares in the Suez Canal Company for Britain, so that the company became a joint British and French enterprise. To ensure that the Canal was not threatened by Egyptian nationalists, Gladstone’s Liberal Government, in 1882, instituted what it called a temporary occupation of Egypt to ensure stability. That temporary occupation lasted 54 years, until 1936, but even after that, Britain had a strong, though undefined, role in Egypt and under the Egyptian monarchy, and Britain retained a base in what was called the Suez Canal Zone, which was actually quite wide. It stretched from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean and westward almost to Cairo, and that was to protect the Suez Canal, and by 1954, there were 80,000 British troops there. So, to that extent, Egyptian independence was limited.

There was only one occasion on which the two antagonists in the Suez Crisis met, Sir Anthony Eden, the British Prime Minister, and Colonel Nasser, the Egyptian leader, and that was in early 1955. They had dinner in the British Embassy in Cairo, and Colonel Nasser said he had always wanted to visit the place from which Egypt had been governed for so many years, and Eden replied, “Not governed…advised perhaps…”.

The Egyptians wanted to remove Britain from the Canal base, and they instituted guerrilla warfare to get the British out. The Americans also took the view that Britain should leave because they argued that the British presence encouraged Egypt and other third world countries to believe that the West was still colonialist, and so that helped the Soviet Union, so the Americans argued.

Anthony Eden, as Foreign Secretary in 1954, signed an agreement withdrawing British troops from the base over a period of two years, and he believed that we could not maintain our position in the Middle East by the methods of the 19th Century but, to maintain our influence, we must try and harness the nationalist movements to our own interests, rather than struggle against them. So, come to terms with the nationalism, withdraw British troops, win goodwill from new nationalist leaders, and then you can preserve British interests not through imperialism but through goodwill. Moreover, in a nuclear world, it seemed that overseas bases were pointless. Now, if that failed, there was a safeguard in the Treaty because it said that British troops could return in the case of an attack on Egypt by an outside power or by Turkey.

Eden negotiated that agreement in 1954 as Foreign Secretary, and his Prime Minister, Winston Churchill was very unhappy about it. He thought it would scuttle, and he was supported by around 40 Conservative MPs, who called themselves the Suez Group, and very remarkably, Churchill’s Private Secretary rang one of them up, after the backbencher had made a speech in the Commons, and told him that the Prime Minister agreed with the backbencher’s criticism of his own government. Churchill said unkindly to Eden that he had not realised that Munich was on the Nile, and that was a reference to the Munich Conference of 1938 which had marked the climax of appeasement. Now, this is important because, from this time, Eden was under threat from the right-wing of the Conservative Party as an appeaser who was unwilling to defend British interests abroad, and the feeling that he was weak increased after Churchill’s retirement in 1955 and Eden succeeded as Prime Minister because many backbenchers contrasted Eden’s consensual, rather emollient style with the more rumbustious approach of Churchill, and throughout the Suez Crisis, Eden was under pressure not from the left, urging him to reach a peaceful solution, but from his right-wing, that he should not surrender British interests. This pressure was also strong from within the Cabinet, and in particular from his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan, who was the second most powerful man in the Government, very much Eden’s rival and indeed was eventually to supplant him.

There is one important effect of British withdrawal from the base: it removed a buffer between Israel and Egypt, and in consequence, Egyptian commando raids began into Israel, so worsening the Arab-Israeli dispute. There were continual border raids.

But, for the moment, Eden won over doubters with the argument that the agreement protected British interests because we could always return to the base if there was trouble, but he did not answer the question: if we could not hold the base while there against a hostile population, how on earth could we return to the base against the wishes of the Egyptians? And the idea that we could return was a hollow pretence. The truth is the agreement was sold to the Conservative Party on the basis that Nasser was a reasonable man, and that once his grievances were dealt with, he would take a reasonable approach on relations with Britain. One cannot understand Eden’s actions in 1956 unless one remembers this. It was a bit like Neville Chamberlain after the Munich Agreement in 1938. Chamberlain had said that Hitler was a reasonable man and that his word could be trusted. Now, Chamberlain’s hopes were shattered when Hitler occupied Prague in 1939, and so Eden’s hopes were shattered by the nationalisation of the Canal Company which occurred just two weeks after the last British troops had left the base in July 1956, and Eden felt he had been personally cheated.

The aim of the 1954 agreement had been to win Egyptian goodwill. That did not happen, and there was continual Egyptian propaganda against Britain and the Egyptians sought to undermine the pro-British regimes in the area, and they sought the unity of the radical Arab regimes so that Israel could be destroyed, so avenging the defeat of 1948. So, Nasser, to British eyes, seemed less of a nationalist than an Arab imperialist.

Even worse, from the point of view of Britain and the Americans, Nasser began to purchase arms from countries in the Soviet Bloc, and this brought the Soviet Union into the Middle East, which hitherto had been a Western sphere of influence, and it made the Tripartite Declaration useless because the West could no longer control the balance between the two sides. Nasser said he was doing that because the French were selling arms to Israel surreptitiously, with the encouragement of America, and that was not in accordance with the Tripartite Declaration. So, of course, there were faults on both sides.

Still, Egyptian friendship with the Soviet Bloc annoyed the British and the Americans, and they began to wonder whether they should not cut aid to Egypt as a result and in particular whether they should not end the financing of the Aswan Dam in Egypt which they had promised. The British and the Americans consulted, and decided jointly to let the loan whither on the vine and fade away, as it were, but the Americans faced a particular problem from the Senate, which was extremely annoyed at Egypt’s flirtation with the Soviet Bloc, and asked, quite reasonably, why countries which were hostile to America should get as much aid as countries which were friendly to America. The Senate Appropriations Committee was proposing that no funds be spent on aid to Egypt without specific congressional approval, and the American Secretary of State, the last thing he wanted was for his foreign policy to be determined by the Senate.

So, Britain and America agreed they should terminate the loan pretty quickly, and this was done by the American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, but he did it in an abrupt and humiliating way, and he could indeed be very tactless. Churchill, referring to Dulles, said that he was “the only bull who carried his own china shop around with him”. What he should have said to the Egyptians was that they would not get the money because they were being helped by the Russians, but what he said instead was that the Egyptians did not have the technical understanding to run the Dam, and obviously that was very insulting.

The response was the Canal Company was nationalised. Now, Nasser said this was in response to the withdrawal of the funding of the Dam, but there is evidence to believe that he was going to do this in any case, and he later admitted that the Egyptians would have taken some similar action in the future.

The Canal was Egyptian sovereign territory, but the Company, which supervised the operations of the Canal, was controlled by the British and French and was meant to secure international control of it, so it was not under the policy of any particular country. So, its status was different from that of the Panama Canal, which had been leased to the Americans and was, at that time therefore, an American and not an international waterway, but still, some could argue that if Panama was under the unfettered control of a single country, why not also Suez? But of course, Suez was nowhere near as important to the Americans as it was to Europeans, and Britain and France thought the international status of the Suez Canal was at risk, and the Canal was very crucial to them at that time because a quarter of British imports and two-thirds of her oil passed through the Canal, and they were very worried that it could come under the control of a hostile power, Egypt, perhaps with Soviet influence. Earlier in 1956, the Soviet leaders, Khrushchev and Bulganin had come to Britain and Anthony Eden had told them, and I quote, that: “The uninterrupted supply of oil was literally vital to our economy. I said I thought I must be absolutely blunt about the oil because we would fight for it.”

The trouble was that it was not clear that what Nasser had done was actually illegal because he seemed to be doing no more than buying out the assets of the Company and offering full compensation to those affected. Most international lawyers, though not all but most, believe the act was not illegal in international law. The British Cabinet, which met the day after the nationalisation said, significantly, and I quote from the minutes: “We should be on weak ground in basing our resistance on the narrow argument that Colonel Nasser had acted illegally. The Suez Canal Company was registered as an Egyptian company under Egyptian law, and Colonel Nasser had indicated he intended to compensate the shareholders at ruling market prices.” From a narrow legal point of view, the action amounted to no more than a decision to buy out the shareholders. The Cabinet then went on to argue: “Our case must be presented on wider international grounds. Our argument must be that Egypt could not be allowed to exploit it for a purely internal purpose. The Canal was a vital link between East and West. It was not a piece of Egyptian property, but an international asset of the highest importance and it should be managed as an international trust.” In other words, it should not be allowed to be in the hands of a single power.

The West was not in a very strong position, I think, to insist on this because Nasser had refused to allow Israeli ships to use the Canal, saying he was still at war with Israel. Now, some international lawyers supported that position, but most did not, and Egypt had been condemned by the UN and told it had an obligation to admit Israeli ships. It did not do so, and no one did anything about it.

Even if nationalisation of the Canal was not illegal, it was condemned by almost everyone in Britain, by politicians of both right and left, as an act of plunder that could not be allowed to succeed. One of the leaders of the British left at that time, the Labour politician Aneurin Bevan said, “If the sending of one’s police and soldiers into the darkness of the night to seize someone else’s property is nationalisation, then Alibaba used the wrong terminology.” Nasser’s action reminded many people of the 1930s and none more so than the Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, who had been deeply scarred by the events of that decade.

Eden had first become Foreign Secretary in 1935, at the early age of 38, and he had been Foreign Secretary in 1936 when Hitler had re-occupied and re-militarised the Rhineland. He felt very guilty that he had done nothing to resist this, though in my view, there was no support in Britain for such resistance. His reputation had been made when he resigned in 1938, when he was just 40 years old, from the Government of Neville Chamberlain in protest against the appeasement of Mussolini, and he then made his reputation, establishing himself in the public eye as the young, handsome, idealistic upholder of collective security and international agreements, and he seemed to personify the struggle against dictatorship in Europe. Now, some argued that Eden’s resignation was misjudged, that Mussolini was a minor figure, and it was worth trying to bring him on-side so as the better to resist Hitler, but Eden rejected that view. He argued that if the democracies were firm with Mussolini, this would impress Hitler and deter him, or at least ensure that the German generals refused to take the risks of war. My own personal view is that Eden was right in that judgement. But what he was fundamentally concerned with in the 1930s and in the 1950s is the fundamental problem of how you secure the conditions of international order.

Eden went back to the Foreign Office in 1940, shortly after Churchill became Prime Minister, and then again in 1951 in Churchill’s peacetime Government, and as Foreign Secretary on these two occasions, he had a record of almost unbroken success and was described as the Australian Labour Prime Minister at the time as “the greatest Foreign Secretary of the Century”, and it was generally felt he had a great flair and instinct for foreign policy matters.

In the 1950s, he saw the same syndrome as in the 1930s, with international agreements being broken and international order being threatened. He compared Nasser with Mussolini, though not with Hitler. But the opposition leader, Hugh Gaitskell, went further. He said in Parliament, “It is all very familiar: it is exactly the same that we encountered from Mussolini and Hitler in those years before the War.” It was just twenty years, one must remember, since Hitler had re-militarised the Rhineland, and such comparisons were frequent. The Daily Herald, a Labour paper, had a headline “No more Hitlers”, and the Secretary General of the United Nations told the British Foreign Secretary in 1955 that Nasser was comparable to Hitler.

Gaitskell, the leader of the opposition, gave three objections to Nasser’s actions, which were exactly the same as those of the Government: the first was the Company was not just an ordinary company but, since it controlled an international waterway, a matter of international concern, and it could not be in the hands of a single power; secondly, the manner of the nationalisation, done suddenly, without negotiation, without discussion, and by force; and thirdly, in Gaitskell’s view, part of a policy of Egyptian imperialism. He said: “We cannot forget that Colonel Nasser has repeatedly boasted of his intention to create an Arab empire from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf,” and he said the French Prime Minister had quoted a speech of Nasser’s and rightly said it could remind us only of one thing, of the speeches of Hitler before the War. But at the same time, Gaitskell said that what Nasser had done so far offered no justification for the use of force, unless authorised by the United Nations, and that is where he differed from the Government – he said it should be taken to the United Nations and one should abide by United Nations’ decisions.

Now, the Cabinet took a different view. It met on the day after the nationalisation and it faced the following question, and I quote from the minutes: “The fundamental question before the Cabinet was whether they were prepared, in the last resort, to pursue their objective by the threat, or even the use, of force, and whether they were ready, in default of assistance from the United States or France, to take military action alone.” The Cabinet answered the question in the following way; “The Cabinet agreed that our essential interest in this area must, if necessary, be safeguarded by military action, and that the necessary preparations to this end must be made. Failure to hold the Suez Canal would lead inevitably to the loss, one by one, of all our interests and assets in the Middle East, and even if we had to act alone, we could not stop short of using force to protect our position if all other means of protecting it proved unavailing.”

But the restoration of international control was not the only aim of the Government. The Cabinet set up an Egypt Committee. This met on the 30th of July, shortly after the nationalisation, and according to the minutes, decided as follows: “While our ultimate purpose was to place the Canal under international control, our immediate objective was to bring about the downfall of the present Egyptian Government. This might perhaps be achieved by less elaborate operations than those required to secure physical position of the Canal itself.” On the other hand, it was argued that our case before world opinion was based on the need to secure international control over the Canal.

Now, to most of us, it will seem shocking that the British Government sought to remove the Egyptian Government, regime change if you like. It would not have seemed shocking I think to British and American Governments at that time. In 1953, the British and the Americans had helped removed the radical government in Iran that had nationalised the oil company in 1951, and had re-established the Shah in power. In 1954, the Americans had helped remove the government in Guatemala, and in 1963, under Kennedy, it was to help remove the government in South Vietnam, in Grenada in 1983, and in Panama in 1989, leaving aside Iraq. Now, none of these governments, it is fair to say, had been democratically elected, though nor were the governments that displaced them, so the British, when the Americans opposed them at Suez, thought this was an example of American hypocrisy, but later on, you will see some examples of British hypocrisy as well.

In my view, and my view here is the minority one – most people disagree – but in my view, the excerpts I have quoted from the British Government Cabinet minutes, which the British Government was not in fact committed to using force against Egypt. It is true they made military preparations during the summer, but in my view, these were contingency plans, to be put into practice only if other methods of achieving a satisfactory settlement had failed, and if that happened, it would have to go back to the Cabinet, which would decide on the use of force. In my view, the British had had too much trouble over the Suez base to wish to go back with a renewed physical presence in Egypt. I believe the hope was that a united front by Britain, America and France would compel a settlement acceptable to Britain and that, as in Iran, a settlement on terms unfavourable to Egypt would lead to the removal of Nasser’s Government and its replacement by a more pro-Western Government. There was always I think, at that time also, a general presumption that Nasser would undertake some further action, such as blocking the Canal, which might well provide a justification for force, but he was far too shrewd to do that and he acted very moderately during this period.

Whatever the Cabinet minutes say, the British were unwilling to act alone. Of course, from the start, they were anxious to secure American support, and indeed, American support was essential because suppose Britain, with France, intervened in Suez and that led to Soviet action, then the two countries would need the protection of the Americans. So, American support, or at least acquiescence, was essential. Anthony Eden told an American diplomat, “We do hope you will take care of the bear,” the bear being Russia.

At first sight, chances of a united front appeared good because the President of the United States was Eisenhower, who was a strong Anglophile, had worked in close harmony with Churchill during the War, had known Anthony Eden and also Harold Macmillan, the Chancellor, and he was particularly good I think at understanding British sensibilities and popular in Britain. His particular skill, which was essential on D-Day, was in handling coalition politics between different countries. For him, the unity of the Allied armies was more important than any national interest, including even American national interests, and he would immediately send back on the next boat home any officer, however senior, who disparaged Britain. One such offer complained to Eisenhower that he was being sent back to America for calling a British officer a son of a bitch, and Eisenhower replied, “But you called him a British son of a bitch, and that is unforgivable.”

Britain was to complain, during the Suez Crisis, that America had not understood the British point of view, but I think it is also the case that Britain did not understand the American point of view. There was a tendency in the early post-War years; perhaps it’s still there, for the British to think of the American Government as a kind of gigantic charitable institution whose purpose was to provide the money to sustain British interests in the world, without asking too many questions about what Britain did with that influence. President Eisenhower himself complained to a colleague, in 1953, he said, “At times, I get weary of the European habit of taking our money, resenting any slight hint as to what they should do, and then assuming, in addition, full right to criticise us as bitterly as they may desire.”

The Americans felt, I think, that they were being patronised by the British, and they were worried, understandably, that Britain might present them with a fait accompli in Suez, that they would invade and then assume the Americans would offer support, and indeed, after the Suez invasion, the American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, told the President, “Their thinking might be that they will confront us with a de facto situation in which they might acknowledge that they have been rash but would say the US could not sit by and let them go under economically.” Now, Eisenhower made clear, from the very beginning, he thought there was no justification for the use of force. He shared the British view that Nasser was a menace to Western interests and that a policy had to be worked out to deal with him, but he did not believe the nationalisation of the Canal Company was the right issue on which to act, and he drew a strong distinction, which I think the British perhaps did not grasp, between military action and covert operations. Again, you may say that is a sign of American hypocrisy, but we will come to signs of British hypocrisy later on.

Eisenhower made his view absolutely clear, not so much in public statements, though there were public statements, but in letters to Eden, and these have now been published. The letters are very courteous, he was writing to a friend and ally, but there was no room for misunderstanding, that he was particularly insistent on a peaceful solution because he was facing a presidential election on November 6th, in which he was campaigning as the candidate who had maintained the peace during the difficult days of the Cold War. The last thing he needed was a war in the Middle East which might undermine that claim. In his memoirs, Eisenhower said: “My conviction was that the Western world had got into a lot of difficulties by selecting the wrong issues about which to be tough. To choose a situation in which Nasser had legal and sovereign rights and in which world opinion was on his side was not, in my opinion, a good one on which to make a stand.”

Still, the British hoped, even if the Americans did not support what they were doing, there might be acquiescence, that the Americans would turn a blind eye, perhaps opposing in public, but in practice doing nothing to stop the operation. Part of the reason for this was that Eisenhower did not say what he would do if the British did use force, partly because he believed they would not do it without American support, and he did not want to appear to threaten an ally. The British were encouraged in their view that they might win American support for a threat of force by the American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and that was paradoxical, since while British leaders liked Eisenhower, indeed almost everyone, in the phrase of the 1950s, almost everyone “liked Ike” as they put it, British leaders did not like Dulles very much, and they were particularly irked by his rather legalistic and self-righteous approach to foreign policy. Eden prided himself on his flair and intuition in foreign policy, and he did not like listening to sermons and moralising from the American Secretary of State. Harold Macmillan, rather unkindly, said of Dulles that “his speech was slow but it easily kept pace with his thought”. Now, Eisenhower liked Dulles, but few others did, and Eden certainly did not, and called him, in his memoirs, “a preacher in the world of politics”. It is also fair to say that Dulles, and many other Americans, did not like Eden, with his languid aristocratic manner and his habit of calling colleagues “my dear”, which rather grated on American opinion.

Dulles’ long-winded speeches left many wondering what precisely he meant, but that was in part deliberate because Dulles was deliberately using delaying tactics. He thought the danger of war would disappear once negotiations started, and that he should keep the pot boiling so that tempers cooled down a bit, but to get the British and French fully committed to negotiations, he had to give the impression that if these failed, the Americans might consider supporting force. In other words, he wanted to string the British and French along. But despite all this, and despite the fact that he was disliked by British leaders, Dulles, oddly enough, was more sympathetic to the British position than Eisenhower was, so he could not disguise that sympathy in Britain.

So, there were crucial misunderstandings on both sides of the Atlantic, and in particular, four crucial mistakes were made in handling that American relationship.

The first mistake was the British assumed that Dulles, who was more sympathetic than Eisenhower, was in charge of American foreign policy, because Dulles tended to be more outspoken. That was wishful thinking. The British assumed that Dulles was in the position of a British Foreign Secretary, who, at that time, would be a powerful politician with a constituency of his own, as Eden had had under Churchill, and Ernest Bevin in the Attlee Labour Government, but the American Secretary of State’s position is not like that. He is a delegate of and responsible to the President, and in some ways, he is more like the Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office than a British Foreign Secretary – he cannot act independently of the President. Dulles was very aware of that because of what had happened in 1947, when an American Secretary of State had tried to do just that, James Byrnes, who had rather underestimated Truman, and was attempting to carry out a foreign policy of his own, but was in effect dismissed by President Truman for insubordination, and that was even though Byrnes had a political base of his own, having been a Senator. Later, in 1982, President Reagan was to dismiss Alexander Haig as his Secretary of State because he found him personally incompatible. Now, Dulles, by contrast with Byrnes, had no electoral constituency or political base. He had been defeated in an attempt to secure a Senate seat in 1950 and was entirely dependent on the President. His only claim to his post was his technical ability and the confidence which the President placed in him. So, whatever Dulles’ private views might have been, he was not going to challenge the President. Eisenhower was the man who made the decisions. He was the man who counted. His word was what counted. The British did not fully understand that.

The second mistake was made by Dulles. He looked at British opinion and he saw that the Labour Party, together with a few Conservatives and many members of the public, were against the use of force, so he assumed force would not be used. He was compared parliamentary opposition in Britain to senatorial opposition in America, and he no doubt remembered the havoc that Senator McCarthy in American foreign policy through his wild charges concerning communists in the State Department, and he noticed the great power wielded by Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic leader in the Senate. But the British system is different. A British Prime Minister, unlike the President, controls the legislature. There could be no equivalent to McCarthy or Lyndon Johnson in the House of Commons, and opposition hostility to government policy is standard – it is expected. Now, Cameron has said he will not act in Syria without some opposition support, but he does not have to take such a line. A determined Prime Minister need not bother with the opposition in Parliament, and insofar as Parliament counted in 1956, it was in the form of the right-wing of the Conservative Party that was pressing Eden to adopt more forcible measures and clamouring for the use of force. So, contrary to what Dulles thought, Parliamentary pressure was spurring Eden on, not holding him back.

The third mistake was made by the British. They saw Eisenhower as a fairly passive figure who would go along with British policy, and there was a caricature of him at that time in Britain, but also amongst some Americans, that he was a lazy President who spent more time on the golf course than in his office. On one of Eisenhower’s letters, Eden said, “The only thing that is true to Ike is his signature, and that is illegible.” Churchill told his doctor, “The President is no more than a ventriloquist’s doll.” In addition, with an election due in November, the British hoped he would not go against Israel, who were their allies here, because of the importance of the Jewish vote in New York, which was then a swing state. But in fact, Eisenhower was in full control of American foreign policy and Dulles was his agent, and most important of all, contrary to public perceptions, perceptions which Eisenhower encouraged so as to be seen as a constitutional monarch above the battle and retain his popularity, Eisenhower was a strong President, with strong views on foreign policy. Far from being a golf-playing amateur, he had, from his Wartime experiences and his post-War leadership in NATO, vast, indeed unrivalled, experience of foreign policy. He knew at first-hand many of the world’s political leaders and the problems involved, and contrary to the sunny image which he projected, he had a furious temper, and as we shall see, he became very angry when his views were ignored. The British were to pay a very high price for under-estimating Eisenhower. In addition, Eisenhower did not need the Jewish vote because, at that time, Republican support lay primarily in upstate New York and not in the cities where the Jewish vote was strong, and in any case, at that time, most Jews voted Democrat and were not intending to support Eisenhower, even if he were to show himself more sympathetic to Israel than in fact he was.

The fourth mistake was made by both sides. The British Chancellor, Harold Macmillan, met Eisenhower in September in Washington for half an hour. They had been colleagues during the War in North Africa. Macmillan was the only senior politician to meet Eisenhower during the crisis. Now, remarkably, during that half-hour, Suez was not raised, and this silence was misinterpreted on both sides. Eisenhower made the mistake of not repeating the warnings he had given to Anthony Eden because he thought Macmillan was an equivalent to the American Secretary of the Treasury or a Continental Finance Minister, someone dealing primarily with technical issues concerning money. In fact, Macmillan was the second man in the Government, deeply involved in Suez, the first to suggest that Britain work with the Israelis to defeat Nasser, pressing Eden to take forcible action and threatening to resign from the Government if Eden did not. During the Suez crisis, he was in regular communication with Churchill, whose prestige of course was still enormous, and both were agreed that Nasser must be confronted. Macmillan was prepared to lead a revolt from the right against Eden, which would have threatened Eden’s premiership. In fact, therefore, Macmillan was the key to Britain’s Suez policy. Eisenhower did not realise this, an error on his part.

But Macmillan made the more serious error: he believed that Eisenhower’s silence indicated consent. He told the Cabinet, and I quote, “Ike will lie doggo”, and that was wishful thinking. He made a further mistake: he failed to pass on to his Prime Minister a warning given by his Permanent Secretary at the Treasury that Sterling would not be able to stand the strain of a military campaign without American help. On the 7th of September, Macmillan was told of a vital necessity, and I quote, “…from the point of view of the currency and our economy, of ensuring that we do not go it alone and that we have maximum American support”. At that time, the pound was not floating, as it is now, but on a fixed exchange rate regime, and Britain would want to avoid what it would regard as a humiliation of a devaluation of the pound. Macmillan simply commented on that Treasury memo, “Yes, this is just the trouble – the Americans are being very difficult,” but he did not tell his Prime Minister of it.

Now, the Americans, and in particular Dulles, as I have said, they tried to play for time. Tempers would cool. The British would gradually understand that, whatever they thought about the nationalisation, it did not have the apocalyptic consequences they believed would occur – life would go on much as it did before.

So, Dulles sponsored two conferences, which were held in London, at which the various users of the Canal could prepare proposals for the Egyptians, but as might have been predicted, they had little effect. The British acquiesced in all this, hoping if they appeared reasonable, they would win American support for a stronger line, but in fact, Eisenhower and Dulles had unintentionally made the British position more difficult because, once it was known they opposed the use of force, this took the pressure off the Egyptians to reach an agreement. They thought all they had to do was sit tight and wait, and the Americans would restrain Britain and France.

Still, it seemed at first sight that the American approach was succeeding and tempers were cooling. The British Foreign Secretary met with his Egyptian counterpart at the United Nations in New York, and they agreed upon six principles for a settlement, the most important of which were free and open transit through the Canal, insulation of the operation of the Canal from the politics of any one country, and that disputes between the Company and Egypt should be settled by arbitration. The trouble was there was no agreement about how these principles should be implemented, how breaches of them were to be verified, and how they were to be enforced against a recalcitrant Egypt, and there was widespread distrust of Egyptian good faith. The British wanted terms that would damage Nasser, hoping perhaps he might be replaced, and that of course suggests the British did not believe that Nasser could accept the sort of terms we were seeking.

It seemed that agreement might be within reach. With winter coming, it would be difficult to mount an amphibious landing to invade Egypt. On the 12th of October, Eisenhower spoke at his press conference as follows: “I have got the best announcement that I could possibly make to America tonight: the progress made in the settlement of the Suez dispute this afternoon at the UN is most gratifying. Egypt, Britain and France have met through their Foreign Ministers and agreed on a set of principles on which to negotiate and it looks like here is a very great crisis that is behind us.” Now, once again, the British protested this was cutting the ground from under their feet because, without American pressure, there was little incentive for the Egyptians to reach agreement, but the American response was that “one should not take too seriously what was said in the middle of an election campaign”.

We will never know whether agreement could have been reached on the basis of the six principles. Britain certainly had a strong negotiating position at the time, with the active sympathy and support of many other countries, including America, but this negotiating position was of course dissipated by the military action, and the six principles would have given Britain better terms than were actually achieved after the failure of military action.

Just at this point, things began to go wrong, and a peaceful settlement soon appeared out of reach. While Eisenhower was speaking, the annual Conservative Party Conference was in session, and at that Conference, the leadership had proposed an innocuous motion which did little more than endorse the Government’s efforts to achieve what it called “a just solution”. The resolution said nothing about force and nothing about international control, which I think confirms my judgement that the Government at this stage was still seeking a peaceful settlement. But two Conservative MPs proposed an amendment, to the effect that the “just solution” must ensure, and I quote, “international control of the Canal”, and one of the MPs said in the debate that, “If the search for control failed at the UN, our hands are free to use any and every measure that may be necessary to achieve our ends, including the use of force, even, against American wishes,” and this view was so strongly supported amongst constituency delegates, the leadership simply accepted it, not daring to risk a vote which it might lose. It was clear the temper of the Conservative Party was opposed to any settlement which could be interpreted as a sell-out.

Now, Eden returned from the Conservative Conference to Chequers, his country home, and on the Sunday, he was visited by two French emissaries. The first was the Deputy Foreign Minister, and the second was the Deputy Chief of Staff of the French Air Force, and they told Eden that the Israelis were preparing to attack Egypt. The Israelis believed that the Egyptians intended to fight a war against them, and they saw no reason why they should wait while Egypt assimilated arms from the Soviet Bloc to prepare their attack. The Israelis were not wrong in their judgement. When the British invaded Egypt in October, they found the following operation order to Egyptian commanders, dated 15th February 1956: “Every commander should be prepared and prepare his troops for unavoidable war with Israel in order to achieve our supreme objective, namely, annihilation of Israel and its complete destruction in as little time as possible and by fighting against her as brutally and cruelly as possible.” Now the French said they were going to help the Israelis, but both the Israelis and the French needed British support to provide air cover for the Israeli troops since the Israeli Air Force was, at that time, too weak to combat Egypt’s Russian-built aircraft. If Britain agreed, so the French emissaries said, Britain and France would have an excellent opportunity to reverse Nasser’s nationalisation and perhaps even to overthrow his Government.

In response to this, Eden visited Paris with his Foreign Secretary to consult French leaders, and on his return, spoke to his senior colleagues. The Foreign Secretary was Selwyn Lloyd, and he I think was rather sceptical of the use of force. He wanted to continue with negotiation. But he was rather in awe of Anthony Eden and he had come to the Foreign Office by a rather curious route. He was a very junior figure, and in 1951, he had been made a Junior Minister at the Foreign Office, much to his surprise, by Churchill. He was expecting to have a position as a Law Officer because he had been a Shadow Law Officer in the late-1940s and he assumed that would be his position, but Eden asked for him as a Junior Minister, and when Churchill said he was going to appoint him to the Foreign Office, Selwyn Lloyd said: “But Sir, I think there must be some mistake – I do not speak any foreign language, and except in war, I have never visited any foreign country. I do not like foreigners. I have never spoken in a foreign affairs debate in the House. I have never listened to one.” Churchill replied, “Young man, these all seem to me to be positive advantages!” But given his position, he was very much in awe of Eden and was easily convinced by Eden.

Now, after senior ministers had consulted, it was agreed that Selwyn Lloyd would go with an official, incognito, to France to meet the French and the Israelis secretly at a village in Sèvres, around 20 miles from Paris, at which the plans would be outlined. That was on the 22nd of October. The Foreign Secretary was told the Israelis proposed to attack in the Sinai Desert in a week’s time, on the 29th of October. The French suggested that they and the British should then issue an ultimatum requiring both Israeli and Egyptian forces to retreat 10 miles from the Canal, the pretext being the safeguarding of the Canal. The Israelis would accept this ultimatum since it would be unlikely they would actually be within 10 miles of the Canal, and actually were not in fact, while the Egyptians could hardly accept a proposal requiring them to withdraw from their own territory which was under attack, and Britain and France would then invade. Would Britain agree?

Selwyn Lloyd said he had to consult his Cabinet, but according to an Israeli account, he insisted on the following: that the Israeli attack not be a small scale encounter but a real war. He said, otherwise, there would be no justification for the British ultimatum, and Britain would appear in the eyes of the world as an aggressor. The British said they had friends, like the Scandinavian countries, who would not view with favour Britain starting a war. You may think this is an example of British hypocrisy to match anything the Americans had done…

The Israelis said they would not attack Egypt unless they had a cast-iron guarantee from Britain that they would bomb Egyptian airfields because, otherwise, they said, their ground troops would be attacked in the Sinai Desert by Egypt. So, two days later, there was as second clandestine meeting at Sèvres, attended this time not by any ministers but by two Foreign Office officials and they initialled a document putting in writing the discussion two days earlier.

When they got back to London, Eden was furious. He said nothing should be put on paper, that the British copy should be destroyed, and the Foreign Office officials were told to go back to Paris to destroy the other copies as well. On returning to the French Foreign Office, they were locked in a room for some time, and indeed unable to obtain their lunch, and then told there was no question of the French destroying their copy because the Israelis had taken their copy back to Israel and they would not destroy it because they did not trust the British to actually bomb Egyptian airfields without the written agreement, and the French could not agree to the Israelis having the only copy. So, the British officials returned emptyhanded, and the so-called Treaty of Sèvres, which was intended to be secret, more accurately a protocol, it was first published by Israeli Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan in his memoirs in 1966, and then by the French Foreign Minister in his memoirs in 1976. The document, now to be found in the British National Archives, is in fact the Israeli version. The British one has been destroyed. But whether treaty or protocol, it was secret and intended to remain secret forever.

The Cabinet, contrary to what was sometimes said, were told in very general terms that the Israelis proposed to attack and what the British and French response would be. They were not told about the details of the Sèvres meetings, nor the protocol that had been signed. Outside the Cabinet, very few were told – only the Cabinet Secretary, the Permanent Head of the Foreign Office, and of course the Foreign officials who had been at Sèvres. But the Permanent Head of the Foreign Office decided not to tell his junior officials, nor even the Ambassadors to Israel, Egypt, France or America, who were therefore left in the dark when called upon to explain British policy. A number of junior officials contemplated resignation and one or two actually did so, and at least one Ambassador, the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, contemplated resignation, but in the end, they stayed at their post. Some officials went to see the former Labour Prime Minister Attlee to ask what they should do, they had a crisis of conscience, and he brusquely told them to return to their posts and not waste his time.

The Law Officers disassociated themselves from the action, which they believed lacked any sanction in international law. They had not been told of the Sèvres protocol and the Cabinet had broken with convention by not seeking their advice. That of course is in contrast with the situation in the Iraq War, when the advice of the Law Officers was sought, on the insistence of military leaders, who wanted an assurance that soldiers were not being asked to do anything unlawful.

The agreement was also kept from Parliament and of course from the public.

In defence of the Government, you might argue that in conflict situations, it is often the case that matters have to be withheld, as was done in both World Wars. Indeed, Winston Churchill said that the truth was “so important in wartime that it had to be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies”. In this case, the justification of secrecy was that Britain would suffer fewer casualties if the Israelis had already helped destroy the Egyptian Army before the invasion, and if the collusion became known, British civilians living in other Arab countries would be in danger. I will leave it to you to decide whether this justification is sufficient.

It is fair to say the House of Commons did not hold collusion against the Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, since, in 1971, he was made Speaker of the House of Commons, with the agreement of all parties.

Now, at first, all seemed to go well.

[Video plays]

“After weeks of stalemate, the Suez Crisis bursts dramatically into the news again, for Israel has invaded Egypt. Britain and France have declared the Canal in danger, and British and French troops are on the move.

The background to these startling events is the running sore of the Israel/Egypt frontier, which has been a theatre of sporadic warfare ever since the Israeli State came into being. For many years, even the village schools in the frontier settlements have known that at any moment death may be looking over their shoulder. The Israeli patrols have been permanently on the watch for any move from the Egyptian side, for Israel’s Arab neighbours have never been reconciled to her existence. Every few weeks, the farmers’ daily round has been interrupted by sudden clashes, for which neither side has been without blame.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, the steadily growing power of the regime which overthrew Faruq has been evident to the world. The Western nations, thinking of the Suez Canal, watched uneasily. Egypt turned eastwards for her supplies of arms, and Russia’s Foreign Minister, Shepilov, found Nasser a ready customer.

But with every man and woman trained, Israel’s strength too was growing, and the danger of a major flare-up increased. The frontier raids continued. Sooner or later, the explosion must come.

At last, without warning, Israel strikes. General Moshe Dayan, one-eyed Commander in Chief, orders the tanks into action. The Israeli forces sweep across the frontier into the Egyptian desert, while Premier Ben Gurion declares general mobilisation. Within hours, the leading Israeli columns are driving towards the Canal. Britain and France react at once with an ultimatum: stop the fighting or we march in. Israel accepts if Egypt will, but Egypt flatly refuses. The world waits tensely to see whether the British flag will fly once more over Suez.”

The Israelis attacked, as arranged, on the 29th of October. Britain and France sent their ultimatum on the 30th, rejected by Egypt. Britain then bombed Egyptian airfields. Now, Radio Cairo spoke of horrifying civilian casualties, but the British in fact bombed only airfields and military targets. The British could easily have terrorised Cairo, Port Said and Alexandria, to enforce a rapid surrender, but did not do so.

After the bombing was to come the invasion, but the military, remembering Arnhem, said an invasion could not be achieved by para-troops alone but must be supported from the sea. Now, for the fleet to arrive on the Suez Canal from Malta, the nearest port available, that would take five days, and the fleet couldn’t start before 30th of October because it had to wait for rejection of the British ultimatum, so para-troops wouldn’t land at Port Said until the 5th of November, the sea-borne invasion would begin on the 6th of November, but of course, all this gave time for those opposed to force to act.

The Labour Party at home opposed it, and there were protest rallies in Trafalgar Square, but that was not as important as American opposition. Eisenhower said he had not been consulted, though I think, from intelligence reports, he would have had a good idea of what was going on, and the Americans said the proper response was to invoke the Tripartite Declaration. But the British and French said that means helping Egypt – she has been attacked by Israel – we are certainly not going to do that, and the British and French therefore vetoed a resolution to that effect in the United Nations, the first time that Britain had ever used the veto, and the Americans then took the issue to the General Assembly. They were absolutely furious.

[Video plays]

“The Suez Canal, storm centre of controversy for weeks, now becomes a cause of war in a lightning sequence of diplomatic and military moves. Since its seizure and nationalisation by President Nasser of Egypt, the vital waterway has precipitated a new crisis in the already tense Middle East. Crack French units are embarked at Marseilles, bound for a joint staging area with Great Britain on Cyprus, less than an hour’s flight from Egyptian ports, where they are prepared for seizure of the Canal by force. Simultaneously, Britain reinforces its garrison on the island for the same eventuality. A naval concentration in the Eastern Mediterranean strengthens the military build-up, even as Israel, in a lightning attack, thrusts deep into Egypt to the vicinity of the Canal. France and Britain issue a 12-hour ultimatum that all fighting must cease. Within hours of its expiration, Britain’s war planes are winging their way to Egypt and its bombers attack five key cities, including Cairo.

Following a Security Council veto by Britain and France of a United States motion for a ceasefire, President Eisenhower, after consultation with Secretary of State Dulles, makes a firm declaration of United States’ policy: “The United States was not consulted in any way about any phase of these actions, nor were we informed of them in advance. In the circumstances I have described, there will be no United States involvement in these present hostilities. I therefore have no plan to call the Congress in special session. Of course, we shall continue to keep in contact with congressional leaders of both parties. It is our hope and intent that this matter will be brought before the United Nations General Assembly. There, with no veto operating, the opinion of the world can be brought to bear in our quest for a just end to this tormenting problem. In the past, the United Nations has proved able to find a way to end bloodshed. We believe it can and that it will do so again.”

The whole question was brought before an emergency session of the General Assembly, where it faces the bar of world opinion.”

Eisenhower was absolutely furious. He was facing a presidential election on November 6th, and he took the issue from the Security Council to the General Assembly, where no veto was possible, and there was a vote of 64 to five calling for an immediate ceasefire. The five were Britain, France, Israel, Australia and New Zealand. The Canadians, who shared the American view, proposed that a United Nations emergency force be established to police the Egyptian/Israeli border. Nothing was said about the need for international control of the Canal and that issue now lapsed, and indeed, no more was heard of it again, and despite the six principles, Egypt, strengthened by her support at the UN, refused to negotiate any further on that particular issue.

The British wondered what to do, I think, when they saw that United Nations resolution, but the Americans left them with little choice because the Americans said they would prevent Britain exercising her withdrawal rights for funds from the International Monetary Fund, which were needed to sustain the pound, and they said they would refuse to supply Britain with the oil she needed until she obeyed the United Nations resolution. It is fair to say the Suez Canal was blocked as soon as the military action began by Nasser, so we were not getting any oil and we therefore needed the Americans to supply the oil. But the Treasury Secretary said to his British counterpart, Harold Macmillan, “You will not get a dime from the US Government until you have gotten out of Suez.” Macmillan, at that stage, said to his colleagues…he threw up his arms and said, “Oil sanctions – that finishes it!” He said we must stop. Now, Eden wanted to continue so that Britain had control of the whole Canal. We were about a third of the way into the Canal. He wanted to continue so that we had, as we would have thought, stronger bargaining power, but the Cabinet would not support him and Macmillan now threatened to resign unless there was a ceasefire. In addition, the Israelis had accepted a ceasefire, so the pretext for British intervention had now gone. The British assumed that the Israelis would take much longer to get to the Canal, about two weeks than they did. In fact, they were there in seven days, so the Israelis were too quick, and the British invasion was too slow. So, at that point, a ceasefire was accepted, and American pressure forced a British withdrawal. The British had hoped that their forces could form part of a United Nations contingent, but the Egyptians said, understandably, they would not accept a UN force if her enemies, Britain and France, were part of it, and they would not accept it until Britain and France had left Egypt, and the UN said the force could only be there subject to Egyptian consent. So, by just before Christmas, the last British forces left Suez, and this was the first time I think in the modern era where Britain had to end a war at a time not of her own choosing.

The aim of the operation had been to remove Nasser, but in fact it was Anthony Eden who went. He resigned on health grounds in January 1957, though it is not clear for how long he could have continued even if his health had been good. He was succeeded, ironically, by Harold Macmillan, though Macmillan’s judgement had been even more in question than Eden’s: he had pressed for force, he had pressed for collusion with the Israelis, he had misinterpreted the views of Eisenhower to Eden, he had failed to pass on a Treasury warning of the strains on Sterling, had failed to take proper precautions to preserve the currency, but he was the beneficiary, so it shows the eternal truth – there is no real justice in politics.

There was an ironic postscript. On the 3rd of November, in the middle of the operation, the American Deputy Director of Intelligence told the CIA representative in London: “Tell your friends to comply with the goddamn ceasefire or go ahead with the goddam invasion! Either way, we will back them up if they do it fast. What we cannot stand is their goddam hesitation!” The CIA officer in London told the Joint Intelligence Committee in London, saying, “I am not speaking without instructions,” and that was an indication that Eden and Macmillan might have been right after all, that if it had been quick, the Americans might have turned a blind eye. Indeed, Dulles said to Eisenhower, on 12th November: “The British, having gone in, should not have stopped until they had toppled Nasser. As it was, they have now got the worst of both possible worlds: they have received all the onus of making the move, and at the same time, have not accomplished their major purpose.” And then, on 17th November, just 11 days after the ceasefire, the British Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, visited Dulles in hospital – he would be hospitalised during the crisis – and Dulles asked, “Why did you stop? Why did you not go through with it and get Nasser down?” and Lloyd said, “Why did you not give us a wink?” and Dulles said, I think perfectly reasonably, “Well, I could not do that.”

But even if the Americans had turned a blind eye, the question remains: what could Britain and France do once they were in Egypt, with another occupation against the wishes of the people? Some Conservatives believed there was an alternative pro-British leadership available in Egypt. I think that was wishful thinking. Probably, British occupation would have met with terrorism and guerrilla warfare, led by Nasser, whose position would have been strengthened. What could have been accomplished if the Suez operation had actually been successful? Perhaps that is the main argument against it. What could it have achieved?

I come to my conclusions...

The effects, curiously, were rather contrary to many of those predicted and not as immediately striking as many had predicted, and Eden, shortly before his resignation, told the Cabinet, “Suez has not so much changed our fortunes as revealed realities.”

It was assumed that Suez would have long-term divisive effects in British politics, but it did not. Things healed pretty quickly. Indeed, opinion polls showed that, oddly enough, Suez became more popular with the public as it was seen to have failed. There was no majority for the use of force before the operation began, but once failure was clear, a majority said that Eden had been right. On 1st and 2nd November, Gallup reported 37% for Eden, 44% against, but on 10th and 11th November, 53% for Eden, 32% against, and popular support for Eden remained high until his resignation. Perhaps the public admired him simply for having a go, for bashing a foreigner who had dared to challenge British interests.

Suez had an effect on opinion-formers, sometimes dismissed as “the chattering classes”: it turned them against the Conservatives, but that would probably have happened anyway – opinion-formers are generally to be found on the left.

Labour tried to make an issue of Suez during the 1959 Election, though few appeared interested and the Conservatives won the Election with an increased majority.

It was assumed that Suez would lead to long-term damage of British/American relations. That did not happen either. The relations were patched up rapidly by Harold Macmillan, and Macmillan said, again rather patronisingly, that the British could be “the Greeks to America’s Rome”, in other words, we had the ideas and the Americans had the power. The Americans were also keen to patch things up. Eisenhower said, “Those British, they are still my right arm.”

But some may say these things were patched up too quickly, that Suez ended a long era in Anglo-American relations which had begun in 1895. From that point on, British Governments had rarely departed from the attitude of courting the friendship of America. Bismarck had famously said the key to the 20th Century would be that the Americans spoke English.

Many in Britain hoped that they, with America, could maintain the peace of the world, an attitude encouraged by alliances in two World Wars, and the British hoped she could work as an equal with America because of her empire which made her a world power. That was all now seen as wishful thinking. The empire had gone, and the British relationship was that of a subordinate. Perhaps Britain was becoming, without realising it, a purely European power.

The German Chancellor, Dr Adenauer, saw the realities at the time very clearly. He said Britain was “like an old man who had lost all his property and did not realise it”. After seeing Eden on 6th November, the day of the ceasefire, he wrote to the French Prime Minister, very presciently, he said: “France and England will never be powers comparable to the US and the Soviet Union, nor Germany either. There remains to them only one way of playing a decisive role in the world: that is to unite to make Europe. England is not ripe for it, but the affair of Suez will help to prepare her spirits for it. We have no time to waste.” He told the French, “Europe will be your revenge.”

The French, and de Gaulle in particular, who came to power in France in 1958, subordinated their relationship with America to the construction of a European power which could exert leverage over America. European interests, the French thought, were distinct: there should be a European policy distinct from the American, and de Gaulle was greatly influenced by Suez. It made him even more distrustful of Britain, which he believed would always follow America rather than Europe, and that I think is one of the reasons why he vetoed Britain’s early applications to join the European Communities – he thought Britain would be an American Trojan horse.

And so, in my view, the effect on the Entente Cordiale was greater than the effect on British and American relations, and the French insisted that Britain, before entering Europe, must jettison Sterling, her reserve currency, so there could be a strong European reserve currency independent of America. Now, that is now the Euro, though you may say it’s not a successful reserve currency. France also developed her own totally independent nuclear deterrent, completely independent of America.

There was no similar reaction in Britain; no anti-Americanism of the right, no Gaullism - anti-Americanism remained a near-monopoly of the left. Macmillan did eventually apply to join Europe in 1961, but his conception of Europe was quite different to de Gaulle’s. He believed in interdependence with America, and Britain as a bridge between the Continent and America, which is probably still the British view, whereas de Gaulle said that Europe should have its own independent policy.

In Britain, Suez ended the illusion which 1940 engendered, that the fate of the country lay entirely in her own hands, the Churchillian illusion, if you like. People remembered 1940, but perhaps they forgot the War had only been won with the aid of the Soviet Union and America- Britain became over-confident. And when this was realised at the time of Suez, there was a loss of national self-confidence, which persisted until the successful campaign to re-capture the Falklands in 1982, the subject of my fourth talk in this series.

When Eden died in 1977, his obituary in the Times said: “He was the last Prime Minister to believe Britain was a great power, and the first to confront a crisis which proved she was not.”

Eden’s failure at Suez was a failure of the right, a failure, if you like, of gunboat diplomacy, but that, in my view, does not comprehend its full significance because Suez raises key questions which have not yet been resolved of how international order is to be maintained in a post-imperial world, and that was the question that had preoccupied Anthony Eden since the 1930s.

In the 19th Century, international order had been secured through the idea of the Concert of Europe, informal summits of European powers. That kept Europe at peace from 1815 to 1914. Then it was replaced by the League of Nations, and then the United Nations, setting up principles of international order and law. At first sight, Suez seemed to show the force of the United Nations as a representative of world opinion, but the United Nations could only work against the democracies, it could not work against the Soviet Union and Hungary and it could not work against Egypt. It was assumed that Suez would strengthen the United Nations – it did not. The United Nations could not get any redress for Britain and France in face of the Soviet veto, and Britain and France felt that the UN was hypocritical: it intervened to stop them, but not the Soviet Union. Aneurin Bevan, a leader of the left, whom I quoted earlier, he said that there was only one motto worse than “My country, right or wrong”, and that is “The UN, right or wrong”. The UN failed to keep the peace in the Middle East. In 1967, Nasser ordered the United Nations emergency force out of Egypt so he could once again threaten Israel, and the resolution setting up the United Nations’ force had accepted it could stay only as long as Egypt consented to it. The result, the Six Day War, was won by Israel, and there was a further war in 1973, and the consequences are still there, in Gaza, the West Bank of the Jordan, and the Syrian Golan Heights, all conquered by Israel in 1967. Had Britain still been in possession of the Suez Canal base, or had Suez been successful, it is possible these wars would not have occurred.

Eden, as I said, was concerned with the weakening of international order, which was threatened by Nasser, just as, in the 1930s, he had been concerned with the weakening of international order through the action of the dictators, and Eden was the first to realise that the great threat to international order was not so much from the communist powers, who were weak and cautious and highly risk-averse, but from radical third world dictators who were much less risk-averse. Nasser has had his successors in the Middle East, in Saddam Hussein, Colonel Gaddafi, and Bashar al-Assad, and we face now not dissimilar problems to that faced by Eden in 1956.

On a number of occasions since 1956, we have intervened in the Middle East, most recently in Iraq and in Libya, and those interventions, like Suez, were highly controversial and show the costs of intervention. But on the other hand, you may argue the failure to intervene in Syria, like the failure to intervene against Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930s, show the risks and costs of non-intervention, so perhaps there are no simple answers, and perhaps Eden was more prescient that appeared at the time, and certainly, the problem which he had to confront, how to secure an international order compatible with radical third world nationalism, still exists today and challenges us all to try to find a solution. From that point of view, Suez was not just a throwback to the past but a pointer to the future.

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Gresham College

Barnard’s Inn Hall

Holborn

London

EC1N 2HH

www.gresham.ac.uk