

British, whether unable to invent a reasonable excuse to halt troop extraction, or simply unwilling to delay troop evacuation, pulled out their final soldiers on June 18. The former possibility appears more probable than the latter, but there also exists a third explanation. That is that British officials never were informed of the State Department's suggestion. In any case, Nasser, expecting Dulles' withdrawal of aid, used the perceived insult to his utmost advantage and seized the canal without opposition. President Eisenhower, who had remained primarily an overseer, began to take a more active role as the potential for an allied response increased. The Suez Crisis had begun.

In the middle of March, 1956, when the Eisenhower administration was reevaluating its offer of economic aid for the Aswan Dam, the State Department memorandum drafted by Wilkins expressed what America sought in the countries it supported. The United States searched for "Stable, viable, friendly governments..., capable of withstanding communist-inspired subversion from within, and willing to resist communist aggression."⁵² Dulles and the Department of State had attempted to turn Egypt into this type of country through an act of good faith - they had arranged for the removal of 80,000 foreign soldiers. Nasser would not allow it. He maintained his independence of action. In doing so he raised American suspicions to the point where the State Department considered Egypt a blackmailing, Communist influenced

country. The overarching belief that "if you are not for us, you are against us" was an important factor. This led to two conclusions.

On one level America's analysts believed that Egypt's only goal was to milk the United States and the Soviet Union for whatever profit it could gain. At the same time, however, they concluded that without American protection Egypt was destined to fall under the control of the Soviet Union - regardless of Nasser's desire to rid Egypt of all foreign influences. Nasser's goal of complete independence was ignored because American officials did not believe it was attainable. The Communists would gain power, eventually, if Egypt rejected US influence.

American career diplomat, Alfred Athertan, was Second Ambassador in Syria during the Suez Crisis. He remarked in his 1990 article "The United States and the Suez Crisis: The Uses and Limits of Diplomacy" that the United States became involved in the Middle East "With its eyes fixed on the Cold War...." Athertan continued by stating that "the American Administration failed to appreciate the strength and irreconcilability of the forces gathering strength in the Middle East."⁵³ He referred, here, to all of America's involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. Yet, Athertan's statement directly applied to the difficulties of an Egypt headed by Nasser, the surrounding Arabian countries, and their bitter conflict with Israel.

That Athertan referred to the Eisenhower administration, and

implicitly Dulles in particular, as viewing the Middle East in regard to the Cold War, says that the Middle East was seen in terms of the Soviet Union's possible expansion into that area. Instead of seeing the internal conflicts, Dulles interpreted only bi-polar considerations: America's interests and the Soviet Union's quest for world domination, not Nasser's desire for an Arab consortium. Had Dulles appreciated Nasser's perspective the Secretary might have planned the withdraw of funding more carefully.

By looking from this perspective alone, Dulles could never have realized Nasser's goals or the reasons behind his actions. Dulles did not conceive of the fact that Egypt might wish to remain truly independent, neither influenced nor indoctrinated by the United States or Russia. Nasser, on the other hand, was determined to form a third ideology. Nasser's ideology called for a confederation of the Arabian states, in which Nasser could coordinate all Arab actions against Israel and in any other contexts that were appropriate.

It was not until after the crisis began that Dulles admitted Nasser had acted as an independent player. At the end of August Dulles stated that Nasser's nationalization of the Suez had been only a matter of time. Nasser would have seized the canal at some point to "forward his policy of 'grandeur'" whether the Aswan Dam aid was withdrawn or not.⁵⁴ Dulles' sentiment implied that Nasser held his own goals for power,

aside from Cold War politics. The flaw in this statement was that if the United States had gone through with the Aswan aid - on its original terms, which on July 19 Ambassador Hussein stated Nasser would accept - America's presence in the area might have convinced Nasser not to nationalize the canal until the dam was completed in an estimated ten years, 1966. Since the canal's ownership was due to revert to Egypt in 1968 anyway, Nasser would have been wise to wait the two years remaining after the scheduled completion date of the dam and obtain the Suez without a fight. Seizing the Suez before the Aswan Dam was finished would have resulted in withdrawal of American aid in the midst of construction.

Prior to actual military action, the diplomacy surrounding Aswan aid and Egypt in general had received little attention from the media. Neither Dulles nor Eisenhower addressed the topic of the Aswan Dam or the mounting doubts about the reliability of Egypt as a conveyer of American interests, during the months before the offer's actual withdrawal. In fact, even Nasser's nationalization of the Suez, could not compete with the more interesting dramas of closer to home news.

Although an article discussing the seizure of the Suez appeared on the front page of the July 27 edition of the New York Times, it was overshadowed by the coverage of a disaster at sea. Nearly three quarters of the front page was taken up with a headline reporting the collision of

two ships off the coast of Nantucket - three rows of one inch letters across the length of the page, three accompanying photos, and several related articles. Nasser's move was noted halfway down the page in about half a column, continued on page three.⁵⁶ The public did not yet conceive of the great dangers inherent in Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. The real media blitz did not begin until unhappy, angry allies voiced their disapproval of Nasser's action and then physically attacked Egypt.

As a military response by America's allies increased in probability, President Eisenhower took control of foreign policy. Throughout his presidency, Eisenhower's direction became more definite each time a military situation arose. Some believed that this crisis especially demanded his attention. As his campaign for reelection approached, an international crisis was brewing. How he reacted could decide whether or not Americans voted for him. Eisenhower's reaction, vehement and emotional, halted the violence that followed Nasser's nationalization.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Crisis And Its Players

From March 1956 forward, the Eisenhower administration was progressively disinclined to deal with the Egyptian President, Gamal Abd'ul Nasser. Dulles and Eisenhower's dissatisfaction with Egypt's political behavior and diplomatic attitude culminated on July 19, 1956 when Dulles withdrew the American offer of financial aid for the building of the High Aswan Dam. Great Britain and the IBRD followed suit.

In retaliation, on 26 July, the Egyptian leader announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Nasser maintained that by using tolls collected from the users of the appropriated canal, Egypt would be able to build the dam. Some of the users although little concerned with Nasser's rationale for nationalization, were disturbed greatly by the act itself. Great Britain, France and Israel, though for different reasons, clearly fell into that category.

With a simple decree Egypt had claimed control over the canal. Law number 285 of 1956 - included in the Egyptian White Paper On the Nationalization of the Suez Maritime Canal Company, which served as a

defense for the Egyptian seizure - stated that "The Suez Canal Maritime Company, S.A.E., is nationalized. All money, rights and obligations of the company are transferred to the State. All organizations and committees are dissolved."¹ Until Nasser's declaration the canal had been managed by the Suez Canal Company, an institution primarily controlled by the British and the French. In dissolving this company, Law 285 promised compensation for stock held by company investors. But, there was no doubt that the canal was now a state institution.

Great Britain and France could not condone nationalization. They maintained Nasser's action was in direct violation of the Convention of October 29, 1888, guaranteeing that, "The Suez Maritime Canal shall always be free and open, in time of war as in time of peace, to every vessels of commerce or war, without distinction of flag."² According to Britain and France, Nasser's nationalization had abridged this right.

The British perspective on the situation was frankly stated in a speech by Prime Minister Anthony Eden. On September 22, 1956 he maintained the international character of the Suez Canal was indisputable. Eden concluded that "the operation of the canal by the Suez Canal Company was part of a comprehensive system, designed by the agreement of 1888 to assure free use of the canal for all the powers concerned, and by purporting to nationalize the company Colonel Nasser had disturbed the balance of this system and removed one of its

essential guarantees."³ England wanted to restore the original system.

From the British viewpoint, Nasser's seizure of the Canal could not go unanswered. On 30 July, in the House of Commons, Eden plainly stated the United Kingdom's position. The Prime Minister told members of the House, "No arrangement for the future of this great waterway could be acceptable to Her Majesty's Government which would leave it in the unfettered control of a single power which could, as recent events have shown, exploit it purely for purposes of national policy."⁴ British interests must be protected said Eden. "Failure to keep the canal international would inevitably lead to the loss one by one of all our interests and assets in the Middle East, and even if Her Majesty's Government had to act alone they could not stop short of using force to protect their position."⁵ From the earliest stages, Great Britain had bound itself to re-internationalizing the canal. Eden succinctly had expressed the rationale for the British government's reaction to Nasser's nationalization scheme, losing the canal could be losing control of the entire region.

Eden's statement that Great Britain would "lose one by one all of our interests" was telling for its economic aspect and for its undercurrent theme. Robert Rhodes James, Assistant Clerk at the House of Commons during the Suez Crisis and eminent biographer of Eden, noted that for the British this waterway was of the utmost

importance because two-thirds of Western Europe's oil sailed through the Suez.⁶ Since British officials did not believe that Nasser would run the canal effectively and without discrimination against other nations, the Suez had to be reclaimed from Nasser's grip to ensure the flow of oil.⁷

More importantly, perhaps, the British viewed Nasser as a nemesis similar to the likes of Hitler. Diplomats when faced with a crisis often look to an historical precedent for a solution. Eden did the same and found his precedent in the late 1930s. Before World War Two, Europe had appeased Hitler by allowing his territorial aggrandizement to go unchecked. Nasser, a nationalist leader with territorial ambitions, was claiming more land. Eden stated in his Memoir Full Circle, "The canal was not a problem that could be isolated from the many other manifestations of Arab nationalism and Egyptian ambitions."⁸ This was Hitlerism and the appeasement at Munich again, but now Britain would not allow it. Eden declared "Some say that Nasser is no Hitler or Mussolini. Allowing for a difference in scale, I am not so sure. He has followed Hitler's pattern...."⁹ England, at least would not allow Nasser as much leeway as Hitler gained. Egypt's seizure of the Suez Canal would not be another Munich.

The French held a similar view of Nasser and his nationalization of the Suez Canal. Time magazine reported in August 1956 that France

was even more displeased with Nasser's action than England. "The French were, if anything, angrier than the British. The Suez, after all, was French-built, and its expropriated company was one of France's bluest chips."¹⁰ French businessmen were unlikely to appreciate the loss of profits, Nasser had caused them to suffer. Even if compensated for the worth of their stock, Frenchmen had lost untold future earnings.

Herve Alphand, first the Permanent Representative to the United Nations from France and later the Ambassador to the United States, stated the French government's position in terms similar to those of Eden. Alphand placed Nasser in the context of Hitler. He remarked "Suddenly we were faced with a unilateral act and the tearing up of a contract without any justification. The French people remembered other unilateral acts of the same nature which between the two world wars, were left unanswered by the democracies and which gradually becoming more and more intolerable led us to the second world war." As clearly as Eden, Alphand saw similarities between Nasser and Hitler. Hitler caused World War Two. Could Nasser instigate a third world war?

From the French perspective, this might have been a possibility. They viewed Nasser's power base as more threatening than Hitler's had been. Alphand maintained that "Nasser is an agent of a big power much stronger than Hitlerian Germany, even more dangerous for the western world - the Soviet Union."¹¹ If World War Three was to be fought, it

would be between the West and the Soviet Union. Nasser's alleged connection to the Russians created even more desire to end his control of the Suez.

Alphand's belief that Nasser was supported by the USSR was related, no doubt, to the situation in Algeria. At the time France was battling against the Algerians, trying to suppress their fight for national liberation. They believed Nasser supplied Algerian rebels with arms he had obtained from the Soviet Union. Time commented France was "deep in a costly and frustrating struggle in Algeria, chief aider and abetter of the rebels is Dictator Nasser."¹² As far as the French were concerned, Nasser was blocking their efforts to restore control in Algeria and Moscow was providing the Egyptian leader with the means to do so. Likewise, the French believed the USSR was involved in Nasser's seizure of the Suez. If Nasser's nationalization could be reversed it would represent one less manifestation of Russian covert aggression. It would also be a means of regaining control over the canal zone from a dictatorial ruler.

Donald Neff, a magazine and newspaper reporter and author of Warriors at Suez, explained that in reality Algeria received only a small number of arms from Nasser. But, to maintain a solid Arab front, Algerians did not contradict the illusion of Nasser providing volumes of weapons for their cause. Neff noted that the idea of Nasser as "master

plotter" and supplier of arms for the Algerian revolt was far more appealing to the French than admitting that the rebellion was instigated and supported by Algerians. In fact, Neff maintained, the mistaken belief of Nasser's complicity in Algeria was a major factor in deciding to attack Egypt.¹³

From the British and French perspectives, Nasser was another Hitler attempting to seize territory illegally. The French had the added complaint that Nasser was helping Algeria. For both countries the Suez Crisis was serious enough to advocate a military solution if Nasser did not rescind his nationalization order. From the first news of Nasser's seizure, French and British officials began their preparations for such an attack.

Israel's concern about Nasser arose not from his seizure of the canal, but from his hostility toward the existence of the State of Israel. Egypt, along with other Arab countries, deeply resented the creation of Israel in 1948 and sought its destruction. In 1956, Nasser was sending terrorist groups, Fidayyun, into Israel that made murderous attacks on the Israeli citizens. Israel's complaint against the Egyptian President also stemmed from the fact that their ships had been denied passage through the Straights of Tiran, the entrance from the Red Sea to one of Israel's main ports, Elat.¹⁴

Nasser's action also created potentially calamitous ramifications

for the Jewish State. On August 10 Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion recorded the Israeli Government's perspective of the Suez Crisis. He believed Great Britain was not prepared to use force against Nasser. Because of this, Ben-Gurion feared Nasser's impending success would increase his desire to destroy Israel.¹⁵ The very act of nationalizing the canal, if unanswered, could spell the doom of Israel.

Ben-Gurion did not yet realize Anglo-French intentions to use force, but within several weeks he would be well aware of them. Before long, the British and French had hatched a plan designed to regain the canal and oust Nasser. It was a proposal in which Israeli participation was requisite.

Obviously, Nasser did not view the Suez situation in the same light as Israel or Great Britain and France. The Egyptian government used the Convention of 1888 to contend that Egyptian control of the Canal in no way contradicted the agreement. A government report cited various articles from the 1888 Conventions that noted Egypt's right of action concerning the canal. The Egyptian White Paper On the Nationalization of the Suez Maritime Canal Company noted that Article Ten of the Convention of 1888 stated that it would not interfere with actions Egypt "might find necessary to take for the defence of Egypt and the maintenance of public order." In addition, Article Thirteen protected the sovereign rights of Egypt.¹⁶ Since the Convention said nothing

specifically against nationalization of the canal, and did protect Egyptian sovereignty, Nasser reasoned his actions did nothing in opposition to the Convention.

Although in certain ways Nasser attempted to disarm Anglo-French objections and reduce conflict with Israel, he was not successful in placating officials in any of these countries. The memoirs of one of Nasser's top military officials, Abd al-Latif al-Bughdadi, revealed the Egyptian government's attempt to avoid provoking its enemies.

Bughdadi stated that to ease Arab-Israeli tensions, Nasser had removed troops from the Gaza strip and stopped "sabotage" in Israel. According to the Egyptian general, "We wished to evade clashes and wanted to let these ships through the Canal so that preventing them would not serve as a pretext against us or justification in world opinion to attack us."¹⁷

In spite of these efforts and perhaps to maintain his popularity with Egyptians and Arabs, Nasser's public statements confirmed for the British and French the allegations they had leveled against him.

Nasser's comments also reflected his own reasoning for taking the canal. His first professed reason for claiming control over the Suez Canal was to gain the profits from tolls paid by ships sailing through the canal. As Nasser stated in his speech announcing the nationalization, this action would provide funds for building the Aswan Dam project. In withdrawing their financial support the Western nations had taken away

a project that was touted as a step toward an improved standard of living in Egypt. Nasser told the Egyptian people that the Western Powers "are determined to frustrate Egyptian attempts at progress and industrialization."¹⁸ Now, because the West refused to help Egypt develop, Egypt was helping itself. This anti-Western stance undoubtedly added to Nasser's domestic popularity.

Although to some extent this factor probably was an issue for Nasser, it was likely that his seizure of the canal was designed more to reduce foreign influence in Egypt than to better the lives of his people. Above all else, Nasser wanted to lead a confederation of Arab states un beholden to any outside nation. The nationalization increased his prestige within the Middle East, reducing outside influences and bringing Nasser closer to his leadership goals. Coincidentally, the action also improved the living standards of his own people and solidified Nasser's support in Egypt.

In his speeches Nasser attacked the Anglo-French position and simultaneously reinforced his own. The Egyptian President announced Eden "also said Egypt shall not be allowed to succeed because that would spell success for Arab nationalism and would be against their policy, which aims at protection of Israel." Nasser's statement struck two key topics - the survival of Israel and the suppression of Arabism. To Britain and France, Nasser's remarks contained the same national

appeal found in Naziism. Added to that was an implied threat against Israel.

Neither concept reassured the Western powers. Not comfortable with third world independence, Britain and France interpreted Nasser's speech in hostile terms. The Egyptian sought an Arabian empire that supplanted all other powers in the Middle East. Nasser also strove to annihilate Israel, the only ally in the Middle East opposing his goal and a stalwart anti-Communist country.

As if Nasser's preaching did not upset the West enough, he also confirmed the French charge that Egypt was supplying Algerians with arms. Nasser informed his audience "of 8,000,000 Algerians, 10,000 are fighting half a million French soldiers. We have arms sufficient to equip those who can fight aggressors."¹⁹ This could only aggravate the French. Nasser admitted he was helping the Algerians to fight against France and that he would continue to do so. Besides this, the specter of Russian involvement was raised again. The surplus arms Nasser's statement implied indicated that Egypt had received large amounts of arms from the Soviet Union. In the allied camp Communist influence in Egypt became a foregone conclusion, to be feared and reversed.

The Egyptian leader's words were designed to appeal to Arabian nationalism by discrediting Western nations. He told his countrymen, "He who attacks Egypt attacks the whole Arab world. They say in their