

papers the whole thing will be over in forty-eight hours. They do not know how strong we really are."²⁰ He portrayed a front not just of Egyptians, but of all Arabs. Indeed Nasser's goal was to unify the Arab world around himself. Nationalization of the canal was a means toward this end.

In his 1990 article "Egypt, From Military Defeat to Political Victory" Israeli Professor Moshe Shemesh agreed that Nasser's nationalization of Suez was intended to increase his power and prestige, reduce foreign influence in the Arabian area, and if possible destroy Israel. Shemesh stated "The nationalization of the Suez Canal Company on 26 July 1956 symbolized for the Egyptians and the Arab world the independence of Egyptian decision-making and the liberation of Egypt from foreign political and economic influence." Shemesh added that because Nasser's support and prestige from Egyptians and the Arab world rested on his seizure of the canal, he could not retreat without losing credibility, even if faced with a war.²¹

This then was how the British, French, and Israelis interpreted Nasser's nationalization and in what light Nasser himself perceived his actions. During the ensuing crisis the United States repeatedly attempted to preclude the use of force by its allies. As events unfolded

three efforts at negotiation failed to bring about a solution satisfactory to any of the factions, Egyptian, Anglo-French, or Israeli. Before the crisis was over battles were fought and blood was spilled. All of these happenings occurred between July, 27 and the first week of November. From the start Great Britain and France were determined to wrest control of the Suez Maritime Canal from Nasser and return it to the West.

British Prime Minister Eden had been quick to respond to the Egyptian President's nationalization of the Suez Canal. The day after Nasser's declaration, Eden cabled President Eisenhower and said it was imperative that Nasser be halted. He proposed economic and political pressures be applied against Nasser immediately. Eden noted "My colleagues and I are convinced that we must be ready, as a last resort, to use force to bring Nasser to his senses." Finally, Eden suggested a tripartite conference take place, so that Britain, France, and the United States could "align our policies and concert together how we can best bring maximum pressure to bear on the Egyptian Government." In response to Eden's proposal Eisenhower dispatched Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Robert Murphy to London to discuss the situation with British and French officials.²²

From July 29 to August 2 American officials - Murphy was replaced by Secretary of State Dulles on the first of August - met with

their French and British counterparts, French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau and British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Selwyn Lloyd.²³ In these meetings, dubbed the Tripartite Conferences, Lloyd put forth the British position concerning Nasser. He held that Nasser's nationalization had to be reversed. Also he maintained that a military response should be prepared as a last resort possibility, since "political and economic pressures [are] unlikely [to] have [the] desired effect unless Nasser knows military sanctions are in [the] background."²⁴ Pineau entirely agreed with this position.

An attempt at negotiation, however, had to be made before military action could be taken. The three powers agreed to send a communique to Nasser which called for the internationalization of the canal, preferably under United Nations aegis, with Egypt receiving fair economic compensation in return. From the Tripartite Conferences also came an invitation to governments that used the canal to take part in a London Conference beginning August 16, 1956.²⁵

In the time between the Tripartite Conference and the London Conference Great Britain and France were not idle. The day after the Tripartite meetings closed David Ben-Gurion received a report that the two countries had a plan of military attack for regaining the canal. It would be executed in approximately three weeks and Israel would not be involved because that would only raise Arab-Israeli tensions.²⁶ Ben-

Gurion accepted this assessment writing in an August diary entry, "A solitary 'operation' on our part may well turn out to be calamitous...." because Israel would be condemned for its aggression.²⁷

University of Sorbonne Professor Jean-Paul Cointet pointed out such an attack might have resulted in the dismemberment of Israel by surrounding Arab countries.²⁸ The risk of an Arab counterattack existed, although a concerted assault was improbable because Arabian unity remained questionable. Even so, a possible mass attack by surrounding countries remained a fear for the Israeli government.

The Anglo-French attack did not occur as quickly as this original estimate called for, but its planning was pursued actively. On Monday, August 13, three days before the London Conference was scheduled to begin, Ben-Gurion noted that French Ambassador to Israel, Pierre-Eugene Gilbert, "is pessimistic regarding the internationalization of the Canal. In his opinion, his government will be bitter following the failure of the [London] Conference - they will want to take action - will [sic] to turn to Israel..."²⁹ The remark showed the French Ambassador's conclusion, before-the-fact, that the conference would not achieve the results desired by France. Gilbert's position also first expressed the possibility of Israel joining with England and France in an attack against Egypt. It is improbable that Gilbert - who no doubt made reports to his superiors regularly - was the sole Frenchman to believe the conference

would fail, particularly given that events followed Gilbert's prophesy. In fact, it is more logical to conclude that Gilbert was less as prophet, than an astute diplomat who knew the minds of his superiors.

Of the twenty-four invitations distributed for the August 16 London Conference, twenty-two countries accepted. Only Egypt and Greece declined, the latter in reaction to previous allied intervention on Cyprus.³⁰ Near the start of the London Conference Dulles talked with Pineau, Eden, Lloyd, and the Prime Minister of Australia, Robert Menzies, to "discuss general tactics." From this session came the idea - apparently raised by Menzies - to propose the creation of an international board to oversee the running of the Suez Canal.³¹ By the end of the Conference eighteen of the countries attending had agreed to this idea. Prime Minister Menzies was appointed head of a five member mission charged to approach Nasser with the proposal.³² Although the committee was cordially received in Cairo, Nasser would not accept the plan. He assured the emissary group of Egypt's intention to run the canal efficiently and effectively, but categorically rejected international control of the Suez.³³

Dulles and Eisenhower determined the next negotiating direction on the night of September 8. It was then that the idea of a Users' Association first was discussed by the President and the Secretary of State. According to existing records, Dulles telephoned Eisenhower at

6:30 p.m. on the eighth and spoke of the idea. Dulles proposed "the use by the users' organization of their own pilots and their collection of the fees with allocation to Egypt on a cost basis; the putting into effect or announcing of alternatives to the use of the Canal so far as oil was concerned, and the continuance of some economic measures taken against Egypt."³⁴ In short, the organization was designed to circumvent Egyptian control of the canal and thereby leave Nasser controlling the Suez in name alone. By hiring pilots independent of the nationalized canal to sail ships through the canal, Dulles sought to evade all Egyptian interference. He proposed "alternatives to the use of the Canal" for oil, which translated into sailing around the Cape of Good Hope and avoiding the Suez all together. Also, continued economic pressure would assist in forcing the Egyptians to give their consent to the internationalization of the Suez.

To further the Cooperative Association of Suez Canal Users - CASU, the official name of the Users' Association - a second London Conference was proposed by the United States. It began on September 19 and continued through the next two days. The eighteen nations that had agreed to Dulles' first plan now returned to discuss the Users' Association and other options, including taking the matter before the United Nations Security Council.³⁵ Although at least five countries favored bringing the Suez Crisis to the United Nations, a majority held

that CASU should be adopted prior to U.N. action.³⁶

At the meeting Dulles maintained that the Users' Association was required because Nasser had rejected the Eighteen Powers Proposal "which gave Egypt the maximum participation which they [the Eighteen Powers] deemed compatible with their own rights under the 1888 Convention." Thus, "it became both appropriate and necessary that the governments of the users should organize as among themselves for the most effective possible enjoyment of the rights of passage given by the 1888 Convention."³⁷ Basically, the plan required Egypt's acquiescence to work with CASU to ensure the canal remained open and ran smoothly. Egypt would be reimbursed "for any expenses reasonably incurred by it in connection with the performance by Egypt of the measure to which Egypt is obligated, by the Convention of 1888, to assure the free and open use of the Canal." But, Nasser would not retain control of the Canal.³⁸

In his book The Failure of the Eden Government, British researcher Richard Lamb reported that Eden supported the Suez Canal Users' Association because he believed if Nasser accepted, his prestige in Egypt and the Arab world would be reduced severely. The French saw the measure as another way of postponing a military solution. Lamb commented "The French, preoccupied with the running sore of the Algerian rebellion, were desperately anxious to launch an immediate

invasion of Egypt...."³⁹ They believed a successful attack would stop the flow of weapons to Algeria and avoid another Munich. Yet, the French were willing to accept Dulles' proposal in name, since it did not hinder their covert preparations for attack.

When asked to capitulate to the Users' Association, Nasser once again refused to cooperate with the West. The Egyptian President maintained, "Today they are speaking of a new association whose main objective would be to rob Egypt of the canal and deprive her of rightful canal dues." He concluded "it is impossible to have two bodies organizing navigation in the canal [i.e. CASU and Nasser's government]. It is equally impossible for the proposed organization to remain abroad and continue to collect dues. If this were permissible we for our part would form an organization for users of the port of London...."⁴⁰ Here was strong recrimination of the Users' Association. Nasser's point was clear. He would as soon accept foreign control of the canal zone, as London would in its port.

While the Egyptian leader remained resolute in his decision to keep the Suez, Great Britain and France continued their preparations for military action against the Nasser regime.⁴¹ As the political negotiations repeatedly failed, Eden's statement made during the Tripartite Conference concerning the necessity of military preparation remained the Anglo-French standby. Throughout September Anglo-French

military plans proceeded. The next step toward a military solution was to reverse their decision that Israel have no part in the attack.

On September 25 Israel's Director General of the Defense Ministry returned from France with news about Anglo-French displeasure with the Users' Association. Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: "Shimon Peres returned from Paris saying both France and England could not agree to Suez Canal Users' Association, so would act by force - would like complicity of Israel, provided Israel does not attack Jordan." The French wanted an attack by the middle of October.⁴² Again the battle did not begin as soon as the French wished. There remained one final attempt at a peaceful solution.

The last effort to avoid a war over the Suez Canal had as little success as the previous attempts. This effort was made, surprisingly, by the British and French who put the crisis before the United Nations Security Council. Stephen Ambrose pointed out in his biography of Eisenhower, that the administration could not know whether this represented an attempt by the Western Allies to obtain a peaceful solution or to conceal bellicose intentions.⁴³ As it turned out, the resolution that came out of the Security Council meetings primarily restated and combined the proposals already offered at the two London Conferences.

Between October 5 and 13 the U.N. Security Council met almost

every day to discuss an item put forth by England and France. The item dealt with the "Situation created by the unilateral action of the Egyptian Government in bringing to an end the system of international operation of the Suez Canal, which was confirmed and completed by the Convention of 1888." In response to their own item, Great Britain and France put forth a resolution declaring the right to freedom of navigation in the canal, the protection of said right, a mandate that Egypt accept the Eighteen Powers Proposal, and in the meantime, that Egypt work with the Users' Association.⁴⁴

On the second to last day of debate, Secretary-General of the U.N. Dag Hammarskjöld expressed six principles on which negotiation with Nasser could be based. The tenets were basic ground rules, almost de facto from the perspective of the British and French. The first principle restated the opening article of the 1888 Convention calling for free and open transit of the canal without discrimination toward any country. The remainder called for respect of Egyptian sovereignty and demanded that no single country politically dominate the canal. It maintained tolls be set by mutual agreement among the canal users and required funds be allotted for future development of the Suez. Finally, the sixth tenet proposed disputes be settled by arbitration.⁴⁵ Although not specifically calling for the measures accepted in the Eighteen Powers Plan and the Users' Association, these principles supported the content of both

proposals.

Additionally on October 13, the final day of debate in the Security Council, Great Britain and France proposed an amendment to the six principles enumerated the previous day. This amendment recommended that the Eighteen Powers Proposal be the terms for negotiation and the Cooperative Association of Suez Canal Users be invoked specifically. Soviet and Yugoslavian dissent on the vote blocked the adoption of this proposed addition, but the six tenets were passed unanimously.⁴⁶

From October 15 to end of the month, communications between the United States and Great Britain and France ceased. During this time American radio signal interceptors recorded a huge volume of coded radio traffic between France and Britain. The US was unsuccessful in decoding the messages, but guessed that something was in preparation because of the increased quantity of transmissions. By this time American intelligence had already discovered that Israel was mobilizing. It was believed, however, that Israel was preparing for an attack against Jordan, not Egypt.⁴⁷ The assessment was incorrect.

Great Britain, France, and Israel had continued discussing plans for their military attack during the Security Council debates. Four days after the U.N. talks closed the three cohorts agreed upon a scheme. David Ben-Gurion reported that having rejected direct English-French and French-Israeli attacks, the British suggested that Israel start the

attack. Then Britain and France could "protest and when we [Israel] reach the Canal - they will come in as if to separate and then they'll destroy Nasser...."⁴⁸ The plot was set. All that remained now was to initiate the attack.

On October 29, 1956 Israel launched an attack across the Sinai Desert against Egyptian forces. The Israeli Army made superb progress, driving down from northwestern Egypt. American officials estimated that Israel would reach the Suez Canal in three days. Israel's success was partially due to the fact that Egyptian military strategists had assumed that only Great Britain would attack, and that it would be from the direction of Alexandria and Rashid, in the northwest. Even when Nasser received a report that Israel, in cooperation with France, intended to attack, he discounted it. He believed the rumor was designed to make Egyptian troops concentrate in the wrong area, facing Israel.⁴⁹

Secretary Dulles, guessing that the British and French were planning military action, reasoned that they "may in fact have concerted their action with the Israelis," since if the Suez was threatened by Egyptian-Israeli fighting, Anglo-French forces would have the excuse they wanted to intervene there. Dulles also reasoned that the Western allies might believe that the United States would be forced to support Anglo-French actions because a disavowal of them would mean siding with the Soviets.⁵⁰ More than three decades later Jean-Paul Cointet

agreed with Dulles' assessment, when he commented that French Government officials did not envisage America would join with the Soviet's in a condemnation of the actions of Britain, France, and Israel.⁵¹

The French and British had miscalculated Eisenhower's response. By the middle of the day following Israel's attack, the President was insisting the problem be taken directly to the United Nations, a step which surely did not display American support for the attack on Egypt. The United States put forth a resolution in the Security Council calling for a cease fire in the Middle East and for all U.N. members to refrain from using force in said area. Both Great Britain and France vetoed the measure.⁵² If there had been any doubt of Anglo-French collusion with the Israelis before, this veto probably put it to an end.

Later that afternoon France and Great Britain further confirmed Dulles' suspicion of the previous day. At 2:17 p.m. the two powers issued a joint ultimatum, with a twelve hour time limit. The ultimatum declared that in the interest of protecting the canal, Israel and Egypt should move ten miles away from it and allow French and British forces to occupy that area. If the belligerents did not comply, Anglo-French troops would take the canal zone by force. As would be expected, Israel agreed to the plan and Egypt rejected it. The allies' hope was that reclaiming the canal would instigate the overthrow of Nasser, place control of the Suez in British and French hands, and leave Israel in

power in the Sinai.⁵³ The scheme did not turn out as well as Great Britain and France had hoped.

Eisenhower's Administration continued its efforts in the United Nations. American representative to the U.N. Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. introduced a resolution to the General Assembly which called for the evacuation of Israeli troops to their original border, a cease fire between Egypt and Israel, all U.N. members refrain from the use of force, and an embargo against Israel. The resolution was acclaimed by a great number of the United Nations members, especially delegates from smaller countries who were surprised that America was supporting Egypt, a third world nation, over its Western allies.⁵⁴

Officials in the Egyptian Government convened on October 30 to discuss the Anglo-French ultimatum. According to Abd al-Latif al-Bughdadi, Nasser did not take the declaration seriously. "He was of the opinion that its aim was to cause most of our forces not to move towards the battlefield in Sinai, thereby giving Israel a chance to gain a victory as a result of the weakness and limited forces fighting them."⁵⁵ Believing this to be true, Nasser rejected the ultimatum. To the Egyptian President's chagrin, he discovered that Great Britain and France indeed had been serious.

Ignoring the resolutions proposed in the U.N., Great Britain and France began their attack on Egypt. On October 31, after the

ultimatum's twelve hour time limit had expired, the British Royal Air Force bombed Cairo and Port Said, one of Egypt's main ports. In retaliation President Nasser scuttled ships in the Suez Canal, making passage through the canal impossible.⁵⁶ Soon after the bombings, English and French paratroopers landed around the Suez and Port Said. This was followed by an amphibious assault.⁵⁷

Seven days after the Anglo-French attack had begun, Prime Minister Anthony Eden was prepared to put a halt to it. On November 6, election day in the United States, Eden informed President Eisenhower that he was willing to accept a cease fire and U.N. peace keeping force. Ambrose pointed out that by that time Great Britain and France controlled the canal zone, but at least for England, the monetary cost had been outrageous. The British already had spent 500 million dollars on the operation.⁵⁸

More importantly, Eisenhower had not allowed any loans to be granted to the British Treasury, once the fighting began. When the war started a run on the Pound occurred, thus the President's ban on loans to England deflated the British Pound tremendously. Besides this, Eisenhower called for an oil embargo against Britain. The United Kingdom could ill afford continued aggression.⁵⁹ France could not support the operation without British participation, and was also pressured to desist. By the end of November a U.N. peace keeping force

was in place and most of British and French troops had been evacuated.⁶⁰ The crisis was over and Nasser had retained his canal.

Great Britain and France, the two countries who resolutely maintained the necessity of force in ousting Nasser from the Suez, and indeed that Nasser's nationalization had to be resisted at all, found themselves with the shortest straw at the end of the Suez Canal Crisis. Their rationale for action and desires for results had failed to be proven correct, by the fact that none of the Anglo-French goals had been achieved. Gamal Nasser, on the other hand, had gained immeasurable prestige and power in the Arab world.

Moshe Shemesh noted that although Egypt had suffered a military defeat, Nasser emerged from the crisis with a political victory. It was a victory that was clear to the entire Arab world. A quick review of the score card revealed Nasser had racked up all the points, while Great Britain, France, and Israel appeared to be scoreless. Both British and French forces were evacuated from the Suez area and Israel had withdrawn its troops from the Sinai.⁶¹ In Shemesh's words, "for Nasser, the crisis was a test of the legitimacy of his leadership and his decision to nationalize the Canal. He emerged from the crisis as the charismatic leader of Egypt and the Arab world. His concept of Arab nationalism, in all its aspects, became the cornerstone of Arab politics."⁶² Nasser had won.

Joseph Frankel, a British Professor at the University of Southampton, stated that for the British "the Suez action...can be largely explained in terms of the psychological predispositions...." He concluded that behind the rationale for military action given by Eden and Lloyd lay psychological pressures from within British society. Frankel explained that "the graceful withdrawal from the [British] Empire and the shrinking world role had built up resentments among the British who were required a spot of adventure before settling to a less spectacular foreign policy."⁶³ That "spot of adventure" was found in the form of the Suez Canal. Like a too strong cup of tea, it left a bitter taste in the mouth of England.

The actions taken by England do appear to have been less than reasonable and thus the result of some emotional response to Nasser's seizure. Frankel pointed out that had violence been avoided Great Britain would have lost little through nationalization. The pecuniary loss of giving up the canal could have been recouped by seizing Egyptian assets in London. It was also improbable British ships would have been denied passage through the canal, given that Middle Eastern oil producers were as interested in selling their product as England was in buying it.⁶⁴ It also seemed clear Nasser's political success would have been minimized had he not been given the propaganda opportunity to consolidate his position in the Arab world, by opposing the Western

world. Had British officials considered these factors fully they would have realized a military attack was the least beneficial reaction at their disposal.

Similar to the British, Cointet maintained that the French rationale for a military solution was a result of behind the scenes motivation. The French Government, said the author, attempted to show Western Europe's independence of action. In spite of America's lack of support for the French position, which had been hoped for, France carried out its military plans with the help of England.⁶⁵ Cointet saw the French Government as using the situation as a means of displaying its own ability to act without the consent or assistance of the United States. France did succeed in acting, but the results obtained were not those desired.

Frankel and Cointet's theories are intriguing, but cannot be substantiated by the information available. What is definite is that the military actions taken by Britain and France did not achieve the results the aggressors sought. Nasser's grasp on the Suez Canal was not lessened for a moment. And, of all the powers vying for influence or control in Egypt, only Nasser's bid was successful.

Laid bare to the world was the fall of the British Empire and its reliance on the good graces of the United States. Although Eisenhower's pressure on the British Pound was not common knowledge, the

international public was aware of the US embargo on oil. In any case, the crippling effect of crossing America's aims was clear. Against American sanctions, the United Kingdom could not survive.

France may have displayed its independence of action, as Cointet stated, but it gained nothing for its trouble. Its actions were regarded as immoral and were denounced by the United Nations. A country supposedly against Russia's strong arm tactics was guilty itself of the same approach. Ambassador Alphand's anger at Nasser's suspected interference in Algeria was unfounded. Algerian independence was inevitable regardless of Nasser's assistance or lack there of, since the rebels did not actually rely upon Egyptian arms or funds. France, embarrassed by its quick defeat at the beginning of World War Two at the hands of Hitler, received another embarrassing black eye when it went up against Nasser and Egypt. The former shame was of a military nature, the latter one was mostly political. Both were unpleasantly received and mortifying to French pride.

Unlike its partners, Israel fared better than Britain or France in achieving satisfactory results. In 1990 Shimon Peres, Director General of the Ministry of Defense during the crisis, wrote an article entitled "The Road to Serves". In the article Peres commented on the goals Israel hoped to obtain by going to war with Egypt. According to the author,

Israel was not concerned with the canal per say, but rather with gaining unhindered passage to Port Elat - through the Straights of Tiran -and ending the terrorist attacks in Israel. Peres noted that both of these goals were achieved.⁶⁶ Israel's impressive advances across the Sinai provided Prime Minister Ben-Gurion with a bargaining chip when the cease-fire was enacted. This enabled him to obtain Nasser's guarantee that the Straights would remain open and the Fidaiyyun attacks would end, in exchange for returning the Sinai.⁶⁷

Peres' optimist conclusion that Israel obtained all it was after in the Suez campaign is not entirely realistic. Certainly, for example, Israeli officials would have preferred to have Great Britain and France in charge of the Suez Canal rather than Egypt. Easy canal travel would be ensured then. Further, had Eden been successful in his efforts, Nasser's rule would have ended when nationalization did. Given that Ben-Gurion feared Nasser's increased prestige would make him more inclined to launch an assault on Israel, it is probable Nasser's ousting was desired by the Israeli government, at some level. Nasser's success had greatly bolstered his image among Arabs. Therefore, one concludes that although Israel came out of the foray far less scathed than either of its allies, it nonetheless had received a defeat in the face of Egypt's victory.

What of the Soviet menace, the Western world's rival, Russia. The French Ambassador to the United States believed Nasser was controlled