

# STUDENT ESSAY

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THE SUEZ CRISIS: A MULTI-FACETED  
CASE STUDY OF NATIONAL STRATEGY

BY

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The Suez Crisis of 1956 is a classic case study showing the dangers of a flawed national strategy. The complex series of events that led up to the crisis pitted three countries (France, England and Israel) against Egypt. Once hostilities were initiated it took the actions and restraints of the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as the diplomacy of the still immature United Nations to resolve and contain the event. This event was the first major confrontation between the two superpowers in the nuclear era. It also involved strong international personalities and clearly depicted how fragile traditional international relationships could become when one or more nations attempted to take unilateral conventional action without superpower sponsorship. It also pointed to the folly of such a policy by bringing the world to the brink of global conflict. This paper argues for the inclusion of the Suez Crisis as a student case-study during Course 2, War, National Policy, and Strategy, as presented by the USAWC Department of National Security and Strategy.

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THE SUEZ CRISIS: A MULTI-FACETED

CASE STUDY OF NATIONAL STRATEGY

An Individual Essay

by

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## ABSTRACT

**AUTHOR:** Colin L. McArthur, LTC, AR

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THE SUEZ CRISIS: A MULTI-FACETED  
CASE STUDY OF NATIONAL STRATEGY

The opportunity to attend any academic institution as a full-time student midway through one's productive career will always be actively sought by those with a sincere interest to read, write, or just "catch-up" with those areas of professional interest frequently neglected. For a military officer who has likely spent 20 or so years in a ultra-conservative, one-dimensional environment, the opportunity for diversion and "broadening" also carries with it a responsibility to spend some time researching the detail behind the headlines of recent (i.e., 20th Century) key events that have shaped the international political structure of the 1980s.

Today the world watches as we castigate ourselves over "Iranscam." It becomes once again evident that policy and policymakers are fallible and that governments and administrations are fragile in an environment where there are few secrets. In a democracy where constitutional First Amendment rights are cherished and where we still feel some national political "guilt" over our unsuccessful involvement in Vietnam, our international relationships and dialogue are conducted under glass, in full view of critics.

The opportunity to examine US international strategy and policymaking is of great interest to most US Senior Service College students who have been recent pawns in the battle of US "national will." Officers watch keenly as a Secretary of Defense



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from a conservative Republic administration articulates a position that hopefully will ensure that US fighting men will not be used in a protracted land conflict without total US resolve and commitment.

The U.S. Army War College (USAWC) has done a credible job introducing its students to strategic studies. However, I would recommend USAWC include an examination of one of the most extraordinary international events since World War II as a basis of outlining the various lessons to be learned from an ill-conceived strategy in the nuclear era.

The example I point to is the Suez Crisis of 1956.

The Suez Crisis has all the ingredients to thoroughly intrigue, teach, confuse and exasperate a student of strategy. First, it dealt directly with six different nations: France, England, Egypt, Israel, the Soviet Union and the United States. Two of the nations were superpowers, two were "middle powers" whose international clout was on the wane, and two were "emerging" nations. In addition, there was a multi-international actor - the United Nations.

Then there were the personalities: Anthony Eden and Selwyn Lloyd from the U.K.; M. Guy Mollet, M. Christian Pineau and Maurice Bourges-Maunoury of France; Nassar of Egypt; David Ben-Gurion, Shimon Peres, Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir of Israel; Nikita Khrushchev and Bulganin of the USSR; and Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles from the United States. The point here is that as one studies the Suez affair it becomes readily apparent that in 1956 the policy of a nation could well be an extension of a strong, single political figure's persuasion.

The four elements of strategy are all evident in the Suez Crisis. The interrelationships of the political, socio-psychological, economic and military aspects are complex. At times, both prior to and during the crisis, one of these elements would dominate.

The remainder of this essay will present a brief glimpse of the tantamount issues surrounding the Suez Crisis from each nation's perspective. As I have become convinced that the Suez Crisis was a watershed event in modern policymaking, my purpose is to highlight the myriad of intricacies, perceptions, mistakes and successes born of this event to whet the USAWC students' appetite for further study.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to present an abbreviated history of the Suez Canal itself prior to the Suez Crisis.

The Suez Canal was built by the Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps, between 1856 and 1869 when it first opened. Financing had been accomplished through the establishment of the Suez Canal Company, a international joint stock company under Egyptian charter. This charter was to allow the Suez Canal Company to run the Canal for 99 years (until November 1968). Egypt owned 44 percent of the stock in the company when in 1875 the British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, purchased all of Egypt's shares for \$20 million.

In 1882 Great Britain first occupied Egypt to protect the Canal during time of war between Russia and Turkey. Egypt was, of course, part of the Ottoman Empire in 1882. World War I signalled the end of the Ottoman Empire and Egypt became a British



protectorate. In 1922 Britain declared Egypt an independent state although Britain continued its military occupation.

A 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty resulted in the eventual end of British occupation of Egypt. In this treaty, Britain retained the right to station troops in the Canal Zone for 20 years. In 1950, Egypt unilaterally ended the 1936 treaty, however, Britain continued its occupation of the Canal.

In 1954 Colonel Abdel Nasser became Premier of Egypt and, shortly thereafter, Egypt blocked the Israeli use of the Suez Canal. Although a UN Security Council resolution was attempted, it was never passed and no formal action was taken against Egypt. Also in 1954, Britain finally agreed to leave the Suez Canal area in 20 months.

On 13 June 1956, British evacuation of Egypt was complete.

On 26 July 1956, Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal and set in motion 6 months of turmoil that threatened world peace. For use of the reader, a brief chronology of the events between 26 July and 22 December 1956 is attached as Inclosure 1 (International Review Service Vol. XIV No. 103, pp. 34-40).

The remainder of this paper will assume the reader is somewhat familiar with the events that transpired during the July-December 1956 period as well as the complicity between France, the U.K. and Israel. The purpose here is to highlight the key elements which could serve as individual or group study topics to be developed and compared to more recent political, military, socio-psychological or economic crisis. In addition, I believe there are major lessons that were learned during the Suez Crisis that are as relevant today as they were in 1956.

## Israel

Of all the actors in the Suez Crisis of 1956, Israel was certainly the nation with the least to lose going in. As it ended, Israel was also the nation that gained the most, at least in the short term, from its role in the event.

Israel had been at war continually since its creation in May of 1948. She had fought Egypt and other Arab states in 1948-1949 and had been fighting an increasing number of Fedayeen terrorists based in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai peninsula. She was surrounded by Arabs intent on her destruction as a sovereign state. In 1954 Egypt seized a Israeli ship in the Suez Canal. It soon became clear that the U.N. would take no action against Egypt as it had taken no action against the Fedayeen raiders.

Israel was full of strong personalities who were used to fighting for survival. David Ben-Gurion quit retirement and in 1955 returned as Israeli Prime Minister to direct a preemptive war with Egypt. To Ben-Gurion, events required a preventive war. He saw Egypt turn to the Soviet Union for weapons and was having difficulty acquiring sufficient arms from the U.S. The Israeli lobby in Washington could not persuade US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to arm Israel as he feared pushing Egypt and the Arab states closer to the Soviets.

Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Chief of Staff, was only 41 years old during the Suez Crisis. He was a brave, brilliant soldier who had long believed that strong reprisal was the only way to stop Egyptian and Arab terrorism.

Shimon Peres was the Israeli Director General of the Defense Ministry. He was brilliant, although more thoughtful and restrained than Dayan. This threesome was dynamic, aggressive and decisive.

In addition to the Sinai raids and the increasing arming of Egypt, the ascension of Nassar, the nationalization of the Canal and closing of the Gulf of Aquaba to Israel shipping by blocking the Straits of Tiran had convinced Israel that it must fight. A natural ally that had been emerging since 1953 was France who also considered Egypt an enemy. France knew that Egypt was supplying Algerian rebels and was greatly concerned about Nassar's increasing power in the Arab world.

The military, economic and political facets that pointed Israel to war are reasonably clear. If it was to survive, it must fight. However, a major plus to Israel in the aftermath of the Suez was socio-psychological. As stated by Moshe Dayan in his Diary of the Sinai Campaign,

The military victory in Sinai brought Israel not only direct gains--freedom of navigation, cessation of terrorism--but, more important, a heightened prestige among friends and enemies alike.... And the sales of arms for her forces ceased to be conditional upon prior agreement among the 'Big Powers' - the U.S., Britain and France.

The following questions are recommended for student discussion/analysis:

- Did Israel exhaust its resources in approaching the U.S. to preclude conflict or purposely elect to ally with France and Britain and consciously not involve the U.S.?

- Explain the differences in US policy toward Israel in 1956 and 1987.

- What was Israel's relationship with Britain in 1956?

### France

The role of France in the Suez affair was also clear. France, along with Britain, was sensitive to the fact that she was losing stature as a world power. Following World War II, a rising sense of nationalism in many colonies began to challenge French interests. France's greatest challenge, of course, was in Algeria where she had been at war since a major nationalist uprising in 1954. At the time of the Suez Crisis of 1956, France had a quarter of a million troops in Algeria and was looking for a honorable way to end the conflict without losing face. Public dissatisfaction with the Algerian situation had in fact caused the downfall of the previous French government and the election of M. Guy Mollet, general secretary of the Socialist party, as Prime Minister.

France had long been associated with the Canal. First, the canal was built by a Frenchman. The Canal Company was originally a French company invested in by more than a quarter of a million small investors. For generations it was not unusual for a French family to present their children Canal Company shares upon christening or as a wedding present.

French interest and involvement in the Suez Canal Crisis, however, was sparked more by the politics of Egypt vis-a-vis France than any issue over the Canal itself. Egypt's Abdel Gamal Nassar had become a symbol of nationalism in the Arab world and

had openly boasted of assisting the Algerian rebels in their fight "against the French tyranny." Cairo radio would incense Frenchmen with its calls for Arab unity with the Algerian rebels.

The new French Prime Minister, recognizing the mood in France responsible for his election, would look to take action against Nassar. Mollet's appointment of two strong French politicians, Christian Pineau as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Maurice Bourges-Maunoury as Minister of Defense virtually assured a violent reaction to Nassar's eventual nationalization of the Canal. Bourges-Maunoury had previously been the Minister of the Interior and had already established initial ties with Israel that would grow into a strong military partnership.

Although not uncovered until many years following the Suez Crisis, France held numerous discussions with Israel from January 1956 onward as France became a key surrogate for French action in the region.

Pineau strongly desired to withdraw France from the Algerian fiasco and believed that if Nassar could be persuaded to disengage himself from supporting the Algerian conflict that France could negotiate a honorable pace with the rebels. If Nassar continued his support of the rebels, however, France could see a potential scenario where a series of diplomatic and military defeats (the latter imposed by Israel) would be required to reduce Nassar's status. One should recognize the importance France placed on this alliance with Israel when Pineau, his Foreign Minister and Defense Minister met personally with Shimon Peres in Paris in January 1956. Peres played on the French sensitivities, warned of the

growing threat Nassar presented and left France with an agreement for major military support. These discussions were held against a backdrop of "the fraternal brotherhood of international socialism" between Ben-Gurion and Guy Mollet. This ensured a facade of political respectability.

Following the 26 July 1956, nationalization of the Canal, France moved immediately to persuade Eden and the British government to join France in demanding that the Canal be put under international supervision. In Britain, France found a willing, if unprepared, military ally.

For a War College student, the French position leading up to and during the Suez intervention is intriguing. There are numerous subjects that would be worthy of a groups lively discussion. Examples are:

- Would the French-Israeli partnership have moved militarily against Egypt if not presented the perfect excuse by Nassar?

- Did France misread the position that would be taken by the United States (i.e., strong opposition to the Anglo-French use of force) or fully recognize the US position and totally disregard it?

- Were Britain and France aware 2 months prior that Egypt intended to nationalize the Canal if the Aswan Dam loans were withdrawn by the West? If so, would there have been prudent reasons to not inform the U.S. of Egypt's intent?

- Which element was most responsible for France's decisive action to act militarily against Egypt? Military (i.e., Egyptian support of Algeria), Economic (i.e., loss of revenue without

adequate compensation), socio-psychological (i.e., Nassar's constant verbal attacks of France) or political (i.e., the combination of strong French politicians and a constituency looking for resolution to the Algerian conflict)?

- Why did France, in concert with Britain, avoid notifying the U.S. of its intent to attack to seize the area surrounding the Canal?

Again, the French position alone provides a student the opportunity for enjoyable research and the distinct feeling that, although numerous books have been written outlining the Suez 'conspiracy', to this day the whole truth has never been pieced together.

#### Britain

Examination of the British position leading up to and during the October-November 1956 turmoil provides a fascinating look at a major power blundering into a international confrontation for which it was ill prepared. It also provides a sobering look at the damage a nation's political leader can cause when he has failed to weigh the implications of all facets of national power. The British position alone serves as a vivid case study of the ramifications of poorly conceived national strategy.

Key events leading to the Suez Crisis started 2 years before. In October 1954, Egyptian President, General Abdul Nassar, concluded an agreement with the United Kingdom whereby the 80,000 British troops stationed along the Suez Canal would be removed by mid-1956. As previously stated, British troops had been posted in large numbers to the Suez region since 1936 as a result of a

20-year agreement with Egypt. Britain was not totally opposed to withdrawing from Egypt as it was strengthening other British bases in Jordan, Iraq, and Libya under the cloak of agreements such as the Baghdad Pact. In fact, although somewhat reluctant to leave the Suez, economics alone were forcing Britain to economize regarding the stationing of its overseas forces.

Having concluded the British withdrawal agreement Nassar expected that he would have little problem convincing the U.K. to provide Egypt arms for protection of the Canal and its general defense forces. When Britain procrastinated, Nassar quickly found another source and announced that he was attaining Czech arms through the Soviet Union.

Anthony Eden assumed the Premiership from Winston Churchill in April 1955. Eden's past diplomatic reputation was excellent. His accomplishments during World War II and while Foreign Secretary during 1951-1955 earned him considerable international respect. Eden was clearly not a fan of Nassar; however, he did not react strongly to Nassar's announcement regarding acceptance of arms from the Soviets. Nevertheless, in January 1956, Eden agreed to join with the U.S. in a massive aid program to assist Egypt build the Aswan Dam.

On March 1, 1956, events turned sour for Eden. General Glubb, a prominent British soldier who had served Arab armies well during his lifetime, was dismissed from his post as Chief of the Jordanian Army. This no-notice dismissal of Glubb and his British staff officers was perceived in England as a major blow to British prestige worldwide. This action infuriated Eden, who



was convinced that Jordan's King Hussein had been put to this action by Nassar in the name of Arab nationalism.

Mideast affairs were but one of Eden's problems during his first year in office. Britain's economy was experiencing ominous signs of inflation and its balance of payments was fast headed in the wrong direction. Britain's gold and dollar reserves were being depleted at the rate of \$100 million a month. There was clear need to reduce government spending. The requirement for a supplementary budget paved the way for stinging critiques from the Labour opposition. Furthermore, it was becoming increasingly evident to many conservatives that Anthony Eden was nowhere near as adept dealing with domestic issues as he was a negotiator on the international scene. Eden also felt the pressure of following a tough act: Winston Churchill. Finally, Eden was in poor health, the result of serious damage done to his bile-duct during a previous operation. A combination of all these factors manifested themselves in irritability, extreme sensitivity and loss of confidence. Eden became particularly sensitive to charges of appeasement as the power of the empire faded.

Eden by now was convinced that every minor issue raised by the Arabs to the British was of Nassar's doing. Nassar, concerned that the Glubb dismissal could severely impact on Jordan's defense posture, announced that Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria would replace any funding withheld by the British. Events were about to escalate.

On 19 July 1956, the U.S. informed Egypt that it would not be able to support the Aswan Dam project as previously promised.

This was a major change in US policy stemming from escalating cost estimates as well as Egypt's recent recognition of Communist China. England and Eden immediately followed suit.

Withdrawal of the loans triggered Nassar's action to nationalize the Canal. Eden, as did Mallot of France, saw the nationalization as an opportunity to destroy Nassar's image as leader of the Arab world. Eden would now employ all available political, economic, socio-psychological and military pressure.

Two days following Egypt's announcement, Britain froze Egypt's sterling balances, followed immediately by France and the United States. Britain then called up 20,000 reservists and dispatched naval, air and ground reinforcements to the Eastern Mediterranean. Eden then cabled President Eisenhower stating that he had decided that the most prudent course of action with regard to Nassar would be to resort to force to reestablish control of the Canal without delay or attempt at negotiation. Eisenhower strongly nonconcurred and warned Eden that such action would cause outrage in America and turn world opinion against anyone using force.

Eden was not to be denied and quickly linked up with his French counterpart, President Guy Mollet. Mollet, of course, was at least as vehement as Eden. A strong Anglo-French partnership could cause some problems for Britain, however. France was closely aligned with Israel, a major enemy of Jordan, still a British ally.

Britain and France elected to "bait" Nassar by sending their ships through the Canal but refusing to pay tolls to the new

Egyptian Canal Authority. Instead, Britain and France sent all tolls to the former company's address in London and Paris. Nassar, wisely, did not react and allowed British and French shipping to continue unimpeded.

One point must be made here regarding Britain's interests in the Canal. Britain's interest continued to center on the safety of the Canal as the shortest, most economic route to India and the East. The British government owned a substantial interest in the Canal Company and British ships represented a substantial percentage of all Canal traffic.

As Eden pondered ways in which he could get Nassar to strike a first blow, and hence be seen as the "aggressor," France had been secretly laying the groundwork for an operation with Israel. Briefly, France offered Israel a golden opportunity to strike at Egypt and eliminate the Fedayeen terrorist bases along the Gaza Strip. France would provide Israel with the tanks and assorted ordnance necessary to attack toward the Canal. Israel would reduce the Fedayeen bases and continue across the Sinai toward the Canal. France and Britain could then enter the Canal zone on the pretext of going in as a peacekeeping force. As the French and Israeli General Staffs worked the details, American intelligence sources received indications that France and Israel were preparing to use force. Finally, on 14 October, France formally invited Britain to the conspiracy.

The plan provided to Eden by the French is concisely outlined by Anthony Nutting, then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, in his book No End of a Lesson.

The plan, as he put it, was that Israel should be invited to attack Egypt across the Sinai Peninsula and that France and Britain, having given the Israeli forces enough time to seize all or most of Sinai, should then order 'both sides' to withdraw their forces from the Suez Canal, in order to permit an Anglo-French force to intervene and occupy the Canal on the pretext of saving it from damage by fighting. Thus the two powers would be able to claim to be 'separating the combatants' and 'extinguishing a dangerous fire'.

Eden received advice from his Minister of State as to why Britain should not enter into this action; however, Eden was committed. Britain's price for entry to the action involved the well-timed bombing of Egyptian airfields and the destruction of the Egyptian Air Force. Israel would only press across the Sinai and close on the Canal if it was confident that the Egyptian Air Force would be rendered ineffective.

The rest is history. Israel attacked on 29 October 1956. Britain and France exercised a sordid veto in the U.N. when the U.S. put forth a ceasefire resolution. During the evening of 31 October-1 November the Royal Air Force bombed four major Egyptian airfields and, in fact, totally destroyed the Egyptian Air Force on the ground. Nassar's forces, sensing what was to come, quickly sank blockships in the Canal that would render it unusable for almost a year.

On 2 November, Syrian forces friendly to Nassar destroyed a number of pump station facilities along the British pipeline running from Iraq through Syria to Tripoli. Saudi Arabia immediately stopped shipment of any oil to the United Kingdom. In short, Britain had just cut herself off from her Mideast oil and would quickly feel the pinch.

As planned, the British and French forces attacked into the Canal zone on 5 November. Although the Egyptians and Israelis had broken contact a day prior (on 4 November), the initial attack was contested, approximately 650 Egyptians killed, and the city of Port Said severely damaged. One military point of interest is that the British attack included the first use of helicopters in an amphibious assault ferrying both troops and supplies from ship to shore.

The U.N., Soviet Union, and most particularly the United States were not amused. The British-French 'peacekeeping' force would be ordered out of the Suez and, in fact, totally exit within 50 days.

For Britain the operation was a political debacle.

It is difficult to believe that a statesman such as Eden, even though ill and under great domestic pressure, could have been party to such a crime. The cost to Britain was exorbitant, both economically and politically.

First, Britain never informed the United States, her greatest ally, of her intentions. Knowing that the U.S. clearly was trying to maintain peace in the region, Britain consorted in secret with France to "end run" Secretary of State Dulles and President Eisenhower. She had, for the moment, lost the trust of the United States.

Britain (with France) had shut down the Canal for herself and the rest of the world. In addition, she had lost her pipeline through Syria. The only place Britain could now go for oil (at least until the Canal would reopen) would be the United States.

In fact, with no dollar reserves, she would need American credit. And the price for such credit? "Immediate withdrawal from Egypt," said President Eisenhower. A major economic blow for an already shaky economy.

Third, she had badly divided the Commonwealth. None of her subjects could do more than 'abstain' on voting for a ceasefire in the UN General Assembly. To make matters worse, the Commonwealth countries were never consulted beforehand causing bitter resentment.

Fourth, Britain had been an accomplice to establishing Nassar as a martyr and a hero; precisely what Eden didn't want to do.

Fifth, Britain had clearly violated international law which she had for so long been a champion.

Sixth, Eden had largely undone the peace, stability, and understanding of Britain within the Arab world, and "left a legacy of bitterness and distrust which would take probably another generation to overcome."

Regarding the British involvement, student discussion topics are plentiful.

- Which element of national strategy was most responsible for Britain's role in the Suez conspiracy: Economic, political or socio-psychological?

- Are there indications that Anthony Eden assessed the potential risks of shutting down the Canal (at least temporarily) and the impact of such action on Britain?

- Did England still believe she had the ability, economically, politically and militarily to ignore, and in fact challenge the positions of the superpowers?

The London Times once wrote a description of Anthony Eden that probably says as much about the basis of the Suez Canal Crisis as any: "Eden was the last Prime Minister to believe Britain was a great power and the first to confront a crisis which proved she was not."

### Egypt

The culmination of World War II introduced a major rise in nationalism in Africa and the Mideast. As strong political personalities emerged from the war, Third World nations became more assertive and began to challenge the past influence, and in many cases abuses, of traditional colonial powers.

During the decade following the war Egypt had gained strength as a leader of the Arab world. In the summer of 1948 she had fought as the leader of Arab interests in the Palestinian War. Although Egypt suffered a series of military setbacks she continued to gain stature in her efforts to shake from British influence. In 1948 she concluded a long series of negotiations with the Suez Canal Company that would ensure Egypt received a much greater share of Canal profits than previously. Egypt also clearly stated that she had no intention to renew the Canal concession past its November 1968 termination date.

In 1952 a military coup d'etat set up a new government in Egypt. After almost 4 years of internal political turmoil, Colonel Gamal Nassar was elected President.

Much of Nassar's popularity was attributed to the "hard-line" he took with regard to Britain. The Suez Canal, now owned predominantly by British interests, was a natural target for

nationalistic rhetoric. Nassar himself was "perpetually outraged by the physical presence of a closed foreign community (i.e., the Canal Company workers) with a standard of living which by comparison made the Arab worker appear less well cared for than his camel." As was true of many British interests during the period, the Canal Company was largely blind to "its own anachromatic nature in an anti-colonial climate." In short, Egypt was tired of the domestic excesses of King Farouk and the condescending attitude of Britain and was about to exert its growing economic and political stature. Nassar's dream was a "new Egypt based upon the expulsion of Western influence and exculpation of the disgrace of the Palestine War."

Nassar saw clearly that Britain and France were attempting to undermine his credibility. Nassar attempted to convince King Hussein of Jordan to loosen his ties with England with whom she relied on heavily for military support. Nassar was also not amused when Eden tried to coerce Jordan into joining the Baghdad Pact. Nassar publicly capitalized on every British diplomatic move during this period where British foreign policy in the Mideast could best be described as inept.

In retrospect, Nassar tried to accomplish too much, too quickly.

Having successfully concluded an agreement with Britain to remove all British troops from the Suez, Nassar was surprised that he could not convince the U.K. to provide Egypt arms to help protect the region. He therefore quickly strengthened relations with the Soviet Union. This, of course, had the effect of aggravating both Britain and the United States.



The United States had led a Western promise of loans to Egypt to build the Aswan High Dam. Egyptian deals with the Soviets, for arms, however, caused the U.S. to reevaluate its position vis-a-vis Egypt. To the U.S., and in particular to John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, and President Eisenhower, who was facing an election in November, Egypt was becoming a poor risk both economically and politically. This attitude was reinforced when Nassar formally recognized Red China and removed his diplomatic ties from Formosa.

When the U.S. led the Western move to withdraw the Aswan loan offer, Nassar was prepared and nationalized the Canal setting a crisis in motion that put the world on the brink of war.

For a student of international relations the Egyptian position in 1956 is an excellent subject. The intricacies of its relationship with the USSR, Red China, Britain, France, the U.S., Israel and the Arab states is both interesting and full of lessons.

Some suggested student discussion/research topics:

- Discuss the rationale for Nassar's timing of the recognition of Red China.

- What evidence exists, if any, that Nassar had predetermined nationalization of the Canal if the U.S. Aswan Dam loan offer was withdrawn?

- What was the final impact of the Suez Crisis on Egypt's international position? Of Nassar personally?

## The United States and the Soviet Union

The role of the U.S. and the USSR in the Suez Crisis of 1956 is a classic example of the role of the two superpowers in the nuclear age. Each nation had its own agenda, however, both were acutely aware of the frightening consequences of irrational or hasty actions. Both powers exerted pressure yet showed restraint.

The US role during the Suez affair was marked by the influence of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Dulles, not President Eisenhower, was the prominent US spokesman throughout the ordeal. The primary reason for Eisenhower's public withdrawal from the tensions of the Mideast was the impending US Presidential elections of November 1956.

Dulles and British Prime Minister Eden were never friends, having collided previously over Indo-China and at the Geneva Conference in 1954. Both statesmen were strong anti-Communists but held differing philosophies on how to counter the growing threat.

Dulles accurately foresaw many of the changing relationships following World War II. He recognized that heavyhanded policies or veiled "threats" directed toward emerging nations would be more likely to drive them toward, not away from, ties with the Communist bloc. Dulles was extremely sensitive to the rising nationalism in the Mideast. Although the Jewish lobby in Washington pressured Dulles to sell arms to Israel, he rejected a \$60 million sale recognizing that it would have major implications to the Arab world.

The US position began to shift as Egypt flirted more and more with the Soviets. Egypt had sensed irritation on the part of the West whenever she dealt with the Soviet Union or China. As Soviet technicians were entered into Egypt along with a Czech arms deal, Dulles became concerned. When Egypt outwardly began to play the U.S. against the USSR regarding Aswan Dam loans, Dulles termed it "blackmail" and recommended to Eisenhower the withdrawing of the US loan offer. Eisenhower and Eden agreed.

The loan withdrawal resulted in the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Interestingly, Dulles was apparently surprised that his recommendation had triggered such a response from Egypt as well as a strong militant reaction from France and Britain.

The USSR was certainly attempting to maneuver its way into the Mideast in the mid-1950s. The Czech-USSR arms deal brought the Soviet Union into Arab politics "bearing gifts - offers of industrial and, scientific assistance for weapons development, agricultural research experts," etc. The Cold War had now moved into the Mideast.

The entry of France and England into the Suez in an obvious conspiracy with Israel was to damage and permanently change the relationship of the three nations. During the 3 weeks in November 1956 that the Suez Crisis was at its peak, the U.S. had been forced into a direct diplomatic confrontation with the Soviet Union. With a US presidential election imminent, the timing could not have been worse. The U.S. had previously made it clear to both France and England that it would not support a military

adventure in the Suez. The U.S. understood the risks involved in a confrontation of this magnitude in the age of nuclear weapons.

The Soviets had been somewhat preoccupied during the period with events in Hungary. On November 3, 1956, the Soviet Union attacked into Budapest to contain the growing democratization of Hungary. Two days later, on 5 November, French and British troops assaulted the Suez Canal. This event set up a difficult scenario in the U.N. where Western charges of Soviet aggression in Hungary were met with Soviet countercharges alleging a double standard. In the turmoil of events during the first week in November 1956, with threats being thrown about in the U.N., the U.S. was drawn into the conflict. In short, there was no way for a superpower to avoid the confrontation, a lesson unto itself.

Another most important lesson to emerge from the Suez Crisis was the role that could be played by the U.N. and its members. As clearly articulated by the distinguished commentator, Richard C. Hottelet, during a 1986 visit to the U.N. by the Army War College Class of 1987, "It is not the direct action but the capability to quickly convene and hold a dialogue" that is the U.N.'s greatest contribution. During the tension of late 1956, it was Lester B. Pearson, then Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs (and later Canada's Prime Minister) who came from a position of relative obscurity to a position of international prominence in acting as a key UN negotiator. His Canadian-sponsored UN proposal to establish a UN peacekeeping force and his hard work to gain acceptance for the plan from all sides would be widely recognized and he would become the recipient of the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize.

For students of international diplomacy or foreign relations, the actions taken within the U.N. during the Suez tension are of great interest. The belligerents tried to avoid the UN actions that were opposed to their individual interests; however, they were subject to both subtle and direct threats by both super-powers. The British Commonwealth nations were split, a rare occurrence, by their support or opposition to British aggression. All Commonwealth nations, however, were stunned by Britain's failure to inform them of its intentions in the assault on the Suez. More importantly, the Atlantic Alliance was severely strained for more than a decade by the Anglo-French collusion. In 1962 the Kennedy Administration "paid-back" the allies by imposing the Cuban blockade without consultation. Shortly thereafter deGaulle vetoed British membership in the Common Market. Later, France and Britain each went their own way on nuclear weapons and France left NATO. The roots of much of this dissatisfaction can be traced back to the aftermath of the Suez.

As Terence Robertson states in his outstanding book on the subject, Crisis - The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy,

Britain and France never wholly forgave the United States. The U.S. never wholly forgave France and Britain for going it alone. France has never forgotten that it was Britain that capitulated to American pressure; and Britain still resents its own collusive alliance with Israel.

In summary, I have found in readings on the Suez Crisis, a more complete understanding of the roles of superpowers, middle powers and Third World actors in the nuclear era. As Americans we can easily fall victim to the "not invented here" syndrome and

fail to realize that future confrontations may require novel alliances and great statesmanship to preclude holocaust.

The Suez Crisis is a great example of diplomacy at the "brink" and is highly recommended for detailed study at the US Army War College. It is an event of such significance and relevance that every graduate should be familiar with its lessons.

## ENDNOTES

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3. Eayers, James. The Commonwealth and the Suez. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.
4. Hamilton, Roberson, and Goodwin. A Decade of the Commonwealth. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1966.
5. Neff, Donald. Warriors at Suez. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.
6. Nutting, Anthony. No End of a Lesson. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1967.
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## APPENDIX

### THE SUEZ CANAL

1956

- 13 June Last British soldier evacuates Egypt.
- 24 June Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser becomes President of the Egyptian Republic.
- July Egypt recognizes communist China - the first nation to do so since the Korean war.
- 19 July U.S. withdraws its offer of aid for financing the Aswan High Dam.
- 20 July U.K. withdraws its offer to participate in financing Aswan Dam.
- 23 July World Bank announces that its loan offer for the Aswan Dam financing expired with the withdrawal of US and UK offers.
- 26 July Egypt nationalizes the Suez Canal.
- 28 July Britain freezes all Egyptian accounts in the U.K. including those of the Canal Company and of Egyptian banks, firms and individuals. In retaliation, Egypt bans all exports to Britain and her colonies unless payment is made through a third state with acceptable currency.
- 29 July - 1 August British, French and US officials start a series of discussions to consider how to deal with the Canal crisis. French and British military authorities also confer. By 1 August agreement is reached to call a conference of the principal nations using the Suez Canal. On 30 July French Premier Guy Mollet describes Nasser as "a would-be dictator" who imitates Hitler. While endorsing the Egyptian action, Khrushchev of USSR later makes a plea for moderation to the Western powers.
- 12 August Egypt refuses to attend conference. Proposes instead a 45-nation conference of all users of the canal to review and modernize the Constantinople Convention of 1888 guaranteeing freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal.
- 16-23 August London Conference, attended by 22 nations, adopts majority proposal.



CHRONOLOGY Continued

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3-9 September           | Five-nation committee presents majority proposal to President Nassar in Cairo. Nassar rejects proposal. Egypt states willingness to sign a treaty under the auspices of U.N. guaranteeing freedom of navigation.                                                                               |
| 11 September            | British and French canal employees leave Egypt.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 12 September            | France and U.K. inform UN Security Council that peace is endangered by continued refusal of Egypt to act on the 18-nation London Conference proposal.                                                                                                                                          |
| 14 September            | Suez Canal operation with Egyptian personnel begins.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 17 September            | Egypt tells UN Security Council that France and U.K. aim to take possession of the Suez Canal.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 19-21 September         | Second London Conference attended by the 18 countries which supported majority plan of first London Conference, sets up "Users' Association".                                                                                                                                                  |
| 23 September            | France and U.K. ask UN Security to consider "Situation created by the unilateral action of the Egyptian Government in bringing to an end the system of international operation of the Suez Canal...."                                                                                          |
| 24 September            | Egypt asks Security Council to consider "Actions by some powers, particularly France and the UK, which constitute a danger to international peace and security and are a serious violation of the Charter...."                                                                                 |
| 13 October              | Security Council adopts resolution enumerating six principles as basis for negotiations on the Suez Canal.                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 29 October              | U.S. asks for an urgent meeting of the Security Council to consider "Steps for the Immediate Cessation of Military Activities of Israel Against Egypt."                                                                                                                                        |
| 30 October              | Prime Minister Anthony Eden announces in London that the British and French Governments have sent an ultimatum to the governments of Israel and Egypt asking for agreement to a ceasefire within 12 hours or "British and French troops will intervene in whatever strength may be necessary." |
| 11.30 a.m.<br>(NY Time) |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

## CHRONOLOGY Continued

30 October  
11.00 a.m. -  
1.10 p.m.  
At the first meeting of the Security Council, on the US item the USSR and U.S. ask for ceasefire and request that all UN members refrain from introducing military goods into the area.

30 October  
4.00 p.m. -  
7.55 p.m.  
At the afternoon session of the Security Council, U.K. and France veto the US resolution (S/3710) calling for immediate ceasefire, withdrawal of Israeli troops behind the established armistice lines and for all members to refrain from introducing military goods into the area.

Vote: 7 Yes, 2 No (U.K., France), 2 Abstain (Australia, Belgium)

30 October  
9.00 p.m. -  
11.05 p.m.  
The Security Council meets a third time that day. The U.K. and France use the veto again on a Soviet resolution calling upon Egypt and Israel to ceasefire and upon Israel to withdraw its troops to behind the established armistice lines.

Vote: 7 Yes, 2 No (U.K., France), 2 Abstain (Belgium, US)

31 October  
3.00 p.m. -  
7.20 p.m.  
Security Council adopts Yugoslav resolution calling for an emergency session of the General Assembly as provided for in the Uniting for Peace resolution.

Vote: 7 Yes, 2 No (U.K., France), 2 Abstain (Australia, Belgium)

31 October  
British and French bombers attack Egyptian airfields.

1-2 November  
5.00 p.m. -  
4.20 a.m.  
First Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly. Assembly adopts US resolution calling for ceasefire and withdrawal of troops and requesting members to "refrain from introducing military goods in the area." The resolution also calls for steps to be taken to reopen the Suez Canal and to restore secure freedom of navigation.

Vote: 64 Yes, 5 No (U.K., France, Israel, Australia and New Zealand), 6 Abstain (Belgium, Canada, Laos, Netherlands, Portugal and Union of South Africa).

CHRONOLOGY Continued

- At this meeting Lester Pearson, Foreign Minister of Canada, asks for General Assembly consideration of the creation "of a truly international peace and police force."
- 3-4 November  
8.00 p.m. -  
3.05 a.m.      Emergency Special Session adopts Canadian resolution asking the Secretary-General to submit within 48 hours a plan for setting up an emergency international UN force to secure and supervise the cessation of hostilities in the Middle East.
- 3 November      Secretary-General issues first report on compliance with ceasefire resolution, listing reservations put forth by Egypt, UK and France (A/3267)
- 4 November      Secretary-General issues first report on plans for emergency force, suggesting Major General E.L.M. Burns as chief of command and outlining recruitment plan.
- 4-5 November  
9.45 p.m. -  
12.25 a.m.      Emergency Assembly adopts three-power resolution (Canada, Colombia, Norway) based on the 4 November report of the Secretary-General establishing a "United Nations Command for an emergency international force". The resolution specified that forces of the five permanent members of the Security Council could not participate in the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF).
- Vote: 57 Yes, 0 No, 19 Abstain.
- 5 November      Israel, Egypt, France and U.K. accept ceasefire unconditionally. Egypt accepts UN force.
- 5 November      Security Council meets at the request of the USSR to discuss a USSR proposal for a ceasefire and for all member states, particularly the U.S. and USSR, to give military and other assistance to Egypt. The Council votes against considering this item.
- Vote: 3 Yes (Iran, USSR, Yugoslavia), 4 No (Australia, France, U.K., U.S.), 4 Abstain (Belgium, China, Cuba, Peru).
- 6 November      Secretary-General issues second and final report on United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF).
- 6 November      British and French forces land at Port Said, Egypt.

## CHRONOLOGY Continued

7 November British and French cease fire at 2.00 a.m. (Local Egypt time).

8 November Secretary-General confirms appointment of General Burns as Chief of UNEF.

10 November USSR announces that Soviet volunteers may go to Egypt if Britain, France and Israel refuse to withdraw their forces from Egyptian territory.

11 November First UNEF units - from Denmark and Norway - arrive at Capodichino (Naples) staging area.

12 November Secretary-General reports his agreement with Egypt as to the arrival in Egypt of UNEF.

15 November First contingent of UNEF (45 Danes, 50 Norwegians) lands at Abu Suweir airfield near Ismailia in Egypt.

18 November Egypt requests UN assistance for clearing the Suez Canal.

21 November Secretary-General issues report on compliance with ceasefire resolutions, including reports of France, Israel and U.K. on withdrawal of troops. France reports withdrawal of one-third of its forces; U.K. plans to withdraw one infantry battalion and Israel reports that it has withdrawn its forces from their most advanced positions in Egypt.

24 November Israel reports the withdrawal of two infantry brigades from Egyptian territory into Israel.

30 November UNEF force in Egypt totals 2,474 troops.

3 December Britain and France announce they will "continue withdrawal" of their forces in Port Said area "without delay".

Secretary-General orders Commander of UNEF to prepare UNEF to take over in the Port Said area by the middle of December. (UN Document A/3415)

21 December US Export-Import Bank lends \$20 million to U.K. for purchases in U.S., including oil, because blocking of Suez Canal has cut off more than half of British (and Western European) oil supplied.

22 December British and French forces complete withdrawal from Egypt.