

## The United Nations and the British Dimension of the Suez Crisis

- 0 3

William Roger Louis, The University of Texas at Austin

- \* Paper for the Symposium, *The Role of the United Nations in International Politic - A Historical Re-examination from the Member States' Perspectives*-, 20-21 December 2003.
- \* None of these papers should be cited without the author's permission.

## **The United Nations and the British Dimension of the Suez Crisis**

Wm. Roger Louis

‘There is only one motto worse than “my country right or wrong”’, Aneurin Bevan once remarked, ‘and that is “the United Nations right or wrong”’. This witty yet incisive comment cut to the heart of the division of sentiment in Britain at the height of the Suez crisis in November 1956. On the one side stood those who continued to believe in the supremacy of Britain’s traditional national and imperial mission. On the other were the champions of the United Nations holding that the UN Charter had opened a new chapter in international law, indeed in human affairs, and that the United Nations therefore held the higher allegiance. In fact there was a great deal of ambivalence towards such passionate convictions, but feelings ran high—as high as on any other issue since the debate about appeasement in the late 1930s—and Bevan correctly detected the principal cleavage. At critical points in the Suez crisis, the debate centered as much on the nature of the United Nations and what it represented as on Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Suez Canal.

In 1956 the United Nations was little more than a decade old. It had only 67 members (versus 191 in 2002) and had not yet developed the aggressively anti-colonial reputation that characterized its proceedings in the following decade.<sup>1</sup> Of the ideas of peace, decolonization, and multi-culturalism later associated with it, the transcendent aim of peace

---

In writing this article I have benefited from reading Asahiko Hanzawa’s Oxford D.Phil thesis, ‘An Invisible Surrender: The United Nations and the End of the British Empire, 1956-1963’ (2002).

<sup>1</sup> The United Nations had 51 original members but 16 more were admitted in 1955: Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Ceylon, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Laos, Libya, Nepal, Portugal, Rumania, and Spain. The year 1956 was thus a year of transition and adjustment to a larger international society though not yet to the ‘third world’ majority that characterized its membership from the 1960s. A shift had taken place, but the implication of the expanded membership of the United Nations was by no means obvious. Gerald Fitzmaurice, the Legal Adviser at the Foreign Office, wrote perceptively: ‘Very few people in

still prevailed.<sup>2</sup> Yet in 1956 there was considerable wariness of approaching the United Nations to preserve the peace at Suez, not least because of the quite different motives of Britain and the United States. The Suez issue was not referred to the United Nations until September 12, nearly two months into the crisis, and then on the initiative of Sir Anthony Eden, not John Foster Dulles or Gamal Abdel Nasser. This cautious approach to UN involvement was shared above all by the Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld.<sup>3</sup> Though he later acquired the reputation as an activist Secretary-General, the qualities of circumspection and caution define the early years of his tenure. The Suez crisis marked his emergence as a leader with breadth of vision and galvanizing energy. On the whole he managed to steer a steady and neutral course, but not without hints, as would become apparent later in his career during the Congo crisis of 1960-61, that neither of the superpowers, nor Britain nor Egypt, could rely on him to promote aims other than those of the United Nations.

Hammarskjöld had assumed office in 1953 at age 48. He was a man of intellectual distinction, trained as an economist and in the law, and with refined interests in art and literature. He had chaired the Nobel Literature Prize Committee of the Swedish Academy. In a period when the United Nations had been weakened by the Korean War and the McCarthy anti-Communist investigations, Hammarskjöld had restored the morale of the UN Secretariat and had transformed the chiefly administrative job of the Secretary-General into a

---

this country realise the immense change that has taken place in the climate of world opinion.’ (Fitzmaurice to Sir George Coldstream, 6 Sept. 1956, LCO 2/5760)

<sup>2</sup> The moral authority and charisma of the United Nations in upholding the principles of peace, decolonization, and multiracialism is the theme of Conor Cruise O’Brien in *The United Nations: Sacred Drama* (London, 1968). On the decade following the Suez crisis: ‘These were the years when fair British royalty would be photographed dancing with jet-black African potentates and their wives.’ (p. 33, quoting the Brazilian journalist Hernane Tavares de Sá)

<sup>3</sup> For Hammarskjöld see Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld* (New York, 1972), a comprehensive and detailed biography based on the Hammarskjöld Papers and UN material, access to which is still mainly restricted.

position of political influence. The Observer, the foremost British newspaper championing the cause of the United Nations, wrote of him in 1956:

He is an unemotional, minutely scrupulous and fastidious northern aristocrat. He does not possess any power of words—his speeches and his papers are said to be even more elliptical and obscure in Swedish than they are in English.

He practises the sort of personal austerity that would be proper to a successful public priest. He avoids personal or emotional entanglements. He has a curious quality of solitariness at the centre of a vast and gregarious organisation.<sup>4</sup>

Hammarskjöld to many was an enigmatic figure, but to those who knew him well there could be no doubt, in the words of the same 'Profile' in The Observer, that he was 'coldly devoted to his job without any of the romantic illusions about the brotherhood of man.'

Hammarskjöld in one sense took a minimalist attitude towards UN functions.<sup>5</sup> In his view, if the United Nations were to survive it had to be constantly on guard against taking on more than it could manage. He strenuously resisted plans for converting the United Nations into a world police force or for adopting countries as permanent wards. Yet in a wider vision Hammarskjöld also saw the potential of the United Nations as an independent institution that might achieve peaceful solutions to international problems in a way that would complement or surpass the efforts of individual states, large or small, which were each locked in narrow visions of self-interest. He worked relentlessly towards UN goals with creativity and resourcefulness. By careful calculation the United Nations might play a critical part in solving not merely the Suez problem but even the more intractable problems of

---

<sup>4</sup> The Observer, 18 Nov. 1956.

<sup>5</sup> In this sense Hammarskjöld's thought bore a similarity to Gladwyn Jebb's. Within the British Foreign Office, Jebb had been instrumental in planning the creation of the United Nations and later served as Permanent Representative 1950-54. He had written in 1951: 'One of the troubles about the United Nations, if I may say so, is that frustrated idealists tend to exaggerate wildly both its present powers and even its potential importance. In my own view it has, even now, a certain role to play . . . but it cannot, for a long time to come, expect to assume the powers and functions of a Super-State.' (Jebb to Harold Nicolson, Strictly Personal, 6 Nov. 1951, Gladwyn Jebb Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, GLAD 1/1/1)

the Middle East. The Suez crisis eventually represented a landmark in the history of the United Nations because of the birth of UN peacekeeping forces. To put it more negatively, as did Sir Pierson Dixon, the British Ambassador at the United Nations, Hammarskjöld sometimes gave the impression that he was ‘fascinated by the idea of building up a U.N. police force under his command’.<sup>6</sup>

In all his UN affairs, Hammarskjöld held that absolute impartiality was essential. He tried to embody that attribute. But he possessed a sceptical frame of mind and, to his critics, he sometimes demonstrated a certain intellectual and ethical condescension that won him enemies, especially those with equally strong personalities. Sir Pierson Dixon was only one of several to collide with him over Egypt. Hammarskjöld, despite his attempt to remain unbiased towards all parties, eventually acquired among British officials a reputation for having, in Pierson’s words, a ‘notorious penchant for the Egyptians’.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of the Suez crisis, however, the British regarded him on balance as anti-Nasser.

Hammarskjöld was sensitive to the United Nations being excluded from the debate about Suez, but he also recognized that the issues were so explosive that the organization itself might be wrecked if any of the protagonists succeeded in using it for their own purpose.<sup>8</sup> He had an unusually candid conversation with a member of the British delegation, Moore Crostwaite, in early August 1956. In Hammarskjöld’s subtle methods, candor was often an oblique rather than a conspicuous virtue, but in this exchange he made it clear that he had ‘an unfavourable impression of Nasser’. Perhaps the crisis would end with Nasser’s

---

<sup>6</sup> Diary entry for 5 Nov. 1956, in Pierson Dixon, Double Diploma: The Life of Sir Pierson Dixon—Don and Diplomat (London, 1968), p. 270. For Dixon see also Edward Johnson, ‘The Diplomat’s Diplomat’, Contemporary British History, 13, 2 (Summer 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Dixon to Lloyd, Top Secret, 19 June 1958, PREM 11/2387.

<sup>8</sup> The British Ambassador in Washington, Sir Roger Makins, recorded a conversation with Foster Dulles that described Hammarskjöld’s ambivalence: ‘the Secretary-General was somewhat unhappy that the United Nations had been by-passed in the Suez affair’ but he did not want the administrative control over the canal ‘to become too closely involved with the United Nations’. (Makins to Lloyd, Secret, 11 Aug. 1956, FO 371/119098)

enemies getting the upper hand, but not if the British and the French allowed it to become a confrontation between the colonial powers and the rest of the world:

He believed that there was a great deal of jealousy and distrust of Nasser among the other Arabs under the surface. He hoped that it would prove possible to exploit this. Making the issue one between the West and the East would solidify the Arabs behind Nasser, and indeed win him sympathy throughout Asia.

On this occasion Hammarskjöld was remarkably blunt: 'If the Suez crisis led to the disappearance of Nasser, so much the better.'<sup>9</sup>

Nasser's mind worked to an extraordinary degree parallel to that of another protagonist, the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Both held similar assumptions. The longer the time after the initial shock of nationalization, the less probable would be the prospect of war. Nasser thus believed that his best chance of avoiding invasion would be to give no further provocation. This outlook helps to explain why Egypt took no initial steps to lodge a protest at the United Nations against mobilization of troops in the Mediterranean. Nasser did not want to see a further escalation of the crisis. Nor could he know for certain what might be the reaction of the Security Council or the General Assembly.<sup>10</sup> The western governments still dominated the United Nations, though not so much as before the admission of the 16 states in 1955.<sup>11</sup> Dulles feared that a debate about the Suez Canal might raise the

---

<sup>9</sup> P. M. Crostwaite to A. D. M. Ross, Secret, 6 Aug. 1956; Hammarskjöld to Selwyn Lloyd, 7 Aug. 1956, FO 371/119114. Hammarskjöld stated in his letter to Lloyd that placing the issue before the United Nations would be 'the only way to avoid making this a conflict between Europe and Asia.'

<sup>10</sup> Nasser was getting advice from India. Nehru wrote to him: 'We do not think it wise for you to suggest that the present problem should be considered by the United Nations. In the present state of the world the alignment of forces there may not be favourable.' Nehru to Nasser, 6 Aug. 1956, Mohamed H. Heikal, Cutting the Lion's Tail: Suez Through Egyptian Eyes (London, 1986), p. 139. Another difficulty for Nasser was that if Israel adhered to a UN resolution it would automatically become unacceptable to Egypt.

<sup>11</sup> Of the 16, only Ceylon, Jordan, and Libya were within the British imperial orbit and even they all would probably come down on the Arab side. The arithmetic of both the Security Council and the General Assembly preoccupied the British from the outset of the crisis. In calculating the Latin American vote, for example, the Foreign Office took into account the assessment of the Embassy in Mexico City: 'the Mexicans regard as one of the heroic deeds of their history ... the expropriation of foreign oil interests by the Mexican

issue of the American position in Panama. The Latin American vote was large, volatile, and sometimes beyond the control of the State Department. Dulles's principal motivation, however, was to prevent Britain and France from using the United Nations as a cover for the use of force.<sup>12</sup>

Dulles like Nasser thought that the longer the crisis could be spun out, the less probable would be an invasion. Instead of approaching the United Nations, Dulles thus proposed an international conference. But he also gave the British the impression that he sympathized with their cause. From the outset, both with Eisenhower and with the British, Dulles used the word 'disgorge' as a way of expressing his attitude to what Nasser must do to bring about a solution. Dulles was caught off guard when the British finally decided to turn to the United Nations. The Suez issue found its way on the UN agenda because of British initiative and despite Dulles's protest. The British decision is thus the key to the dynamic within the United Nations, which in turn took on an independent momentum of its own. The machinery of war had already been thrown in motion; but attitudes and opinions change, and once the corresponding mechanisms of peace began to operate the chances seemed probable to most contemporaries that war could be averted.

The initial British assessment of the prospect of turning to the United Nations was negative. In the immediate aftermath of Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal

---

Government in 1938.' (Chancery to Foreign Office, Confidential, 18 Aug. 1956, FO 371/119120) There was a similar reaction in Iran, where newspapers and public figures applauded Nasser's nationalization as 'another blow in the fight against colonialism, another step in the liberation of the Middle Eastern countries from the tutelage of the great powers. It reminds them vividly of their own nationalisation four and a half years ago, of the Iranian oil industry and the Abadan refinery.' (Roger Stevens to Lloyd, Confidential, 7 Aug. 1956, FO 371/119104)

<sup>12</sup> See Herman Finer, Dulles Over Suez: The Theory and Practice of His Diplomacy (Chicago, 1964), chap. 9. Finer's book was one of the first major historical analyses of the Suez crisis, though it is often slighted because of its anti-Dulles bias. The US Ambassador in London at the time of the Suez crisis, Winthrop W. Aldrich, made a shrewd assessment of it: 'a remarkably valuable historical essay despite the fact that the author is evidently strongly prejudiced against Secretary Dulles'. (Winthrop W. Aldrich, 'The Suez Crisis: A Footnote to history', Foreign Affairs, 45, 3, April 1967, p. 550)

Company, Sir Harold Caccia had summoned, among others, the officials most concerned with the United Nations, Sir Pierson Dixon and Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice. Caccia was Deputy Under-Secretary and Ambassador-designate to the United States. He would shortly depart, by sea, for Washington, where he would arrive in November in the aftermath of the British and French invasion of Egypt. Tough, aggressive, and competent, Caccia was an Eden loyalist. He had been Eden's Private Secretary before the Second World War. Dixon was one of the most able members of the diplomatic service of his generation. He too had worked closely with Eden and continued to defend British policy at the United Nations even though personally he regarded it as misguided and, in the end, as disastrous. Fitzmaurice was the Legal Adviser at the Foreign Office and had some twenty-five years experience in the legal department. Possessing a keen legal mind, he became the Prime Minister's most persistent and trenchant foe within the Foreign Office.<sup>13</sup>

This committee of Foreign Office worthies agreed unanimously that it would be better to summon a conference of maritime powers than to submit the matter to the United Nations. Though Dulles is usually given credit for convening the maritime conference, its origins can also be found in the Foreign Office. So too can the scepticism of the United Nations that characterized Anglo-American discussions at this stage. 'A special session of the General Assembly would be chancy', according to Caccia and his colleagues, nor would the Security Council be satisfactory because of the Soviet veto. They also reached a negative conclusion on the possibility of being in touch with the Secretary-General because whatever information they gave him 'would tend to reveal our intentions'. The meeting ended on the further negative note that the Chinese President of the Security Council would probably vote with the Arabs. Clearly not much could be expected from the United Nations.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum by J. D. Murray, 30 July 1956, FO 371/119118. For Fitzmaurice see Lewis Johnman, 'Playing the Role of a Cassandra: Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice, Senior Legal Advisor to the Foreign Office', *Contemporary British History*, 13, 2 (Summer 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Memorandum by J. D. Murray, 30 July 1956, FO 371/119118.



Nor did the Prime Minister think it expedient to turn to the United Nations. ‘Please let us keep quiet about the UN’, he commented on 8 August.<sup>15</sup> In a manner entirely consistent with his earlier views about the League of Nations, Eden proclaimed himself to be an internationalist but privately he had viewed both the League and especially the United Nations as organizations that might do more harm than good. In the 1930s he had regarded the League as an extension of the Foreign Office. The United Nations was much less malleable. Nevertheless he needed to rely on the support of the United States and the Commonwealth, both of which would increasingly insist that Britain show good faith by referring the dispute to an international forum. Eden did not want to appear as the aggressor in the judgment of world opinion. He therefore supported the idea of a maritime conference and eventually the proposal to submit the issue to the United Nations to prove that Britain had gone to every length to resolve the question by peaceful means. But ultimately there would be a fundamental and irrevocable difference between him and the United States, the Dominions, and not least the Labour Party. Many at the time assumed that the British government would abide by a UN solution to the problem. Eden himself never wavered from the belief that the British must act in their own self-interest regardless of the United Nations.

#### John Foster Dulles and the Path to the United Nations

It is necessary briefly to study Dulles’s attitude because in some ways the British were genuinely misled. The Secretary of State was in Peru at the beginning of the crisis, but

---

<sup>15</sup> Minute by Eden, 8 Aug. 1956 on F.O. to Washington, 7 Aug. 1956, PREM 11/1099. The context was a suggestion by the French that the Secretary-General should be given information about the maritime conference. Eden’s thought thus ran parallel to the negative conclusions reached by Caccia and others.

on his return to Washington he quickly made his views known to the British.<sup>16</sup> ‘Mr. Dulles sent for me this afternoon’, Sir Roger Makins, the Ambassador, telegraphed to Eden on July 30. Dulles made clear two points on which he remained consistent during the crisis. Eden himself angrily underlined them on the original telegram:

The United States Government thought it necessary to distinguish between the Suez Canal Convention of 1888, which was concluded in perpetuity, and the Canal Company concession, which had been granted for a fixed term. It was, therefore, infractions of the Convention, rather than the termination of the concession, on which action could most appropriately be based.

While he agreed that our attitude should be a firm one ... his view was that so long as there was no interference with the navigation of the canal, and no threats to foreign nationals in Egypt, there was no basis for military action.<sup>17</sup>

‘Why?’, Eden had written in the margin in response to Dulles’s emphasis on the Suez Canal Convention of 1888, which secured the right of passage of vessels of the signatory states. Dulles was pointing out, implicitly at least, that every nation possesses the sovereign right to nationalization, which in his judgment could not be effectively challenged in international law unless questions arose about fair compensation or efficient management. Thus there was no basis for intervention, at least for the time being. On that point, at least, Eden was obviously clear about Dulles’s meaning, even though it was open to the charge of hypocrisy in view of American intervention in Guatemala and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Eden himself doubted that effective action could be taken on the legal basis of a nineteenth-century treaty. ‘Theft’ was the straightforward word he used to describe the rationale for retaliation.

The problem for the British was that Dulles seemed to be speaking at two levels. One was the academic and legal, sometimes taking the form of a sermon embellished by

---

<sup>16</sup> On these points I draw on my essay based on the Dulles and Eisenhower Papers as well as the US and British archives ‘Dulles, Suez, and the British’, in Richard H. Immerman, ed., John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War (Princeton, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Makins to Lloyd, Top Secret, 30 July 1956, PREM 11/1098.

points of law, as if he were presenting a case to the United Nations. The other was the popular and robust vernacular, which anyone could easily comprehend. In meeting with Eden and others in London on 1 August, Dulles had said that a way had to be found 'to make Nasser disgorge what he was attempting to swallow'.<sup>19</sup> Here, as in the case of taking his country to the brink of war, Dulles's spontaneous remarks pulled him into controversy. Eden wrote in his memoirs about Dulles wanting to make Nasser disgorge: 'these were forthright words. They rang in my ears for months.'<sup>20</sup> Allowing for an element of exaggeration, what Eden wrote was no doubt true. Dulles gave the impression that he sympathized with the British and would support them, in the last resort with force, if they first pursued legal and peaceful methods, in Eden's phrase, to bring Nasser to his senses. In the calculation of the timing, however, Dulles was much closer to Nasser's reasoning. According to Nasser's confidant, Mohammed Heikal, Nasser believed that 'the period of maximum danger for Egypt ... would be in the first few days after the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company'. Thereafter the odds of an attack on Egypt would diminish until the autumn when the risk would virtually evaporate.<sup>21</sup>

The British needed the support of the US government, which, in their mistaken view, was dominated by Dulles. In fact Dulles and Eisenhower worked as a team with Dulles, usually but not always, deferring to the President and the President in turn setting the guidelines but often following Dulles's suggestions. The basic decisions were made by Eisenhower.<sup>22</sup> But it was Dulles who publicly appeared as the figure taking the lead in the

---

<sup>18</sup> See especially Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954: Guatemala (Washington, 2003), which establishes full documentation on the CIA operation in Guatemala.

<sup>19</sup> Record of meeting, 1 Aug. 1956, PREM 11/1098.

<sup>20</sup> The Memoirs of Anthony Eden: Full Circle (Boston, 1960), p. 487.

<sup>21</sup> Heikal, Cutting the Lion's Tail, p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> See Robert R. Bowie, 'Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Suez Crisis', in Wm. Roger Louis and Roger Owen, eds., Suez 1956 (Oxford 1989), which remains the best account of the relationship between Eisenhower and Dulles.

maritime conference leading to the mission headed by Robert Menzies of Australia to persuade Nasser to accept international supervision of the canal.<sup>23</sup> It was also Dulles who provided the inspiration for the Suez Canal Users Association (SCUA), which demonstrated his underlying objective of securing a peaceful means of resolving the conflict. Those in the British government who studied Dulles's methodical statements in writing as well as his spontaneous utterances were clear about his intention. Adam Watson, the head of the African Department of the Foreign Office, wrote on the eve of the invasion by the expeditionary force in late October 1956: 'the fact is that he [Dulles] always intended SCUA as a means for negotiating a settlement, not for pressure on Nasser.'<sup>24</sup>

Eden and Dulles both made miscalculations about the United Nations as well as mutual aims. To restate one of his assumptions, Dulles believed that that 'the danger of bellicose action would disappear if negotiations were prolonged'.<sup>25</sup> Eden assumed that if the British supported, in his phrase, the proposal for a 'Users Club' (what became known as SCUA), then Dulles would back them in the application of economic sanctions and, if necessary, force. Eden said at one stage that SCUA was 'a cock-eyed idea, but if it brings the Americans in, I can go along.'<sup>26</sup> He hoped to bring the crisis to a head as quickly as possible, thereby not losing momentum in protracted negotiations. Dulles by contrast wanted to gain time. But contrary to what might seem to be the natural course, he did not wish to turn to the United Nations, where the Soviet Union would be certain to block any chance of peaceful resolution of the issue. The British and French would be able to take advantage of the Soviet veto to prove the futility of the United Nations. The inaction of the United Nations would thus become a cover for the use of force.

---

<sup>23</sup> See Allan Martin, Robert Menzies: A Life (2 vols. Melbourne, 1993-99), II, chap. 12; W. J. Hudson, Blind Loyalty: Australia and the Suez Crisis, 1956 (Melbourne, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Watson to G. E. Millard, Secret, 31 Oct. 1956, PREM 11/1175.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Murphy, Diplomat among Warriors (London, 1964), p. 468.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas, The Suez Affair, p. 83.

When Dulles spoke at the conference of 18 maritime countries that met in London 16-23 August 1956, he sounded to some as if he was leading the Anglo-French prosecution against Egypt. It is not surprising that Eden later felt that he had been deceived. But some observers including American as well as British, were critical of Dulles's forensic agility. Charles Bohlen, the US Ambassador in Moscow, wrote of Dulles's performance that he came 'to the edge of downright trickery and even dishonesty' by giving the British and the French the impression that he favored them while indicating to the Russians that he was anti-British, especially anti-French, and, apart from Nasser, pro-Egyptian.<sup>27</sup> Still, Eden inferred from Dulles's tone and utterances that American and British aims could be coordinated.

Eden remarked later that 'We have been misled so often by Dulles' ideas that we cannot afford to risk another misunderstanding ... . Time is not on our side in this matter.'<sup>28</sup> Timing was in fact one of Eden's principal preoccupations. He hoped to be able to mount an attack on Egypt by mid-September. Thereafter the weather in the eastern Mediterranean would begin to worsen and, just as important, the passage of time would make it increasingly difficult to keep the troops mobilized and on the alert. Eden was as much aware as were Dulles and Nasser that the momentum could not be sustained indefinitely. To keep things in play he pursued two contradictory tactics. One was to seek the resolution of the conflict through peaceful means, which the Foreign Office now accepted as an overriding mission. Eden's other tactic was to plan for an invasion. The military objective was contingent upon failure to secure a peaceful resolution of the problem. He would have to demonstrate that all reasonable means—including the United Nations—had been exhausted before war could commence. To satisfy his own Cabinet as well as the House of Commons, the Labour Party, and the Commonwealth, Eden found it necessary to turn to the United Nations.

---

<sup>27</sup> T. Michael Ruddy, The Cautious Diplomat: Charles E. Bohlen and the Soviet Union, 1929-1969 (Kent State University Press, 1986), p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Eden to Lloyd, Top Secret, 8 Oct. 1956, FO 800/741.

Within the Foreign Office, Harold Beeley, the Middle East expert, played a central part in shaping policy and expressed the preeminent goal: 'we must clearly aim at defeating Colonel Nasser without resort to force.'<sup>29</sup> At about the same time Sir Gladwyn Jebb, the Ambassador in Paris, weighed in with the recommendation that Britain turn to the United Nations. During the Second World War, Jebb had headed the postwar planning and reconstruction department that had helped to create the United Nations. After the war he served as Permanent Representative at the United Nations 1950-55. One might have thought that his views would have considerable influence, despite the arrogance and certainty with which he presented them. Jebb was committed to the United Nations and no one was more aware than he of the intricate politics of the Security Council and General Assembly.<sup>30</sup> In addition to Beeley and Jebb, Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice persistently pointed out Britain's commitment to the UN Charter. Beeley, Jebb, and Fitzmaurice were representative of those in the Foreign Office who believed that Britain must work in concert with the United Nations to resolve the issue. They and others, however, confronted a formidable personality, Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, the Permanent Under-Secretary.

Kirkpatrick deftly parried suggestions about the United Nations in such a way as to make them compatible with the aim of invasion. Kirkpatrick stood second to none, not even Eden, in his belief that the United Nations must be kept subordinate to British policy. His tactic with Beeley and Fitzmaurice was to engage them in debate, often inconclusive, about the merits of a proposal to keep Nasser in play or the legal justification of force. In the case

---

<sup>29</sup> Minute by Beeley, 18 Aug. 1956, FO 371/119128. In minutes on Beeley's analysis, Caccia and Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick (the Permanent Under-Secretary) reluctantly accepted this point but the latter remained sceptical and asked for specifics on how it might be achieved. The crisis now developed so rapidly that the British found themselves responding to events rather than guiding them. Beeley's plan rested on the assumption that Nasser might be provoked into action 'justifying military measures against him' by ships refusing to pay dues. Beeley noted in late August: 'We must work to a faster time-table' but had no suggestions to make. (Minute by Beeley, 31 Aug. 1956, FO 371/119128)

of Jebb, Kirkpatrick—along with the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister—simply ignored him. At each stage Jebb was cut out of the discussions leading to major decisions. Jebb naturally resented his status as a pariah, but it was a shrewd, instinctive judgment on the part of Eden. Jebb was one of the few people in the Foreign Office who, by sheer strength of personality, might have blocked the plans for the invasion. As it transpired, Kirkpatrick remained the dominant force within the Foreign Office. Eden trusted him and relied on him. Kirkpatrick regarded the United Nations with suspicion and even contempt but was willing to exploit it to advantage.

The records in the British archives reveal the extent to which Kirkpatrick carefully followed the evolution of Dulles's attitude and the ways in which the British might respond. Kirkpatrick believed that the time would come to apply 'economic and psychological measures of pressure' against Nasser in such a way as to command American assent:

We seem to be in a good position to do this because the Americans are so frightened that we may use force that we might bulldoze them into suitable economic and psychological measures simply by threatening that if they do not agree we shall have no alternative but to have recourse to force.<sup>31</sup>

Kirkpatrick thus gave careful thought to the ways in which the Americans might be manipulated. His ideas reveal a deadly set of interlocking miscalculations. He hoped that Dulles could be nudged from economic and psychological measures into political and military action, or at least into acquiescence in the British use of force. Kirkpatrick furthermore believed that the Americans would prefer not to know about the military plans against Nasser. According to another Foreign Office official, nothing had been said to the Americans 'because we assume that they did not wish to be told'.<sup>32</sup> This was a fatal misjudgment, which not only helps to explain the reaction of Eisenhower and Dulles to the

---

<sup>30</sup> See Jebb's memorandum 'Suez and the United Nations', 24 Aug. 1956, FO 371/119177. For Jebb see Christopher Goldsmith, 'In the Know? Sir Gladwyn Jebb, Ambassador to France', *Contemporary British History*, 13, 2 (Summer 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Minute by Kirkpatrick, 4 Sept. 1956, FO 371/119154.

invasion but also the British decision, taken in some exasperation, to turn to the United Nations.

During the crisis Eden received conflicting advice. Kirkpatrick represented one powerful view, cogently presented whenever the occasion arose, that whatever the Americans might do, the British would soon face a choice between 'the use of force or surrender to Nasser.'<sup>33</sup> On the other hand Eden certainly did not lack counsel that intervention would be a mistake unless the Americans acquiesced. Certain officials read the minds of Eisenhower and Dulles much better than others, and one of them stands vindicated in view of the events of late October through early November 1956. Sir Roger Makins wrote from Washington that he did not know the 'inner thoughts' of those in London making decisions about possible 'military action'—but 'to attempt it without full American moral and material support could easily lead to disaster.'<sup>34</sup>

Dulles of course had been fully aware of the British and French line of thought even though he was eventually taken aback that they did not consult him about taking the issue to the United Nations. He summed up the main points in late August 1956 in a way that reflected both his and Eisenhower's understanding of the interplay of complex forces and the reasons the United Nations had not as yet been brought into play:

I [Dulles] said I had come to the conclusion that, regrettable as it might be to see Nasser's prestige enhanced even temporarily, I did not believe the situation was one which should be resolved by force.

I could not see any end to the situation that might be created if the British and the French occupied the Canal and parts of Egypt. They would make bitter enemies of the entire population of the Middle East and much of Africa. Everywhere they would be compelled to maintain themselves by force and in the end their own economy would be weakened virtually beyond repair and the influence of the West in the Middle East and most of Africa lost for a generation, if not a century. The Soviet Union would reap the benefit of a greatly weakened Western Europe and would move into a position of

---

<sup>32</sup> Minute by Donald Logan (Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary), 23 Aug. 1956, FO 371/119123.

<sup>33</sup> Kirkpatrick's draft telegram to Makins, 10 Sept. 1956, FO 800/740.

<sup>34</sup> Makins to Lloyd, Top Secret, 9 Sept. 1956, FO 800/740.



predominant influence in the Middle East and Africa. No doubt it was for this reason that the Soviets were seeking to prevent a peaceful adjustment of the Suez problem.<sup>35</sup>

The Russians as well as the British and French must be prevented from making cynical use of the United Nations—a thought so recurrent or implicit in Dulles's thought that one wonders whether he might have been aware of the irony. His main point could be summed by stating that the United States would, in effect, boycott the United Nations while playing for time with their western allies.

By late August 1956, and even before, there were signs of internal strain on the British side. Lord Home, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, was conspicuously more successful with Australia and New Zealand than with Canada, and with the white Dominions generally than with Pakistan and especially India.<sup>36</sup> Four out of five British voters believed that the dispute should be referred to the United Nations.<sup>37</sup> Within the Cabinet, Harold Macmillan held a position of particular significance not only as Chancellor of the Exchequer but because of a visit to Washington in September and his assessment of Eisenhower and Dulles. If Eden misjudged the Americans, the misperception was all the more pronounced in Macmillan's celebrated reassurance in September: 'I know Ike. He will lie doggo!'<sup>38</sup> This was the occasion on which Macmillan informed Dulles that Britain would turn to the United Nations. He wrote in his diary that Dulles lost his temper: 'We should get nothing but trouble in New York; we were courting disaster.' As if

---

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum of conversation with the President, 30 Aug. 1956, White House Memoranda Series, 'Meetings with the President, August-December 1956 (6),' Eisenhower Papers.

<sup>36</sup> See Peter Lyon, 'The Commonwealth and the Suez Crisis', in Louis and Owen, Suez 1956.

<sup>37</sup> Ralph Negrine, 'The Press and the Suez Crisis', Historical Journal, 25, 4 (1982), p. 978.

<sup>38</sup> Macmillan to Eden, 26 Sept. 1956, PREM 11/1102.

to lend color to the exchange, Macmillan added in his distinctive racy style: 'From the way Dulles spoke you would have thought he was warning us against entering a bawdy-house.'<sup>39</sup>

Britain referred the Suez question to the United Nations on 12 September 1956, a turning point in the crisis. On the next day Dulles made a spontaneous public statement affirming the purpose of American policy. His ideas were consistent with the thoughts he had voiced intimately to Eisenhower but they were phrased in such a way as to earn infamy, at least in the British lore on Suez. This extemporaneous utterance was the first of the two incidents in which Dulles—in the British interpretation—revealed his true colors. It was the occasion of his famous remark that the United States would not force its way through the canal. In response to a question about the possibility of Egypt blocking passage of American ships under the auspices of SCUA, Dulles had replied, in the phraseology that made headlines throughout the world, 'We do not intend to shoot our way through!'<sup>40</sup> To Eden the statement was an act of betrayal. He held to the end of his days that Dulles had misled him into believing that, if all else failed, the United States would support the use of force.

The second incident was a press conference Dulles held on 2 October 1956. He elaborated on the Suez Canal Users Association. If his previous remarks had left any uncertainty, his comments now were explicit that SCUA would remain a voluntary association. Dulles's main idea had always been that an international authority would schedule pilots, collect tolls, and compensate the Egyptian government. The users of the canal would thus be in a position of collective bargaining against Egypt. But the international authority would have no power to enforce Nasser's compliance. 'There is talk',

---

<sup>39</sup> Harold Macmillan, Riding the Storm, 1956-1959 (New York, 1971), pp. 135-36.

<sup>40</sup> See Finer, Dulles over Suez, p. 229. Emphasis in the original.

Dulles said, 'about teeth being pulled out of the plan, but I know of no teeth; there were no teeth in it.'<sup>41</sup>

As if this further renunciation of the use of force were not enough, Dulles at this juncture connected the canal controversy with the volatile issue of colonialism. The United States, he stated, 'cannot be expected to identify itself 100 per cent either with the colonial Powers or the Powers uniquely concerned with the problem of getting independence as rapidly, and as fully, as possible.' All but suggesting that the British, together with the French, still possessed a nineteenth-century mentality, Dulles maintained that the colonial regimes should be dismantled. It should be the goal of the United States, in his view, to facilitate the shift from colonialism and 'to see that this process moves forward in a constructive, evolutionary way, and does not come to a halt or go forward through violent, revolutionary processes.'<sup>42</sup> Dulles was apprehensive about the instability that might be caused by decolonization. Yet he also gave the impression that the European colonial powers were not moving fast enough toward a transfer of power.

Dulles's comments caused great bitterness. The Suez crisis did not represent a colonial issue to the British public but, in the words of The Times, 'one of elementary

---

<sup>41</sup> The Times, 3 Oct. 1956.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* In the latter part of his argument, Dulles actually made a defence of the colonial system that Eden, at least implicitly, upheld in hallowed tradition in all of his public statements: Britain had the responsibility to act as a guardian until the colonial peoples could manage their own affairs. According to one of the most incisive commentators on this point, the political philosopher Martin Wright, in 1960: 'Some of Eden's critics seem to argue that the right policy is to grant independence to the rest of Asia and Africa as quickly as possible, and let the newly enfranchised members of the international society settle down to industrialize themselves and practise democracy with only such benevolent help from the older Powers as the newer themselves will ask. This may be a dream-transformation of the historical experience called Balkanization, which means a Kleinstaaterei of weak States, fiercely divided among themselves by nationalistic feuds, governed by unstable popular autocracies, unaccustomed to international law and diplomatic practice as they are to parliamentary government and a battle-ground for the surrounding Great Powers. If it were clearer that this is not the future of the uncommitted world, it would be clearer that Eden's analysis was wrong, however much he may be blamed for not finding policies whereby a declining Great Power can mitigate the evil.' (Martin Wright, 'Brutus in Foreign Policy', International Affairs, 36, 3, July 1960)

international law and order affecting a waterway which is many times as important for western Europe as the Panama Canal is for North America.’<sup>43</sup> Whatever the merits of the British stand on the canal, Dulles had cast a slur on the British colonial record. From the distance of some five decades it is difficult to recall the intensity of the debate about the end of the British Empire. The British, sometimes under American pressure and despite their better judgment, had quickened the pace of decolonization. For Dulles to call into question the British colonial record was entirely unjustified from both Tory and Labour points of view. His animosity now seemed almost to rival the ill will demonstrated by Nasser. The Times well expressed the sense of wounded pride and national indignation at Dulles’s innuendo that Britain was not a progressive colonial power:

Britain’s record as a colonial Power stands in voluntarily bestowing independence on four great Asian countries after the war, in withdrawing from the Palestine mandate—at little benefit to peace in the Middle East—in 1947 [sic: 1948]; in delaying settlement with Egypt because the latter refused to grant like independence to the Sudan, and in granting independence to Malaya and the Gold Coast next year at a time when even some nationalist politicians are forcibly expressing their doubts as to its immediate desirability.

Britain has nothing to learn from anybody about the task of bringing progress, freedom, and self-government to the emergent peoples.<sup>44</sup>

With his remarks about colonialism, Dulles earned a permanent reputation as a hostile critic of Britain’s imperial mission. At the United Nations, he had helped, probably inadvertently, to turn the Suez crisis into a debate about colonialism.<sup>45</sup> The convergence of the two

---

<sup>43</sup> The Times, 3 Oct. 1956.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> As a notable coincidence, within a few days an article on ‘Nasser’s Friends in Africa’ by Thomas Hodgkin appeared in the New Statesman: ‘Egypt’s present influence turns largely on its ability at the same time to express the anti-colonial sentiments now seeping most of Africa, and to appear as the defender of Islam. . . . Where, as over Algeria or Suez, hostility to the West is reinforced by the sense of Moslem brotherhood, and European politicians intent on self-destruction permit Egypt to play this . . . role, it can be played with great effect. One certain consequence of British and French military operations against Egypt would be a crop of anti-colonial wars and national revolutions, with all the emotional appeal of a jihad, throughout Moslem Africa.’ New Statesman, 15 Sept. 1956. Hodgkin’s seminal work, Colonial Nationalism, appeared in 1956.

themes of peace and anti-colonialism would now dominate the United Nations for the next two decades.