

The Suez Crisis and the American Presidential Election of 1956

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When Britain, France, and Israel attacked Egypt on October 31, 1956, the Eisenhower administration's Middle East policy seemed to have collapsed. Since late July, when President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt forcefully seized the Suez Canal, Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had striven to prevent military retaliation by Britain and France. Thus the actual outbreak of hostilities, undertaken without American knowledge or consent, marked the failure of American efforts to resolve the Suez crisis through peaceful negotiations. Yet this diplomatic defeat ironically insured the re-election of Dwight D. Eisenhower on November 6, just one week after the fighting began in the Middle East. Adlai Stevenson, Eisenhower's Democratic opponent, was unable to propose an acceptable alternative to American policy during the invasion of Egypt; indeed, most Democratic candidates throughout the election campaign of 1956 failed to make any constructive suggestions to help settle the Suez Canal conflict. This failure, combined with Eisenhower's image as an experienced leader in a time of crisis, led American voters to return Eisenhower to office by a resounding margin.

Both the Eisenhower administration and the Democratic Eighty-Fourth Congress played significant roles in the sequence of events that produced the Suez crisis of 1956. In the previous autumn, Dulles and Eisenhower had decided to try to woo Nasser with an offer to help build the Aswan High Dam in Egypt. This offer was prompted, at least in part, by Nasser's purchase of arms from Czechoslovakia (acting as an intermediary for the Soviet Union) in September, 1955.¹ The prospect of increased Communist influence in the Middle East alarmed the American government, and Eisenhower set out to draw Nasser toward the West through extensive economic assistance. The administration also hoped that the Aswan Dam would give Nasser additional prestige and political strength, thereby permitting him to brave Arab extremists and

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attempt a peace settlement with Israel.² Thus in December, 1955, the United States and Britain agreed to grant Egypt \$70 million to begin constructing the Aswan Dam. They also promised, subject to legislative approval, a loan of \$130 million to help with the later stages of construction.³

It all seemed quite logical at the time. Egypt, as the natural political center of the Arab world, was the key to the Middle East, and the Aswan Dam was the key to Nasser's good will. Nasser placed considerable emphasis on the dam as a source of additional personal power, hoping it would reinforce his image as the leader of renewed Arab nationalism. The dam was to be the symbol of a reborn Egypt: providing electrical power, irrigating desperately needed acres of new farmland to feed Egypt's rapidly increasing population, and controlling the capricious power of the Nile. But by mid-February, 1956, Eisenhower and Dulles already had changed their minds about aiding Nasser in building the Aswan Dam.

This decision, made only two months after the United States formally extended the offer to Egypt, reflected the administration's inability to formulate a consistent, coherent policy for the Middle East. Eisenhower's hopes of using the Aswan Dam aid offer as a catalyst for an Arab-Israeli settlement were quite naive. A secret American peace mission to Egypt and Israel, undertaken by Eisenhower's personal emissary, Robert B. Anderson, failed completely.⁴ Anderson's signal lack of success removed one of the administration's reasons for making the Aswan Dam offer, but Eisenhower presumably still wanted to forestall Communist expansion into the Middle East. He seems to have lost sight of this goal, however, when Nasser decided to ask the United States for better terms in the proposed \$130 million Anglo-American loan. Upon receipt of Nasser's request, in mid-February, Eisenhower concluded that Nasser was trying to use Egypt's neutrality to blackmail the United States into cooperation. He now saw Nasser as a man convinced he could play off the West against Russia by promising Egypt's allegiance to the highest bidder.⁵ But Nasser's neutralism certainly was obvious at the time Eisenhower and Dulles made the Aswan Dam offer; indeed, the arms deal between Egypt and Czechoslovakia was the *catalyst* for the extension of American aid. Eisenhower's complaint that Nasser was shopping both sides of the street reflected mere petulance, rather than mature assessment of Egypt's political preferences.

Even if the administration had decided to press ahead with the offer to Egypt, however, Congress probably would have refused to appropriate the necessary funds. Eisenhower never formally requested such funds, but powerful members of both houses of Congress made clear their opposition to the project anyway. Loy Henderson, then Under Secretary of State for Administration, recalled that "Influential members of the Appropriations Committee of the House in personal conversations had convinced Mr. Dulles that there was no possibility that Congress would be willing to appropriate any funds for use in connection with the Aswan Dam project."⁶ In the Senate, Walter George of Georgia, the extremely powerful chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, refused to approve long-term aid projects such as the Aswan Dam.⁷ Further, the Senate Appropriations Committee explicitly forbade the use of any funds contained in the Mutual Security Bill for fiscal 1957 for the Aswan Dam, without prior approval by the Committee.⁸

This congressional sentiment, combined with the Anderson mission's failure and Nasser's request for changes in the loan agreement, led Eisenhower and Dulles to abandon the Aswan Dam project. Although they did not formally cancel their grant offer, they clearly had no intention of pressing forward with this matter after mid-February. Dulles and Eisenhower did not even deign to reply to Nasser's suggestions, and Egypt's recognition of Communist China in May, 1956, merely confirmed the administration in its view of Nasser as untrustworthy.

In early July, however, Nasser suddenly decided to accept the original Anglo-American offer. Dulles later claimed that the Egyptian government knew that the United States was not prepared to carry through with the project at this time, but Nasser apparently wanted to force a public decision one way or the other.⁹ Accordingly, Dulles informed the Egyptian ambassador on July 19 that the United States had withdrawn its offer of aid for the Aswan Dam.

Since the Aswan project had never been popular on Capitol Hill, Dulles's withdrawal of the offer was "strongly backed" by Congress.¹⁰ Senator Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts, ranking Republican member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, recalled later that since Egypt had been "playing ball with the Russians to a very considerable degree, . . . there were

many people in the Senate who were very cautious about making that loan."¹¹ Mike Mansfield, Democratic Senator from Montana, noted that "when the decision (to cancel the grant offer) was made, there was very little opposition to what the Secretary did."¹² Republican conservatives such as Senators William Jenner of Indiana and Styles Bridges of New Hampshire, who disliked the whole notion of foreign aid, were naturally delighted with Dulles's decision. But Democratic leaders and moderate Republicans also applauded the Secretary. Minnesota's Republican Senator Edward Thye agreed that "it is not feasible for us to participate in the project," and Democrat George Mahon of Texas, a powerful member of the House Appropriations Committee, declared in the House that "the Secretary deserves to be complimented for assuming this position."¹³

But no one in the State Department or in Congress anticipated Nasser's response to Dulles's public rebuff.¹⁴ On July 26, the Egyptian leader seized the Suez Canal and declared that henceforth it would be run by Egypt, for Egypt's profit. The toll revenues from the nationalized waterway would be used to build the Aswan Dam without Western help. Since many Democratic leaders in Congress opposed the administration's original Aswan offer, and supported Dulles's decision to cancel the grant, they could not now convincingly criticize the Secretary for inviting Nasser's violent response. Democratic candidates could decry Dulles's brusque method of withdrawing the grant, as did Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee. They could also persuasively argue that Dulles should never have made the offer in the first place, given Egypt's hatred of Israel and Nasser's flirtation with the Communist bloc. But Congressional complicity in the withdrawal policy decision largely limited criticism to Dulles's subsequent Middle Eastern maneuvers.

Democratic dependence upon Jewish support in the elections of 1956 also prevented Democratic leaders from blaming Dulles for provoking the Suez crisis. In previous campaigns of the 1950's, it was apparent that the party needed to carry large Eastern cities with significant numbers of Jewish voters.¹⁵ Nasser represented extreme anti-Israeli feeling in the Arab world, and Democrats thus had to applaud any action that promised to deflate Nasser's pan-Arabist pretensions. Republican candidates felt less compelled to woo Jewish voters¹⁶ and were able to remain silent and simply

follow Eisenhower's lead on Suez during most of the campaign. When the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion occurred, Republicans could refuse to condone the attack. Democratic candidates, however, could not vigorously condemn the allied attack because of their dependence upon Jewish votes.

Another advantage accrued to the GOP because an overwhelming majority of the American public believed that United States military forces should stay out of the Middle East conflict.¹⁷ Although the invasion demonstrated the emptiness of Republican claims that Eisenhower had restored peace to a troubled world, Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson could not oppose the President's efforts to keep America out of the Middle East fighting. Stevenson did excoriate the administration for losing the confidence of our allies, but he did not propose any constructive alternatives to American policies in the week before the election. In such troubled times, Stevenson's criticisms seemed petty; he seemed to be playing politics with the issue of war. While Eisenhower appeared as the calm, experienced statesman determined to uphold American interests abroad, Stevenson merely quibbled.

All these elements of the Suez problem diminished the effectiveness of Democratic criticism of American policy. But they did not prevent some Democrats from sniping at Dulles and Eisenhower from the very beginning of the canal crisis. Only one day after Nasser seized the canal, Representative Emanuel Celler of New York, an ardent defender of Israel, told the House that

Messrs. Dulles, [Anthony] Eden, and [Christian] Pineau have reaped what they have sown . . . They have pursued a consistent policy of appeasement subordinating self-respect to the fog of fear. They were passive when Egypt closed the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping [in 1948], failing to see that as a forerunner to Egyptian arrogance.¹⁸

Celler did not propose military or economic reprisals, however. He felt that "the proposal of good sense" would be the "building of an alternate canal," across Israeli territory, to the Mediterranean.¹⁹

Other Democrats were quick to get on record as opposing Egypt's action, but their statements were notorious for their lack of both critical views toward administration policy and suggestions

for an immediate solution of the problem. Democratic Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas declared that "the situation is dangerous and ominous . . . Our entire civilization is based on respect for international agreements and contracts, and Egypt's action constitutes a real threat to peace." James P. Richards of South Carolina, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, termed the Suez crisis a "great danger" to peace, and Oregon's Senator Wayne Morse, a recent convert to the Democratic party, saw Nasser's move as "a serious threat to our interests in the Middle East."²⁰

There was wide bipartisan support for policies designed to settle the Suez Canal problem peacefully. Mansfield supported Celler's suggestion of an alternate canal through Israeli territory and also proposed the construction of large tankers to carry Middle East oil around the Cape of Good Hope. He advocated that, if all else failed, an appeal be made to the International Court of Justice. The Montana Senator told his colleagues that British and French emotionalism over the Suez nationalization decree was understandable, but was just "as bad and as dangerous as Nasser's." Alexander Wiley, ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and one of Dulles's staunchest supporters in the Senate, also advocated increased production of large tankers and the use of "the full power of moral persuasion" to bring Nasser to his senses. Senate Minority Leader William Knowland of California maintained that "our job will be to urge a policy of restraint so that the matter may be taken before the United Nations and the International Court of Justice to discourage precipitous action."²¹

Congressional reluctance to involve America in any military ventures in the Middle East should have pleased Eisenhower and Dulles, for they already had formulated a policy which emphasized restraint and peaceful negotiations.²² They realized that Britain and France had a vastly greater economic stake in the Suez Canal, since about 50-75 per cent of Western Europe's oil passed through that waterway. By contrast, only about 15 per cent of American oil imports came through the canal.²³ Britain and France also had been far more involved in Middle Eastern political affairs than the United States, and they retained a psychological and emotional attachment to that area. Thus they were more offended and endangered by Nasser's actions, and both governments almost

immediately began preparations for forcefully reclaiming the canal. Dulles quickly perceived their intentions and flew to London to calm them. From early August until late October, Eisenhower and Dulles were concerned primarily with forestalling military intervention by France and Britain. Dulles devised numerous delaying tactics to placate Eden and Pineau, and to persuade them that one more avenue to a peaceful settlement always existed. Robert Murphy, then the third-ranking official in the State Department, recalled that "it was philosophically assumed (by Dulles) that the danger of bellicose action would disappear if negotiations were prolonged, and that delays would reduce the heat and make possible some kind of nonviolent settlement in Egypt."²⁴

To this end, Eisenhower told Eden on July 31 that "you must avoid the use of force — at least until we have proved to the world that the United Nations organization cannot handle the problem. . . . Thus by logic and tactics we will win the world over to our side."²⁵ Dulles then suggested that a conference of all nations with economic interests or treaty rights in the Suez Canal be held in London in mid-August. Eden publicly agreed, but he did not halt his military contingency planning. Dulles and Eisenhower thus strove to communicate an impression of firmness. They had to convince the British and French governments that they could force Nasser to accept a compromise solution, which involved at least international operation of the canal, if not international control. But since American policy was concerned more with preventing military intervention than with leading Nasser to compromise, it could easily seem dishonest and insincere to European observers.²⁶

Dulles returned to Washington on August 3 and proudly told Congressional leaders that he had single-handedly halted the drift toward war.²⁷ Most of these solons approved Dulles's actions, but an undercurrent of criticism began to emanate from two opposite directions. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, who still retained the emotional allegiance of many American conservatives, called for military force "if necessary" to keep the Suez Canal open, although Egypt apparently had no intention of closing it. Terming Nasser "a crackpot and a screwball," McCarthy suggested that "we should definitely . . . send in battle vessels of the necessary size to clear up the mouth of the harbor, clear up the

canal, and make sure that we have got the same free use of the canal as we had previously." McCarthy predicted that Britain and France could probably do the job themselves, although the United States should be ready to help if needed.²⁸

Demands for a hard-line policy also came from Chicago, where the Democrats were preparing for their national convention. Like most partisan critics of the administration's Suez policy, though, the Democrats who made these demands failed to suggest specific constructive alternatives. Representative John W. McCormack, serving as chairman of the 1956 Democratic platform committee, warned that Egypt's seizure of the Suez Canal might be "another Munich" unless Eisenhower took a firm stand against it. McCormack told a reporter that Eisenhower and Dulles have "been guilty of appeasement and lack of firmness in dealing with our foreign policy." Taking dead aim at the heart of the administration's Suez policy, the Massachusetts Democrat claimed that "when the administration leaders procrastinate in dealing with a situation, it is the same thing as appeasement."²⁹ McCormack did not advocate military intervention by the Western powers, but he obviously felt that American policy could not succeed without at least implicitly threatening Egypt in some way.

Throughout the 1956 campaign, demands for a firmer policy toward Nasser came from a coalition of Democratic political leaders who combined domestic liberalism, pro-Israeli sentiment, and steadfast Cold War rhetoric in varying degrees. This group included Senators Henry Jackson of Washington, Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, and Herbert Lehman of New York, along with Representatives Celler and McCormack. These men consistently exhibited manifestations of the "Munich syndrome" by accusing Eisenhower and Dulles of "appeasing" Nasser and confusing the Egyptian leader with Hitler or Mussolini. At the same time, they termed Nasser a pawn of the Russians and interpreted his seizure of the canal as a major Cold War gambit by the Soviet Union.

Most Democrats at the 1956 convention, however, were less bellicose than McCormack. To be sure, many of the witnesses at the platform hearings criticized the administration for insufficient support of Israel over the past four years, and several denounced Eisenhower for not providing adequate leadership in the Suez Canal crisis thus far. Representative Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, for example, presented the platform committee with a manifesto,

signed by ninety-one Democratic Congressmen, which accused the administration of drifting toward a Middle Eastern war. But this charge also reflects the ambivalent Democratic attitude toward the Suez problem. Some party leaders felt a need to support Israel without qualifications and thus demanded a firm policy toward Nasser. Others correctly divined the attitude of the majority of the American voting public: the United States had no business getting involved in a shooting war in the Middle East. Dodd and his colleagues tried to bridge this gap by declaring, "We shall strive to avert war in the Near East by vigorous leadership in the United Nations . . . and by making defensive arms available to Israel."³⁰

The final version of the Democratic platform included this same compromise sentiment. While it accused Eisenhower of following policies which "are unnecessarily increasing the risk that war will break out in this area," it also supported the administration's declared goal of "free access to the Suez Canal under suitable international auspices." The platform's authors concluded that "the current crisis over Suez is a consequence of inept and vacillating policy." But the proposed Democratic remedy was simply the shipment of additional arms to Israel and the conclusion of security guarantees with cooperative nations in the Middle East to deter aggression.³¹

While the Democrats were conducting their business in Chicago, Eisenhower asked Congressional leaders to meet with him at the White House for a bipartisan conference on Sunday, August 12. Since Congress had adjourned on July 27, it took several days to contact all the legislators involved. The original telegrams asked these congressmen to meet with Dulles at the State Department to discuss the upcoming London Conference, but House Speaker Sam Rayburn and Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson urged their Democratic colleagues to refuse the invitation. Previous conferences with Dulles had not been worth the trip, according to one party official, and many Democrats were loath to interrupt their activities in Chicago. They may have feared that a meeting with Dulles would bind them to his policies at a most inopportune time. When the White House learned that they had refused to meet with the Secretary, presidential aide I. Jack Martin phoned the congressmen and told them that Eisenhower himself wanted to discuss the Suez situation with them. They quickly accepted the invitation.³²

This meeting was designed primarily to demonstrate bipartisan support for Dulles's participation in the London Conference the following week. Some Democrats remained dubious of the value of the White House conference. Rayburn refused to comment on the presidential summons on his way into the White House, growling, "You wouldn't print it if I did." House Majority Leader McCormack refused to attend the meeting. But after their eighty-minute talk with Eisenhower and Dulles, all of the conferees endorsed an administration statement indicating that everyone there "recognized the importance of dependable operation of the canal as a major artery of world traffic." American policy had always insisted that the canal be completely open to world shipping, and that only peaceful means could achieve this objective. Thus Eisenhower had obtained substantial bipartisan backing for his policy of settling the Suez problem by negotiation and compromise. He asked for no commitments from the congressional leaders, but their comments after the meeting indicated that they were content to await the outcome of the London Conference. Senator George reported that he was "satisfied we are moving in the right direction." Mansfield agreed that the "best thing will be to wait and see what comes out of the London conference," while Lyndon Johnson promised he would not play politics "when the security of the country is at stake." In an effort to bind Democrats even more firmly to his policy, Dulles invited Mansfield and Republican Senator H. Alexander Smith of New Jersey to accompany him to the London Conference. This project was scotched, however, when Mansfield eventually turned down the offer for "personal reasons." Democratic leaders made it clear that the administration still had to take the lead and bear the responsibility for the outcome of the London Conference.³³

Republican leaders naturally voiced their optimism and faith in administration policy. New Hampshire Senator Styles Bridges, conservative chairman of the Republican Senate Policy Committee, told reporters after the meeting that "we're not close (to war) at the moment," and Leverett Saltonstall claimed to be "hopeful" of a satisfactory solution. When the Republican national convention met in San Francisco the following week, it deemed the Suez crisis too fluid a situation for platform writers to tackle. Unlike its Democratic counterpart, the Republican platform did not promise defensive arms to Israel. The convention simply entrusted the

whole affair to Eisenhower and Dulles and urged support for the United Nations' efforts to create "a lasting peace in this area."³⁴

Now the election campaign began in earnest. The Democrats gave Adlai Stevenson another chance to unseat Eisenhower, and they selected Estes Kefauver, one of the more progressive southern senators, as his running mate. After a quixotic attempt by Harold Stassen to displace Richard Nixon as the Vice-Presidential nominee, the Republicans enthusiastically renominated both Eisenhower and Nixon. The Democrats lost no time in moving to the attack. Just one day after receiving the nomination, Kefauver jabbed at the administration's Middle East policy. In an interview with William Randolph Hearst, Jr., Kefauver blamed the current Suez troubles on Dulles: "We should not have turned down the Aswan Dam project in a way which precipitated this crisis." Although he supported the current American objective of free navigation through the canal, Kefauver also insisted that "we should be very positive in backing up Britain and France in insisting that there should be an effective international agreement to preserve freedom of navigation." Two days later, Stevenson's aides indicated that the Tennessee Senator's views on the Suez situation were quite similar to those of their candidate.³⁵

While the pressure of an election campaign began to build up at home, events abroad were dimming the outlook for a peaceful Suez compromise. Egypt had refused to attend the London Conference, and that conclave was unable to agree unanimously on a plan of action. On August 23, however, eighteen of the twenty-three nations present did agree upon a proposal for an international organization to operate the Suez Canal. A five-man committee, headed by Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, travelled to Cairo on September 3 to present this plan to Colonel Nasser. Though the mission ultimately ended in failure, Dulles and Eisenhower seemed to have temporarily staved off military action by Britain and France in the Middle East. Moderate Democratic leaders publicly praised Dulles for his patient, conciliatory efforts at London. On August 29, Walter George declared that "while the danger of an actual collision of force is not entirely removed, it is more remote. It seems that the secretary of state did some fine work in bringing about a meeting with President Nasser." George's counterpart in the House, James Richards, returned from

a trip to Western Europe in late August and told newsmen, "Our leadership at the London conference was good." Mansfield also commended Dulles's actions. Expressing his hope that the Menzies mission would succeed, Mansfield applauded Dulles for "stopping the rush toward aggressive action on the part of France and Britain."³⁶

While Nasser and the Menzies mission sparred in Cairo, Dulles moved to reinforce Democratic support for his Middle East policy. On September 6, the Secretary gave a ninety-minute briefing on the Suez negotiations to Senators Mansfield, Humphrey, and William Langer, and Representatives Richards and Carnahan. All but the Republican Langer were influential Democratic spokesmen on foreign policy. Dulles made it very clear to them that he was determined to prevent the use of force in the Middle East. When they emerged from this conference, the four Democrats commended Dulles for his handling of the Suez Canal dispute thus far. For Mansfield and Humphrey, the best aspect of Dulles's policy was his emphasis on obtaining a peaceful settlement. "I think the secretary is doing a good job in calming people down," Mansfield told reporters. "His efforts aim at settling this by reason rather than emotion." Humphrey agreed that Dulles had taken "some of the emotion out of this thing, and has given us at least a possibility of a peaceful settlement." Both he and Mansfield urged that the Suez question be kept out of domestic politics.³⁷

When Nasser finally rejected the Menzies mission's proposals on September 9, however, Democratic hard-liners demanded that Dulles take firm action against Egypt. Emanuel Celler suggested economic sanctions as a method of bending Nasser to Western will. "If these economic pressures fail," he concluded, "then the Sudan and Ethiopia, no friends of Nasser, must be importuned with appropriate considerations to interfere with the headwaters of the Nile."³⁸ This scheme was quite unrealistic, but it demonstrated the frustration these Democrats felt as administration expedients failed to loosen Egypt's hold on the canal. Even the moderate Richards, while stressing his desire for peace, remarked that Nasser "has gone wild and it's possible that France and Britain may go in shooting."³⁹

Perhaps Senator Henry Jackson best exemplified their hostility toward Nasser. Jackson firmly believed that the situation in the Suez in 1956 was analogous to the European situation in the 1930's.

Upon returning from a trip through Russia and the Middle East, Jackson told his constituents that Nasser was "another Hitler," and that "he must be stopped because dictators thrive on concessions and indecisions — such as those which have characterized our handling of the Suez crisis . . . Like Hitler, every day that we do not stop Nasser, he becomes that much harder to stop." But Nasser was not dangerous solely because he was an aggressive dictator: "Nasser is merely the front man for the Soviets in the Middle East and in Africa." The Kremlin, according to Jackson, had three main goals in the Middle East. First, Nasser would take over the Suez Canal. Then he would establish control of the oil resources in the Middle East and destroy Israel in the process. "His third objective is domination of all Africa." For Jackson, Suez was "all part of the Soviet policy of acquiring enough real estate in the world until it gets control." "When we stop Nasser," he concluded, "we also will have stopped — or at least seriously impeded — the Soviet Union's bid for control of the Middle East and Africa." He advised unyielding American support for Israel and increased American propaganda efforts among the Arab nations.⁴⁰

Stevenson, while insisting that he did not want to add to the administration's difficulties by criticizing its Middle East policy, nevertheless began to stress a theme that dominated his remarks over the last weeks of the campaign: the alleged rise in Russian influence in the Middle East due to Soviet support of Nasser in the Suez negotiations. On September 20, and again on September 23, Stevenson criticized Dulles for permitting Russia to gain the "foothold in the Middle East she has sought for centuries." The Democratic nominee attributed this spread of Communist influence to the "dangerous drift in foreign affairs" resulting from the lack of a firm, realistic American policy for Suez.⁴¹

Indeed, the administration was casting about, searching for some expedient that would placate Britain and France while persuading Nasser to compromise. After the failure of the Menzies mission, Dulles almost immediately proposed a new plan. On September 11, he discussed at length with Eden the idea of a Suez Canal Users Association (SCUA). This international organization would try to deal on its own with all problems of passage through the Suez Canal, ignoring Egypt almost completely. Eden assumed that any Egyptian resistance to the use of the canal by SCUA ships

would be met by Western military action, and thus he accepted the proposal. But Dulles clearly had no thought of SCUA shooting its way through the canal. For him, the plan was merely a ploy to gain time and allow European public opinion to demonstrate its pacifistic nature. Undersecretary of State Robert Murphey recalled later that although Dulles may have felt SCUA was "worth a try, in the absence of anything else," no realistic observer could have expected Nasser to accept it: "There was no reason to hope that he would."⁴²

As mentioned, Eden accepted SCUA under the mistaken assumption that it implied American support for any necessary military maneuvers; Dulles in turn misinterpreted Eden's acceptance as proof that his delaying tactics had worked once more, and that European military plans were "withering on the vine."⁴³ Instead, when the British government finally learned Dulles's true intentions for SCUA, in early October, they decided to move ahead full-speed with their preparations for a military attack upon Egypt.⁴⁴

Britain, France, and Israel all concealed their strategic Suez planning from the United States, but numerous American political leaders sensed that Dulles's maneuvers were no longer succeeding. The bonds of the Atlantic alliance were beginning to unravel, and domestic criticism of Dulles increased accordingly. Even Senator Knowland acknowledged that the Suez problem was as dangerous as a powder magazine.⁴⁵ On September 27, Dulles once again called in several Senators for a bipartisan briefing on the Middle East and admitted that the situation was indeed grave. This time, few of the conferees expressed support of Dulles's policies. One of the four Senators present, William Fulbright, voiced his doubt that Dulles had worked out "any solution at the moment."⁴⁶

Numerous Democratic candidates continued to berate Dulles all through October. Their criticism centered on three main arguments. First, they continued to accuse the administration of allowing Russia to gain influence in the Middle East. This Cold War rhetoric turned the tables on Eisenhower and Dulles, since in the 1952 presidential campaign the Republicans had charged the Democrats with the loss of China and Eastern Europe. Mayor Robert Wagner of New York, a candidate for the U.S. Senate, claimed that "the Russians have broken through into the Middle East," and that the administration was trying to hide the Suez

crisis "under the rug until after (the) election." Speaking in Cincinnati on October 19, Stevenson asserted that in the past few months, "Russian power and influence have moved into the Middle East — the oil tank of Europe and Asia — and the great bridge between the East and West." Four days later, in Madison Square Garden, he charged Dulles with permitting such a Russian penetration of the Middle East "as the Czars couldn't (accomplish) in 300 years of persistent effort."⁴⁷

The second element in the Democratic critique concerned the faltering Atlantic alliance. Kefauver claimed that "NATO has disintegrated," and Stevenson told his New York audience on October 23 that "our relations with our oldest and strongest allies, Britain and France, are more fragile than they have been in a generation." Henry Jackson termed the American attitude in the Suez negotiations "disgraceful", and said that Dulles, "the original misguided missile, . . . should have backed the British and French, and insisted on Egypt's recognition of the Treaty of Constantinople" of 1888, guaranteeing the Suez Canal as an international waterway.⁴⁸

All these men had criticized Dulles's policy before, but now even the moderate Mansfield began demanding a change in American tactics. The Montana Democrat asked Dulles to stop his "stalling procedure"; NATO was in a state of decomposition, and present American diplomacy could bring no improvement. Dulles's actions thus far had brought only a "temporary respite at the price of putting off the day of reckoning." Mansfield accurately foresaw the dangers ahead if Dulles persisted in his policy of procrastination:

We will either act to secure a just settlement of the Suez problem or we will stand by idly as the provocation in Suez leads to other provocations and ultimately to the catastrophe of open conflict which will lay the Middle East in ruins, tear apart what remains of Western unity, and open the channels for further Soviet penetration into Africa and Europe.⁴⁹

One of the reasons the Suez crisis seemed so vital to the Atlantic alliance was the dependence of Britain and France upon Middle Eastern oil carried through the Suez Canal. Concern for the survival of NATO would logically require a similar concern for this

oil supply, and yet the third element in the Democratic attack was an accusation that the Eisenhower administration was too preoccupied with the Arab nations' oil resources. Kefauver synthesized this argument in a classic liberal style. The Tennessee Senator claimed that the Republicans should have supported Israel wholeheartedly, instead of trying to conciliate oil-rich Arab leaders. The United States had tried to appease Nasser and other radical Arab nationalists and only belatedly realized that such a pro-Arab policy brought few rewards. Instead of supporting the democratic state of Israel, Kefauver said, "We have been thinking too much about oil and too little about people in the Middle East. We have gotten in trouble . . . when we make oil or any other material thing our prime consideration instead of standing by deserving friends and sustaining democratic moral values." Again and again, in New York City, in Washington, D.C., and in Wilmington, Delaware, Kefauver reiterated this argument. His call for a moralistic Middle East policy reached a climax on October 31, when he implored Michigan voters to "put people in office who will think in terms of what is right and moral and of the Golden Rule and not just in terms of oil, power politics, massive retaliation and the hydrogen bomb."⁵⁰

Republican spokesmen made few replies to these Democratic attacks. Most Republican candidates either remained silent and permitted Eisenhower to defend his own Middle Eastern policies, or else they commended the President's desire for a peaceful settlement. While New York's Attorney General Jacob Javits, who was running against Wagner for a Senate seat and *had* to deal with the Suez issue because of the large Jewish vote in New York City, appropriately denounced Nasser as a "totalitarian", he opposed the use of force against Egypt. Praising the administration's restraint of Britain and France, Javits claimed that only Eisenhower's prestige and leadership could avert a disastrous Cold War defeat for the West in the Middle East.⁵¹

Eisenhower's own campaign statements stressed his image as a statesman determined to keep the peace. Believing that Dulles had convinced Britain and France to abandon the use of force against Nasser, the President told the nation in October that there was "good news from Suez," and that "a very great crisis is behind us."⁵² This was not mere campaign rhetoric. Eisenhower and Dulles believed that their long-time allies would not jeopardize the

administration's electoral position by attacking Egypt before November 6. From mid-October on, Britain and France had cut off almost all communication with the United States and thus succeeded in concealing their invasion plans from American view. In the Middle East, U.S. intelligence reports indicated increased Israeli military preparation in late October, but Eisenhower believed that Israel intended to attack Jordan, not Egypt.⁵³ Thus the President was quite sincere, albeit naive, in his assurances to the American people. He kept running on a "peace and prosperity" platform, unaware that the first plank would soon be knocked out from under him.

Eisenhower believed that Britain and France would not betray him right before an election. Yet their military plans were specifically designed to do precisely that. Important forces in both nations' cabinets had convinced themselves that the heavy Jewish vote in the United States would prevent Eisenhower from reacting too strongly against an attack on Egypt. British Chancellor of the Exchequer Harold Macmillan, especially, helped persuade Eden that "Ike will lie doggo until after the election."⁵⁴ Britain and France had coordinated their military plans with Israel, believing that an Israeli attack would provide them with a convenient rationale for intervention. On October 29, Israel launched an attack upon Egypt, heading straight for the Suez Canal. Both European governments issued ultimatums to Egypt and Israel to cease firing, withdraw to lines ten miles away from the Suez Canal, and permit the British and French to establish themselves along the canal as a peace-keeping force. If either side rejected this proposal, Britain and France would intervene to enforce it. Naturally, Egypt refused to cooperate, since its army still held territory east of the canal; the ultimatum would have forced them to withdraw to a position ten miles west of that waterway. Eden and French Premier Guy Mollet had expected Egypt to reject their demands, and thus Britain and France implemented their invasion plans on October 30.

When Britain and France entered the fray, the administration's Middle East policy collapsed completely. America's two major European allies now had begun a military action without notifying the United States of their intentions. The joint invasion made a mockery of Eisenhower's previous proclamations of "good news from Suez." Stevenson repeatedly seized upon that phrase and told his audiences that Eisenhower either did not know what his closest

international friends were doing, or else deliberately misled the American people. Either way, he argued, the Suez imbroglio demonstrated the complete failure of Republican leadership in the world. The administration's consistent policy of restraint and peaceful negotiations on the Suez Canal issue had led only to betrayal by our allies and open conflict in the Middle East. Although news reports from the Middle East were still very sketchy, Kefauver immediately charged that the Israeli-Egyptian fighting "knocks into a cocked hat the peaceful world slogan of the Republican campaign."⁵⁵

There is evidence that Eisenhower might have permitted Britain and France to continue their operation if they had moved quickly and efficiently. Veteran Congressman Walter Judd, a leading supporter of Eisenhower's foreign policies, learned from a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that "our decision was held up 24 hours 'in the expectation that the British, French and Israeli action *would succeed.*'"⁵⁶ In that case, the United States could have simply accepted Anglo-French control of the canal as a *fait accompli*. Eisenhower also recalled later that he expected the British and French to complete their operation within 24 hours.⁵⁷ But they bungled their end of the invasion so badly that the United States was virtually forced to oppose them as a matter of principle. Dulles feared that American approval of the invasion, while it was still in progress, would have convinced African and Asian nations that America upheld European colonialist objectives and thus would have destroyed the confidence of non-Caucasian peoples worldwide in American integrity.⁵⁸

Eisenhower firmly insisted that Britain and France cease their military activities and withdraw from the Suez area. Unfortunately for Eisenhower, the American stand against the allied invasion coincided with the position of the Soviet Union, Nasser's firm supporter throughout the Suez crisis. Democratic speakers relentlessly emphasized the apparent absurdity of this situation. As early as October 30, the day of the Anglo-French ultimatums, Kefauver blamed the administration's "confusion and inconsistency" for putting Russia, Egypt, and the United States on one side, and Britain, France, and Israel on the other. Representative Clement Zablocki of Wisconsin told Milwaukee voters that "Republican foreign policy has brought us to a sorry state. Our allies do not even bother to inform us. . . . Now we are lined up with the Soviets against our long-time allies."⁵⁹

Democrats who had been restrained in their criticism of Dulles throughout the Suez negotiations now attacked him. They now had more potent ammunition, and there was no longer any need to await the outcome of the Secretary's latest delaying maneuvers. Their criticism was directed mainly at the apparent disintegration of the NATO alliance. On October 31, Senator Albert Gore of Kentucky told an audience in Austin, Texas that the Suez tragedy "is a shocking demonstration that our closest allies have lost confidence in current American leadership." The following day, Mansfield described America's free world leadership as "pretty sad" and said that "the Atlantic alliance is under strain, to say the least." Walter George went further and claimed that NATO had been destroyed. On November 2, six Democratic members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Mansfield, Green, Fulbright, Sparkman, Humphrey, and Morse) asserted that the administration's Middle East policy produced the "worst [American] diplomatic disaster in memory."⁶⁰

Stevenson's presidential campaign had been languishing for want of an effective issue, and he therefore tried to use the Middle East conflict as a focal point during the last week of campaigning. During the first few days of the invasion, Stevenson suggested that the attack may have been provoked by Arab nations supplied with Soviet weapons. On October 31, he told a New York audience that the United States, by "every consideration of law, of moral, and spiritual obligation and faith, is bound to support the integrity of Israel." In Detroit, on November 2, he criticized the "lack of principle" in the administration's foreign policy and said that Eisenhower and Dulles were responsible for the Middle East fighting and the decline of the Atlantic alliance. Yet Stevenson also had to admit that he agreed with Eisenhower's decision to submit the Suez problem to the United Nations, and that "the situation does not warrant involvement of our armed forces." As the American public's desire for peace became more obvious, Stevenson retreated from his earlier defense of the invasion and became less critical of Eisenhower's Middle East policies. When the United Nations approved an American cease-fire resolution on November 2 by a vote of 64-5, there was little constructive criticism Stevenson could offer.⁶¹

The American people clearly wanted to avoid involvement in the Suez fighting,⁶² and Republican spokesmen repeatedly emphasized

Eisenhower's determination to keep the nation out of war. Dropping their earlier defense of Eisenhower as president in a world of peace, these Republican leaders also conveniently ignored any American responsibility for the current Suez fighting. Nixon claimed that the nation now needed "a strong statesman in the White House" and described Eisenhower as "a man of peace and of calmness and moderation in a crisis." Clearly, Eisenhower's experience as a military commander and as president was proving to be an asset as election day neared. Knowland called him the "champion of peace", and John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky proclaimed that "In the face of these events [in Egypt], it is clear that our country needs its best, most-experienced leadership": Eisenhower.⁶³

Republican candidates even managed to turn the splintering of the Atlantic alliance to some advantage. Nixon declared that the American cease-fire resolution in the U.N., designed to stop the invasion of Egypt, "has had an electrifying effect throughout the world." "For the first time in history," he claimed, "we have shown independence of Anglo-French policies toward Asia and Africa which seemed to us to reflect the colonial tradition."⁶⁴

If Britain, France, and Israel had attacked Egypt a month earlier, Democratic criticism of Eisenhower's Middle East policy might have swayed more voters away from the incumbent administration. Eisenhower's stand against the invasion may have hurt him in the large eastern cities, since Jewish voters there favored Stevenson in 1956 more than they had four years earlier.⁶⁵ Republican candidates in eastern industrial states who bowed to the administration's position on the Middle East found themselves in some difficulty. Even New York's Jacob Javits was booed by some Jewish audiences during the last week of the campaign.⁶⁶

Eisenhower's obvious and consistent desire for peace redounded to his benefit elsewhere, however. World events dominated the headlines in the final days of the campaign, and American voters instinctively turned to the man they trusted to deal with crises.⁶⁷ As the magnitude of the Eisenhower landslide became apparent on election night, November 6, Lyndon Johnson sadly declared that the Middle Eastern crisis was responsible for the Democratic party's loss. "In a moment of peril," he said, "the American people voted to back up their President and demonstrate to the world that America is united. Every other issue faded into insignificance."⁶⁸

Stevenson's advisers echoed this sentiment the following day. Clayton Fritchey, Stevenson's press secretary, told reporters that "the administration's own failures in foreign policy, by an ironic twist, turned to their advantage."⁶⁹ Polls revealed that there was a larger shift in voter sentiment in the last ten days before November 6 than in the preceding six weeks. Until the final week of the campaign, Eisenhower had consistently attracted 55-56 percent of the vote in the Gallup poll. But in the final poll, taken between October 30 and November 2, during the height of the Suez crisis, his support jumped to 59.5 percent. The effect of the foreign situation was further underscored by the inability of congressional Republicans to capitalize on their leader's popularity. Although Eisenhower's share of the popular vote was higher than in 1952, both the House and the Senate remained in Democratic hands. Not since 1848 had the party of a successful presidential candidate failed to capture at least one house of Congress. Eisenhower's victory demonstrated Americans' trust in his personal leadership, not in his party.⁷⁰

Seldom had such a devastating diplomatic defeat so benefitted the architects of that policy. Eisenhower and Dulles struggled from July through October to prevent their Atlantic allies from using force against Egypt. The Anglo-French invasion in the first week of November revealed clearly that the United States had lost the confidence of two of its closest allies. Yet American voters rewarded Eisenhower with another term of office. The slim chance Adlai Stevenson had to unseat Eisenhower vanished when the Suez crisis exploded.

NOTES

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-61* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), pp. 24-6; Kennett Love, *Suez: The Twice-Fought War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 302.

² Love, *Suez*, pp. 305, 307-8; Herbert Parmet, *Eisenhower and the American Crusades* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 479.

³ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, p. 31; *United States Department of State Bulletin*, December 26, 1955, p. 1050.

⁴ Love, *Suez*, p. 309.

⁵ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, p. 31.

⁶ Loy Henderson to author, January 15, 1977.

⁷ For some of George's numerous statements opposing long-term foreign aid, see *Washington Post*, January 8, 13, 14, and 24, 1956, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, January 8, 1956, and *New York Times*, January 11, 1956.

⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, Appropriations Committee, *Report on Mutual Security Appropriations Bill, 1957*, Senate Report 2579 to accompany H.R. 12130, 84th Congress, 2nd Session, 1956, p. 6.

⁹ Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, pp. 32-3.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, July 21, 1956.

¹¹ Leverett Saltonstall to author, May 4, 1976; Leverett Saltonstall Interview, Dulles Oral History Project, Princeton University. Most of the interviews in the project were conducted between 1964 and 1966. Transcripts are available at Princeton, or may be purchased by mail.

¹² Michael Mansfield Interview, Dulles Oral History Project.

¹³ *Congressional Record*, 1956, pp. 13806, 14179, 13837; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 22, 1956.

¹⁴ William Rountree Interview, Dulles Oral History Project; Parmet, *Eisenhower*, p. 483.

¹⁵ Parmet, *Eisenhower*, p. 474.

¹⁶ Eisenhower's strength in the 1952 presidential campaign also seemed to make him relatively immune to any defections by the few Jewish-Americans who did support the Republican party. Parmet, *Eisenhower*, p. 474.

¹⁷ For American attitudes before the invasion, see *Washington Post*, November 18, 1956; for an analysis of voters' attitudes during and after the invasion, see *Newsweek*, November 12 and December 10, 1956.

¹⁸ *Congressional Record*, 1956, p. 15376. Anthony Eden was then the British Prime Minister, and Christian Pineau was Foreign Minister of France.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Herman Finer, *Dulles Over Suez* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), p. 60; *Washington Post*, August 1, 1956; *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 28, 1956.

²¹ *Congressional Record*, 1956, pp. 15571-2, 15653-5; *Great Falls (Montana) Tribune*, August 2, 1956; *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 31, 1956.

²² Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, pp. 37-9.

²³ Office of Armed Forces Information and Education, Department of Defense, *Report on the Middle East* (April 10, 1957); Hugh Thomas, *Suez* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 49.

²⁴ Robert Murphy, *Diplomat Among Warriors* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), p. 384.

²⁵ Finer, *Dulles*, p. 91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁷ Thomas, *Suez*, p. 58.

²⁸ *Washington Post*, August 2 and 6, 1956; *Dallas Morning News*, August 6, 1956; *New York Times*, August 6, 1956; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 6, 1956.

²⁹ *Washington Post*, August 7, 1956.

³⁰ *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 8, 1956; *New York Times*, August 8, 1956.

³¹ *Milwaukee Journal*, August 15 and 16, 1956; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 16, 1956.

³² *Washington Post*, August 11, 1956.

³³ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*; *Milwaukee Journal*; *Louisville Courier-Journal*; *San Francisco Chronicle*; *Washington Post*; all August 13, 1956.

³⁴ *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 13 and 20, 1956; *Great Falls Tribune*, August 13, 1956; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 13, 1956; *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 13, 14, 16, 1956; *Milwaukee Journal*, August 13 and 21, 1956.

³⁵ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 18 and 20, 1956.

³⁶ *Nashville Banner*, August 29, 1956; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 31, 1956; *Great Falls Tribune*, August 29, 1956.

³⁷ *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*; *Washington Post*; *Milwaukee Journal*; *Great Falls Tribune*, and *Louisville Courier-Journal*; all September 7, 1956; Finer, *Dulles*, p. 213.

³⁸ *New York Times*, September 10, 1956.

³⁹ *Washington Post*, September 11, 1956.

⁴⁰ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 14 and 27, 1956.

⁴¹ *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 18, 1956; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 18, 1956; *Washington Post*, September 21, 1956; *Nashville Banner*, September 24, 1956.

⁴² Thomas, *Suez*, p. 76; Robert Murphy Interview, Dulles Oral History Project; Murphy, *Diplomat*, pp. 387-88.

⁴³ Murphy, *Diplomat*, p. 388.

⁴⁴ Thomas, *Suez*, p. 96.

⁴⁵ *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 20, 1956.

⁴⁶ *Washington Post*, September 28, 1956; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 28, 1956.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, October 3, 1956; *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 20 and 24, 1956; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 21, 1956; *Washington Post*, October 24, 1956; *Dallas Morning News*, October 29, 1956.

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, October 16, 1956; *Washington Post*, October 24, 1956; *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 25, 1956.

⁴⁹ *Great Falls Tribune*, October 9 and 16, 1956.

⁵⁰ *Washington Post*, October 8 and November 1, 1956; *New York Times*, October 16, 1956; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 8, 1956; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, October 9, 1956.

⁵¹ *New York Times*, October 7, 1956.

⁵² Thomas, *Suez*, p. 102.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵⁴ Macmillan quoted in Thomas, *Suez*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ *Detroit Free Press*, October 30, 1956.

⁵⁶ Walter Judd to author, June 7, 1976 and December 21, 1976; Walter Judd Interview, Dulles Oral History Project.

⁵⁷ Michael A. Guhin, *John Foster Dulles: A Statesman and His Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 293.

⁵⁸ Walter Judd to author, June 7 and December 21, 1976; Walter Judd Interview, Dulles Oral History Project.

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, October 31, 1956; *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 31, 1956; *Milwaukee Journal*, November 5, 1956. Even Republican Senator H. Alexander Smith of New Jersey believed that "Dulles should have gone along with our Allies on the Suez policy," and Smith privately told Dulles so "when the thing

was hot." Smith recalled that this was the only time he really disagreed with Dulles and Eisenhower on a foreign policy issue. H. Alexander Smith Interview, Dulles Oral History Project.

⁶⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, November 1, 1956; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 2, 1956; *Washington Post*, November 2 and 4, 1956; *Great Falls Tribune*, November 3, 1956.

⁶¹ *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 31, 1956; *Detroit Free Press*, November 3, 1956; *Chicago Tribune*, November 1 and 3, 1956.

⁶² *Washington Post*, November 18, 1956; *Newsweek*, November 12 and December 10, 1956. *Newsweek* noted that "peace was the dominant issue of the election." *Newsweek*, November 12, 1956, p. 62.

⁶³ *Washington Post*, November 2, 1956; *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 6, 1956; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November 1, 1956. All this led Kefauver to remark acidly that "the Republicans have memory trouble. They don't know what stream they are in the middle of — the war stream or the peace stream." *Chicago Tribune*, November 3, 1956.

⁶⁴ Finer, *Dulles*, p. 397. Knowland went so far as to call upon the United Nations and world opinion to condemn Britain and France. *Dallas Morning News*, November 1, 1956.

⁶⁵ Parmet, *Eisenhower*, p. 487.

⁶⁶ *Washington Post*, November 7, 1956.

⁶⁷ Parmet, *Eisenhower*, p. 486; *Washington Post*, November 11, 1956; *Newsweek*, November 5 and 12, 1956.

⁶⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, November 7, 1956.

⁶⁹ *Washington Post*, November 8, 1956.

⁷⁰ *Washington Post*, November 11, 1956; Parmet, *Eisenhower*, p. 491.