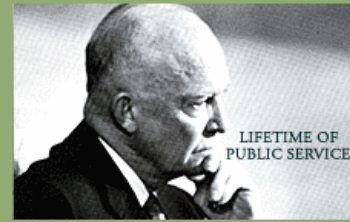


DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER MEMORIAL COMMISSION

It's time to build a national memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower.



Eisenhower Stories

The Suez Crisis

President Eisenhower was deeply saddened when he had to rebuke his old friends and allies, France and Great Britain, after they invaded Egypt, a sovereign Middle Eastern nation. Ike was convinced, however, that his allies were wrong, both as a matter of principle and of strategy. Here's the way it happened.

After World War II, many countries that had long been subjected to European colonial control began movements to achieve independence. In places such as India and Burma, national independence was achieved by relatively peaceful negotiations with England. In Algeria and Indo-China (Vietnam/Laos/Cambodia) bloody guerilla wars broke out when France refused to grant immediate independence.

Egypt was a special case. Technically, Egypt became an independent nation under a 1922 treaty with England but remained under British military control until World War II ended. By 1953 the only European military power on Egyptian soil was a military base, occupied by British forces, three miles wide and sixty-five miles long beside the Suez Canal. Egyptian political and military leaders announced their determination to throw out the "hated imperialists" and by 1955 the British had almost completely evacuated the military base and turned the facilities over to the Egyptians.



That evacuation left unsettled, however, some important control issues involving the Canal. Since its completion in 1869, no single nation had ever exercised control of the waterway. It was always open to all ships, including warships, of any nation. The Suez Canal Company, whose stock was owned by several European nations, maintained the canal, but exercised no control over its use. Unlike the Panama Canal which has a very intricate series of locks to be operated and maintained, Suez is an open waterway without any locks or obstructions from end to end. Egypt clearly had the capacity to operate the canal and the nation's political leaders demanded sole authority over those operations. The British and French leaders insisted that no single nation had the right to control unilaterally the world's most important waterway.

The true reason that European countries were so determined to have international control of the Suez Canal was oil. Almost all of their oil came through the canal, and they were afraid of dire economic consequences that might result if Egypt should choose to disrupt their fuel supply. The negotiations and bickering went on from 1952 to 1956 without resolution.

Egypt's leader, a former army colonel, Gamal Abdel-Nasser, had come to power in the spring of 1954 and proclaimed Egypt to be the greatest Arabic socialist state. One of his earliest acts was to ask the United States to sell \$27 million worth of military arms and equipment to Egypt. When informed that he would have to pay cash for American arms, Nasser quickly dropped the matter and quietly opened negotiations with the Soviet Union for his military hardware.

The following year Nasser approached the United States for a major loan to help in constructing a huge Nile River dam at Aswan. Negotiations proceeded and a tentative agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom, and the World Bank was reached in June, 1956. But at the same time he was dealing with America and England, Nasser was secretly negotiating a combined arms and Aswan dam financing arrangement with the Soviet Union. Satisfied that he would have full Soviet support for his needs, Nasser began to make outrageous public demands on the United States and Great Britain, demands that he knew they would never accept. Finally, in July, the Eisenhower administration notified the Egyptian leader that the dam financing agreement was withdrawn.

Nasser responded with a vitriolic public attack on the United States and two days later announced that Egypt had nationalized the Suez Canal and imposed Egyptian military law in the Canal Zone.

America and its allies were alarmed by the prospect of having a Soviet-sponsored nation control the canal. European leaders were quite concerned with the possibility of Arabian oil shipments being delayed or denied. France and Britain shared these fears, but also saw the Suez situation as a symbol of their diminishing position in the Middle East. They turned to military action in an effort to restore their control.

President Eisenhower believed that "...the Canal was, in effect, a global public utility." He thought the United Nations, or an alliance of the maritime nations, should determine the status of the canal. In his view, military action by one or two European nations acting without substantial world sanction would not achieve a stable settlement. Unilateral military action would incite Arab hatred and destabilize the Middle East. He steadily urged calm diplomacy and an abstention from military action unless it was sanctioned by the United Nations.

But the negotiations made no progress and by October 25th both Britain and France had terminated talks with America. At the same time Egypt renewed its incursions into Israel and established a joint military command structure with Syria and Jordan, surrounding Israel with coordinated armies. In late October Israel launched a preemptive attack invading the Sinai Peninsula. By nightfall of the first day, Israeli troops had advanced to the Suez Canal.

Having good reason to believe that France and Israel were secretly acting in concert, Ike directed his diplomats to secure a resolution of the United Nations Security Council stipulating that no member nation could use military force in the Middle East.

Even the Soviet Union joined the U.S. in voting for the resolution – but France and Britain vetoed it.

A few days later British and French military forces invaded Egypt at Port Said and along both sides of the canal. Egypt retaliated by sinking ships at critical points in the canal, completely blocking the waterway.

President Eisenhower was outraged at the behavior of America's allies. When he addressed the American people, he completely disassociated the United States from the conflict and explained that America had no prior knowledge of the attacks on Egypt: "We cannot – in the world, any more than in our own nation – subscribe to one law for the weak, another for the strong There can only be one law – or there will be no peace." In addressing the United Nations, Eisenhower's Secretary of State said, "It is nothing less than tragic that ... we should be forced to choose between following in the footsteps of Anglo-French colonialism in Asia and Africa or splitting ... away from their course."

Over the next several weeks Eisenhower led the negotiations for a cease fire followed by a United Nations resolution requiring the British and French to withdraw from Egypt rapidly and unconditionally. The Europeans had won the battles and lost the war, weakening the western alliance and achieving nothing. Eventually, Ike also convinced the Israeli government to withdraw from Egyptian territory. It took six months to clear the wrecks and reopen the Suez Canal. Egyptian sovereignty had been affirmed by Eisenhower and, through American diplomacy, by the United Nations.

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