Suez and the Moral Bankruptcy of Empire

A.J. Stockwell

A.J. Stockwell looks at the political fallout of the Suez crisis, both at home and more widely in its effect on the British Empire.

It is often claimed that the dramatic clash between ethics and cynical realpolitik at Suez spelled the end of the British empire. The resort to force without UN sanction, collusion with France and Israel and prime ministerial deceit breached principles of international diplomacy, parliamentary conduct and the Cabinet’s collective responsibility. Eden’s actions were attacked in the press, Parliament and public demonstrations.

Risking charges of treason and loss of sales, Alastair Hetherington of the *Manchester Guardian* and David Astor of the *Observer* unequivocally condemned the venture. They were joined by the *New Statesman*, *Spectator* and eventually the *Daily Mirror*. The director-general of the BBC, Ian Jacob, resisted government censorship and William Clark, the prime minister’s press secretary, resigned over attempts to gag the media. Jo Grimond united the Liberals in attacking Eden, and, after a hesitant start, Hugh Gaitskell by and large did the same for the Labour Party (though Jewish MPs found themselves in a dilemma). In the Lords, the Archbishop of Canterbury, still the conscience of the nation, condemned the venture. Although only two, junior, ministers resigned (Anthony Nutting and Edward Boyle) and although only a handful of Conservative MPs abstained in the vote of no-confidence, there was also considerable unease in the Conservative Party – unease that was largely repressed for fear of rocking the boat. Thus, Walter Monckton, who opposed armed intervention, was persuaded to move from the Ministry of Defence to be Postmaster General rather than resign from government. At the War Office John Hare made his opposition clear but remained in post. James Stuart decided to stay at the Scottish Office notwithstanding grave reservations about Eden’s leadership. Buchan-Hepburn, a former chief whip and minister of works with a seat in the Cabinet, opposed the use of force from first to last, though lost office only when he supported R.A. Butler as Eden’s successor. Butler himself, with an ‘appeasing’ past to live down, dithered to such an extent that he forfeited trust on all sides of the party. Some, like Hailsham at the Admiralty, thought military intervention was ‘madness’, rather than immoral, though Hailsham himself did not demur from supporting it and dissuaded Lord Mountbatten from resigning as First Sea Lord.

Indeed, senior military officers and civil servants, too, found it difficult to remain politically neutral. Sir Norman Brook, the Cabinet Secretary, held to a pragmatic course throughout, weeding incriminating evidence of a venture which he privately regarded as ‘folly’. Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, head of the Foreign Office, dismayed colleagues not only by his support for the use of force but also by his connivance at the exclusion of the FO from decision-making. Heads of mission overseas – William Hayter in Moscow, Humphrey Trevelyan in Cairo, Malcolm MacDonald in New Delhi – despatched warnings which went unheeded. In London, Evelyn Shuckburgh, Eden’s former private secretary, was relieved to be on secondment from the FO at the time, while Paul Gore-Booth and Denis White at the FO and Joe Garner of the Dominions Office, were among a mass of Whitehall officials contemplating resignation. Evan Luard did resign his position in the diplomatic service, stating: ‘I belong to a generation which was brought up in the belief that for one nation to undertake the use of armed force against another in order to promote its own interests is morally wrong. I grew up during a war which, I understood, was fought for the establishment of that principle.’ In flouting the UN Charter, the government ‘seems to have betrayed everything for which I had believed this country stood’.

But Suez did not simply provoke a moral outcry against cynical realpolitik; it also provoked a clash
of values and principles. Advocates of firm government at home and abroad were morally outraged by what they regarded as the supine display of loss of will. They robustly defended the virtues of patriotism, imperial responsibility and international policing. Within government, Lord Salisbury personified these patrician values. Outside government, the Suez Group, and its supporters in the House of Lords, were dismayed by the pusillanimity of an administration that at first negotiated military withdrawal in 1954 and eventually succumbed to international pressure to recall the troops, and they lamented the betrayal of British forces serving overseas in yet another forgotten army. Lord Cromer went so far as to address his fellow peers in the full dress uniform of a colonel of the Grenadier Guards. Thus, like Munich in 1938, Suez provoked a range of moral reactions. In so doing it divided the nation, split political parties, divided families, cut through generations, crossed party lines and strained professional loyalties. The furore also made allies of unlikely bedfellows who would otherwise have been uneasy in each other’s company. For example, in the Suez Group, whose ranks swelled to over a hundred in defence of national honour at the height of the crisis, appeasers from the 1930s joined with anti-appeasers, Commonwealth men with Europeanists, Tory diehards with Conservative modernizers. From different perspectives and at every twist and turn in the saga, the British fulminated against the moral bankruptcy of government. Indeed, each contradictory aspect of Britain’s role in the affair provoked outrage in some quarter or another, be it the initial appeasement of Nasser, or the resort to force, or the ultimate retreat.

While some argue that the debacle arose from the divorce of policy from moral precepts, others contend that it was not their divorce but their entanglement that spelled disaster. They do so on the grounds that the pursuit of an ethical policy is rarely a practical option because politics is the amoral art of the possible, the skill in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable. At Suez, this argument continues, the nation and its leaders succumbed to a collective hysteria that robbed them of judgement and prevented rational consideration of the intractable problems of the real world and of the national interest in it. A different view is that Eden’s realpolitik failed because it was not real enough. His stratagem was fatally flawed because it did not take account of the one moral issue that was intrinsic to the international relations of the 1950s. By this time the international community accepted that anti-colonialism was politically correct, if not in all cases morally right. Ironically, Eden himself had warned Cabinet colleagues of this three years before the crisis: ‘In the second half of the twentieth century we cannot hope to maintain our position in the Middle East by the methods of the last century.’

generated immense moral fervour, but how did it affect empire? Denis Healey was by no means alone among his contemporaries to conclude in his memoirs that Suez was not only ‘a demonstration of moral and intellectual bankruptcy’ but that it was also ‘a turning point in post-war history’ signifying ‘the end of Britain’s imperial role outside Europe’. Britain’s humiliation fanned colonial resistance and international hostility. Lacking moral authority to compensate for material weakness, government was forced to retreat from empire. Learning the lessons of Suez – i.e. the importance of the special relationship with the US and the strength of world opinion – the British sought a new role in the world. They now turned their backs on empire as unprofitable and morally bankrupt. Indeed, within four years of the crisis Harold Macmillan’s speed in repairing Anglo-American relations, his cost-benefit analysis of the colonial empire, his increasing disdain for the Commonwealth, his defence review, his moves towards Europe, his ‘wind of change’ policy in Africa, all seemed to nudge Britain into the post-colonial era.

On its fiftieth anniversary it might be churlish to discount the significance of Suez, but anniversaries invite reflection on times past, and we should be on our guard against exploiting hindsight or falling for the old fallacy of post hoc ergo propter hoc by over-stating claims made for Suez as the turning-point in the story of British decolonization. After all, Suez was not the first crisis that had divided the nation over the morality of empire. Remember, the slave trade, Robert Clive, the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the Indian Mutiny, the Morant Bay rising in Jamaica, Gordon of Khartoum, the South African War, the Amritsar Massacre, Gandhi’s salt march, the fall of Singapore, and countless other incidents. Nor did Suez bring closure to this debate which would
flare up a few years later over killings in Kenya’s Hola Camp, over the so-called ‘police state’ of Nyasaland and over Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence. Moreover, bitter argument over the rights and wrongs of empire would continue into the post-colonial era.

may have been a milestone in ending empire, but it was not its starting point. The age of imperialism had been pronounced dead in the Second World War. ‘If there is one point in the Indian problem that cannot be disputed – or, at any rate, is not disputed outside the ranks of the British Conservative Party’, wrote Orwell in November 1943, ‘it is that Britain ought to stop ruling India as early as possible.’ Certainly, the fall of Singapore had destroyed British authority in Asia and the restoration of lost colonies in 1945 was but a brief flicker of new imperialism. Although Anglo-American action in 1953 against Mussadiq’s Iran had set something of a precedent for ‘regime change’ in ‘rogue states’ in the Middle East, Britain’s ability to act independently in the region, even in Egypt, had been diminishing long before 1956. With respect to Africa, British decolonization from the late 1950s was only tenuously linked to repercussions of Suez and more directly affected by subsequent events. In any case, the process of British decolonization was largely determined by dynamics specific to the territories concerned and took the form of multiple bilateral arrangements between Britain and its disparate dependencies. As for Macmillan’s cost-benefit analysis of the colonies and Duncan Sandys’ defence White Paper, neither was an initiative originating in Suez, but both derived from previous planning during Eden’s administration.

Furthermore, it is clear that after Suez, the empire remained entrenched on the ground and in ministers’ minds. Return to normality was the hallmark of post-Suez policy and we should not be duped into thinking otherwise by attempts to present to the world the progressive face of colonialism. These did not mark a fresh start but a restoration of previously close relations with the United States. They were the continuation of a public relations exercise dating from at least the fall of Singapore in 1942 to counter what Whitehall regarded as American prejudice against the British empire. Although much has been made of Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* as marking the advent in 1956 of post-colonialism, Macmillan (who succeeded Eden in January 1957) assumed that there were still ‘places where it is of vital interest to us that we should maintain our influence’. And this is what his government and its successors strove to do, especially east of Suez. Officials in the Foreign Office’s Southeast Asia department later recalled how in the 1960s the Tories remained ‘committed to imperial responsibilities and the world role’ and that ‘their instinct was to hang on and not to give up until they were convinced it was the only option’.

So, too, British governments maintained an independent presence in the Middle East after 1956. They intervened in Jordan and Kuwait, and they reinforced their presence in Aden. Spencer Mawby has recently argued with respect to Arabia that, after the Suez crisis, Britain pursued a forward policy akin to the earlier period of ‘high imperialism’ (British policy in Aden and the Protectorates 1955-67). Suez merely confirmed the British in their determination to stay in southern Arabia and this applied to both the Conservative government and also, to begin with, to Wilson’s Labour government. Both built on an imperial heritage; both were committed to retaining influence in the Middle East; both were hostile to Nasser’s regional ambitions. Conservative and Labour governments in the post-Suez era also shared a fundamental misconception of their capacity, first of all, to remain in South Arabia, then to control the process of withdrawal and, finally, to exert influence after their departure. Here, as elsewhere in the empire, Suez appeared to have wrought few changes either to the problems facing the British or to their approach to them.

Although they continued to hope, as a Cabinet committee of officials put it two years before Suez, to ‘secure acceptance of a reasonable and beneficial delay in order to ensure a more orderly transition’, in one territory after another they were overtaken by events and forced to quit in a hurry. Coming out of retirement in May 1967 to be the last high commissioner of South Arabia, Sir Humphrey Trevelyan was determined not to preside over ‘a scuttle on Palestine lines’. Yet, like Mountbatten during the last months of the British Raj twenty years previously, Trevelyan was soon pressing for an earlier date for British withdrawal in order to avoid chaos. As Trevelyan left Aden, the military band struck up ‘Fings ain’t wot they used to be’. But things did seem to be very
familiar, if not exactly what they used to be. Things in Aden appeared to be following a pattern of imperial ebb and flow that had washed over the ten years before the Suez crisis and over the decade after it.

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