

Suez 60 years on

In November 1956 the Suez Crisis shook British politics to its core. Conservative historian **Lord Lexden** looks back at one of the defining moments in the decline of the Empire, and argues that the much maligned Sir Anthony Eden was left with little choice but to act

At dawn on November 5th sixty years ago, just over one thousand British and French airborne troops landed near Port Said at the northern end of the Suez Canal. They were the first wave of an allied invasion force whose mission was to wrest the Canal from the hands of the fanatical Egyptian dictator, Gamal Nasser, who had seized it over three months earlier, and create the conditions in which it could be placed under responsible international control where it belonged in view of its economic and strategic importance.

Long diplomatic negotiations had failed. The British government under Sir Anthony Eden, himself one of the world's leading diplomats, had made it clear from the start of the crisis that it would use force as a last resort.

The enemy showed little inclination to fight. Their morale could scarcely have been lower. Over the previous four days much of the Egypt's Soviet-equipped air force had been wiped out, and many military installations destroyed, by carefully targeted bombing which, as a result of the skill of British pilots, had left the civilian population largely unharmed.

In Sinai the Egyptian army had been routed by fast-moving Israeli forces under brilliant and daring commanders whose plans had been agreed beforehand in great secrecy

with Britain and France. This collusion was to bring deep discredit to the two Western governments and to Eden in particular.

Several hours after the first landings, a great British armada of some 100 ships that been assembled in Malta arrived off Port Said with more than 30,000 troops on board, representing about a tenth of the army's strength at that time. They included at least one future Tory MP, Jim Spicer, while another, Philip Goodhart, accompanied the expeditionary force as the correspondent of *The Sunday Times*.

The entire Canal – indeed the entire country – was theirs for the taking. The allied commanders had told their respective governments that they would

need no more than 48 hours to complete their mission.

During the first 24 hours, British forces secured control of half the Canal with the loss of just 21 lives. They were to go no further.

Despite strong French opposition, the British government ordered a ceasefire which came into effect at midnight on November 6th. It was agreed that a UN force would be sent to take over.

French anger was intense and enduring. It was to sour Anglo-French relations in the years ahead when Britain sought to join the European Common Market.

Some days later, on November 18th, the foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, visited the American secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, as he lay dying in a hospital in New York. "Selwyn, why did you stop?" said Dulles. "Why didn't you go through with it and get Nasser down?" Selwyn Lloyd replied, "if you had so much as winked at us we might have gone on".

An American wink of silent approval would certainly have made all the difference. Even American neutrality would probably have been sufficient to have enabled Eden, the central figure throughout the entire crisis, to complete the liberation of the Canal. That would almost certainly have led to the downfall of Nasser which Eden saw (and rightly so) as vital if lasting stability was to be secured in the Middle East under moderate Arab leaders who



A British Royal Navy minesweeper in the Suez Canal, November 1956. Right, soldiers of the 1st Battalion Royal Scots march into Port Said



would not impede the export of oil on which Europe at that time depended so heavily.

As it was, Eden had to be content with weakening the Egyptian dictator who had planned a position of dominance for himself in the Arab world, where he did not hesitate to use poison gas. "If we had not acted," Eden wrote on November 12th when it was all over, "before very long Nasser would have been ruler of the whole Arab world," with the Soviet Union firmly by his side.

It never occurred to Eden that he would encounter active American hostility. It seemed inconceivable that President Eisenhower would turn against Britain just 11 years after he had led allied troops to victory in Western Europe.

Eisenhower complained that Eden kept

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him in the dark about his plans. That was completely untrue. He was informed at every stage. Internal American politics counted for more than great international interests. Eisenhower felt that in an election

year with his second term as president in the balance he needed to oppose what influential sections of American opinion regarded as an intolerable act of imperialist aggression (conveniently forgetting that the United States itself had conspired to get rid of a nationalist leader in Iran four years earlier).

American support for UN economic sanctions against Britain and the prospect of a run on the pound forced Eden to order the humiliating ceasefire. Behind it lay an American conviction that Britain had failed to recognise that its days of greatness were over. As one senior American official put it, "the Prime Minister had not adjusted his thoughts to the altered status of Great Britain and he never did".

Eden was insulted even more viciously at home than in the United States. 'Murderer' rang out more than once in the Commons chamber. Passions rose to a pitch that had not been seen since Asquith was howled down during the Home Rule crisis of 1912-14. Sittings were suspended for the first time since 1924. In the Lords the government was condemned repeatedly by the Archbishop of Canterbury in what was to be the Church of England's last major intervention in the country's high politics.

Eden handled the impassioned arguments with calmness and serenity. He retained his dominance over the Commons until

the collapse of his health compelled him to resign in January 1957. Public opinion polls showed strong support for him.

All this has been forgotten. Instead it is now widely believed that the stress of Suez made him a drug addict dependent on Benzedrine. His medical records show that this is totally untrue.

There is one serious charge which may never cease to damage Eden's reputation. Rumours that secret meetings had taken place with French and Israeli leaders to plot the campaign against Egypt became widespread in November sixty years ago.

In the last speech that he made in the Commons on 20 December 1956 Eden said "there was not foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt – there was not". This was untrue. It was a tragic end to a long and distinguished political career. 🇬🇧



Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden leaves 10 Downing Street on the eve of the crisis



Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer. His lecture on Anthony Eden delivered in May as part of a series at Speaker's House is available on the BBC Parliament channel