

Suez 1956: Coalition Crisis

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This paper will analyze the foreign policy decisions of president Dwight D. Eisenhower and secretary of state John Foster Dulles in reaction to the Suez Crisis of 1956. This moment in Cold War history was made exceptional by the strange mix of American, European, Soviet, Israeli, and Arab interests that collided in Egypt that October. In the moments before the crisis and in its early stages, Eisenhower employed a collegial style of decision making. Eisenhower had given Dulles considerable autonomy on foreign policy while Eisenhower struggled with illness and his reelection campaign, making a collegial approach sensible in lieu of formal National Security Council (NSC) meetings.¹ Additionally, the crisis in Egypt during its first few days required such quick action that collegial decision making was again needed and Dulles again directed most of the consensus-reaching among Eisenhower's advisors as they decided how to address the responsible heads of state on October 30th, the American Public on October 31st, and ultimately the United Nations (UN) on November 1st. As the immediacy of the crisis subsided, collegial meetings returned to their role of pre-NSC warm up sessions and formalistic decision making became increasingly important, especially after a medical emergency on November 2nd forced Dulles off of the scene.² The decisions of Dulles and Eisenhower and their foreign counterparts created a diplomatic windfall for the United States that redefined the role of the US in the Middle East, was a premonition of the Eisenhower doctrine, and effectively ended the post-world war II interventionism of old European colonial powers.

President Eisenhower was an experienced manager of foreign policy by 1956. His time as supreme Allied commander under Roosevelt, as Chief of Staff of the Army under Truman, and as president of the US for four years had given him great confidence in his efficacy as a statesman. The level of autonomy that he afforded Dulles was not from a lack of policy input from Eisenhower; it was from

¹ Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: page 46

² Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: Piety, Pragmatism, and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy*, 1999: page 156

Dulles's loyalty to Eisenhower and his dutiful representation of Eisenhower's foreign policy goals. Eisenhower gave Dulles responsibility, but the authority still remained firmly with the president.³

The approach that a president uses to make policy decisions, formalistic, competitive, and collegial, depends greatly on the personality of the president. His sense of competence and capacity for argument are hugely determinant of how he will organize his decision-making bodies. Along with Eisenhower's feeling of competence was an impatience for argument and a feeling that he could operate on a level above the rest of the executive, letting his chiefs of staff handle consensus while he directed policy priorities from on high and made the final decisions.^{4 5} This dislike for disagreement disqualified the competitive model for Eisenhower, but his appreciation for army-like hierarchy and his confidence in close advisors allowed for a blend of collegial and formalistic approaches. The executive under Eisenhower was famous for its appearance of tightly formalist structure, but moments of collegial decision making facilitated the official policy making procedures even when not in crisis mode. These served to iron out differences between key advisors representing key differences of opinion, so that NSC meetings would not get excessively bogged down with argument.⁶ When in crises did occur, collegial decision making became increasingly important for swift action, and in the coalition of crises involved with the Suez crisis, Eisenhower's top advisors would have a huge responsibility to find consensus for Ike.

The first crisis was the nationalization of the Suez canal by Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Eisenhower administration had offered to loan Nasser the money to build a dam at Aswan, greatly increasing arable land for Egypt, but American opinion was turning against Nasser and the project. Irritation with Nasser's recognition of the PRC that May, pressure from the American Jewish lobby to refuse support to a self-proclaimed enemy of Israel, and economic concerns that the dam would bolster Egyptian cotton

³ Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: page 10

⁴ George, *Presidential Personality and Performance*, 1998: pages 207-209

⁵ Joes, *Eisenhower Revisionism: The Tide Comes In*, 1985: page 565

⁶ Johnson, *Managing the White House*, 1974: pages 233-235

production and endanger the exports of the Southern states all led Dulles to reconsider the dam project.⁷ The NSC met at Camp David on July 13th to discuss revoking the dam package. Eisenhower had been plagued with ileitis in June and was recovering from surgery, so it had been mainly Dulles overseeing the Aswan issue.⁸ Dulles presented the case for defunding to Ike who gave it the green light. Dulles would take the hit politically, and Eisenhower could continue to focus on recovery and reelection.⁹

Nasser was furious at the abandonment of Western investment, and chose to nationalize the Suez Canal in retribution on July 26th.¹⁰ Nasser's nationalization was a particular affront to Britain, who was reliant on access to the canal for oil security and who had colonial ties to Egypt that prime minister Anthony Eden sought to upkeep. Eden from the beginning made it clear that the use of force was an option if Nasser refused to let British shipping access the Suez.¹¹

This attitude was troubling to Eisenhower, who returned to Washington to oversee the handling of the unfolding crisis. In an NSC meeting on August 30th, Eisenhower made it clear that avoiding military action was his top priority. Dulles agreed, and suggested a conference in London for interested parties that would determine the future administration of the canal. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh A. Burke and chairman of the the Joint Chiefs Admiral Arthur W. Radford supported the conference, but argued that Nasser's presence in the region was a source of instability and anti-Western sentiment, and that if England and France were prepared to topple him that the US may have an interest in allowing them to do so, perhaps even with the help of American advisors.¹² ¹³ Eisenhower reiterated the force should be avoided at all costs, but agreed with Dulles's suggestion of a London conference. In the meantime, a

⁷ Newton, *Eisenhower: The White House Years*, 2011: page 224

⁸ Hybel, *US Foreign Policy Decision-making from Truman to Kennedy: Responses to International Challenges*, 2014: page 104

⁹ Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, 1981: pages 80-81

¹⁰ Newton, *Eisenhower: The White House Years*, 2011: page 224

¹¹ Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: page 42

¹² Hybel, *US Foreign Policy Decision-making from Truman to Kennedy: Responses to International Challenges*, 2014: pages 105-106

¹³ Richardson, *Avoiding and Incurring Losses: Decision-Making in the Suez Crisis*, 1992: page 391

Middle East Emergency Committee would be established among government officials and representatives from American oil companies to develop strategies to supply Europe with oil if the canal was shut.¹⁴

The first conference in London on August 23rd sought to create an international administration that would control the canal and maintain open access to it. Egypt refused to send representatives to the conference, and the proposal that it came up with was rejected by Nasser.¹⁵ Dulles then organized a second London conference for September 19th, this time to create a Suez users association that would be a voluntary organization to control the fees given to Egypt for use of the canal.¹⁶ Dulles believed that the association should have ultimate operating authority, but Ike cautioned him that Nasser would be unlikely to agree to such an arrangement, and suggested that the association be limited to regulatory powers. The second London conference again failed to produce a resolution suitable to Nasser.¹⁷ By now the British, French, and Israelis were underway with plans for an invasion of Egypt. Israel would invade the Sinai peninsula, the British and French would issue an ultimatum calling for a ceasefire overseen by the British and French, and when Nasser predictably refused, they would take the canal by force.¹⁸

US intelligence was aware of mobilizations in the Mediterranean and along the Israeli borders, but it was unclear who the coalition included and who their target was. Israel's activity was suspected to be directed against Jordan, and the Naval exercises of the British fleet near Malta were thought to be mainly for show. Eisenhower was for most of this time engaged with Eden in correspondence where Ike constantly warned Eden against the use of force, fearing an escalation could be an opportunity for the Soviet Union.¹⁹

Even after the Israelis invaded Gaza and the Sinai on Oct 29th, it was not immediately clear to the US the degree to which the British and French had colluded. Eisenhower engaged with Eden and his

¹⁴ Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, 1981: page 82

¹⁵ Guhin, *John Foster Dulles: A Statesman and His times*, 1972: page 281

¹⁶ Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: Piety, Pragmatism, and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy*, 1999: page 151

¹⁷ Guhin, *John Foster Dulles: A Statesman and His times*, 1972: page 284

¹⁸ Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: page 82

¹⁹ Hybel, *US Foreign Policy Decision-making from Truman to Kennedy: Responses to International Challenges*, 2014: page 110

representatives in Washington to ensure that they honored their alliance with the US, and Dulles prepared a state department draft resolution accusing the Israelis of aggression and demanding their withdrawal.²⁰ British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd convinced Dulles to change “aggression” to “violations of the armistice agreements,” and a Belgian amendment changed “withdraw forthwith” to “withdraw,” but the British and French would both veto the US resolution in the Security Council.²¹ Also vetoed was a similar ceasefire resolution submitted by the Soviet Union who seemed to be preparing, as Dulles and Eisenhower had predicted, to try to turn the crisis into an opportunity to find allies in the post-colonial Middle East.²²

On the evening of Oct 29th, the US representative to the UN Henry Cabot Lodge jr. had spoken to the British representative to the UN, Person Dixon, about the upcoming Security Council meeting to demand Israel’s withdrawal. Dixon was angry at this, and spoke dismissively of the tripartite treaty between the US, Britain, and France which was the basis of their alliance. Lodge relayed this troubling exchange to Dulles, who shared it with Eisenhower on the morning of Oct 30th.^{23 24} They met along with undersecretary of state Herbert Hoover and expressed their confusion over the situation. Eisenhower asked if the British and French would support a resolution for withdrawal, and Dulles expressed skepticism that their allies would act quickly if at all to support such a move. Here Dulles accurately observed the importance of oil access and colonial interests to British decision making on Egypt, and he and Hoover agreed that the British were relying on the US to keep them supplied with fuel if the canal was cut off. Eisenhower grouched that the British should not be so sure, and put cutting them off on the table.²⁵ The meeting concluded, Dulles edited Eisenhower’s first of many telegrams to Eden that day, calling upon him again to honor their alliance and to use peaceful methods to resolve the crisis.

²⁰ Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: pages 90-91

²¹ Guhin, *John Foster Dulles: A Statesman and His times*, 1972: page 291

²² Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: page 97

²³ Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America into the Middle East*, 1981: page 371

²⁴ Guhin, *John Foster Dulles: A Statesman and His times*, 1972: page 290

²⁵ Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America into the Middle East*, 1981: page 372

The veiled hostility in Washington turned to open fury on October 31st when the French and British began to bomb Egyptian ports on the Mediterranean. Eisenhower and Dulles quickly composed stern, identical letters of condemnation to the prime ministers of England and France.²⁶ Ike, furious at having been kept out of the loop, then met with Arthur Fleming of the Office of Defense Mobilization to let him know that he was not afraid to let the oil aspect of the Suez crisis screw over the Europeans for their foolish invasion. Fleming had a more amenable approach, and the president ended up asking him to see if the navy could help the British resupply if he later chose to.²⁷ For the rest of that day, according to speech writer Emmet Hughes, Eisenhower was very calm. He was concerned that the Soviets would try to exploit the situation in the UN, but was convinced that only the British and French would lose face as a result of the crisis.²⁸

Although the US ceasefire resolution had failed in the Security Council the night before, the reaction of the General Assembly towards the US resolution was overwhelmingly positive. When Lodge told Dulles about the attitude of the UN, Dulles encouraged Lodge to call Eisenhower and lift his spirits with his report. Eisenhower was indeed buoyed by the UN's enthusiasm over American policy in the Suez, and Oct 31st became an active day of crisis management, especially for Dulles.²⁹ First he met with vice president Nixon, who was in favor of condemning harshly the actions of the British and French. And although Dulles favored the moderate high road and cautioned Nixon against his firebrand outlook, they shared a sense of satisfaction with seeing European concerns that they considered outdated fail miserably; Dulles because they spelled the end to European colonialism in the region, and Nixon because it gave the United States a chance to shake off the hairbrained commitments of the Western allies that he resented.³⁰

³¹ Dulles then met with Lodge to discuss the feasibility of a UN condemnation of the invasion. Dulles was

²⁶ Ibid. page 375

²⁷ Ibid. page 375

²⁸ Ibid. page 376

²⁹ Ibid. page 385

³⁰ Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America into the Middle East*, 1981: page 386

³¹ Richardson, *Avoiding and Incurring Losses: Decision-Making in the Suez Crisis*, 1992: page 398

worried that the British were still too invested in the Suez, and Lodge conceded that ambassador Dixon would likely attack the US at the Security Council if such a condemnation was brought to the table.³²

Next Eisenhower approached Dulles and asked him to write the president's speech addressing the American public that evening. Ike wanted to take the opportunity to distance the US from the actions of their allies but reassure the public that the alliance itself was still strong. Dulles wrote Ike a long, rambling speech that he eventually brought to Hughes to help edit. Hughes and Dulles worked back and forth for three hours to create a statement that struck the appropriate tones. Dulles was determined to include references to Budapest, where the Soviets were engaged in a bloody crackdown against Hungarian political protesters. Dulles considered it a tragedy that their allies had taken the limelight off of their enemy, and that the US could not condemn forcefully the colonialist attitude of the Soviets in Hungary while tacitly standing by the European colonialists in Egypt. Eisenhower praised the speech that Hughes and Dulles delivered to him in the last minutes before he was set to deliver it, and its contents are considered to be a precursor to the Eisenhower doctrine.^{33 34}

The next morning, November first, the NSC gathered to discuss what the goals of the US ought to be in the UN session that day at 5:00. Dulles began the meeting with a characteristic history lesson, this time about colonialism. Dulles explained that for him, the Suez crisis was about taking a stand on colonialist ambitions, and balancing our alliance with declining colonialist powers with our friendships with recently liberated states.³⁵ Eisenhower asked if the UN general secretary was likely to introduce a resolution, and Dulles replied that a resolution would either come from the US or the Soviets. Treasury Secretary Humphrey then suggested the the UN should be asked to declare who the aggressors were and who deserves condemnation, but before Dulles acknowledged him Special Assistant Harold Stassen suggested that the US limit its resolution to a ceasefire. Ike and Dulles both retorted that the previous

³² Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America into the Middle East*, 1981: page 386

³³ *Ibid.* pages 386-388

³⁴ Joes, *Eisenhower Revisionism: The Tide Comes In*, 1985: page 568

³⁵ Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: Piety, Pragmatism, and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy*, 1999: page 155

ceasefire resolution had been vetoed, and that there was no reason to think that it wouldn't be vetoed again. Stassen replied by saying that citizens would not accept going against old allies like this and that he was not convinced that Britain and France were declining as world powers. Ike replied here by insisting that the European powers were indeed on their way out and that the United States should not keep their good graces if they came at the cost of our support in the Middle East. Here Humphrey again asked if the UN ought to determine what to do, and Dulles snapped that doing so would forfeit their advantage to the Soviets. The meeting continued for over an hour, with participants generally agreeing to halt military aid to involved parties but disagreeing on the emphasis and intensity of the US condemnations. Eventually Eisenhower, frustrated with the argument, sided with Dulles and asked what needed to be done to achieve the goals he had initially recommended. Dulles requested to retreat to the state department and strategize, and Ike ended the meeting. His parting shot was that the US had to assert its leadership if it was to keep out the Soviets, but that the resolution must avoid sounding too inflamed against our allies. Later he would send a memo to all of his top advisers, saying that the UN must not be permitted to put the US in an embarrassing situation and that the Soviet Union must not be permitted to grab the reins.^{36 37 38}

The resolution that Dulles and Lodge eventually presented to the UN involved mild sanctions against Israel, an immediate ceasefire, a ban on all military aid to involved states, and reopening of the Suez canal.³⁹ Dulles was warned by Eisenhower that if their resolution failed, a harsher one by the Soviet Union that played on Arabic resentment of Israel and Europe could triumph, hugely harming the credibility of their Western allies. Dulles gave a solemn but inspiring speech before the General Assembly that he would long-after call one of his greatest achievements as secretary of state. It contained

³⁶ Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America into the Middle East*, 1981: pages 390-392

³⁷ Hybel, *US Foreign Policy Decision-making from Truman to Kennedy: Responses to International Challenges*, 2014: pages 117-118

³⁸ Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: pages 103-106

³⁹ Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: page 110

anti-colonialist tones that distanced the US from their allies but that were reserved enough to prevent undue anti-Western fervor, and achieved as accurately as could have been hoped for the president's desired middle ground approach to the crisis.⁴⁰ Although the US resolution received clamorous support with the Egyptians and with the GA, Britain and France still did not accept the resolution.⁴¹ Meanwhile, intelligence suggested that the Soviets were moving warplanes into Syria to prepare for an intervention, and Eisenhower received a message from the Soviet Union suggesting a cooperative attack to remove the Europeans. Eisenhower was convinced that it was a bluff, but met with the Joint Chiefs to devise a plan. Together they decided to move the Navy's sixth fleet into the Eastern Mediterranean, with British and French ships nearby as a sign of solidarity.⁴² In the meantime the JCS would plan how to handle any further escalation.⁴³

Thankfully no further escalation occurred. Pressures at home had forced the British and French to consent to a ceasefire and allow the UN to take over the situation at the canal. As Eisenhower had predicted, the British and French were the only Western powers that were truly disgraced by the crises, while the US enjoyed huge diplomatic prestige from their authoritative role in bringing about withdrawal. Throughout the crisis Dulles, Lodge, and Hoover pursued Eisenhower's directive to bring about a peaceful end to the Suez invasion and in a series of collegial meetings that smoothed over vastly different policy approaches so that by the time of the pivotal NSC meeting on November 1st, policy consensus was almost achieved. Eisenhower was a president that prided himself on a white house that operated upon strict formalist structure. And although the important decisions in the Suez crisis were indeed the results of meeting with the NSC and other suitable organizational bodies within the executive, Eisenhower and his top advisors early on decided collegially what courses of action were on the table for the formalist

⁴⁰ Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: Piety, Pragmatism, and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy*, 1999: page 154

⁴¹ Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956*, 1995: page 112

⁴² Richardson, *Avoiding and Incurring Losses: Decision-Making in the Suez Crisis*, 1992: page 395

⁴³ Hybel, *US Foreign Policy Decision-making from Truman to Kennedy: Responses to International Challenges*, 2014: page 119

entities to debate on and strategize over. With the best possible solutions arrived at by his close advisors and with the support of his formalist apparatus, Eisenhower's administration secured national and international prestige for the United States, avoiding association with the actions of the British and French without compromising the Western alliance or the personal policy goals of the president.

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