Suez: the Debate

The Anglo-French invasion of the Suez Canal in November 1956 resulted in an open break between the United States and its major European allies. The American response was swift and severe: the United States immediately condemned the invasion in the United Nations, speculated against the pound (thus threatening Britain with severe economic distress) and prevented Britain from withdrawing money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Britain was entitled to withdraw the money and an injection from IMF would have shored up the declining value of the pound. In addition, the United States withheld oil from Europe until Britain and France agreed to withdraw their military forces. The United States was able to do that because Egypt had blockaded the Suez Canal and other Arab nations had blown up the oil pipelines; thus the only oil available to Europe was from the western hemisphere which was controlled by the United States. President Eisenhower, however, did not think the British had been chastened enough and effectively forced the British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, out of office. The American ambassador to London, Winthrop Aldrich, described Eisenhower as ‘vitriolic’ and ‘unstatesmanlike’. Why did the United States adopt such severe measures against its closest ally?!

Historians, journalists and memoir writers have subjected the Suez crisis to a host of different interpretations. Many of them have seen the Suez invasion as a relatively slight aberration in an otherwise harmonious Anglo-American relationship. Others have stressed the mutual dislike between Eden and Dulles, which supposedly prevented them from finding a solution to Egypt’s nationalization of the Suez Canal. Yet others have attributed the crisis to Eden’s misjudgment, arguing that the Prime Minister, having suffered several botched
stomach operations and recurrent bouts of fever, was by the autumn of 1956 on a steady diet of painkillers which clouded his judgement and drove him to the edge of insanity. Finally, nobody seems to have contested Eisenhower’s argument that American pressure on the European powers was necessary in order to maintain respect for international law and order and to prevent the breakdown of the United Nations. The opening of major archival collections in Britain and the United States in recent years has produced material for several new studies on the Suez crisis. It is difficult to group these studies together in one school or another, and they will therefore be discussed separately, following the more traditional or ‘pre-archival’ studies of the Suez crisis.²

While most of these interpretations have some merit to them, they also have serious shortcomings. For example, describing the crisis as a slight aberration in Anglo-American relations is hardly an adequate explanation, as will be shown in the discussion below. A variety of this view is the claim by William Stivers that after the attack on the Suez Canal: ‘The [Eisenhower] administration’s policy during the remainder of the crisis was aimed at saving Britain and France from the consequences of their folly’.³ Public humiliation could hardly be labelled wise alliance policy. It is true that Eden and Dulles had a serious falling out because of the Suez crisis, and Eden in his memoirs is extremely critical of the United States in general and Dulles in particular, which probably explains why historians have put so much weight on the relationship between Eden and Dulles. But, until the height of the Suez crisis, Dulles and Eden had worked closely and effectively together on numerous issues, such as the Geneva conference on Indo-China and the rearmament of Germany. True, they never became personal friends, but their relationship was more one of cooperation than hostility. How, then, do we explain Eden’s comments in his memoirs? Eden was taken by surprise by the strong American reaction to the Suez invasion, and the humiliation he suffered there would forever taint an otherwise extraordinary career. Moreover in the beginning of the crisis Eden and Dulles had been able to work well together. It was only after both parties realized that the United States and Britain had fundamentally different objectives in the Suez dispute that the personal animosity between Eden and Dulles surfaced.⁴

Unquestionably, Eden’s problems with his bile-duct, the botched operations, and the use and alleged misuse of painkillers affected his personality, but to argue that Eden was verging on the edge of irrationality during the Suez invasion is stretching the influence of Eden’s