Eden was dining with the King of Iraq and the King’s closest advisers when he received news that Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal. His visitors left early and the Prime Minister immediately called key members of his cabinet together, and invited the French Ambassador and the American Chargé d’Affairs to participate. While technically legal, the Cabinet considered Nasser’s nationalization the last in a long series of provocations, which had to be rectified, by force if necessary. Soon, alarming messages were reaching the United States.

The American reaction, however, was at first muted. Eisenhower had a series of meetings with his top advisers, but would singledhandedly determine American policy, a policy that was clear and consistent through the Suez crisis. The President would only accept the use of force under the most extreme circumstances: if American citizens or the United States were attacked. Although Dulles would sometimes ‘ad lib’ the allies, the Eisenhower administration never gave a green light for military action. Eisenhower’s initial response was far more concerned about Nasser’s inflammatory rhetoric against the United States and Hoover was instructed to lodge a strong protest to the Egyptian ambassador. While not sharing London’s alarm, Eisenhower still wanted to find a common Anglo-American response to Nasser, excluding military action. He believed that ‘Egypt was within its rights, and that until its operation of the Canal was proven incompetent, unjust, etc., there was nothing to do’.¹

The British had requested the presence of a high-ranking American official in order to coordinate policy over Suez. With Dulles in Latin America, and unwilling to send the State Department’s second ranking officer, Hoover, Eisenhower instructed Deputy Under-Secretary of State, Robert Murphy, to go to London. The President did not seem
overly concerned about the situation: Murphy’s role was to be that of
an observer. He was told ‘to see what it was all about’ and ‘just go over
and hold the fort’. Murphy did not get more specific instructions until
Dulles returned to the State Department, and cabled Murphy on 30 July
1956. Dulles agreed with the President that force was only acceptable as
a last resort, and only after all peaceful means had been exhausted.
Declaration of war was the prerogative of Congress, which Dulles
doubted would be forthcoming, if traffic was allowed to pass un-
molested through the Canal.2

Dulles then outlined three courses of action to which he wanted
Murphy to get allied agreement
1 There needed to be general acceptance of an international
conference.
2 This was to be delayed as long as possible. Dulles wanted an inter-
national conference because he expected Nasser to turn down an
ultimatum and thus give the allies an excuse to use military force.
But as force was unacceptable to the US administration, other
means to solve the crisis had to be found. If Nasser refused reason-
able proposals coming out of an international conference, ‘then
there would be a broader basis than now exists for other affirm-
ative action, free of the imputation, however false in fact, that we
were backing [the] French and [the] British for purposes not
directly related to the operation of [the] Canal’. Only under such
circumstances could the allies expect positive action from
Congress. Thus Dulles was playing for time, delaying the calling of
the conference and dragging out the negotiations, in order to
defuse a potentially explosive situation. This is perhaps the key
issue in the Suez crisis between the United States and Britain and
France.
3 Finally, Murphy had to prevent the issue of the nationalization of
the Canal from being referred to the United Nations because of the
unpleasant consequences it could cause for the American position
on the Panama Canal. As Dulles explained to Murphy: ‘[W]e must
consider our own position in [the] Panama Canal which depends
upon a treaty, and we would be unwilling to be party to a procedure
which assumed that the United Nations had authority in such
matters which would override treaty rights’.3

Murphy had limited success in ‘holding the fort’ and became thor-
oughly alarmed by belligerent British politicians. Macmillan in
particular convinced the American envoy that military action was
imminent. Eisenhower believed that Murphy could no longer control