

DULLES IN THE SUEZ CRISIS

Responses to Law, Aggression, and Revolution

Manfred Halpern

Professor Herman Finer, author of fourteen books on world politics, and political institutions and philosophy, has now written a morality tale abounding with italics, capital letters, and searing words. The burden of his tale is this: In July 1956, John Foster Dulles thoughtlessly provoked a ruthless dictator into nationalizing the Universal Suez Canal Company which controls the lifeline of the West. Then Dulles compounded his sins. He failed to support our closest Western allies by holding the rest of the world at bay while our friends rightfully resorted to force against a Nasser who had rejected an international management board for the Canal. He tried to sap the resolution of Britain and France by delaying their intervention in behalf of international law and morality by proposing international schemes for the Canal which the United States proved unwilling to impose on Egypt.

Throughout this period, Dulles was dishonest with his allies. He never clearly told them that the United States would not stand for the use of force to end Egypt's control over the Canal. He failed to use the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt in order to insist on international control of the Canal and an Arab peace treaty with Israel as the price for halting the invasion. Admittedly, such an attempt would have "incurred the hatred and scorn of many, perhaps all, of the new nations," but that could not have done "the slightest practical damage whatsoever to American interests or reputation." Instead, "America's resistance to the clamant new nations would eventually have required them also to confront their own unjust egoisms and their many vindictive illusions."

What were the reasons for such a wicked course? Finer answers: moralism, evangelism, shortsightedness, and timidity in a President and Secretary of State "so afraid of Moscow's power and intentions that they yielded to their fears."

I would yield to few in my lack of admiration for

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John Foster Dulles—for the substance of his international policies toward most of the world, including the Middle East before and after the Suez crisis; for the style of his diplomacy; or for his deliberate isolation from his own State Department. In this particular case, however, there is much, if not everything, to be said in favor of Dulles' policy.

There is no need to take the side of the devil in Finer's morality play. Neither the facts nor the issues have been validly or fairly cast by him. We shall have to start afresh.

Dulles was the first American Secretary of State ever to visit the Middle East, but he came in 1953 only to see how his long-held convictions might here also be translated into action. He was concerned to bring about military collaboration between the West and the nations along the southern frontier of the USSR. The resultant Baghdad Pact did not turn out well. To list only some of its difficulties: It exacerbated intra-Arab and Pakistani-Afghan tensions and conflicts and for the first time actively involved the United States in them. It stimulated rather than set barriers to Soviet arms shipments to Egypt as the former perceived the build-up of Western military influence and the latter saw that the West intended to isolate it politically and keep it weak militarily. More significant, however, was Dulles' failure to perceive that the main threat to the security and stability of the Middle East was not outright Soviet aggression, but internal weakness. Internal instability, however, was the product of the imbalances and frustrations brought about by insufficient capacity to deal with social change. It is the one kind of change Dulles (or Finer, for that matter) never perceived. In one of his last speeches, to a conference of the National Council of Churches devoted to the theme of change, Dulles spoke of many changes, including the conquest of both polar regions of the earth. Only of the worldwide revolution of modernization, involving the transformation of man, politics, and society, did Dulles say nothing.

That is the principal reason why the Suez crisis began with an act of piercing blindness. To Egypt, the largest of the Arab countries, Dulles said no; we

shall not help to finance the Aswan Dam, Egypt's main hope for rising above a \$120 annual per capita income. To Asians and Africans generally, who thought themselves proudly and sensitively free at last to build nations and construct modern societies, he sought thus also to make plain that nothing mattered as much as military alignment with the United States. Indeed, neutralism was an evil that could not pay: the USSR had no resources to help make it a viable position. Our denial of help to Egypt would dramatize this point.

That is not, of course, what happened. The USSR helped finance the Dam, and even when Khrushchev arrived last month to celebrate the completion on schedule of its first stage, Nasser was still firm and assured in his neutralism. (When Khrushchev criticized Arab unity for excluding proletarian internationalism, Cairo TV followed a carefully edited Khrushchev at the Dam with a documentary on the Berlin Wall.) In responding to Dulles' calculated rebuff in 1956, Nasser on July 26 also nationalized the Universal Suez Canal Company, and thus took control over one of the world's main arteries.

These consequences reflected a characteristic failure of Dulles' imagination. He understood what he regarded as evil better than the world which gave rise to it. His policies tended to stem from a finished certainty of mind regarding the evil to be averted, joined to impressive flexibility regarding methods. One felt he overcame this profound distance between ends and means by virtue of his character—by the very force of his conviction, rather than by an analysis of historical forces, trends, opportunities, and costs. The latter approach, by its very nature, thrives on shared information and free discussion. Dulles had little taste for such engagement. Characteristically, none of his colleagues had known in advance that Dulles would reject the financing of the Aswan Dam for the extraordinary reasons he gave for it. The growing tendency toward decision by committee bureaucratizes conscience. Yet in a world that is being fundamentally transformed, is not an

individual conscience which is sure at last of its own structure and counsel also likely to produce unwisdom and immorality by imposing itself on a world to which it has failed creatively to relate itself?

It is greatly to Dulles' credit that in the crisis that ensued at Suez, he saw most of the issues with clarity and acted with remarkable shrewdness and morality. I think the reason for his strength and insight during this time, in contrast to the earlier (and later) period was that, for a brief interval, the world came close to his image of it. In this interval of crisis, one of the basic issues was international law. He knew that law well, and fortunately for him and the world, its existing rules and morality were still entirely relevant to the justice of the case at issue, if not sufficient for its explanation.

Dulles argued that any sovereign state has the right to nationalize property, provided it paid fair compensation. The agreed price has by now been paid by Egypt in full.

He argued that the use of force would be justified only if Nasser stopped international traffic through the Canal and no other means availed to change his mind. Nasser has never stopped traffic in the Canal, except in immediate reaction to the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on October 1956. Indeed, it is a generally acknowledged fact that more boats now run more quickly through an improved Canal than they did in 1956. The transit of Israeli boats was not a new issue in 1956. Israeli ships have been banned from the Canal since 1948. The Egyptians argue that, in the absence of a peace treaty, Egypt remains at war with Israel. A U.N. Security Council Resolution countered this Egyptian argument in 1951, but mentioned no sanctions. Dulles said he would much prefer international control over the Canal in order to insure free transit for all, insulated from the politics of any nation. But recalling the rules of law (and not eager to get involved with Panama or the Dardanelles at that critical moment) he never suggested that such a desirable end would be worth a war.

Dulles recognized from the beginning that Britain and France were, nonetheless, intent on going to war, and that his arguments did not seem persuasive to them. He therefore insisted on involving his allies in prolonged and elaborate negotiations on possible schemes for dealing with the Canal. His primary purpose was to dull passions and play for time. He knew that most of the British Labor Party, some Conservatives, including members of Anthony Eden's Cabinet, and nearly all of the British Foreign Office were opposed to the use of force. French cabinets were notoriously unstable. Dulles also intended

Herman Finer, *Dulles Over Suez: The Theory and Practice of his Diplomacy*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965. \$7.50.

Leon D. Epstein, *British Politics in the Suez Crisis*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961. \$5.00.

James Eayrs, *The Commonwealth and Suez: A Documentary Survey*, New York: Oxford University Press. \$10.00.

through these conferences to put international pressure on Nasser for guarantees on transit. In this respect he had to settle for less than he had initially spoken for, but he achieved the minimum guarantees he had sought. These were delayed by the invasion, but in July 1957, Egypt accepted compulsory jurisdiction before the International Court in legal conflicts over the Canal's operations. It was the war that Dulles did not succeed in avoiding.

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How can the United States effectively deter its allies from going to war? It is a question deserving increasing discussion, especially since we failed in 1956. It is also an issue which is just as alive when phrased in a less parochial fashion: How could our allies effectively deter us, or the USSR deter its allies, from spreading the war in Southeast Asia? If the relationship involved is that of the United States to Greece and Turkey (in regard to Cyprus), the problem is relatively simple. But how can big powers restrain medium powers while preserving solidarity with them against other big powers? If we look for the reasons for our failure in 1956, we shall at least have to forego answers composed of ready-made clichés. It is not enough to say, let us choose the lesser evil. Which is the greater menace to the growth of security and community in the face of a great foe: to pledge solidarity regardless of cause or to insist on justice as a necessary condition of solidarity? Nor can we say simply: concentrate on the fight against communism. There were no local Communists to fight in Egypt, and all Soviet technicians and advisers left for the Sudanese frontier when the fighting began. The events of 1956 should teach us that it may be easier to deter enemies than friends. There is ample evidence in the *Finer* book, though *Finer* does not recognize it (and I also recall ample evidence in the cables and memoranda of those days), that we repeatedly warned and pleaded, directly and indirectly, with our allies to exploit our elaborate negotiating schemes for getting themselves off the hook domestically, and to recognize that we would not support them in acts of war. We failed to see that since we could not imagine ourselves using force to stop our allies from making war, they could not imagine themselves being effectively deterred. We did succeed in convincing them that we would not join them in attacking Egypt. They, however, merely concluded therefore that they would not need American power to defeat Egypt, but only in order to deter the USSR from entering the fray.

We argued the case in terms of international law

and the practical needs of traffic. They found it hard to pay attention, for their case, as they saw it, had to do with power. Their traditional position in the Middle East was at stake. Their power had rested on control, not on access based on acknowledged interdependence. (This difference of opinion over control as against access based on interdependence still bedevils different U.S.-U.K. policies toward oil and oil-producing territories in the Middle East today.) Britain and France felt secure only if they could reassert control over the Canal. They thought they had power enough to do that. They misunderstood the nature of power in today's world. The result of a successful Anglo-French seizure of the Canal would have been disastrous. Reoccupation of the Suez Canal was bound to be met with continued sabotage by Egyptians who had succeeded once before in 1953, while negotiating for an earlier British withdrawal from this area, in making the Canal Zone unsafe for sustained operations. Had the French and British thereupon been tempted to seize Cairo and Alexandria, they could have succeeded. But this step would have turned the largest Arab country into a larger Algeria, with thousands willing to convert their miserable life into heroic death. No Egyptian would have been prepared to risk assassination and the disdain of the world's majority to govern Egypt in behalf of Western powers during their stay or after their departure.

Though Dulles recognized the force of this argument even before the October attack, his telling of it suffered in effectiveness, for he understood its tactical implications, but not its underlying political reasons. To reassert a legal, economic, or political claim after men have tasted the right to build their own nation and transform their own society is to challenge a revolution, and to be met accordingly.

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Dulles' power of persuasion was also lamed by a sentiment he shared with his allies. Diplomats, like generals, also have a tendency to remember most vividly and to prepare to fight, above all, the last war. Dulles, like Eden, had learned few lessons better than the lesson of appeasement at Munich. Both saw Nasser as a small Hitler. At his most informal, Dulles may at times have sounded like a man who would not entirely object to seeing Nasser overthrown, provided it were done quickly and in behalf of international principles, not Western reoccupation.

Thus, Dulles was unable to deter a war he had good reason to fear would come unless the United States could stop it. It broke out in a manner Dulles had not anticipated and of which President Eisen-

hower had no forewarning until he read the press dispatches. Britain, France, and Israel had entered into collusion ("orchestrated their efforts" as a French account has it), for Israel to attack Egypt, and for Britain and France to enter in order to separate the combatants ten kilometers east and west of the Canal for the sake of protecting its traffic, now that it was demonstrably threatened. What further symptoms there followed of a mad world! In Britain, a democracy then led by a physically and mentally ailing Prime Minister who had informed only part of his inner cabinet of his intention, party discipline helped to maintain Britain's characteristic stability in this crisis even while American, Commonwealth, and U.N. pressure, and a dire run on sterling funds, caused it to retreat from Suez. France, after its retreats from Suez and later from Algeria (which a victory at Suez was to have helped save) came to have a more glorious opinion of itself as a world power. By now, both Israel and Egypt have more and better weapons than they did in 1956, and the arms race continues. Only the Canal, the object of the quarrel, continues to run free.

I cite such facts (only a few of them) in order to bring back into our consciousness what has remained in the consciousness of non-Westerners whenever they hear us speak of the character of Western leadership in the world. (The USSR did itself little good

and much harm at the time by seemingly threatening to help Egypt with volunteers and with missiles against Europe—but waiting to speak in this vein until American and U.N. pressure had caused Britain and France to promise withdrawal.)

America alone had opportunity at that time to build upon its new strength and credit in the Middle East, thanks to its adherence to just international law. It could have created new barriers against aggression and determined upon helping all Middle Eastern nationalists to cope successfully with rapid social change. Dulles took a different tack. He drafted the Eisenhower Doctrine which undertook to defend any Middle Eastern country not against any aggression, but only against aggression from international communism. Increasingly also, he intervened politically, economically and militarily to preserve an increasingly unstable status quo.

Dulles deserves praise for striving for justice under the law and for combatting the Communist revolution (and even his allies) when they threatened to undermine the law. By now, however, it is not enough to keep to one law and to know the evil of a particular revolution. One can neither deter aggression nor produce justice unless intelligence and conscience is attuned to a world in revolution, and can create norms and action relevant to that revolution.

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