

1956 Suez Crisis: When U.S. Did the Right Thing

by Edward Spannaus

In light of the enormous pressures on the Bush Administration to back the fascist policies of the Sharon government in Israel today, it is worthwhile recalling what happened during the 1956 Suez Crisis, when the United States refused to back the plot by Britain, France, and Israel to seize the Suez Canal and overthrow Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser.

When Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in July 1956—an action which was unquestionably legal—the British and the French began plotting with Israel, for the British and French to seize the canal, and Israel to seize the Sinai peninsula. In October, Israel launched raids into Gaza, and in the West Bank on the border with Jordan. President Dwight Eisenhower believed that Israeli Premier David Ben-Gurion assumed that the November 1956 Presidential elections would hamstring him, but he sent a message that “Ben-Gurion should not make any grave mistake based upon his belief that winning a domestic election is as important to us as preserving and protecting the peace.”*

Eisenhower thought that if the Israelis kept going, “I may have to use force to stop them. . . . Then I’d lose the election.” But he told Secretary of State John Foster Dulles: “I will not under any circumstances permit the fact of the forthcoming elections to influence my judgment. If any votes are lost as a result of this attitude, that is a situation which we will have to confront, but any other attitude will not permit us to live with our conscience.”¹

When Israel ordered a general troop mobilization in late October, Eisenhower was still expecting the Israelis to strike Jordan. “I just can’t figure out what the Israelis think they’re up to,” he said to an aide. “Maybe they’re thinking they just *can’t* survive without more land. . . . But I don’t see how they can survive without coming to some honorable and peaceful terms with the whole Arab world that surrounds them.” As to the French, Eisenhower believed that they were egging on the Israelis, because of their colonial problems in North Africa.

In fact, what the Israelis did, on Oct. 28, was to attack Egypt; at that point, Eisenhower realized that the British and the French had been lying to him, and were conspiring with Israel to retake the canal. The British expected that, when push came to shove, the United States would have to back them. But Eisenhower, who reportedly viewed the British

actions as reeking of 19th-Century colonialism, refused, and he was determined not to let the plot succeed.

‘An Unworthy and Unreliable Ally’

Even if it cost him the election, Eisenhower said, he was bound by the 1950 Tripartite Declaration (of the United States, the U.K., and France) to maintain the status quo in the Middle East, and to support a victim of aggression—in this case, Egypt. When Eisenhower got word on Oct. 30 that British and French landings in Suez were imminent, according to minutes of a meeting with top advisers, “He wondered if the hand of Churchill might not be behind this—inasmuch as this action is in the mid-Victorian style.” Although Eisenhower was not particularly anti-British, at this point he denounced them as “an unworthy and unreliable ally.”

Because of the British and French veto in the UN Security Council, the United States announced that it would introduce a resolution in the UN General Assembly (where the “Permanent Five” had no veto power) calling for a cease-fire, for Israel to withdraw to its original borders, for all UN members to refrain from the use of force (aimed at Britain and France), and for an embargo against Israel until it withdrew. It was perhaps the United States’ and UN’s proudest moment. Third World countries were ecstatic that the United States would support a Third World country against colonial powers that were normally its allies.

On Oct. 31, the British began bombing Egyptian targets. On Nov. 1, the United States formally introduced the resolution in the UN General Assembly, and Eisenhower announced sanctions against Israel, including withholding U.S. aid. Early the next morning, the U.S. resolution passed by a vote of 64-5 in the General Assembly—with only Britain, France, Israel, Austria, and New Zealand opposed.

On Nov. 6, Election Day, the British announced their willingness to accept a cease-fire, and Eisenhower defeated Adlai Stevenson (who had urged him to send arms to Israel) by a margin twice that of the 1952 elections. Eisenhower had roughly 35 million votes to Stevenson’s 25 million, and the Democrats carried only seven Southern states. More Jews voted for Eisenhower in 1956 than four years earlier.

When Israel refused to withdraw its occupying forces from the Gaza Strip and from Sharm-el-Sheikh, Eisenhower stuck to his guns against enormous political pressure, and supported UN sanctions against Israel. When Congressional leaders, under pressure from the Israeli lobby, refused to back him, Eisenhower went on national television, and said: “Should a nation which attacks and occupies foreign territory in the face of the United Nations disapproval be allowed to impose conditions on its own withdrawal? If we agreed that armed attack can properly achieve the purposes of the assailant, then I fear we will have turned back the clock on international order.” Eisenhower persisted, and also threatened to take away the tax deductions for gifts to Israel and Israeli bonds. Under that threat, Israel withdrew.

1. Quotations from Eisenhower are taken from Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).