Episode 2.19: Not All Heroes Wear Capes follows on from what we saw in the previous episode, where Eden attempted without much apparent shame to completely redefine what the Suez Crisis had meant, and what Britain’s role in the crisis had been. From the afternoon of 6th November, with a ceasefire in the air, a UN Emergency Force still had to be negotiated. Eden could claim that British and French forces were sticking around in Egypt only for the purpose of maintaining peace and protecting the Suez Canal. Yet, his critics could argue that Britain and France broke the peace in the first place, and that the Canal was now only blocked because of British and French belligerence.

For his sins, Eden’s Party would be attacked in the Commons on the 6th November by the Labour Leader, until, shortly after 6PM, he decided to spill the beans to his peers in the Commons. No, he wasn’t about to tell the truth, instead he was about to put forward the polished turd of an explanation for why Britain had acted as it did. We quote from Eden in full in this episode, as we are reliant on the good folks at Hansard for making the all-important speeches in the Commons over these heady days freely accessible to all. Primary sources help build a story like no other, and here we can hear the British PM say the exact words he said at ten past six on 6th November. Words which, it would transpire, were based in the main on lies which Eden knew to be lies from the beginning. The British PM, as we learned last time, was now engaging in a new strategy – damage control. He was determined to make Britain look as good, as noble and as heroic as possible while doing it. By the end of his diatribe, one could be forgiven for thinking that the world owed Britain some heartfelt thanks. Only Eden and a closed circle of allies knew the truth, but it couldn’t stay this way for long…

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Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to 1956 episode 2.19. Last time, our story examined the fateful day of 6th November, when, despite the forceful entry of the Anglo-French soldiery into Egypt, a ceasefire was looming. We saw why Anthony Eden felt compelled to agree to this ceasefire – it was a culmination of factors, which included the sense of isolation and Soviet military threats, but the finishing blow came from the Secretary of the Treasury, Harold Macmillan. Macmillan essentially fudged the numbers, and claimed that Britain was in far greater financial peril than was actually the case, largely because he had since been persuaded of the need for peace, and wished to impress upon his colleagues and superior of the need for this approach.

Eden had remained resolute to the point of ignorance in the past, but economic arguments were impossible to ignore, and so Macmillan’s warnings proved effective. In such a way did the conflict between the Egyptians and the Anglo-French come to an end, but the Suez Crisis was far from over yet. In this episode then, we’ll examine those days of 6th and 7th November, and ascertain how the ceasefire was finally reached, and then how a beleaguered Tory government sought to present it. Our story is nearly at an end history friends, but some of the best bits are still to come, so without any further ado, I will now take you all to 6th November 1956…

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The truth was beginning to dawn on President Eisenhower, but even then, the truth was so outrageous and so fantastic, it seemed almost impossible for it to be the truth at all. Dwight D. Eisenhower was cursed with a tendency to assume the best and most intelligent policy from the British, and to assume that PM Eden’s disastrous policy must have had more weight and layers underneath the surface than the initial impressions of British retreat and humiliation indicated. The President, in other words, assumed too much of Anthony Eden. Herbert Hoover Jr, the American under-secretary of state while John Foster Dulles was convalescing, recalled one phone call which Eisenhower had with Eden on 6th November. After having approved with resignation the ceasefire in Egypt, Eden then sought to avoid actually resigning by painting the ceasefire in as positive a light as possible.

Eden’s latest brainwave was that an international police force would be sent to Egypt, but that this force should not be composed of some arbitrary UN GA group of ragtag states – oh no. Eden would present the force as needing to have a special kind of authority, so it would thus be only natural that this force should be comprised of members of the UN SC. By making this suggestion, Eden was plainly seeking to preserve the Anglo-French right to maintain a force in Egypt, which an EF organised by the UN GA would not have allowed. The PM believed his policy was something akin to genius, and he phoned President Eisenhower the day before the presidential election in the late afternoon of 6th November to inform him of the plan, and to ask whether Eisenhower would approve of sending a US contingent within this theoretical UN SC force. In a positive mood was Eden, and when Herbert Hoover answered the phone he passed it to his President. Hoover recorded what happened next:

In his conversation with Anthony Eden, the British PM had expressed extreme reluctance to agree to the proposal that this police force would have no British or French troops as a component. When the President asked Sir Anthony how he proposed to exclude Soviet troops from the…forces if he insisted on British and French components in the UN [SC] police force, Sir Anthony had indicated that this problem had not occurred to him, and that he would have to give it some thought. The President said that he was absolutely astounded.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Eisenhower was not the only one to be astounded. That Eden had thought he could invent this UN EF composed of the SC members’ forces, but somehow exclude the Soviets who were also a permanent member of that SC is insane. Yet, it was also a signature of Eden’s that when making plans, he ignored or avoided the potential hiccups of the plan by pretending that they didn’t exist. If Eden’s plan for keeping Britain and France invested in Egypt under the UN flag struck Eisenhower as daft, then the proposal came under similar criticism in the House of Commons, where the predictably merciless leader of the Labour Party Hugh Gaitskell commented on 6th November that:

Is it not…a perfectly sensible proposition that the four great Powers should be excluded? Is it not the case that three of the four great Powers, Russia, Britain and France, have now been virtually condemned as aggressors by the Assembly of the United Nations? Is it not the case that the other great Power, the United States, has made it plain that it does not desire to participate directly in such an international force? If the Government take the view that the great Powers should be included, on what grounds can they possibly object to Soviet Russia sending her contingents? For my part, I have always said that, to get an ultimate settlement in the Middle East, we should have to bring in Russia, but at the present moment, and after what has happened in Hungary, I should have thought that Her Majesty's Government would show no great enthusiasm for Russia participating in such an international force. But how can they refuse, if they insist that they themselves must participate?[[2]](#footnote-2)

It was a line of questioning which would have been difficult for the PM to answer satisfactorily, if indeed he had paid it any attention to begin with. As we said though, Eisenhower continued, for the moment at least, to assume the best of the British policy. Even after the French FM spilled the beans about what had gone down in the middle of November, Eisenhower adopted the view that the British ‘had not been in on the Israeli-French planning until the very last stages when they had no choice but to come into the operation.’ This ideal interpretation of the conspiracy which had taken place did not prevent Eisenhower from getting frustrated with Eden for the untimeliness of his act, but it did mean that the President wore something akin to rose tinted glasses for at least the month of November where British policy was concerned. Herbert Hoover recalled that:

One of the arguments the President cited to support this view was the long delay that took place between the time the British declared their intent to go into Egypt and the time they actually went in. He said that the British were meticulous military planners and he was sure that if they had been in on the scheme from the beginning that they would have seen to it that they were in a position to move into Egypt in a matter of hours after they declared their intention to do so.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This was, as we can see, the most flattering and positive interpretation of British military preparedness, yet Eisenhower had good reason to see things from this perspective. He had, after all, seen the British fight first-hand and seen what their military machine could do. But back to the debates taking place in the House of Commons for a moment, and Hugh Gaitskell provides us with a handy summary of what motivated the British and French to want to stay behind. By this point, about 3.30 in the afternoon of 6th November, it was not yet common knowledge in the House of Commons that Eden had settled on a ceasefire, but Gaitskell’s perceptive interpretation of British terms, and his knack for reading between the lines of Eden’s declarations, are worth recounting. Gaitskell said:

We have heard from the Government from time to time that they believe that the fighting must be pushed ahead until either we or an international force gets into the Middle East, and that we must stay there until the problem of the Suez Canal has been solved. Yesterday, when I said that that seemed to be imposing a solution by force, the Foreign Secretary denied that that was so. I ask hon. Members for a moment to reflect. What exactly is meant when one says that either we, the British and French, or an international force, must be in the Canal Zone and remain there until agreement has been reached? What is meant by "agreement" here? Does it mean until a solution wholly satisfactory to Her Majesty's Government has been reached? Are we then to exercise, as it were, a right of veto? Suppose that negotiations took place and we said, "No, we do not think that this is good enough. We are not going out until we get what we want"; if that is the case, how on earth can it be described as anything other than imposing a solution by force?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Hugh Gaitskell had a point, but as he noted even before these debates began, neither the FS nor the PM were yet present to answer these points, largely because both men were by this stage consumed with communicating the latest turn in British foreign policy, and making plans to dress it up as favourably as humanly possible. While this task may seem like a grim and hopeless one on the surface, this was not in fact the case. Both Britain and France had help from an unlikely source in legitimising their policy – on 5th and 6th November, who should make a state visit to France, but the Chancellor of West Germany Konrad Adenauer.

As was the case with most major events that took place in the first two decades after the SWW, the question of European integration and solidarity during the Suez Crisis was a critically important one to those that continued to grapple with exactly what Western Europe was, and how organised or collective a grouping it could realistically be. We saw in the last episode that initial American efforts to pressure the Anglo-French by making use of the other European powers did not actually work, as the West Germans in particular were more inclined to side with France and Britain than to tow the American line.

A major reason for this was down to the person of Konrad Adenauer himself. Adenauer effectively ruled West Germany since its inception in 1949, and would continue to rule it until 1963, when he retired at age 87. Adenauer was obviously an immensely important and impressive political personality in post-war Europe, and while we don’t have a great deal of time to examine his impact in a broad sense, we are in a position here to note the impact Adenauer had on shaping West German foreign policy during the window of the SC. Adenauer’s shock and outrage at American behaviour was rooted in an event which we haven’t examined in much detail yet, but which we will look at later on in the episode.

Nikolai Bulganin, the Soviet premier and de facto underling of Khrushchev, had sent what amounted to a threat of nuclear war to the British, French and US, if all did not cooperate to bring about peace in Egypt. Eisenhower ignored the note, even while his private conversations with his own subordinates testified to the fact that he took the threat very seriously indeed. Yet Eisenhower was caught in that dilemma between offering support to the British and French for what they had done and were doing in Egypt, or accepting the Soviet threat and losing a considerable amount of face. By remaining silent, Eisenhower aimed to avoid either of these unfavourable options, yet by his silence he hinted to Adenauer and other sensitive Europeans that it was perfectly acceptable for the Soviets to bully and threaten their European neighbours to get what they wanted. When the US and Soviets found themselves, to Eisenhower’s profound disgust, voting in favour of similar resolutions, this to Adenauer was the final straw. Perhaps more because he resented American inaction rather than because he favoured the Anglo-French action, Konrad Adenauer threw his weight behind the French policy, signifying a great moral victory for the beleaguered French.

This act by the German Chancellor is especially significant and says a great deal about the power of his own personality because at the time, the Bonn government and the opposition were divided over how to approach the Suez Crisis. Adenauer forged ahead with a policy of his own by insisting on making a visit to Paris over 5th and 6th November, which sent a strong message of solidarity to those in his Cabinet and in the West German opposition. By sending this message, he intended to show that his loyalty towards the European brethren and his outrage at Soviet threats mattered more than whether or not he personally approved of Anglo-French adventures. Certainly, the embattled French government led by Guy Mollet appreciated this gesture, and welcomed Adenauer warmly.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Let’s remind ourselves of what had gone down in the diplomatic channels by 6th November. The most important day of negotiations must be the 1st November, purely on the grounds that the three announcements made on this day and later into the early hours of 2nd November, formed the basis for so many other agreements which followed, including the ceasefire agreed to by Britain, France, Israel and Egypt just before midnight on 6th November. That 1st November was also the day that Imre Nagy declared his country had left the Warsaw Pact, followed by a request for immediate UN assistance, demonstrated clearly that these were buys times indeed for the United Nations. By 7th November, an uneasy peace would descend upon Egypt, as we’ll see, but the building blocks which led to this development, and which closed the door on the first, most dangerous part of the SC, were laid in the days’ before, and mostly by Canadian diplomacy.

It was immensely fortunate for Eden that other nations had been working towards peace in the background before 6th November. By the time he signalled his intentions to agree to a ceasefire in the early afternoon of 6th November, several devices were already in place to jolly this process along. It certainly wasn’t thanks to British or French diplomacy in the UN that a ceasefire proceeded smoothly forward once Eden had agreed to it – indeed, Eden and his French peers had been the greatest impediment to an arranged peace up to this point. With Britain bowing out though, it was next to impossible that the Israelis and French would continue on without her. Guy Mollet’s sinking despair and Christian Pineau’s boiling anger at the Americans, misplaced though it was, reflected the fact that they knew the jig was up as soon as the British left the Suez building.

But before we cover the circumstances of the ceasefire agreement made in the afternoon of 6th November, it is worth reflecting for a moment on the aforementioned Soviet nuclear threats made on 5th November, which had so distressed Konrad Adenauer and then outraged him when Eisenhower did nothing about them. As was apparently always the case when action is taken towards a certain direction in foreign policy, the public aim of this policy was very different to goals aimed for in private. In the case of Khrushchev’s approved note bluffing nuclear war and the provision of ‘volunteers’ in Egypt if the Anglo-French didn’t withdraw, what Khrushchev actually wanted was not the Anglo-French acquiescence or American withdrawal. Instead, and this is where it gets even more interesting, Khrushchev wanted to force the Americans to support the blunt instruments used by the British and French, and draw closer to them with pledges of support.

Why would Khrushchev want to bring the US and the Anglo-French closer together, in one of the very few instances when the policies of these traditional allies did not coincide? Did it not make sense for Moscow to exploit these divisions, rather than seek to covertly heal them? On the one level it did, but Khrushchev was not looking for a significant military advantage, he was instead looking for a propaganda advantage in his dealings with the ME. Imagine the boost to Soviet prestige if the Western Allies first closed ranks over Egypt and made a big song and dance about their plans for the ME. Imagine then that the Soviet Union sent letters threatening their destruction if they did not all withdraw. Imagine then that the Western Allies withdrew, and the ME was freed from the imperialistic Western powers thanks to the goodwill of the Soviets.

These three ‘imaginings’ were of course all bananas – the Soviets had no intention of letting the ME drift into a neutral, independent camp. Any influence which the West lost in the region, Moscow would for sure want to replace with their own. However, propaganda was a wonderful thing, and the Soviets were masters at manipulating the facts to serve their ends. If the US would rush to the defence of Britain and France in the face of Soviet threats, then this collusion between the West could be used as invaluable ammunition by the Soviets to tell their particular story. It had already been immensely useful for the Soviets to cry foul of the Anglo-French intervention in Egypt and paint it as imperialism striking again – especially when the Soviets engaged in some crushing imperialism of their own in Hungary at almost exactly the same time.

Interestingly, not only had the Soviets threatened, they had also offered Washington an impossible proposal of joint US-Soviet military intervention in Egypt, again, for the sole reason that when the Eisenhower administration refused to take them up on this offer, Moscow could present Washington as being against peace in Egypt. Neither Eisenhower nor Dulles had been ignorant of what the Soviets were trying to do, and Eisenhower’s very reluctance to answer the respond to the Bulganin note is explained by the administration’s correct perception that the Soviets were simply trying to stir the pot. As ever, Soviet diplomacy did not mean what it said. As the historian Brian MacCauley wrote in his article examining the Hungarian revolt and the Suez Crisis side by side:

In this respect, Khrushchev turned a military defeat of Soviet interests in the Middle East, aided by Moscow's inaction, into a propaganda victory for Soviet prestige in the Arab and third worlds. He convinced these peoples that it was the heroic Soviet defence of Egypt that defeated the Western invasion. The actual fact of Soviet desertion of Cairo until the war was all but over and until its hands were freed from the Hungarian revolt was conveniently forgotten by the third world in the avalanche of Soviet propaganda (forgotten by all of the third world except Nasser, that is).[[6]](#footnote-6)

This last point adds a further layer onto the Soviet trickery. Despite what their belligerent tone may have suggested, the Soviets went to great lengths to ensure that conflict did not break out between themselves and the West over Egypt. On the day of the Israeli invasion, the Soviets effectively evacuated their military personnel into the Sudan. Even more depressingly for President Nasser, who had long been told to rely upon the Soviet link for his nation’s security, the Soviets evacuated their state of the art jet fighters from the Egyptian airfields, along with their Soviet pilots. This represented nothing less than an abandonment of Nasser in order to bring about the policy Khrushchev desired and to studiously avoid the consequences he feared. It is somewhat ironic though that Moscow’s behaviour in the Egyptian theatre, which the Soviets would later warp to demonstrate their defeat of imperialism and their noble favour towards Arab independence, was bitterly resented by the very Egyptian they claimed to have saved. President Nasser knew the truth, but he also knew that he needed friends in this troubled world, and so he let the Soviets peddle their lies.

Before we look at the ceasefire properly, it would be wrong to leave the House of Commons debates in the afternoon of 6th November in the rear view just yet. As he had done up to this point already, Hugh Gaitskell had torn asunder the Tory rationale for making war in Egypt, and for warping or guarding details of the operation at every juncture. Gaitskell’s comments on the British policy are all the more striking because of the language used – it isn’t the high and mighty, flowery language used by some British statesmen in debates, for example, in the 19th century. The criticisms levelled at Eden by Gaitskell here read much like the judgements of any academic writing about the period sixty years’ later. For that reason, it’s worth citing two extracts in particular of this continuing debate. Remember, that at this point, the Commons had not been told of Eden’s agreement on the issue of a ceasefire. Since he had not yet graced them with his presence, the assumption went that the government intended the war to continue. Gaitskell, like others, was sick of the Suez Canal being used as justification for the continuation of the war, just as he was sick of the government deliberately muddling the Israeli-Egyptian conflict with the Suez Canal issue. Gaitskell said:

Let us consider where we are in respect of the Canal. I believe that it has now been blocked by eight ships, and with every hour that passes the prospect is that more ships and obstructions will be sunk in it. If we stop the fighting at once the continuing effort to block the Canal will also stop…I think that we should get agreement from Egypt that if we have a ceasefire and withdraw our troops there will be no further sinking of ships in the Canal. Why should not Egypt accept that? The Egyptians only began to sink these ships when we began to attack them. The whole excuse that we went in to protect the Canal from danger seems to me the most transparent that one can possibly conceive. There is not a shred of evidence that there was any really serious danger until we intervened. I agree that there may have been some air battles over that area. It might have been necessary—I want to put this absolutely fairly—for ships to be diverted for a short period, but until we intervened what conceivable interest had either Israel or Egypt in blocking the Suez Canal?

A Conservative backbencher, a Mr E Partridge, then interrupted Gaitskell to ask ‘Why did they – Egyptians – have the block-ships ready?’ To which Gaitskell replied with a palpable sharpness ‘Because they feared we were going to do exactly what we did do.’

While the PM and FS were communicating the news of the ceasefire to the relevant departments, and of course to the soldiery fighting on the ground in Egypt, Gaitskell was ripping the record of the Government’s policy to pieces. It is very hard to fault Gaitskell’s logic here, and the fact that this is the case speaks volumes about exactly how deep a hole Eden had dug. Normally, in cases like these, the question of right or wrong is not so clear cut. However, thanks in part to the stark spectacle given by the Soviet crushing of Hungary, Gaitskell and many others would make the point that, even if the Anglo-French intervention had nothing to do with the Soviet decision to re-enter Budapest, which the opposition believed was very unlikely, then at the very least, Britain’s moral pedestal had been shattered by her actions. Whereas before she would be entitled to comment and criticise Soviet misadventures, now Britain could not do this, for the very reason that, in the minds of many of her statesmen, her citizens and foreign observers, she had behaved in the exact same way. Gaitskell thus continued his blistering attack on Tory foreign policy, and by so doing captured the objections and dilemmas faced by so many of his colleagues. I know you may be sick of hearing of the Labour Leader by this stage, but his points are far too on the ball not to share. In a memorable attack on Eden’s policy, Gaitskell said:

What other object is there in continuing the fighting? Is it to force Egypt to capitulate? Is that what hon. Members opposite want? No doubt they will get their military victories; there never was any doubt about that. When we saw them cheering the reported fall of Port Said yesterday, if we looked glum it was because of the reaction we felt to their cheering a victory which all of us, surely, took for granted. Is it really necessary to prove that we and the French and the Israelis combined could defeat Egypt? I ask the Government, is it their view, now that we are at war with Egypt, that we must have complete capitulation; or are they content merely to carry out the original ultimatum—if, as I fear from what we have heard so far, they intend to go on? Do they propose to stay in the Suez Canal Zone, or do they propose to fight on until Egypt surrenders unconditionally? We are entitled to an answer to that question. There is, obviously, the possibility that if we rest on the Canal Zone, Colonel Nasser…will withdraw his forces, or a large part of them, to Cairo, or west of Cairo, and proceed with guerrilla attacks from there. We shall then be in much the same position as we were in before. We evacuated the Canal Zone [in 1954]. The decision to evacuate was made by a majority of the party opposite. We supported them. We could have defeated them on it, but we supported them. We could have defeated them, had we supported the "rebels," but we did not. What conceivable gain can there be in going back to a position which we deliberately abandoned? I come to one last possible idea as to why the fighting should be concluded. There is talk going round…that, "Nothing succeeds like success"; that all we have to do is to win, and then everything will be fine. Then the Government will be rescued from the position in which they find themselves. If that is the idea they want a fait accompli before anything else happens. Well, it has been rather a long time in coming, but if it comes, what exactly is accomplished? What are we accomplishing by continuing with this war at the gigantic cost of destroying our reputation in the world by three times defying Resolutions carried by large majorities in the United Nations? So far as oil supplies are concerned, we have lost heavily and, above all—in my opinion perhaps the worst consequence of all—we have split the British Commonwealth. Now, on top of this, in these last twenty-four hours—less—there is the Russian threat of intervention. Hon. Members opposite cannot say that we did not warn them that that might happen; we did—the last thing in the world that we should like to see, because we, as I think hon. Members opposite on reflection will realise, are just as proud and anxious for our country as they are. The difference between us is that they have different views from ours as to what constitutes the honour and interests of Great Britain.[[7]](#footnote-7)

There was a surprising amount of references to Britain’s honour, to her prestige, to her reputation and to her good name on 6th November Commons debates. If Britain lost these qualities, then she lost credibility at a time when the Soviet enemy behaved in a damnable way, and she then lost the opportunity to condemn these actions and gain the moral high ground because of it. All of these losses must have been in the forefront of Eden’s mind at this point, but Gaitskell’s point on the value attributed to simply ‘winning’ in Suez also deserves reiterating. Here, Gaitskell referred to Eden’s apparently unshakable belief that even while the house of cards seemed to tumble down around him, if Egypt could just be made to capitulate, and if Eden could just be granted an opportunity to declare victory, it would all have been worth it. This of course was despite the fact that, as Gaitskell pointed out, Britain had lost far too much by this point to recoup all these losses with a mere military victory.

Even if the Union Jack flew once more over the Canal, no one would soon forget the belligerent, scheming behaviour of the British and French, especially with the Soviets harping on about their unsavoury behaviour to all who would listen, and with the unsettling rumours of collusion continuing to leak out. It was precisely because of the damage done to the British reputation that Anthony Eden grasped at so many PR straws, seen in his efforts to consistently recast the Anglo-French action as a peacekeeping mission, which was designed to pre-empt the later peacekeeping action undertaken by the UN. With his suggestion that the UN SC should compose this peacekeeping force being shot down with some indignation in Washington, Eden was faced with the question of what he could now do to paint his policy and the subsequent climb-down in as positive, and honourable a light as possible. With this goal in mind, Anthony Eden finally arrived in the House of Commons to join the debate which had now been on-going for several hours.

At four minutes past six on 6th November, he stood up to speak, and finally informed his peers of what had transpired. The contents of Eden’s speech are fascinating for the multiple layers of detail they contain, and it is absolutely worth reading them out here. I should emphasise again, that in conflicts like these, it has been invaluable to have access to Hansard and to read the House of Commons debates which were recorded exactly as they took place. I am indebted to the stenographers in their task to record the details of the speeches of those British statesmen. I believe it is the stenographers that are the unsung heroes of historical research, since it is because of their work that I am able to provide you guys with such a detailed account of what was said. Recounting these details will take us into injury time in this episode, but considering the contents, and how long we’ve taken to get to this point, I’m sure you’ll forgive me if this episode is longer than normal. After some preliminary introductions, Eden got down to brass tacks, and cited from the documents passed between himself and the UN SG, which now paved the way to peace. Anthony Eden said:

During the night [of 5-6 November] we received from the Secretary-General of the United Nations a communication in which he informed us that both Israel and Egypt had accepted an unconditional cease-fire. With regard to an international force he stated his opinion that the Government of Egypt had accepted such a force. He inquired as to the attitudes of the French and British Governments about such a force in the fight I think in particular of the Canadian Resolution. He also said that he was addressing a similar inquiry to the Government of Israel. Accordingly in reply we have sent the following communication to the Secretary-General:

Her Majesty's Government welcome the Secretary-General's communication, while agreeing that a further clarification of certain points is necessary. If the Secretary-General can confirm that the Egyptian and Israeli Governments have accepted an unconditional cease-fire and that the international force to be set up will be competent to secure and supervise the attainment of the objectives set out in the operative paragraphs of the Resolution passed by the General Assembly on 2nd November, Her Majesty's Government will agree to stop further military operations…They wish to point out, however, that the clearing of the obstructions in the Suez Canal and its approaches, which is in no sense a military operation, is a matter of great urgency in the interests of world shipping and trade. The Franco-British force is equipped to tackle this task, and Her Majesty's Government therefore propose that technicians accompanying the Franco-British force shall begin this work at once. Pending the confirmation of the above, Her Majesty's Government are ordering their forces to cease fire at midnight tonight…unless they are attacked. The French Government are in agreement with the terms of this reply.

A few things should be taken from this extract. While it was the official announcement of the Government’s intention to make a lasting peace in Egypt, it was absolutely tinged with some national self-interest. Note the reference near the end to the Franco-British force being equipped to clear the Suez Canal – a clear and not very carefully veiled demonstration that, even if they could not be included in the UN EF, Eden intended to keep British forces in Egypt regardless. Another point worth mentioning, is that Eden clearly made no mention of the true reason for coming to terms with an armistice. It wasn’t because the other parties involved wanted one, but because after hearing the doomsday economic news from Harold Macmillan, Eden felt he had no choice. Of course, presenting this course of events would have been immensely unflattering, so Eden set to work here presenting the peace deal as one which Britain was agreeing to for the good of everyone else – as something of a noble gesture for the cause of peace.

Having set the groundwork for this manipulation of the facts, Eden would only advance this mission as we’ll see in the next few episodes, where the British and French would be presented by government spokesmen as having held onto Egypt and kept it ‘safe’ until the UN EF arrived. The manipulation and attempts to recast the British role is nothing short of breath-taking – Eden was on a personal mission to acquire a victory from the jaws of humiliating defeat. Now that Nasser plainly couldn’t be evicted, Eden hoped for the next best result – British control over the Suez Canal, while under the auspices of the UN. If this didn’t work, then portraying the British action as a selfless one – which he did in front of his colleagues in the Commons – would have to suffice. Eden also tried another tactic – distraction. Now that the ceasefire had been laid before his colleagues, and there was a chance to portray Britain in a positive light, the next step was to focus attentions on another bogeymen – the Soviets – to demonstrate just how honourable British intentions and actions had been. With this in mind, Eden quoted his telegram sent to Bulganin in response to the latter’s earlier message. One of the highlights of this extract regarded the genuine Soviet hypocrisy in its criticism of British moves, as Eden detailed, noting the contents of his reply to Bulganin that:

Our aim is to find a peaceful solution, not to engage in argument with you. But I cannot leave unanswered the baseless accusations in your message. You accuse us of waging war against the national independence of the countries of the Near and Middle East. We have already proved the absurdity of this charge by declaring our willingness that the United Nations should take over the physical task of maintaining peace in the area. You accuse us of barbaric bombardment of Egyptian towns and villages. Our attacks on airfields and other military targets have been conducted with the most scrupulous care in order to cause the least possible loss of life. Some casualties there must have been. We deeply regret them. When all fighting has ceased, it will be possible to establish the true figure. We believe that they will prove to be small. They will in any event in no way be comparable with the casualties which have been, and are still being, inflicted by the Soviet forces in Hungary. The world knows that in the past three days Soviet forces in Hungary have been ruthlessly crushing the heroic resistance of a truly national movement for independence, a movement which, by declaring its neutrality, proved that it offered no threat to the security of the Soviet Union. At such a time it ill-becomes the Soviet Government to speak of the actions of Her Majesty's Government as 'barbaric'. The United Nations have called on your Government to desist from all armed attack on the people of Hungary, to withdraw its forces from Hungarian territory, and to accept United Nations observers in Hungary. The world will judge from your reply the sincerity of the words which you have thought fit to use about Her Majesty's Government.

Eden at least knew that his own policy’s hypocrisy had been hidden, or that at least the waters had been muddied, in comparison to the blatant destruction of Hungary and the removal of the revolutionary government which Moscow had originally seemed to accept. Now that he had redirected the attentions and criticism of his peers towards the Russians, Eden continued with his mission to present his policy as a noble and just one. By so doing, the PM listed several positive results from the recent Anglo-French action which had never been Eden’s original intention to set in motion. In fact, with President Nasser still in place, and the Canal uncertain, Eden’s original plan and those of his French allies had manifestly failed. However, to admit this would have been to accept and welcome disaster, so Eden chose to present the unintended outcome of his failed policy as the natural and desired results which had been sought after from the start. Part of this process was of painting Britain as something of a superhero. You can judge for yourselves how truthful this portion of Eden’s speech was, as the PM noted:

I will lay down what I believe has been the result of the action we took, with all its admitted attendant risks, which I have never concealed. I believe that it has limited the area of conflict. If hon. Members think that that is not a fair comment I should like them to consider whether, when hostilities broke out, any of them thought it possible that the other Arab countries would not have been, all of them, immediately involved in a war with Israel. I believe—in fact, I am convinced—that it was only the knowledge of the presence of our forces which limited the conflict to that area. The fact that fighting has now stopped and that the Israeli acceptance of the 10-mile limit has made it virtually certain, as far as it can, that the two parties shall not re-engage in conflict meanwhile, is, I should have thought, also an achievement which all of us should reckon to be worthwhile. Now I come to what is a more controversial but, as time passes, may perhaps become a more generally accepted statement of one of the results, namely, that the action we took has been an essential condition for the attempted creation—which we hope will be successful—of a United Nations force to come into the Canal Zone itself. I ask hon. Members to look at the history of the Middle East in the post-war period and ask themselves if anything but this action would have brought the United Nations to take this step. I am absolutely sure that it would not.[[8]](#footnote-8)

So Britain had prevented conflict from spreading to other states in the ME. She had saved Israel by so acting. She had ensured that conflict would not soon erupt again between Israel and Egypt. Finally, and most controversially considering all that Britain did to hinder the actions of the UN, and all that the real unsung diplomatic heroes in the Canadians did to further that body’s cause, Eden argued that by acting with France here, Britain essentially forced the UN to act by drawing the situation in the ME to her attention. The transformation was essentially complete, and while the next day Eden would have to answer further questions on what had gone down, these were trials for another day. He had successfully – to some degree at least – changed the argument, and provided a new slant on British actions. Far from the true motives which had originally moved Eden to conspire with its Israeli and French allies, Eden presented a version of Britain to the world that had acted with the most honourable and reasonable of intentions, to prevent further war in the ME, to contain the looming conflict that was already present, and to put steel into the UN to act.

It wasn’t, taken at face value, a particularly strong argument. Yet, Eden had produced something, a new narrative, which could be effectively argued for by adherents to his policy line. No longer would Eden or his circle have to simply argue that might had made right – instead, the story was that Britain had done it for the good of the world. Perhaps, the ailing PM believed that while the opposition or other sceptics busied themselves with trying to reel in this red herring, they would forget about the truth of the matter – Eden had taken a gamble, and he had failed. Eden certainly believed that it was better to have a policy which not everyone could agree with and which not everyone could understand, than to claim ownership of a policy which had simply failed. Failure, that cardinal sin of the statesman, was something which Eden was determined to avoid whatever the cost. This cost – of bare faced lies, of manipulation and of a serious distortion of history – was one which the embattled PM was evidently willing to pay.

We’re going to leave it there for this episode my dear patrons, since it has been something of a saga today, but I want to say a huge thanks for listening to this weighted episode, where we covered a great deal of stuff. I hope you enjoyed it, because I for one really enjoyed writing and performing it for you guys. I hope you’ll join me next time anyway, for our penultimate episode of 1956. It’s very sad I know, but as you can see, the further along in this story we get, the better, I would argue, it keeps on getting. In any case, this has been episode 2.19 of 1956, my name is Zack, thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Cited in Barry Turner, *Suez 1956*, p. 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS’, HC Deb 06 November 1956 vol. 560 cc20-84; see cc.31-32. Available: http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1956/nov/06/debate-on-the-address [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cited in Barry Turner, *Suez 1956*, p. 405. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS’, HC Deb 06 November 1956; see cc 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Ralph Dietl, ‘Suez 1956: A European Intervention?’, pp. 272-273. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brian McCauley, ‘Hungary and Suez, 1956: The Limits of Soviet and American Power’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Oct., 1981), pp. 777-800; p. 788. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Hansard*, 6 November, *Ibid*, cc 32-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. All citations from 6th November come from previous *Hansard* source, cc.75-84.

See http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1956/nov/06/debate-on-the-address [↑](#footnote-ref-8)