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British Prime Ministers Since 1945: Eden

Chapter 5: Eden: the prince crowned

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When Sir Anthony Eden became prime minister in April 1955, he was already a famous man, not quite as famous as his immediate predecessor, but almost. He was known and highly regarded far beyond the confines of Great Britain. Born and brought up in County Durham a scion of minor aristocracy, educated at Eton and Oxford and the member of parliament for the safe Conservative seat of Warwick and Leamington since 1923, he achieved a modicum of fame in 1935 when he was appointed the youngest foreign secretary since before the Crimean War and a much more in 1938 when he resigned from Neville Chamberlain's government following a sharp disagreement between him and the prime minister over the tactics that Britain should employ in its relations with Mussolini's Italy. Following the outbreak of war in 1939, he returned to government, first as Dominions secretary under Chamberlain, then as secretary of state for war under Churchill and finally as, once again, as foreign secretary. He went on to serve in the Foreign Office – essentially as Churchill's foreign-affairs deputy, dealing with those matters not currently uppermost in the boss's mind – from 1940 until 1945. As foreign secretary yet again between 1951 and 1955, with Churchill's faculties and strength much diminished and ever diminishing, Eden played an enhanced version of essentially the same role. But he was far from being a mere subordinate or underling. By the early 1950s, Eden was someone everyone in the political world felt bound to listen to and take note of. By then, he was one of the brightest stars in Britain's, or any other country's, political firmament.

Eden's renown stemmed from more than his sheer longevity in office. It owed a good deal to his evident charm, his winning smile, the cut of his suits and, not least, his film-star good

looks (the films in question being those of the 1930s and 1940s); as someone observed, ‘The older the lady, the deeper the swoon.’ [DRT, *Eden*, pic caption after 438] But politically and in government circles it owed far more to the fact that Eden was very good at his job. Behind the debonair exterior there lurked a consummate professional. Eden worked prodigiously hard and expected his staff to do the same. He prepared himself thoroughly for meetings and in his dealings with others was invariably courteous and level-headed. He was also an accomplished linguist, fluent in French and German and, having read oriental languages at Oxford, was capable of reading Arabic and Persian literature in the original. Although he was no Churchill-like rhetorician, his speeches were usually models of logic and clarity. As he gained experience, he proved a courteous but tough negotiator. As the years went by, he also became one of the best informed of the world’s statesmen. Most of those initially prejudiced against him on account of his boulevardier style soon realised that he was a lot more impressive than he looked. He might possibly have become the first secretary-general of the United Nations. When he first appeared as Britain’s new foreign secretary at the UN General Assembly in 1951, ‘Foreign Ministers and diplomats crowd[ed] up to welcome him on every side’. [Shuckburgh, 13] At a conference in Geneva in 1954, less than a year before he became prime minister, Eden was largely responsible for brokering a deal between France and the communist rebels in Vietnam which brought peace (albeit temporarily) to that war-torn country. The Geneva conference represented, in Eden’s own view, his finest hour.

Eden’s personality was more complex than that of Attlee or even Churchill. There were two Anthony Edens. One was the public Eden: assured, poised, confident, always in control. The other was the inner Eden: private, nervous, often self-doubting, given to quite violent mood swings. The actor Anthony Quayle, meeting Eden for the first time, ‘remarked that he seemed

like an actor playing the part of A. E.’ [Dixon, *Double Diploma*, 86 + DRT, *Eden*, 681n89]

Quayle was right: the inner Eden *was* playing the part of his public self. If Attlee was a man wholly comfortable in his own skin, Eden was anything but. A young diplomat noted after a pleasant holiday in the south of France with Eden and his wife during the 1930s:

As a man rather than a pleasant holiday companion he struck me as very quick on the uptake, sensitive & with all the points & some of the failings of a thoroughbred.

Sometimes his nervousness wd get the better of him & one bad course wd. be enough to spoil a whole dinner. . . . [A]dmitting and admiring his qualities I cannot help the suspicion that some essential things are lacking: greatness, firmness, fixity of purpose, the quiet confidence that in these perilous years ‘I know I can save England and no-one else can’. [Caccia quoted in DRT, 171-2, 672n96 + Caccia]

It was always difficult for Eden to reconcile his two selves, and the effort cost him a great deal.

It almost certainly contributed to the frequent breakdowns in his health and to the unhappy breakup of his first marriage. Eden had numerous affairs – he loved women, and they loved him – and for a large part of his career he lived in a state of constant low-level anxiety lest his sexual relations with women other than his wife become public knowledge, at a time when such knowledge could easily terminate a political career. One of the inner Eden’s greatest consolations was his intense interest in the arts, especially painting, sculpture, architecture, novels, poetry and the theatre (he never travelled anywhere without having about his person a pocket edition of a play by Shakespeare). ‘Eden, in short’, as D.R. Thorpe, his most recent biographer, puts it, ‘was one of the most cultivated Prime Ministers to occupy Downing Street in the twentieth century’. [DRJ, 331] His love of the arts – as well as the success of his second marriage – made bearable the long years of his retirement.

The relationship between Eden and Churchill was, to say the least of it, a curious one. On the one hand, Churchill, nearly twenty-three years Eden's senior, seems to have regarded Eden as a sort of surrogate son, definitely a more satisfactory offspring than his actual son, the tempestuous Randolph; at least that was the opinion of many of the two men's contemporaries. Churchill also seems to have fostered within himself an over-romanticized view of Eden's resignation from the Chamberlain government. Eden was certainly critical of the totality of Neville Chamberlain's policy of attempting to appease both Germany and Italy by making large-scale concessions to them (always at other countries' expense), and he might well have felt bound to resign sooner rather than later, but the immediate cause of his 1938 resignation was on a specific, relatively narrow difference of opinion between him and the prime minister, although that difference was undoubtedly compounded by personal tensions between the two. Still, Churchill was right in believing that Eden was ultimately an across-the-board opponent of appeasement, and he probably also sensed that the nervousness inherent in Eden's temperament would prevent him from ever seriously challenging his own dominant position. Whatever his motives, Churchill left no one in any doubt that from the early 1940s onwards he regarded Eden as his natural – indeed his inevitable – successor. Before departing on a visit to America in 1942, Churchill wrote to the king, George VI, privately but formally in the following terms:

In case of my death on this journey I am about to undertake, I avail myself of Yr Majesty's gracious permission, to advise that He shd entrust the formation of a new Government to Mr. Anthony Eden . . . who is in my view the outstanding Minister in the largest political party in the House of Commons and in the National Government over which I have the honour to preside, and who I am sure will be found capable of

conducting Yr. Majesty's affairs with the resolution, experience & capacity which these grievous times require. [DRT, 272]

Churchill never subsequently resiled from that position. Eden was now the crown prince, and he was willing for more than a decade to allow himself to be cast in that role.

That was on the one hand: strong bonds of loyalty and fealty between the two men. But, on the other hand, neither of the two was always over-impressed by the performance in office of the other. They were by no means unqualified mutual admirers. As early as 1936, they were on different sides in the heated debate over the abdication of Edward VIII, Churchill being volubly against, Eden in favour. In the bleak autumn of 1940, Eden took Churchill to task for not handling the prickly Charles de Gaulle with greater delicacy, and Churchill, according to Eden, 'told me that I ought not to be so violent with him' – before reassuring Eden a week later that the postwar succession 'must' of course be his. [DRT, 247 / AE] In 1943, he turned down an offer of the viceroyalty of India 'because he genuinely believed – and was encouraged so to believe by the King – that it was in Cabinet as a counter-balance to Churchill's wilder excesses that he could make the most valuable contribution to the war effort.' [DRT, 286] After the war, as we saw in the last chapter, Eden chafed bitterly at Churchill's refusal to depart or even to say definitely when he would depart. He wanted the top job himself (Churchill always said he had 'hungry eyes'); but, even more, he was one of the majority in the cabinet who thought Churchill had escalated downwards from dilatory wilfulness to total, selfish incompetence. As for Churchill, he had many reasons, not all of them selfish, for clinging on, and one of them was undoubtedly the doubts that he had long harboured about Eden's ability to function successfully as Number One rather than Number Two. Churchill's faithful aide, Jock Colville, reported in his diary the aftermath of the occasion, at the very end of Churchill's premiership, on which the

prime minister, breaking with precedent, hosted a dinner for the Queen and Prince Philip at 10 Downing Street. The aftermath was dramatic:

When they [the guests] had all gone, I went up with Winston to his bedroom. . . . For several minutes he did not speak and I, imagining that he was sadly contemplating that this was his last night at Downing Street, was silent. Then suddenly he stared at me and said with vehemence: “I don’t believe Anthony can do it.” **[JC, 708]**

Events soon proved that Churchill’s hunch about his successor was well founded.

Today, Anthony Eden’s name is indissolubly linked with that of the Suez Canal and Britain’s catastrophic invasion of Egypt in 1956; but, when Eden took office in April of the previous year, and went on to lead the Conservatives to victory comfortably at the May 1955 general election, no one could possibly have foreseen what was going to happen next. The new prime minister was only 58, and it was widely, though not universally, assumed that he would carry on in the usual way until 1959 or 1960, perhaps for longer. Harold Macmillan was probably expressing the commonest view when he noted in his diary on the day the new man took over: ‘It is a pretty tough assignment to follow the greatest Englishman of history, but I feel sure Eden will make a good job of it.’ **[HM, *Diaries*, 413 but DRT, 433 / Swinton, Dalton]**

Sadly, from the beginning both Eden’s temperament and his past conspired against him. If Churchill had been ‘gloriously unfit for office’ in 1951, Eden was, if anything, even less well fitted in 1955. Within months of his taking office, his weaknesses and limitations were already becoming apparent. Not the least of his problems were his actions – and, even more, his inactions – during the many years while he was waiting to succeed Churchill. Everyone knew he was waiting. Everyone also knew that he was waiting more and more impatiently. Word that he frequently disagreed with Churchill on substantive issues almost certainly leaked out. But at the

same time it was patently obvious to everyone that, in the game of cat-and-mouse that Churchill was playing, Eden was the mouse – a mouse, moreover, that signally failed to fight its corner. It is hard to escape the conclusion that most of his prospective cabinet colleagues and a large proportion of Conservative backbenchers, although they liked Eden and admired him in many ways, saw him as essentially a weakling. Seeing him that way, they were inclined to treat him that way. If he was going to prove a strong leader, he was going to have to assert himself.

Eden also suffered from the limitations of his governmental experience. He had by no means succumbed to the disease that Churchill dubbed ‘F.O.itis’. **[find ref]** On the contrary, Eden was intensely interested in a wide range of domestic issues. Unlike so many senior Conservatives then and since, he hailed from the economically deprived North East and strongly identified with that part of the world. Following his resignation as foreign secretary in 1938, he spent several months touring, studying and talking to all sorts and conditions of people in the depressed industrial areas of County Durham, Tyneside, Glasgow and South Wales; and after the war, with the Conservatives in opposition, he played a large part in reorienting Tory party policy towards a more consensual, humanitarian ‘One Nation’ brand of conservatism. He interested himself in housing, industrial and regional policy, workers’ participation, employee share ownership and the broadening of educational opportunities. His difficulty was that, in office, he had never acquired hands-on, day-to-day experience of dealing with any of these issues. As a result, the focus of his attention as prime minister remained on foreign affairs, and his dabbling in the details of domestic policy was often amateurish. In retrospect, he himself recognised that it would have been better if, in 1951, he had insisted on a domestic portfolio instead of returning to the Foreign Office. **[ref?]**

Eden's principal ministerial appointments on taking office were as unimaginative as they were, up to a point, unavoidable. Eden sought to give the impression that, new to office, he was determined to make a fresh start; he would be the one to breathe fresh air into the new administration. But, like Churchill, Eden on the whole preferred to work with people with whom he was familiar, and in any case most of Churchill's appointees to middle-ranking office during his tenure of office had not distinguished themselves. There were not many individual junior ministers who self-evidently merited promotion. Even so, Eden badly dented his reputation by appointing a Churchill-look-alike administration on taking office in April 1955 and then reshuffling it to only a limited extent – and, as many thought, belatedly – the following December. In April, nothing much happened apart from the installation of Macmillan as foreign secretary. The result was 'a general – if discreetly muted – surprise within the Party that so little had been done.' [RRJ, *AE*, 404] In December, Eden transferred Macmillan, after only nine months at the Foreign Office, to the Treasury, where he succeeded R.A. Butler who, after five years as chancellor, became leader of the House of Commons. Otherwise, again, nothing much happened. Eden's failure to undertake a major reconstruction of the government immediately following the Conservatives' success in the May election meant that 'discontent, concern and criticism were further augmented.' [ibid] Eden gave every appearance of being timid and indecisive. In addition, his decision to appoint as his new foreign secretary the little known and conspicuously underwhelming Selwyn Lloyd, only recently elevated to the cabinet, signalled that the prime minister intended to be his own foreign secretary. In removing the infinitely more forceful Harold Macmillan from the Foreign Office, Eden, in the view of almost everyone, 'had appointed a tame nonentity rather than tolerate a politician of his own rank in the Party and the

House of Commons.’ [RRJ, *AE*, 424] Eden probably had no intention of making himself look especially strong, but he only succeeded in making himself look weak.

Like his two predecessors, Eden was brought up to be, and certainly remained, a constitutional traditionalist. He took the cabinet seriously, it met frequently, he chaired it skilfully (far more in Attlee’s style than Churchill’s, though he was not quite as incisive as Attlee), discussion in cabinet was uninhibited, and sometimes the cabinet’s conclusions were not the ones he would have preferred. During his first year in office, the cabinet discussed, often at length, the deteriorating state of the economy, how the government should respond to Princess Margaret’s desire to marry a divorcee, the future of the death penalty, Commonwealth immigration, MPs’ pay and much else besides. Harold Macmillan, then still foreign secretary, jotted down in his diary a summary of one relatively routine meeting:

The Cabinet approved the line which I proposed to take over Cyprus. I really think it is imaginative as well as sensible. . . . The rest of the discussion in Cabinet this afternoon (it lasted 3 hours) was taken up with the economic situation. I thought the various contributions were sensible and practical. The chief problem is how to make a ‘balanced political package’. A Capital Gains Tax wd undoubtedly have the best political effect – but it is not a very good plan for a Tory Govt to start new taxes, and it is said to require a 30-40 Clause Bill. We have got to do the job (at least in essentials) in 5 Parliamentary days. [HM, *Diaries*, 470, perhaps expand CGT in n.]

There are many such entries in Macmillan’s diaries, testifying to the cabinet’s collective importance in Eden’s time. At one point, Macmillan even complained that the cabinet was meeting too often. [ibid, 416]

Eden, however, was not content with Downing Street and Whitehall formalities. He never attempted to engage in detailed micromanagement of the government, but he did chivvy his ministers and leave them constantly with the feeling that he was looking over their shoulder. Accustomed to dealing with the public Anthony Eden – calm, confident and relaxed – his ministerial colleagues and their officials suddenly found themselves having to deal with the inner Eden, the man, so to speak, behind the mask. He frequently phoned ministers at inconvenient hours, often late at night, and, when he did, he often sounded over-excited and anxious. He occasionally lost his temper. Rumours began to spread that inkwells had been thrown. His lack of confidence in dealing with domestic issues sometimes led to exchanges that were as brusque and ill-humoured as they were ill-informed. Unlike Churchill, who liked both a good argument and people who were prepared to have a good argument with him, Eden liked neither. He took criticism, and even mere disagreement, badly. His nervousness and lack of confidence meant that he was prone to changing his mind and often put off tough decisions (and allowed his cabinet to do the same). Most of his colleagues liked and sympathised with him, but they did not find him at all easy and must often have wished, although they would not have put it so vulgarly, that he would simply sod off.

Macmillan, for one, frequently praised Eden in his diary for his deft handling of the cabinet ('Eden is a good chairman – very fair and very agreeable'), but even more frequently he was clearly irked by the prime minister's nagging: 'A mass of telephoning went on . . . which ruined the whole day from luncheon onwards. The P.M. is very nice and friendly, but he does fuss.' [HM, *Diaries*, 513] R.A. Butler similarly recounted in his memoirs how often he was 'at the receiving end of those innumerable telephone calls, on every day of the week and at every hour of the day, which characterized his conscientious but highly strung supervision of our

affairs.’ [Butler, *AofP*, 184] Even someone as relaxed and calm as the Earl of Home (later Sir Alec Douglas-Home), one of the principal beneficiaries of Eden’s patronage, was alleged to be exasperated by the daily phone calls. [RRJ, *AE*, 411] One of Eden’s sympathetic biographers, Robert Rhodes James, suggests that prime ministers can be categorized as either Olympians or Interferers. Churchill had been an Olympian, sometimes so Olympian that he vanished into the clouds. Eden was indubitably an Interferer. [ibid] Asked in January 1956 by Hugh Gaitskell, his successor as Labour leader, to say why the government appeared to be doing so badly, Clem Attlee replied that Eden had never ‘had any experience of running a team.’ [HG, *Diary*, 411, CA+] His many years at the Foreign Office, first under Chamberlain, then under Churchill, had deprived Eden of such experience.

Between the May 1955 election and the summer of the following year, the sense that all was not well inside the government spread throughout Whitehall and Westminster, reinforced by alarmingly large swings against the Conservatives in a sequence of by-elections in Tory-held seats. There had been a post-Churchill honeymoon, but it had been brief. Eden continued to suffer from the lack of a substantial personal following – and from never making any attempt to acquire one. He was not only a loner: he was largely out on his own. There were no staunch ‘Edenites’. He was comfortable in the House of Commons chamber, and he spoke well there; but, in Harold Macmillan’s words, he was ‘*not* an Hof Commons man – he *never* enters the Smoking Room’. [HM, *Diaries*, 576] The sympathetic biographer quoted a moment ago, Robert Rhodes James, served as a junior official on the House of Commons staff during Eden’s premiership and had seen him at close range. He was aware that Eden had never been a convivial parliamentarian and had suffered as a result:

When he looked at the Conservative benches he saw in the main the faces of complete strangers. The great Lord Salisbury, whose vagueness was famous, was said not to recognize even his own Cabinet members, and Arthur Balfour studiously never read newspapers, but these were different times. The majority of Conservative Members had hardly ever met Eden, except in the most perfunctory manner at best, and only saw him from afar. Many of them sensed . . . that he did not particularly want to know them better. From the beginning, he was a distant and aloof Prime Minister . . . What was in truth a mixture of shyness and reserve was ascribed to vanity and self-esteem, two vices that he conspicuously lacked. [RRJ, *AE*, 406]

Eden had very few thick-and-thin political friends.

The prime minister was further beset by a development that was in no way of his own making. The Conservative party in the mid 1950s was simultaneously becoming more deeply divided than it had been in the recent past and also a great deal stropier. Lord Kilmuir, a cabinet minister under successive Conservative prime ministers throughout the 1950s, famously maintained that ‘Loyalty is the Tory’s secret weapon.’ That was becoming less and less true. Dissident Conservative MPs seldom defied the whips and voted against the government in the division lobbies, but they spoke out against government policy, wrote newspaper articles critical of it and covertly briefed journalists against both the government and, increasingly, Eden himself. In particular, but not exclusively, the ‘Suez Group’ of backbench Tory MPs were determined that Britain should surrender nothing of its status as an imperial and world power. Its members deeply resented the willingness of successive Conservative governments to contemplate granting self-government and even outright independence to Britain’s remaining colonial territories. In 1954, with Churchill still prime minister, twenty-six Conservative

backbenchers did vote against the government following ministers' negotiation of an agreement with Egypt under which Britain would withdraw its troops from Egypt two years later in return for that country's guaranteeing the right of free passage of ships through the Suez Canal. As foreign secretary, Eden had been the principal architect and promoter of that agreement.

Eden was exceptionally maladroit in his dealings with the press. Attlee, as we have seen, took little interest in journalism and journalists, but he took just enough interest to ensure that he was treated with at least a modicum of respect. Churchill – although he was close to several newspaper proprietors, notably Lord Beaverbrook, and although he had once enjoyed a substantial career in journalism – scarcely bothered himself with the press after 1951 (apart from glancing at the papers the next day to see how well his speeches had been received); at his age and with his world renown, he was too grand to have to bother. Eden, however, did bother, but only in the narrow sense that, being thin-skinned in any case, he was extraordinarily sensitive to what the newspapers had to say about him. Otherwise, he was a complete innocent. He seemed to think that if he confided in the editor of *The Times* all would be well. One prominent journalist, accustomed to being the recipient of newsworthy leaks from the Churchill camp, was furious when his Number 10 sources dried up and became in consequence a vehement critic of the Eden government and all its works. **[RRJ, 412]** Eden recognised that he needed a press and public relations adviser but in a fit of insouciance appointed to the post a left-leaning *Observer* journalist named William Clark whom he had never previously met, who had not the beginnings of an understanding of Eden's political interests and who was an inveterate gossip, anxious to impress whomever he happened to be talking to at any given moment and totally incapable of keeping his mouth shut. **[DRT, 443-4]** Despite Clark's innumerable indiscretions, many of which found their way back to Downing Street, Eden never sacked him. As though all that were

not enough, Eden had somehow acquired – for reasons that historians have been unable to fathom – an implacable enemy in the person of the rich socialite Lady Pamela Berry, the forceful wife of Michael Berry, the *Daily Telegraph*'s chairman and editor-in-chief.

As a result of Eden's insouciance and naivety, Clark's egomania and Lady Pamela's animosity, Eden found himself, after the first few months, confronted by an almost uniformly hostile press. In the eyes of most newspapers, he was a prime minister who could do no right. Labour-supporting newspapers were predictably critical, but they were joined in a strange anti-Eden coalition by the Berrys' *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, one of whose columnists, Randolph Churchill, was among Eden's most virulent critics. In January 1956 the press's hostility reached its climax when the *Daily Telegraph* published an excoriating leading article by the paper's deputy editor Donald McClachlan:

There is a favourite gesture of the Prime Minister which is sometimes recalled to illustrate this sense [the sense that then prevailed] of disappointment. To emphasis a point he will clench one fist to smack the open palm of the other – but this smack is seldom heard. Most Conservatives . . . are waiting to feel the smack of firm Government.

[Dutton, 378]

The article stung Eden, who was persuaded a few days later to publicly deny that he was considering resignation – a denial that only fuelled speculation about his future intentions.

By the summer of 1956, Eden's government was clearly in the doldrums. The press was hostile. Several of Eden's colleagues were discouraged. Conservative backbenchers sulked. There was evidence of discontent among the party in the country. And it did not help that Rab Butler, when ambushed at the airport by a journalist who asked him whether Eden was 'the best prime minister we have got', replied tersely 'Yes' – an exchange that much of the world's press

distorted in a way suggesting that Butler had volunteered, with incredible disloyalty, ‘Eden is the best prime minister we have got.’ By early July, Anthony and Clarissa Eden were greatly looking forward to a much needed three-week holiday in August. Then, suddenly, on 26 July 1956, Egypt’s military dictator, Gamal Abdel Nasser, unilaterally abrogated his 1954 agreement with Britain, nationalized the Suez Canal and ordered Egyptian troops to seize the entire Suez Canal Zone.

The story of the ensuing Suez crisis has often been told, and it is a sorry tale, one of the sorriest in modern British history. **[Kyle + Bennett]** Egyptian control of the canal – and its ability to close it – represented a serious threat to both Britain’s oil supplies and its power and influence in the Middle East. Eden quickly appointed an inner cabinet, the Egypt Committee, to direct Britain’s response. Largely at Britain’s instigation, an international conference met in London three weeks later and agreed a set of compromise proposals, designed to give the Egyptian government a substantial stake in the canal’s administration but without ceding total control over it to Egypt. Nasser rejected the London conference’s proposals. At a second conference in late September, also held in London, the American delegates, anxious to avoid the outbreak of war in the Middle East, especially on the eve of a presidential election in the US (due to be held in early November), proposed setting up a Suez Canal Users Association which would ensure continued access to the canal by international shipping. The Soviet Union, in a tacit alliance with Egypt, vetoed that idea when it was presented to the United Nations Security Council in October. After three months, an impasse had been reached.

At this point, there seemed – at least to the British government – to be no alternative to the use of force. British ministers, officials and military commanders had all along suspected as much and had been making contingency plans. During the weeks following the Soviet veto and

working together in the utmost secrecy ('colluding' was the word used later), the prime ministers and foreign ministers of Britain, France and Israel devised a plan which would begin with Israel invading Egypt and pushing rapidly towards the Suez Canal. The Israeli government had its own reasons for fearing Nasser, who clearly aspired to the leadership of the whole Arab world. As soon as Israel invaded, Britain and France would issue a joint ultimatum demanding that both Israel and Egypt cease fire. Israel would, by prior arrangement, agree to halt its action. Egypt could be counted upon not to do the same, at which point British and French forces would occupy the Canal Zone for the alleged – but obviously bogus – purpose of separating the two combatants. At first everything went to plan. Israel invaded Egypt at the end of October. A day later Britain and France issued their ultimatum. Israel complied with it. As predicted, Egypt did not. Within a week British and French troops had captured Port Said at the canal's northern entrance, thereby seizing control of the canal itself.

But the whole thing immediately descended into farce. One of the stated aims of the exercise had been to ensure that ships of all nations could continue to pass freely through the canal. Instead, the Egyptians sank all the ships already in the canal, blocking it completely. One of the exercise's unstated aims had been to topple President Nasser. Instead, his defiance of Israel and Europe's two principal 'imperialist' powers merely consolidated his position at home and enhanced his standing in the rest of the Arab world. The General Assembly of the United Nations condemned Britain's and France's action, with both the United States and the Soviet Union voting for the same hostile resolution. The Soviet Union used the Anglo-French action as partial cover for its invasion of Hungary to suppress an anti-Soviet rising there. Worse, the United States, with Eisenhower now reelected, signalled that it would do nothing whatever to bail out the pound sterling and the British economy, both now under extreme pressure as a result

of the Anglo-French action. The British and French troops invaded Egypt on the night of 5-6 November. On 7 November the British announced a ceasefire. Protracted in its making, the Suez crisis was abrupt in its termination.

In what ways was Anthony Eden, as an individual and in his role as Britain's prime minister, responsible for what went wrong? The British government as a whole clearly made mistakes. What part did he personally play in the making of those mistakes?

Any British government of the 1950s, whatever its political complexion, would have felt compelled to do something in response to Nasser's coup. Inaction was not an option. Nasser's sudden and unilateral nationalization of the canal and seizure of the Canal Zone were in flagrant violation of both his own government's 1954 agreement with Britain and, more debatably, the 1888 Convention of Constantinople between Turkey (at that time the nominal sovereign power in Egypt) and Britain and France. Nasser's action reminded most contemporaries of Hitler's illegal occupation of the Rhineland in 1936, which Britain and France had signally failed to resist – a failure that had spurred Hitler on to further acts of aggression. The Egyptian leader's ambitions to exert his influence across the entire Middle East and the wider Arab world resembled closely – or so it seemed – Hitler's ambitions across Europe, which had ultimately been defeated, but at enormous human and material cost, little more than a decade before. In the mid 1950s British politicians of all parties, with few exceptions, assumed that Britain was, and should undoubtedly remain, one of the world's great powers, virtually on a par with the United States and the Soviet Union. Britain still possessed a vast empire, with large swathes of global atlases still painted in imperial red. Nasser's ambitions posed a specific threat to Britain's principal Middle Eastern allies, Jordan and Iraq, and the Egyptian leader showed every sign – as evidenced by Egypt's large-scale purchase of arms from Czechoslovakia, a Soviet satellite – of

seeking to replace British power and influence in the region with Soviet power and influence. The Suez Canal itself was far from being incidental. Seizing it made Nasser look big. More prosaically, but also more importantly, Egyptian control of the canal threatened to disrupt communications between Britain and its colonial possessions and military bases in Asia and Africa. It also gave the Egyptian government the power, whenever it chose, to cut off the huge shipments of oil from the Middle East that passed through the canal, shipments that were vital to the British economy. (Some two-thirds of the whole of western Europe's oil supply reached Europe via the canal.) Unsurprisingly, when Nasser announced the canal's nationalization the Labour opposition was every bit as vehement as the Tory government in denouncing the measure and demanding that Britain act. Privately, Hugh Gaitskell, the Labour leader, told Eden that 'I thought they [the government] ought to act quickly, whatever they did, and that as far as Great Britain was concerned, public opinion would almost certainly be behind them.' **[HG, *Diary*, 553]** In parliament, Gaitskell said of Nasser's coup that 'it was done suddenly, without negotiation, without discussion, by force', adding:

Nasser wanted to show the rest of the Arab world – 'See what I can do'. He wanted to challenge the West and to win . . . He wanted to make a big impression . . . It is all very familiar. It is exactly the same that we encountered from Mussolini and Hitler in those years before the war. **[Kyle, *Suez*, 164]**

Against that background, and given the foreign-policy calamity that was to befall him, his government and his whole country a few months later, a number of features of Eden's performance as prime minister stand out.

One is the extraordinary speed with which decisions that were later to prove disastrous were taken. Eden did not take those decisions on his own, but they could not have been taken

without his approval, indeed without his active encouragement. Eden may not have been the sole mover within the British government, but he was, as he continued to be throughout the crisis, the prime mover. On 26 July the news that Nasser had announced the nationalization of the canal reached Eden within hours. That evening he happened to be hosting a state function at Downing Street, and as soon as it was over he convened an ad hoc late-night meeting to consider the West's response. Present were the chiefs of staff, the French ambassador, the American chargé d'affaires, and four cabinet ministers, Selwyn Lloyd, Lord Salisbury, Lord Kilmuir and Lord Home. At 11.30 the next morning, 27 July, the full cabinet met and, without dissent, approved the outlines of the prime minister's proposals for dealing with the crisis. It also agreed that an Egypt Committee should be set up to take matters forward. That committee, under Eden's chairmanship, met and conferred for the first time at 7 o'clock that evening. Simultaneously and at speed, a network of other ministerial and official committees relevant to the crisis was put in place. As one of Eden's biographers notes, without comment, 'Within hours of Nasser's action, a new Whitehall structure had been created.' [RRJ, 460]

Not only had a new Whitehall structure been created at speed: in less than one day, the cabinet, with Eden in the forefront, had already decided what the broad lines of British policy were to be. Although the Egyptian government could be allowed to have something of a say in the future, the Suez Canal was not to be regarded as simply a piece of Egyptian property but rather as an international asset that must, beyond question, be internationally controlled. If this particular asset had been in the hands of a pro-Western government in Cairo, then Egyptian ownership and control might have been tolerated, but Nasser was anything but pro-Western. On the contrary, he showed distinct signs of inclining towards the Soviets and certainly constituted a threat to other Western interests in the Middle East and North Africa. Ideally, peaceful

negotiations might be got to yield some new international means of controlling and operating the canal -- means that were acceptable to the Western powers. However, in default of Egypt's willingness to agree to such a foreign-dominated arrangement, British ministers were clear that foreign control must be imposed on Egypt, if necessary by force. The first conclusion set out in the minutes of the 27 July cabinet meeting was unequivocal. It was agreed, according to the minutes, 'that HMG should seek to secure, by the use of force if necessary, the reversal of the Egyptian Government's action to nationalize the Suez Canal Company' (which was what Nasser, formally, had done). It was also agreed by the cabinet that Britain had to be prepared to use force 'even if we had to act alone'. [RRJ, 461] Left implicit, but one major premise nevertheless of the government's thinking, was the idea that, if it became necessary to use force, one of its main purposes would be to oust Nasser from power. If he would not agree to what the British were demanding, then someone else would have to. And it was most unlikely that Nasser would agree.

Thus, British policy – settled upon in less than 24 hours and thereafter never qualified or modified – amounted, first, to guaranteeing free passage of ships through the Suez Canal for the purpose of securing Britain's oil supplies and its worldwide imperial interests and, second, to toppling Nasser and his anti-Western regime and replacing it with someone or something more amenable. Leaving all other issues aside, it never seems to have occurred to anyone at the top of British government (though it did occur to others elsewhere) that setting out to topple Nasser might have the perverse effect of making more likely the disruption of free passage through the canal. D.R. Thorpe quotes an old Arab proverb, 'One cannot carry two watermelons in one hand' – but Eden's government tried to just that and predictably failed. [DRT, 483] It also seems never to have occurred to Eden and his ministers that, whether they liked it or not,

Nasser's bargaining position already was, or very soon would be, stronger than theirs. He had done nothing illegal, having undertaken to compensate the Suez Canal Company's shareholders, he physically controlled the canal, and he was enormously popular in his own country and the rest of the Arab world. It is true that Eden and his colleagues never really woke up to these two realities, even when subsequent events began to underline their importance; perhaps they were too sound asleep to be capable of being woken up. But they might have taken both of them into account if, right at the beginning, they had taken more time to reflect on where they were and what they proposed to do. Of calm, detached reflection, there was little, if any. Rome may not have been built in a day, but a large part of the Suez catastrophe was.

Speed amounting to haste was compounded by the nature of the decision-making process that was agreed upon at the beginning and then stuck to throughout. The outward forms of cabinet government were maintained at every stage, but the actual practice of high-level decision making was from the beginning lodged in the hands of Eden and a relatively small number of individuals – a number, moreover, that tended to dwindle as time went on. The Egypt Committee established at the end of July – widely referred to from the start as 'the war cabinet' – numbered half a dozen, although others dropped in from time to time. The crucial negotiations with the French and Israelis in late October were conducted by two men, Eden and Selwyn Lloyd, with Lloyd on one crucial occasion negotiating alone, although on Eden's terms.

['Sevres']

However, the smallness of the number, as such, mattered less than the personalities and preferences of those centrally involved. The Egypt Committee comprised Eden, who was adamant from the beginning that Britain needed to assert itself and that Nasser had to go; Selwyn Lloyd, a relative newcomer, who was intensely loyal to Eden and invariably deferred to him;

Harold Macmillan, who at this stage was, if anything, even more gung-ho than Eden (Suez being to him ‘a question not of honour only but of survival’); Lord ‘Bobbety’ Salisbury, an unreconstructed imperialist and by a wide margin Eden’s closest and longest-standing political friend; Lord Home, the Commonwealth secretary, an Eden protégé only recently elevated to cabinet rank; and Sir Walter Monckton, the defence secretary, who was new to his office, unhappy to be in it and totally unfamiliar with its subject matter. **[M quotation, M Diaries, 580+]** With the partial exception of Monckton – who in September unexpectedly and belatedly did voice doubts about the wisdom of Eden’s policy but who lacked even a modicum of personal authority -- the Egypt Committee consisted entirely of eager Edenites. It contained no effective devil’s advocates or askers of awkward questions, no one prepared to challenge the prevailing consensus. In other words, the committee’s composition might have been deliberately designed to promote group-think. Someone who remained on the periphery throughout was Rab Butler. Whether Butler would have asked awkward questions and whether his presence would have made any material difference to the eventual outcome may be doubted (and is by most historians), but it was strange and almost certainly unwise of Eden to effectively sideline one of his most experienced and intelligent ministers, someone who was his deputy in all but name. He probably feared that Butler might possibly disturb the consensus.

Eden’s formidable and well-deserved reputation as a statesman and diplomat, with his vast experience of the Middle East and his knowledge of Arabic, almost certainly had the effect of enhancing his standing with almost all of his less senior colleagues and also, by the same token, of suppressing whatever temptation they may have felt to question the wisdom of his actions. Walter Monckton was certainly tempted but, new to his job and diffident by temperament, delayed speaking out until it was too late. More widely, most members of the

cabinet outside the inner circle were exceedingly tentative in what they said, if they said anything. Peter Thorneycroft, the trade minister, had some reservations, which he did express. So did Derek Heathcoat Amory, the minister of agriculture, fisheries and food, who let his doubts be known. But those two counted for little. With Anthony Eden in charge, most ministers remained silent and confidently acquiescent, more spectators to the play than actors in it. Although all members of the cabinet were equal, some were more equal than others. The cabinet collectively was kept informed but was not otherwise seriously engaged.

The cabinet aside, Eden himself and those immediately around him were guilty of manifold failures of intelligence, in both senses of that usefully ambiguous noun. They imagined a horrendous future – that is, if Nasser retained control of the canal – but seemed incapable of imagining an unsatisfactory present. Eden, in particular, persistently engaged in selective perception. He saw what he wanted to see, heard what he wanted to hear and usually succeeded in ignoring anything that he did hear but which did not like the sound of. He fondly imagined that others would behave in the way that he wanted and expected them to behave.

His misreadings, shared by most of his close circle, notably Harold Macmillan, were legion. He imagined that the Egyptians on their own, without foreigners in charge, could not manage and operate the canal. They could, and they did. Until the Anglo-French invasion, ships of all nations except Israel continued to pass normally through the canal. Closer to home, Eden heard Gaitskell's denunciations of Nasser's peremptory behaviour but failed to heed the Labour leader's warnings early on that Labour could not continue to support the government if it acted unilaterally in the face of international opposition, especially from the United States or at the UN. Eden, who disliked Gaitskell, showed little interest in building, let alone sustaining, bipartisan support for his actions. He also chose to ignore the views of the Joint Intelligence

Committee, which warned at the outset, ‘We do not believe that threats of armed intervention . . . would bring about the downfall of the Nasser regime or cause it to cancel the nationalisation of the canal’, and which continued to warn about the probable consequences of precipitate action. [Aldrich/Cormac, 195] As Neville Chamberlain had during the 1930s, ‘Eden neglected the JIC’s best predictions and picked his own bits of preferred intelligence.’ [ibid, 196] Eden appears to have heeded the advice only of his military chiefs.

But Eden’s most gratuitous intelligence failure was also the most important. He totally misread – as did Macmillan – the probable reaction of the United States administration to the use of force by Britain and France. From the moment Nasser nationalized the canal, the American approach to that unexpected development differed markedly from Britain’s. Britain’s oil supplies might be threatened, but America’s were not. So long as the Suez Canal remained open, the US was not overly concerned about Egyptian control of it. Although the Americans had no time for Nasser, they did not view him as a latter-day Hitler or Mussolini and doubted whether he could easily be removed from power. Moreover, they did not regard him as posing an existential threat to Western interests in the Middle East. Of course, they took exception to his dealings with the Soviet Union, but they discounted the possibility that the USSR might become a significant player in that part of the world. They were far more worried that Arabs across the region would regard a Western attack on Egypt as an attack on themselves, promoting Nasser’s status as a pan-Arab nationalist and possibly undermining Western-oriented regimes elsewhere in the Arab world. Americans, even staunchly pro-British Americans, suspected that Britain’s approach to the Suez crisis owed as much to Britain’s desire to shore up its status as a world power as to its specific concerns about the canal.

Policy-makers in Britain, including Eden, knew all that, but they convinced themselves that, if push came to shove, the special Anglo-American relationship would hold and that the Americans would stand by their wartime ally. Both President Eisenhower and the American secretary of state, John Forster Dulles, constantly expressed their sympathy with Britain's predicament and their desire to be of assistance, but they also made it clear, or tried to, that US would neither join in nor countenance the use of force. Dulles's language was often opaque. Of the two men, he seemed the more sympathetic towards Britain's position. But Eisenhower, although making friendly noises, was always perfectly clear: so far, but no further. He wrote privately to Eden to that effect at the beginning of September ('I am afraid, Anthony . . .') and never deviated from that position. **[Dutton, 405]** As time passed, the president's language grew more pressing and he urged on Eden the necessity of finding a peaceful solution. On the eve of the Anglo-French invasion, he wrote Eden a letter ('Dear Mr. Prime Minister . . .') that was cold in tone and all but threatening in content. **[Dutton, 431]** Eden had made two mistakes. One, wholly characteristic, was to register the friendliness but ignore the warnings; until the end, he believed that the US could not possibly desert Britain in its hour of need. The other was to imagine that the ambivalent-sounding Dulles, as secretary of state, was the man in charge of American foreign policy. But he was not. Eisenhower, the president, was. As so often in international relations, even among allies, each side failed to attend properly to the other side's politics and pressing concerns. **[REN, AP, Chap IV]** The upshot, as we noted earlier, was that the American administration refused to behave as predicted, immediately distanced itself from Britain diplomatically and refused to bail out the pound or support Britain economically in any way. Ironically, it was Macmillan, the chancellor of the exchequer, once so vigorously in favour of aggressive action, who took the lead in calling time. Eden and the rest of the cabinet felt they

had no option but bow to his insistence that, without American support, which he warned them would not be forthcoming, the nation faced economic collapse. Britain's ceasefire followed forthwith. Harold Wilson was exaggerating only slightly when he remarked wryly of Macmillan 'First in, first out'. [DRT, 530]

Eden's blunders over Suez were numberless, but it is worth mentioning two more in passing. In the first place, neither Eden nor anyone else in British government gave any serious thought, or possibly any thought at all, to what Britain's end-game was supposed to be. If Britain and France's troops succeeded in taking control of the former Suez Canal Zone – that is, in being allowed by the rest of the world to take control of it – what was supposed to happen then? Were they supposed to remain there indefinitely (after the British, only two years before, had accepted that they could no longer afford to remain)? If they were not to stay, what was supposed to happen then? There was vague talk of introducing some kind of international force (although there was no reason to think that any kind of international force would be forthcoming), and there was equally vague talk of some West-friendlier Egyptian regime's being installed instead of Nasser (although there was little or no evidence to suggest either that Nasser would fall or that some such alternative could be brought into being). Of wishful thinking, there was much; of thought-through planning, there appears to have been none. Everything was supposed to come right on the night. It didn't. Secondly, Eden and his government's claim that the British and French were occupying the Suez Canal Zone for essentially peacekeeping purposes – in order to secure the canal and separate the Israeli and Egyptian combatants – was so implausible as to be preposterous. No one could believe it. No one did believe it. It was obvious that no one was expected to believe it. Incredulity reigned. Head in hands and eyebrows raised, political leaders across the world shook their heads in wonder and

astonishment. How could the government of any country in the world look so feeble, inept and laughable? To that question there was no answer.

The political pressures on him were enormous, but it was Eden personally who was principally at fault. It would have been difficult, but as prime minister he could have insisted – as President Kennedy in the U.S. did during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 – that more time be devoted to thinking hard about the probable consequences of pursuing a variety of alternative courses of action. Instead of plunging in, he could have kept his options open. He could have employed his well-established credentials as an anti-appeaser (against Germany in the 1930s, against the Soviet Union after the war) to suggest the possibility of reaching some kind of accommodation with Nasser, one that would enable both sides to claim that they had won. He could have emphasized, before undertaking military action, the absolute necessity of being certain of securing American support. No alternative policy to the one he championed might have achieved the desired results, but the one he adopted certainly did not, and it caused an enormous amount of collateral damage, not least to Britain's standing throughout the world. Suez did not cause the end of Britain's empire, but it certainly accelerated it. By the summer of 1956, Eden was already physically unwell, possibly in ways that affected his mental capacity, as some writers have suggested [**DO, InSandinP**] But it seems more likely that Eden, even had he been in perfect health, would have made the same kinds of mistakes. They were easy ones to make. He made them.

Eden's mishandling of the Suez crisis finished him politically, though apparently he did not realize that at first. The imperialist Suez Group within the Tory party thought he had been weak. The post-imperialist wing of the party thought his judgement had been extraordinarily poor, indeed execrable (and several had resigned from the government with others defying the

whip). Almost everyone in the Conservative party, whether in the cabinet, in parliament or in the country, whatever their disposition, knew that he had failed utterly. The Conservatives' chances of retaining power under his leadership looked bleak. Fortunately for Eden, his physical health, which had often been less than robust, failed completely towards the end of 1956, and on 7 January 1957 he was able to resign, with considerable dignity, as both prime minister and a member of parliament, before flying ten days later to New Zealand to recuperate. Just prior to resigning, he lied to the House of Commons, denying that there had ever been any collusion between Britain and France and claiming that 'there was not [*sic*] foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt'. [Dutton, 450-1] That lie, when finally exposed (the truth had long been suspected), further tarnished Eden's reputation, but it had no bearing on the actual events in which he was involved. It was his gross mishandling of those events that destroyed both his long-sought premiership and his reputation.

