

THE  
DECLINE AND FALL  
OF THE  
BRITISH EMPIRE

1781-1997

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PIERS BRENDON

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JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

the Holy City. He was struck by the coruscating brilliance of the 'sunlight in which every stone and tree becomes a jewel – *urbs Sion aurea*, Jerusalem the golden; or, as Josephus put it, a golden bowl full scorpions'. At sunset the towers of the city and 'the deep obscurities of the valleys had the colours of a Japanese print'.<sup>110</sup> But red tracers streaked across the pale blue sky. Most civilians kept their heads down and had their cars stolen. The High Commissioner was an exception. After inspecting a guard of honour drawn from the Highland Light Infantry, Cunningham drove through the Damascus Gate and out of the city in an armour-plated Daimler with one-inch thick glass loaned to him by King George VI, for whom it had been built during the Blitz. Even so Cunningham was stopped at both Jewish and Arab checkpoints. The majesty of his vehicle scarcely compensated for the ignominy of his exit.

## 'The Destruction of National Will'

### Suez Invasion and Aden Evacuation

No sooner had the British left Palestine than its Arab neighbours entered, eager to strangle the state of Israel at birth. Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq expected an easy victory. King Farouk, who had inherited the crown of Egypt from his father Fuad in April 1936, staked it on the outcome of the war in May 1948 – he sent his forces into battle without even consulting his Prime Minister. This proved to be one of the rashest gambles in his rakish career. The Haganah, with guns, tanks and even Messerschmitt fighter planes purchased from Czechoslovakia, routed all but Jordan's Arab Legion. Commanded by John Glubb, known as Glubb Pasha, together with a cadre of British officers, it captured the Old City of Jerusalem. King Abdullah was able to incorporate the West Bank of the Jordan River into his realm, an appropriation that Israel preferred to the creation of a Palestinian state. The triumph of 'Mr Bevin's Little King'<sup>1</sup> emphasised the disaster that overtook his royal rival for the leadership of the Arab world. Farouk exposed not only his own ineptitude but the failings of his army.

No one observed them with a sharper eye than Captain Gamal Abdel Nasser, a fiery young patriot who was wounded during the fighting. He noted that the high command tried to hide its incompetence by fostering fantastic myths about the enemy, who were said to have electrically operated towers that rose from the ground and fired in all directions. Yet on his own side, wrote Nasser, there was 'no concentration of forces, no accumulation of ammunition and equipment. There was no reconnaissance, no intelligence, no plans.'<sup>2</sup> Nor was there military secrecy: Cairo newspapers published Nasser's marching orders before he had time to obey them. So in the end Israel secured the Negev, which was likened to a dagger blade dividing the Arab world, splitting the Muslims of Asia from those of Africa. And until restrained by Truman, the Haganah menaced the land of the Nile itself. Nasser attributed the spoiling of the Egyptians less to Jewish invaders than to British occupiers. During a truce he even quizzed an Israeli counterpart about how the Zionists had succeeded in their 'struggle with the English'. Nasser concluded that Egypt, so long demoralised by colonial



oppression, had become prey to a corrupt and decadent ruling order. It had been 'left to the mercy of monsters'.<sup>3</sup>

The most profane of these monsters was King Farouk himself, who typified the impotence of Egyptian government under British tutelage. In theory, of course, the treaty of 1936 had confirmed Egypt's independence, withdrawing foreign privileges and confining the British garrison of ten thousand troops to the zone around the Suez Canal. In practice, the imperial force always exceeded that limit and it swelled to vast proportions during the Second World War. Similarly, Sir Miles Lampson was demoted from High Commissioner to ambassador in 1936 but he was urged by the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, to make his new role 'in fact, though not in appearance',<sup>4</sup> as effective as his old one. Nothing loath, Lampson continued to dominate the land of the Nile in the spirit of Lord Cromer. He kept the Union Jack flying at the Residency, travelled the country by special train and rode through Cairo in a Rolls-Royce preceded by two motorcyclists blowing whistles. Too grand to carry money, he maintained 'an exceptionally grandiose establishment'. It even included a clerk to look after his game book. Mad about blood sports, Lampson shot kites on the golf course as well as ducks in the Delta. He amused his hard-worked staff by saying, 'I like coot; they kill so well.'<sup>5</sup> A huge man with a bulbous nose and a blistering manner, the ambassador bullied Egyptian politicians and lectured the King. Farouk nicknamed him 'Professor' and 'Gamoose' – water buffalo. Lampson called Farouk 'the boy' and said that he was 'becoming a fair pickle'.<sup>6</sup>

He meant that the monarch was a grotesque voluptuary who, like Heliogabalus, 'abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures with ungoverned fury'.<sup>7</sup> Gourmand, libertine, kleptomaniac, drug-trafficker and buffoon, Farouk surrounded himself with a camarilla of Nubian flunkies, Italian toadies and Levantine pimps. He played cruel practical jokes. He sold fine titles and bought smart cars, which he drove at breakneck speed. He was an insatiable collector, hoarding everything from paperweights to pornography, from Fabergé eggs to match-box tops, from cuckoo clocks to pictures of copulating elephants. Farouk also liked to accumulate the latch keys of nubile young women. His sexual antics caused scandal even in a city with an international reputation for vice – during the war one Cairo brothel displayed a sign saying, 'Esperanto spoken here'.<sup>8</sup> A slave to caprice, Farouk resisted all other forms of control. In February 1942 he tried to defy Lampson himself, just as German panzers were sweeping across the western desert and Cairo mobs were shouting, 'Forward Rommel; Long Live Rommel'.<sup>9</sup> The only thing that could hold up Rommel, wits suggested, was the slow

service in Sheppard's Hotel. The ambassador demanded that the King should invite the pro-British Mustafa Nahas, leader of the Wafd, to form a government. When Farouk procrastinated, Lampson ringed the Abdin Palace with troops, tanks and armoured cars, and burst in with a letter of abdication for him to sign. According to Lampson's gloating account, Farouk 'asked almost pathetically and with none of his previous bravado if I would not give him one more chance'.<sup>10</sup>

The ambassador reluctantly agreed, convinced that 'we have a rotter on the Throne' who would seize any opportunity to 'stab us in the back'.<sup>11</sup> It was a shrewd summation. Farouk fantasised about shooting Lampson and evicting the British. The bitterness of the humiliation poisoned his life and apparently induced persecution mania. Despite strict censorship, the palace coup could not be kept secret for long. News of it particularly outraged Egyptian soldiers. General Mohammed Neguib offered to resign because he was ashamed to wear his uniform. Nasser thought that the army was disgraced by its failure to intervene: 'If it had dared the English would have retreated like pansies (*khawalates*).'<sup>12</sup> He and other young officers began to plot revenge. So did politicians, writers, students, workers and nationalists of all sorts when wartime restrictions were lifted. Inspired by creeds ranging from Islam to Marxism, they agitated for radical programmes. Militants held mass demonstrations that led to bloody clashes with police and troops. Terrorists assassinated Egyptian collaborators and threw bombs into British barracks and clubs. Behind the disturbances was a common demand for the complete evacuation of all foreign servicemen, without which independence was a sham.

Bevin wanted an equal alliance and hoped to lease the Suez Canal base. Early in 1946, as an earnest of his good intentions, he recalled Lampson (now ennobled as Lord Killearn). The ambassador's parting shot was to assure the Foreign Office, in an echo of Cromer, that Egyptians were much like children and needed 'a fair and helpful hand to guide them'. The removal of Killearn's hand delighted many in Egypt, no one more than its sovereign. But others thought that the new ambassador merely implemented the old 'colonialist policy with silken gloves'.<sup>13</sup> This was not entirely fair. In May 1946 Attlee announced that all British forces would quit Egypt. And when Churchill damned the decision, Bevin, his mouth so swollen after the extraction of three teeth that he looked just like a bloodhound, decried his 'Poona mentality'.<sup>14</sup> Yet no agreement was reached. This was because Bevin rejected Egypt's claim to the Sudan, which should also, he insisted, enjoy eventual self-government. Farouk won some fleeting popularity by wearing the crown of both countries and claiming to embody in



his increasingly corpulent person the unity of the Nile Valley. But when it came to resolving the Anglo-Egyptian stalemate, the King was a pawn. Moreover, he discredited himself hopelessly in 1948, divorcing his popular wife Farida ('the only one') and appearing at casinos during the war against Israel dressed in the uniform of a field-marshal. After the defeat he presided over a victory parade. Like England's Prince Regent, who sometimes claimed to have fought heroically at Waterloo, Farouk afterwards boasted that he had personally led his troops into battle.

Such extravagances encouraged the revival of Nasser's dormant conspiracy. Many of those who joined the ranks of his Free Officers had, like Nasser himself, humble origins. They deplored the abject plight of the fellaheen and Nasser quoted Mustapha Kemal: 'To live in despair is not to live at all.'<sup>15</sup> They contrasted the grinding poverty of the many with the flaunted opulence of the few. This was a familiar refrain. Winston Churchill himself had urged Farouk to promote social welfare since 'nowhere in the world were the conditions of extreme wealth and poverty so glaring'.<sup>16</sup> But coming from him it was an audacious criticism. For during the war Churchill's own government had squeezed Egypt more fiercely than ever, incurring a debt of over £350 million. The Free Officers blamed Britain not only for gross exploitation but also for inadequate military training and deficient weaponry, which put them at the mercy of the Haganah in 1948. The arms scandal also reflected corruption in high places of the Egyptian government. The wife of Mustafa Nahas, who himself led the Wafd to victory in the election of 1950, was heavily implicated. Moreover, the Prime Minister, primped, powdered and perfumed, with a gleaming Cabochon emerald ring worn outside his grey silk gloves, seemed a model of decadence to rival the King himself. The Free Officers were not impressed that Nahas now became more politically radical, championing social reform and repudiating the treaty of alliance with Britain that he himself had signed in 1936. And the Egyptian masses, their struggle for survival aggravated by a slump in cotton prices, were not appeased by the fact that British forces had (in 1947) withdrawn into the Canal Zone. For this was a mortifying symbol of Egyptian subservience, 'a state within the state'.<sup>17</sup>

Eclipsing Singapore, as well as the spreading archipelago of American bases in Arab states (Morocco, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), it was the most elaborate overseas military installation in the world. The Canal Zone consisted of 750 square miles of desert between Suez and the Nile delta, equipped with ports and seaplane docks, ten airfields, a railway system for nine hundred carriages and a road network for thousands of vehicles. It contained barracks, hospitals, factories, bakeries, power stations, coal

bunkers, oil tanks, supply depots, ammunition dumps, sewage farms, water filtration plants and recreation facilities. But by the end of 1951 the garrison, intended to protect the jugular vein of the Empire, faced the task of protecting itself. The 38,000 troops (their number soon doubling) were beset by Egyptian strikers, saboteurs and so-called 'liberation commandos', or *fedayeen*. These were mainly peasants, workers, students and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, acting with the tacit support of the government. Back in power and fuelled by whisky, Churchill responded like the cavalry subaltern of Omdurman. Advancing towards Eden with clenched fists, he growled: 'Tell them that if we have any more of their cheek we will set the Jews on them and drive them into the gutter from which they should never have emerged.'<sup>18</sup> Guerrilla raids prompted regular retaliation. On 25 January 1952 British soldiers used tanks and artillery to demolish the police barracks at Ismailiya, with the loss of over fifty lives. The following day, *The Times* indignantly reported, 'frenzied crowds' subjected Cairo to 'anarchy, destruction, incendiarism and pillage', leaving the streets looking 'as though they had been attacked by a fleet of bombers'.<sup>19</sup>

The prime targets on this 'Black Saturday' were British bastions such as Thomas Cook's travel agency, Barclays Bank, Shepherd's Hotel and the Turf Club. But the mob also burned edifices patronised by pashas and beys – smart department stores, luxury cinemas and fashionable nightclubs such as Madame Badi'a's, haunt of Farouk's favourite belly dancer, Tahia Carioca, known to the British as 'Gippy Tummy'. They even menaced the Abdin Palace where the King was holding a vast, gold-plated banquet to celebrate the birth of a crown prince. The authorities were slow to restore order, the Minister of the Interior being preoccupied with the purchase of a house and the Prime Minister, Nahas, being 'busy having his corns cut'.<sup>20</sup> In fact the riots signalled the start of a revolution against an *ancien régime* in the last stages of decrepitude. What ultimately brought it down was its failure to get rid of the British. In July 1952 the Free Officers completed the work of the mob. They mounted a putsch and forced the King to abdicate. Dressed in an admiral's uniform and given a twenty-one-gun salute, Farouk sailed away from Alexandria on board the *Mahroussa*. It was the same royal yacht, once again freighted with gold ingots, that had taken his grandfather, Khedive Ismail, into exile in 1879. The Free Officers, led by General Neguib but dominated by Colonel Nasser, had resisted the temptation to execute the King. 'History will sentence him to death,' said Nasser.<sup>21</sup> He himself was intent on liquidating the twin evils of colonialism and feudalism.

Despite a power struggle lasting two years, he made progress on both counts. First the new regime crushed external opponents, including the



Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood. Then Nasser purged rivals within the junta, notably the pipe-puffing Neguib, who had put forward liberal-democratic policies known as 'the ideas of March'.<sup>22</sup> The new dictator was initially awkward and unpopular, the son of a postal clerk who had usurped the purple. He admitted to remaining a revolutionary conspirator at heart, 'suspicious of everyone'.<sup>23</sup> But Nasser was a model of probity beside Farouk. He lived modestly with his family in the suburb of Heliopolis, building extra rooms on to his house as they became necessary. The CIA merely demonstrated its ineptitude by offering him a three-million-dollar bribe – though he did use part of a huge sum given to Neguib by Kermit Roosevelt, a ubiquitous CIA operative, to build the Cairo Tower, the granite landmark that Nasser called 'Roosevelt's erection'.<sup>24</sup> Nasser's worst vice was chain-smoking Craven A cigarettes. Unlike the King, he radiated energy. Tall and muscular, he moved like a panther. His olive-skinned countenance, white teeth gleaming between aquiline nose and prognathous jaw, was spell-bindingly expressive. Whether plotting, raging, joking, gossiping or orating, he behaved like the embodiment of the national will.

Without delay he assaulted the old order, abolishing Ottoman pashadom, founding a republic and initiating agrarian reform at a time when landless labourers were earning ten piastres (ten pence) a day. He also set about restoring the dignity of Egypt, fatally impaired by the alien incubus. A vital step was to abandon Egyptian claims to the Sudan, on the grounds that its people too had the right to decide their own destiny. At a stroke the Nile Valley, though itself divided, united against the imperial power. Britain felt bound to honour its pledge granting Sudanese independence, which came into effect in 1956. Anthony Eden was responsible for this course of action, designed to secure a settlement in Egypt. Ironically, in view of his subsequent gunboat diplomacy, the Foreign Secretary told the cabinet that it was impossible 'to maintain our position in the Middle East by the methods of the last century'.<sup>25</sup> Eden further succeeded in reaching an agreement whereby British forces would leave the Canal Zone within twenty months, by June 1956, though they would have the right to return if Egypt were attacked. Under pressure from President Eisenhower's ponderous Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, Churchill was reluctantly persuaded to accept this. The Prime Minister inveighed against 'Dull, Duller, Dulles'.<sup>26</sup> And he harped on a perennial theme, the eclipse of British power by the United States. His doctor, Lord Moran, said that 'it was a canker in his mind, he grieves that England in her fallen state can no longer address America as an equal, but must come, cap in hand, to do her bidding'.<sup>27</sup> Churchill would have grieved more had he known that Nasser referred to

the Americans and the British respectively as the 'coming' and the 'going' – *'el gayin wa el rayin'*.<sup>28</sup>

Yet Churchill remained furiously ambivalent about the 'scuttle'<sup>29</sup> from Egypt. With his head he recognised that the Canal Zone was only held at crippling cost – over £50 million a year. The bill was harder to bear since Britain, which had produced more than a quarter (in value) of the world's manufactured exports in 1950, was now being swiftly overtaken by European rivals recovering from the devastation of the world war. Moreover, there would be additional demands, for blood as well as money, if the Egyptians mounted another guerrilla campaign. Although a third of the ships passing through Suez were still British, the Canal was no longer the vital imperial artery it had been in the days of the Indian Raj. Its importance was further diminished by the advent of the hydrogen bomb, which meant that Britain's global strategy might rest on a scattering of Gibaltars. Coming to terms with Nasser could win Egypt for the West in the Cold War and help to improve the lot of a people whose average expectation of life was about half that of Britons. Yet in his heart Churchill detested any surrender of British power. He had condemned Attlee's refusal to confront Mohammed Mossadeq ('Mussy Duck' in Churchill's parlance), the pyjama-wearing Prime Minister who nationalised Iran's oil, including the largest refinery in the world at Abadan. And Churchill supported the secret American coup to change the regime in 1953, which put the Shah on the peacock throne and left Dulles 'purring like a giant cat'.<sup>30</sup>

Now Churchill kept grumbling about the 'appeasement' of military dictators in Egypt. He wanted to kick 'Neg-wib' and said that 'he never knew before that Munich was situated on the Nile'.<sup>31</sup> Capitulation there would lead to the collapse of Britain's colonial position from the Niger to the Limpopo. Churchill's gut feelings were best expressed by the 'Suez Group' of right-wing Conservatives, devotees of the evanescent cult of Empire. They believed that it was shameful for a nation which had won 'the biggest war in history' to retreat in the face of Egyptian 'terrorism'. The evacuation of the Canal Zone, wrote Leo Amery's die-hard son Julian, 'would mean the end of the Commonwealth as an independent force in the world'. If pushed too far, Churchill should take vigorous action, ignoring opposition from aspirant arbiters of international conduct in the United States and the United Nations. Britain should 'occupy Cairo and install a new and friendlier Egyptian government'.<sup>32</sup> Invited to a meeting of Conservative backbenchers to discuss the government's policy, Churchill said: 'I'm not sure I'm on our side!'<sup>33</sup>

Churchill was also uncertain about Anthony Eden's capacity to lead



the country. Keen to remain Prime Minister himself, he did not hide his doubts that the Tory crown prince (or, as he wickedly called him, 'my Princess Elizabeth') might turn out to be a dud. In particular Churchill suspected that the sleek, buck-toothed Eden lacked the moral fibre to defend Britain's interests overseas. 'I'm worried about this myxomatosis,' Churchill told the Minister of Agriculture in cabinet. 'You don't think there's any chance of Anthony catching it?'<sup>34</sup> Certainly Eden was prone to ill health and he was plagued by inflammation of the bile duct resulting from a botched operation on his gall bladder. He was also subject to tantrums and nerve storms. When they subsided he would apologise effusively, confessing to being 'a bloody prima donna'.<sup>35</sup> The son of a half-mad baronet and an exceedingly beautiful woman, Eden was said to be a bit of both. He veered between consuming vanity and crippling self-doubt. Eden usually advocated sensible colonial policies and always had the courage of his clichés – Bevin was famously quoted as saying that he uttered 'clitch after clitch after clitch'.<sup>36</sup> But Eden had been equivocal over Munich and, despite his progressive instincts, he was fearful of adopting any course that could be branded as appeasement. After succeeding the octogenarian Churchill in April 1955, he writhed at charges that he was inclined to dither and scuttle, that he was incapable of administering the smack of firm government. One journalist wrote that when he made the emphatic gesture of punching his fist into the palm of his hand, no sound was heard. Another said that his words of command had all the dynamism of a radio 'talk on the place of the potato in English folklore'.<sup>37</sup> Psychologically Eden became a prisoner of the Suez Group, which itself reflected public anxiety about British decline and 'advancing American imperialism'.<sup>38</sup> The Group's members were not immune to the dazzling charm that made Eden, it was said, 'the best hostess in London'.<sup>39</sup> But they generally disliked his effete ways, his addiction to double-breasted waistcoats and his habit of calling men 'my dear'. Especially offensive was the manner in which his 'moustache curled inside out'.<sup>40</sup> One young Tory MP said, 'Eden had to prove he had a real moustache'.<sup>41</sup> Clarissa Eden did her best to help. Moments before her husband's eve-of-invasion broadcast on 3 November 1956, she saw on a television monitor that his moustache was almost invisible and quickly blackened the bristles with her mascara.

The symbol of Eden's determination to maintain British paramountcy in the Middle East, despite the withdrawal from Egypt, was the Baghdad Pact. This was a security agreement signed in 1955 by Turkey, Iraq, Britain, Pakistan and Iran. Its avowed aim was to defend the region from any Soviet threat. But the Pact was also a form of diplomatic imperialism. Although apt to confuse nationalists with Communists, Eisenhower would not sign

it for that reason, though he did support it. And over the air waves Nasser vehemently denounced it for splitting the Arab world, which he aspired to lead. Eden found him adamant, even bitter, on the subject during their only personal encounter, which took place at the British embassy in Cairo on 20 February 1955. Immaculate in a dinner jacket, Eden upstaged the khaki-uniformed Nasser by addressing him in Arabic, which he had learned at Oxford (where the oriental syllabus ended in the Middle Ages). When Nasser said that he was interested to see inside the building from which Egypt had been governed, Eden, who had instructed Lampson to ape Cromer, silkily corrected him. 'Not governed perhaps,' he said, 'advised, rather'.<sup>42</sup> According to one of several differing accounts of the evening, Nasser felt patronised by Eden, who behaved like 'a prince dealing with vagabonds'.<sup>43</sup> He had acted in a similar manner towards Mussolini, giving the impression that he thought 'Wogs begin at Calais'.<sup>44</sup>

Nasser became more bellicose a few days after meeting Eden, when Egypt's smouldering conflict with Israel once more burst into flame. On Ben-Gurion's orders a young officer called Ariel Sharon led a ferocious attack on three Egyptian camps in Gaza. Nasser's forces were too weak to retaliate in kind so he at once embarked on a quest for arms. Frustrated by months of fruitless negotiation with the West, he struck a weapons-for-cotton deal with the Soviet Union. All the old fears about the advance of the Russian Bear, now metamorphosed by Bolshevism and slaving for Suez, returned to haunt the British. One senior official at the Foreign Office concluded that 'we must first try to frighten Nasser, then to bribe him, and if neither works, get rid of him'.<sup>45</sup> Nasser, influenced towards non-alignment by Nehru among others, could not be intimidated. So Eden and Dulles attempted to outbid the USSR by proffering aid to build the Aswan Dam. Intended to harness the Nile, transform Egypt's economy through hydroelectricity and feed its rapidly increasing population by means of irrigation, this was the biggest civil engineering project in the world, one that would raise a structure seventeen times larger than the Great Pyramid. Indeed the 'Red Pharaoh',<sup>46</sup> as Americans called Nasser, referred to it as his pyramid. But he remained intransigent over Israel and he continued to attack the Baghdad Pact. Eden blamed him for Jordan's refusal to join, comparing him to Mussolini and saying that 'his object was to be a Caesar from the Gulf to the Atlantic, and to kick us out of it all'.<sup>47</sup>

Then, on 1 March 1956, the young King Hussein, determined to be master in his own house, summarily dismissed Glubb Pasha from command of the Arab Legion. Vilified as 'an imperialist scorpion'<sup>48</sup> by Egyptian propaganda, Glubb had been the personification of British sway in the Middle



East. For Eden his sacking was an unbearable 'blow to Britain's waning prestige as an imperial power'.<sup>49</sup> The Prime Minister was further tormented by the reaction of the Suez Group. Julian Amery told *The Times* that Glubb's expulsion, which followed the retreats from Palestine, Abadan, the Sudan and the Suez Canal, attested to the complete 'bankruptcy of the policy of appeasement'.<sup>50</sup> The Prime Minister was harried in the Commons and took out his fury on Nasser. Over an open telephone line he told the junior minister at the Foreign Office, Anthony Nutting, 'I want him murdered'.<sup>51</sup>

Doubtless at the Prime Minister's behest, the Secret Intelligence Service did hatch plots to assassinate Nasser and to topple his government. Its agents, who proposed to pour nerve gas into Nasser's office through the ventilation system, were by no means discreet. They spoke to CIA officers without employing euphemisms such as 'liquidation' and they collaborated with the Israelis, referred to as 'snipcocks'.<sup>52</sup> British ministers and diplomats were shocked by their schemes, which never came to fruition. But later in the year President Eisenhower, who authorised covert action of this sort himself on occasion though he would not sanction American involvement in killing Nasser, took a more robust view of imperial prerogatives. 'I just can't understand why the British did not bump off Nasser. They have been doing it for years and then when faced with it they fumble.'<sup>53</sup> Dulles also fumbled. At first he agreed with the British to let the Aswan loan 'wither on the vine'<sup>54</sup> in order to punish Nasser for his continuing links with Communism – in May 1956 Egypt recognised 'Red China'. But in the face of mounting American opposition to the offer, Dulles abruptly cancelled it and the British followed suit.

Nasser was expecting the rebuff but he was enraged by the insulting manner in which it was delivered. He thought that Dulles's slur on Egypt's economy was a deliberate 'slap in the face'.<sup>55</sup> Nasser, newly elected President and the first native Egyptian to rule his country for 2,600 years, had no intention of turning the other cheek. He laid his plans carefully. On 26 July 1956, the fourth anniversary of Farouk's abdication, he addressed 250,000 people from a balcony overlooking Alexandria's Liberation Square. The speech, broadcast throughout the Arab world, showed that he had finally mastered the demagogue's black art. It vilified the West for attempting to return Egypt to financial bondage, an enterprise that he called 'imperialism without soldiers'. It contained a code name – Ferdinand de Lesseps – which sent Nasser's occupation squads into action. And it announced, in a peroration greeted with wild enthusiasm, that 'some of your Egyptian brethren . . . are taking over the Canal Company at this very moment'.<sup>56</sup> The Canal would pay for the Dam and its control would restore the nation's pride.

Britain was correspondingly humiliated. So was Eden, who became quite unbalanced by Nasser's affront to his *amour propre*. As the crisis developed the Prime Minister raged more furiously than ever at his aides, as if to sharpen the jibe of Churchill's private secretary, who had told them: 'I work for a great historical figure, and you work for a great hysterical one.'<sup>57</sup> Eden resorted to a pharmacopoeia of drugs, taking morphine to calm himself down and Benzedrine to pep himself up. He blamed the glare of the lights in a television studio on Communists at the BBC. He became erratic and apocalyptic, saying that, rather than have the Empire nibbled away, he would prefer to see it 'fall in one crash'.<sup>58</sup> But Eden's reaction was not just a matter of wounded vanity and impaired ability. He genuinely lamented the collapse of imperial power, agreeing with Harold Macmillan, his initially pugnacious Chancellor of the Exchequer, that unless they met Nasser's challenge 'Britain would become another Netherlands'.<sup>59</sup> Like many others, he saw Nasser as heir to the European dictators of the 1930s. Eden compared Nasser's mildly idealistic book *The Philosophy of Revolution to Mein Kampf* and thought his expropriation of the Canal Company resembled Hitler's invasion of the Rhineland. He warned that Nasser's appetite would grow with feeding and that he would commit further acts of aggression, perhaps stopping the flow of oil from the Gulf.

On 2 August 1956 the British cabinet approved military preparations to overthrow Nasser and seize the Canal. This was the antithesis of appeasement, itself condemned by most British newspapers. None wrote with more vim than *The Times*, eager to compensate for its pusillanimity towards Nazi Germany:

Nations live by vigorous defence of their own interests . . . Doubtless it is good to have a flourishing tourist trade, to win Test matches, and to be regaled by pictures of Miss Diana Dors being pushed into a swimming pool. But nations do not live by circuses alone. The people, in their silent way, know this better than the critics. They still want Britain great.<sup>60</sup>

Eden flattered himself that he 'had one outstanding quality and that was his capacity to gauge public opinion'.<sup>61</sup> Yet only a third of the population supported the use of force (though that figure rose to just over a half after the conflict ceased). And some people in the know, such as Sir Dermot Boyle, Chief of the Air Staff, quickly concluded that 'Eden has gone bananas'.<sup>62</sup>

Eden's mental state was not improved over the next three months by having to deal with Dulles, whom he compared unfavourably to Ribbentrop. The Secretary of State's leaden manner was tiresome enough: his speech



was slow, Macmillan memorably observed, but it easily kept pace with his thought. Still more exasperating, though, were Dulles's tortuous opinions. His message, delivered at Eisenhower's behest, was that Britain should not try to 'break Nasser' by force; but it contained enough ambivalence to foster Eden's illusion that he might secure American acquiescence, if not support. Dulles's initial response was that Nasser must be made to 'disgorge his theft'<sup>63</sup> so that the Canal could be internationalised and oil supplies secured. After his first meeting with Eden at the start of the crisis, Dulles concluded that Britain and France (intent on ending Egypt's aid to Algerian rebels) would invade the Canal area. He told Eisenhower, 'I am not (repeat not) sure from their standpoint they can be blamed.' But he added, with characteristic contrariness, 'I believe I have persuaded them that it would be reckless to take this step.'<sup>64</sup>

Eisenhower himself was addicted to 'zigging and zagging'<sup>65</sup> and averse to making categorical statements. The President later claimed that he had told Eden of 'our bitter opposition to using force'.<sup>66</sup> But he expressed no bitterness. Eisenhower said that force was justifiable as a last resort and, the soul of Rotarian affability, he never threatened a hostile American response to British aggression in Egypt. Furthermore, after seeing him in September, Macmillan confirmed the President's soft line. They had been comrades in the Mediterranean theatre of war, where Macmillan learned the 'strange language of his own'<sup>67</sup> that Eisenhower spoke. Macmillan had also learned a more crucial lesson after narrowly surviving a plane crash in Algiers – he emerged from the wreckage with his moustache 'burning with a bright blue flame'.<sup>68</sup> In hospital he read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, concluding from it that Britons were the Greeks in America's new Roman Empire and that they must surreptitiously direct their brash masters just 'as the Greek slaves ran the operations of the Emperor Claudius'.<sup>69</sup> So Macmillan wilfully misinterpreted the President's words. He reported, 'Ike is really determined, somehow or other, to bring Nasser down.'<sup>70</sup>

Thus encouraged, Eden cooperated with Dulles's various attempts to find a peaceful solution. There were conferences of interested parties and appeals to the United Nations. A Canal Users' Association was formed and the Australian Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies was sent as an envoy to Cairo, where he decided that 'These Gypos are a dangerous lot of backward adolescents.'<sup>71</sup> Nothing came of these efforts. Nasser stood firm, encouraged by the fact that, contrary to western prognostications, Egyptian pilots proved quite capable of running the Canal on their own. So Anglo-French military preparations continued, plagued by predictable snags. The invasion was at first code-named Hamilcar but only after British soldiers

had painted large capital aitches on their vehicles for aircraft recognition did they realise that the French spelled it Amilcar. Although equipped to fight guerrillas in Cyprus, Malaya and Kenya (to which Cairo Radio beamed pro-Mau Mau propaganda in Swahili), British forces were ill-prepared to mount a major seaborne invasion. The army had to hire civilian lorries, Coca-Cola trucks and Pickford's furniture vans to help transport munitions. Moreover, its old breech-loading rifles were inferior to the semi-automatic Czech weapons of the Egyptians. The RAF was beset by technical problems and an acute shortage of transport aircraft; and beside those of the French its planes looked 'almost Victorian'.<sup>72</sup> The navy was obliged to requisition freighters and passenger ships and to bring back into service Second World War landing craft that had been pensioned off as ferries and pleasure boats. An American admiral thought the British capacity for amphibious lift 'nothing short of pitiful'.<sup>73</sup> In the days of the Raj London would have expected India to make good some of its military deficiencies. Shrewd observers reckoned that it might recruit Israelis to fill the role of sepoys.

An emissary of the French Prime Minister, Guy Mollet, suggested the idea of a clandestine Anglo-French pact with Ben-Gurion during a meeting with Eden on 14 October 1956. The proposal attracted him. It offered an end to Dulles's interminable negotiations and an instant pretext for Britain and France to intervene in Egypt. While Israel thrust across the Sinai Desert, its main object being to smash Nasser's blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba and gain permanent access to the Red Sea, the two European powers would have a justification for 'protecting' the Suez Canal, separating the combatants and ousting Nasser. Eden thus embarked on his fatal course. Goaded by the Suez Group, desperate to assert his political virility, convinced that the Empire would rot away unless it took a firm stand, he brushed aside all obstacles. He dismissed political and military reservations. He got an obliging Lord Chancellor to rule that Nasser's confiscation of the Canal Company was illegal and that the 'infringement of an international possession is the equivalent of an attack on national property giving one the right to self-defence'.<sup>74</sup> The Prime Minister also overcame the few scruples of his Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, who was described by an English diplomat as Eden's 'bell-hop'<sup>75</sup> and by an American diplomat as a 'crooked Welsh lawyer'.<sup>76</sup> In tribute to his glossy pliability, Churchill called him 'Mr Celluloid'.<sup>77</sup>

Lloyd was secretly dispatched to a villa at Sèvres, near Paris, with orders to take matters forward with Mollet and Ben-Gurion. The Foreign Secretary disliked foreigners – a positive advantage in such a job, Churchill allegedly told him. Furthermore, Lloyd later wrote, France and Israel were 'the two



nations in the world I most mistrust'.<sup>78</sup> He made his feelings plain after opening the conclave with a joke that fell flat, to the effect that he should have worn a false moustache. According to General Moshe Dayan, Lloyd gave the impression that he was 'bargaining with extortionate merchants' and showed a distaste for 'the place, the company, and the topic'.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, progress was made and the negotiations were ratified at a subsequent meeting. To the cynical amusement of the French and the angry scorn of the Israelis, the Foreign Office's main concern was that Albion's perfidy should never be divulged. Clearly this was Eden's chief anxiety, as evidenced by his efforts to purge the written record. He revealed little or nothing to officials. He informed few ministers about the Sèvres protocols, merely getting the cabinet to accept that 'in the event of an Israeli attack'<sup>80</sup> Britain would join France to separate the belligerents. He misled parliament and the press, though he did confide in the gentlemen of *The Times*, rightly thinking that they regarded discretion as the better part of journalism. He kept Eisenhower in the dark. Eden did not even take the high command into his confidence. General Sir Hugh Stockwell, the land task force commander, only gathered from the French three days before the event that Israel would assail Egypt. The British invasion fleet itself could not set off from Malta until the expiry of the Anglo-French ultimatum demanding Nasser's withdrawal from the Canal. In short, the whole enterprise was vitiated by hypocrisy.

So Britain's military operation, unlike that of its allies, was initially hamstrung and ultimately doomed by the need to conceal its true purposes. The Israelis stormed into the Sinai on 29 October and, after some fierce battles, soon had the Egyptians retreating to guard the Canal. France did not wait for the expiry of the ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of both sides and hardly bothered to hide the fact that it was fighting on behalf of Israel – to Eden's acute embarrassment. But from its congested base at Akrotiri in Cyprus the RAF was hesitant about unleashing its squadrons of Canberras and Valiants on Egyptian military targets, which prompted Ben-Gurion to impugn Britannia's virtue: 'The old whore!'<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the British armada of 130 warships, sailing from their deep harbour at Valletta in Malta at the pace of the slowest landing craft, could not reach Port Said until 6 November. During that week the military were hampered by contradictory and unpremeditated orders from their political masters, who wanted them to win the war while pretending to keep the peace. Meanwhile, there was ample time for opposition to coalesce at home and abroad.

It began in the Tories' own ranks. Anthony Nutting resigned, unwilling

to reveal his motives at the time but unable to stomach what he later called 'this squalid piece of collusion'.<sup>82</sup> Others followed suit. Foreign Office mandarins protested about a conspiracy that one junior minister called 'the most disastrous combination of the unworkable and the unbelievable'.<sup>83</sup> Eden's press secretary quit, evidently thinking that the gods wished to destroy his beleaguered boss, who was now 'mad, literally mad'.<sup>84</sup> There was also disaffection in the services, Mountbatten begging Eden to 'turn back the assault convoy before it is too late'.<sup>85</sup> The Labour Party, led by Hugh Gaitskell, made a cogent case against the so-called 'police action', which was really an undeclared war in breach of the United Nations charter and other covenants. Moreover, the ultimatum was self-evidently absurd, since if each side moved ten miles from the Canal Nasser's forces would have to retreat while Ben-Gurion's advanced into Egyptian territory. Bombing Egypt, the victim of aggression, rather than Israel, its perpetrator, indicated that Britain's peace-keeping role was a sham. Using its veto to defeat the motion for a cease-fire in the UN Security Council showed that Britain's true object was to seize the Canal. Grey-faced, red-eyed and hoarse-voiced, Eden was pushed on to the defensive in parliament. And Selwyn Lloyd was obliged to assure the Commons that there had been 'no prior agreement'<sup>86</sup> with Israel – a lie that did not prevent him from later becoming Speaker of that honourable House.

Professed patriots of all classes and political persuasions rallied behind the embattled government, regarding the Gaitskellite assault as treason. Lord Home, an appeaser at Munich but an aggressor at Suez, assured Eden: 'If our country rediscovers its soul and inspiration, your calm courage will have achieved this miracle.'<sup>87</sup> The Suez Group cheered the affirmation of imperial power, one of its members asserting that the area around the Canal was 'in some essential sense part of the United Kingdom'.<sup>88</sup> The Beefeater press was equally staunch. Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* declared that Eden was acting to 'safeguard the life of the British Empire'.<sup>89</sup> It was aptly said, though, that no cause was truly lost until it won the backing of the *Express*. Even more telling than its support was the defection of *The Times*, whose recent history, Beaverbrook wrote, 'was also a history of the decline of the British Empire'.<sup>90</sup> The Thunderer rumbled about the damage done to Anglo-American relations by deceiving Eisenhower. Britain was 'not a satellite' of the United States but an ally, it stoutly maintained, and what that alliance 'cannot stand is a lack of candour'.<sup>91</sup>

Eisenhower too reckoned that 'nothing justifies double-crossing us'.<sup>92</sup> Actually both he and Dulles would have accepted even the duplicity if Britain and France had presented them with a swift *fait accompli*. As it



was, the President had to face a fraught hiatus during which Russia crushed the uprising in Hungary (2 November), Dulles went into hospital for a cancer operation (3 November) and he himself was fighting for re-election (6 November). During that critical week he quelled his rage and excelled himself as a global statesman. Freezing out Eden politically, 'Ike' affirmed that their personal friendship remained warm. He even professed to understand why the Prime Minister had responded to Nasser's affront 'in the mid-Victorian style', while wondering if 'the hand of Churchill might not be behind this'.<sup>93</sup> The President opposed Russian intervention in the Middle East and rejected Moscow's proposal that the Soviet Union and the United States should make common cause against Britain and France. To enforce his will he deployed America's overwhelming economic might, instantly transforming Harold Macmillan from hawk to dove. 'We must stop, we must stop,' the Chancellor exclaimed, 'or we will have no dollars left by the end of the week.'<sup>94</sup>

Eisenhower not only refused to buoy up sterling but insisted that 'the purposes of peace and stability would be served by not being too quick in attempting to render extraordinary assistance' to Britain over oil supplies.<sup>95</sup> He took advantage of the hostility to the Suez operation in Commonwealth countries such as Canada, India and Pakistan. And he mobilised support in the United Nations, not only the forum of world opinion but a body capable of imposing sanctions on pariah states. In the face of this pressure Eden crumbled. He held a cabinet meeting on 6 November at which Macmillan's warning about a run on the pound proved decisive. Eden therefore telephoned Mollet and told him that he could not continue. A French official recorded this frantic outburst of despair:

I'm finished. I can't hold on. The whole world reviles me . . . I can't even rely on all Conservatives. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Church, the oilmen, everyone is against me. The Commonwealth is tearing itself apart. Nehru wants to smash its bonds. Canada and Australia no longer follow our lead. I can't dig the Crown's grave . . . I can't make England the only champion.<sup>96</sup>

So a cease-fire was announced on the very day when the seaborne invasion took place at Port Said. Eden had deemed the Egyptians yellow but they resisted strongly and the Allied forces could only occupy the northern tip of the Canal, itself now blocked with ships sunk by Nasser. So abruptly did hostilities cease that the first British troops were being withdrawn as later units were landing. General Stockwell wryly informed the War Office, 'We've now achieved the impossible. We're going both ways at once.'<sup>97</sup>

Eisenhower single-mindedly pursued his own course, determined to restore the status quo. He bullied and cajoled the Israelis until they withdrew from Sinai. He refused to supply a financial 'fig leaf'<sup>98</sup> to hide Anglo-French nakedness until Suez was handed over to a UN force. This was agreed within a month. The British government did its best to present retreat as victory, even claiming that the intervention had saved the situation in the Middle East by bringing in the United Nations – a conceit punctured by the future Labour Chancellor, Denis Healey, who said that it was 'like Al Capone taking credit for improving the efficiency of the Chicago police'.<sup>99</sup> In fact, Nasser only let in the UN peacekeepers on sufferance. His prestige waxed as Eden's waned. The Prime Minister had conducted, as a Labour MP said, the most spectacular retreat from Suez since the time of Moses. The Suez Group had nothing but contempt for his weakness. Churchill's verdict was widely quoted: 'I doubt whether I would have dared to start; I would never have dared to stop.'<sup>100</sup> To mount the invasion and then call it off almost at once, said the Minister of Defence, was 'like going through all the preliminaries without having an orgasm'.<sup>101</sup> Eden further demonstrated his impotence by flying off to recuperate in Jamaica, despite a friend's warning that 'all the doctors were black'.<sup>102</sup>

On his return Conservative daggers were out for him, the sharpest wielded by Macmillan. Enough time had elapsed, in the prophetic words of that radical firebrand Aneurin Bevan, 'to permit the amenities of political assassination. Even a minor Caesar is entitled to be despatched with due decorum.'<sup>103</sup> Ill health provided a genuine excuse for Eden's resignation. Conservatives preferred Macmillan to R. A. Butler as his successor. So did Eisenhower, who extolled Macmillan's straightness but failed to recognise his Janus face. But on the very day when Queen Elizabeth asked Macmillan to form a government, 10 January 1957, the President had second thoughts. He said that Butler would have been easier to work with because 'Macmillan and Eden were somewhat alike in the fact that both could not bear to see the dying of Britain as a colonial power.'<sup>104</sup> Although the French, incensed by the desertion of their ally, had other ideas, Eisenhower himself reckoned that Britain's post-imperial destiny lay in Europe. A possible 'blessing' might emerge from Suez, he said, 'in the form of impelling them to accept the Common Market'.<sup>105</sup> The corollary of this, he considered, was that America would have to fill the vacuum left by Britain (and France) between the Mediterranean and the Gulf 'before it is filled by Russia'.<sup>106</sup> So early in 1957 he enunciated the so-called 'Eisenhower Doctrine'. In the name of the global struggle against Communism, it stipulated that America



would give economic aid and, if requested, military assistance to Middle Eastern countries. Few welcomed this neo-colonial overture. Nasser condemned it as an informal version of the Baghdad Pact. The Arab world in general feared, and had some reason to fear, the imposition of a new overlord, Uncle Sam instead of John Bull.

Britain's retreat from Suez was a 'disgraceful and calamitous event' comparable to the expulsion of Byzantium from Alexandria in AD 640, when the Saracens planted the standard of Mohammed on 'the walls of the capital of Egypt'.<sup>107</sup> Many of Eden's critics at the time thought that the fiasco spelled the end of the Empire. Anthony Nutting described Suez as the 'dying convulsion of British imperialism'.<sup>108</sup> The Deputy Cabinet Secretary, appropriately named Burke Trend, judged that the crisis of 1956 was 'the psychological watershed, the moment when it became apparent that Britain was no longer capable of being a great imperial power'.<sup>109</sup> Even right-wing Tories were downcast. Julian Amery considered that the 'destruction of national will power [was] the greatest casualty' of Suez. He further wrote that it marked the end of the Commonwealth as 'a military or economic bloc', dashing hopes that this voluntary association might be an informal substitute for the Empire. Suez also gave a fresh impetus to 'our enemies' in Aden, Cyprus, Malta and the 'African dependencies'.<sup>110</sup> Nasser reached the same verdict, saying that it helped African countries to 'insist about their independence' and adding hopefully that it ruled out the future use of the colonial 'methods of the nineteenth century'.<sup>111</sup> King Hussein of Jordan, who now looked to Washington, exclaimed: 'What a tragedy: the day Britain finally fell off its pedestal, particularly around here.'<sup>112</sup>

Americans also sensed that the tectonic plates of history had shifted at Suez. Reading the fashionable Arnold Toynbee rather than the old-fashioned Edward Gibbon, they reckoned that British civilisation was palpably giving way to their own. And Nasser was evidently a virile new Asian Caesar responding to the challenge of the superpowers. Such conclusions were too catastrophic for some. Duncan Sandys, who became Defence Minister in Macmillan's government, went so far as to say that fundamentally 'the Suez crisis has altered nothing'. For the time being, no doubt, it had 'sadly impaired Britain's prestige'. But Britain had not suddenly become a 'second class power' and he anticipated a swift 'revulsion of world opinion in our favour'.<sup>113</sup> At the beginning of 1957 *The Economist* issued a more moderate warning against those who envisioned an apocalypse now.

There are few left who doubt that Britain has been trying to play a bigger role than can be sustained by the resources, political, military or financial, that it can bring to bear. Indeed, there are some signs that the reaction has gone too far: there are people who seem to think that there are no intermediate steps between the Empire On Which the Sun Never Sets and the fate of Nineveh or Byzantium.<sup>114</sup>

That the British did not at once share their fate was largely due to America. Because Eden had suspected that the United States was out 'to replace the British Empire' he had made the cardinal mistake over Suez, as Churchill intimated, of not 'consulting the Americans'.<sup>115</sup> His successors, recognising their country's satellite status, did not make the same mistake – quite the opposite. For his part Eisenhower aimed to employ the British Lion, injured though it was, in his struggle with the Russian Bear. This meant rebuilding the damaged alliance and shoring up Britain's position in the Middle East.

Contrary to myth, therefore the imperial legions did not march home in 1956. Of course, London's freedom of action was circumscribed by Washington. And severe economic constraints did cause a reduction in the size of the Royal Navy (which lost its last four battleships) and the phasing out of conscription for military service. But in 1957 Macmillan's government also provided for a strong airborne task force. Although Suez brought the Commonwealth to 'the verge of dissolution',<sup>116</sup> according to the Canadian Foreign Minister Lester Pearson, it remained a global body. And Britain, possessing other allies as well as nuclear weapons, still aspired to be a great power. After Suez and with American help, it kept the weakened Baghdad Pact in being under another name, the Central Treaty Organisation. It sustained friends such as the King of Jordan and the Sultan of Muscat. It retained influence in Iraq and Libya until their nationalist coups in 1958 and 1969 respectively. When Kuwait became independent in 1961 its ruler signed a treaty of friendship with Britain to guard against an irredentist Iraq. As late as 1967 there were more than ten thousand British troops in the Persian Gulf. Until financial and anti-imperial pressures combined between 1968 and 1971, Britain dominated feudal sheikhdoms on the fringe of the Arabian peninsula, themselves once gatekeepers to the Indian jewel, now guardians of the Gulf's black gold.

Moreover, successive governments in London engaged in a bloody contest to preserve the base at Aden. This was one of the most bitter and confused of all independence struggles and it showed that Britain still possessed the resolve and the capacity to remain in the Middle East. On the other hand, Suez had been a clear notice to quit. The debacle had