

EDEN'S CRUSH

Naturally, Eden's Government didn't see it that way. Neutrality was all very well in peacetime, but this was war, albeit a proxy war that they didn't want to identify as such out loud for PR purposes. Come to that, neutrality wasn't all that great in peacetime either as far as the Government was concerned; it would make their lives in particular much easier if the national broadcaster would just fall into line behind the national Government.

It wasn't destined to matter very much longer. The Bonfire Night landings at Port Said were the last straw for the rest of the world. Britain's ambassador to the UN, Sir Pierson Dixon, sent an anguished telegram to the Prime Minister warning him that Britain and France were on the point of "alienating the whole world". Eden had already alienated President Eisenhower, who was putting such enormous pressure on the pound sterling that the Chancellor of the Exchequer - a man named Harold Macmillan - formerly one of the foremost Suez hawks in the Cabinet, was changing his mind.

When pressed, the public still by and large believed in the Government's stated pretext, largely because it was the fifties and the British public still tended to assume the Government must be telling the truth by definition - particularly when it was a Conservative Government. But that was slowly changing with the dawn of the era of mass media and communications, at the vanguard of which at this point was television.

ITV had a new discussion show called Free Speech - essentially a transfer of the BBC's "In the News", in which four regular panelists from opposing sides of the spectrum discussed the events of the day. The Corporation had dropped it for being too spicy, but ATV hired the same four panelists (Michael Foot and AJP Taylor on the left, Roger Boothby and WJ Brown on the right) for the exact same purpose and called it "Free Speech". The format under any name is mostly remembered now for the discussions during Suez, which saw Foot and Taylor labelling Boothby a "criminal" for supporting an invasion, and Boothby looking prepared to kill them both with his bare hands right in front of the cameras.

The BBC may have said a silent prayer of thanks that they no longer made the programme. But it would have been scant consolation. The Suez Crisis had exposed the relationship between Government and national broadcaster as highly dysfunctional, if not actively codependent. Its policy of impartiality had faced what may have been its sternest test to date, and had even given way on a couple of occasions, in the earlier, more ambiguous stages of the crisis.

They had made compromises with their own values. What they had not done, however, was break or betray them completely. As the initial outrage over Nasser's actions cooled, and the early consensus melted away with it, the Corporation stuck to its guns. The issue became party political, and therefore they would not, could not take sides. That one of those parties was, inevitably, the one in Government, made no difference. It didn't enhance their position or their priority. The opposition still had to have its time on the soap box. Suez established a precedent for this view that provided a solid foundation for the BBC going forward.

It also fostered resentment of the Corporation in the corridors of power, and gave the Government the notion of it as something to keep an eye on - possibly even a potential fifth column, or outright enemy. Those rumours of Eden having prototype legislation drawn up for a full Government takeover, just as his uncle-in-law had proposed the first time during the General Strike thirty years earlier, might be unproven, but they were believed at the time and are no less believable now.

In both cases, the idea never got past being a twinkle in the Prime Minister's eye (or the Chancellor's, as Churchill was in 1926). With Port Said in flames, the "war" ended abruptly at 9PM GMT in a unilateral British ceasefire, much to the surprise of the French, the Egyptians and even the Royal Marines on the ground. Eden had caved in to international pressure - particularly from America - at the last minute, if not later, to the satisfaction of no one. Nasser kept the canal, now with the endorsement of both the US and the UN. Neither Britain nor France would be anything close to major superpowers again. Their empires were disintegrating and neither of their Governments would survive long. France's entire constitution collapsed in 1958 in the wake of even more strife in North Africa.

Eden was gone even sooner. Shattered, humiliated, largely abandoned by his own party and an increasing physical wreck, he resigned in January 1957 on the advice of both his doctors and basic common sense. He went to his grave blaming Eisenhower in general and America in particular for his downfall - a resentment that carried on through successive, bipartisan Governments, to the extent that it probably contributed to Britain staying out of both Vietnam and the Yom Kippur wars. So some small good came of the whole mess.

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RULE THE WAVES (5.32)