

HOW THE WAR WAS LOST

With the Government and Britain itself both humiliated at home and abroad, the time had obviously come to apportion blame, or more accurately deflect and re-appropriate it. The Government started to turn its attention to the media and how they reported on events.

As communications had accelerated over the first half of the 20th Century, events had sped up to match, and ultimately beat its pace. The endless race between history and broadcasting, with one constantly streaking ahead of the other, matching and overtaking on a giant metaphorical moebius strip was in one of its flashpoint phases. The Suez Crisis had seen the birth of emergency news coverage, with the new boys ITN to the fore against Tahu Hole's BBC News department - with unprecedented innovations like newsflashes on the hour, and Robin Day practically killing himself rushing from the Commons to the studio, Hansard notes in hand, to produce fresh updates as quickly as possible.

Once again, the difference was stark. ITN were fresh, modern and innovative. BBC News, however, was still run by Tahu Hole, with his insistence on two sources for every story, his pathological caution, his dictatorial running of the Department and his basic lack of qualification, knowledge or understanding of either broadcasting or journalism. Time and again the Corporation was lapped by the commercial upstarts. The BBC correspondent Hardiman Scott only just made it to Port Said in time to be of any use, after being subjected to rigorous, circuitous security checks and then passed like a hot potato between multiple branches of the armed forces. Meanwhile ITN had already sent a reel of film direct from the front lines to London, thereby securing the momentary war's one and only scoop.

That would be bad enough had the crisis gone well for Britain and the Government prevailed. However, in the exact opposite circumstances of failure and humiliation, those in power were casting around for someone to blame, or at least on whom to take out their frustrations. Not for the first and nowhere near for the last time, the BBC were perfectly placed for it. ITV, on the other hand, were largely ignored.

The BBC's unique position as state-funded but not state-controlled national broadcaster often fluctuated between "blessing" and "curse"; in this matter it was pivoting in the latter direction. ITN had had some of the same trouble during the crisis. Kenneth Clark was on his way to give a lecture when the Prime Minister approached him and flat-out asked if he could "slant" the news about Suez. Clark told him he couldn't if he wanted to, which he didn't. It never came up again. ITN, and

ITV in general, powered by capitalism, were less annoying to the Government - any Government - than the BBC, state-mandated but tantalisingly beyond control.

Conservative MPs started ranting in Parliament about the Corporation's biased stance in favour of the Opposition. They were eventually granted an adjournment debate just to shut them up - that is to say, a debate on a topic rather than any specific or practical such as a proposed piece of legislation or even a motion. The BBC stood accused of giving Gaitskell and his views undue prominence, considering he was, after all, the Opposition, and therefore subordinate to the Government - if not outright inferior - and at a time of National Emergency to boot. The very idea of Gaitskell's right to a response broadcast was called into question. Even the supposed moderates in the party would line up behind Eden in denouncing the BBC's very impartiality itself as inappropriate in a time of war. Once British boots were on the ground, the Corporation's duty was to support them, and as far as the Conservatives were concerned, that meant supporting the Government. All of which chilled Grisewood and Jacob to the bone.