

REGYPTIAN STRUT

There was a canal in Egypt. In fact there still is. It's situated in the knobbly bit to the top-right of the country, the place where Africa meets Asia. It starts at Port Said in the north, on the Mediterranean coast, and ends in the Gulf of Suez in the Red Sea. It connects the northern and southern hemispheres, divides two continents, and brings the West and East closer together by eliminating the need to go all the way around the entirety of Africa. For this reason it is terribly important and useful.

It was the idea of a French diplomat called Ferdinand de Lesseps, whose Suez Canal Company started building it in 1859 and completed it 10 years later, under the understanding that Egypt itself would own the actual canal (ie the hole in the ground full of water), but the Company would own and operate the infrastructure - the ports, the traffic, and everything that made it more than a hole in the ground full of water. And because the Company was an SA - the French equivalent of a plc - that meant rich shareholders, mostly French and English, except for a token 15% reserved for the Egyptian Government.

That Government changed radically in 1952, with the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy and a new revolutionary republic installed under Mohammad Naguib and Gamal Abdul Nasser, the latter of whom ultimately (after much internal power struggling) took power in the long term after 1954. That same year, Britain and Egypt signed an agreement whereby British troops were gradually withdrawn through 1955, leaving Egypt fully autonomous and unoccupied for the first time in centuries.

This process was finally completed in June 1956. Nasser wasted very little time thereafter before throwing a sphinx among the pigeons. On July 26th, he announced the nationalisation of the canal. By which he decidedly did *not* mean merely the hole in the ground full of water. The entire infrastructure, ports, traffic and all, were brought under the control of a new, state-owned authority, leaving the original Suez Canal Company, and more to the point its shareholders, out in the cold.

Naturally this went down badly with the two main powers behind the Canal Company, Britain and France. They furiously cited that 1954 agreement, which included an understanding that the Suez Company was sacred. Nasser countered with a broken agreement of his own: Britain and America had agreed to fund the latest engineering project to come out of Egypt, the Aswan Dam, then abruptly went back on it, in a dizzying ballet of Cold War manouvering. Nasser still wanted to build the Dam, and the money had to come from somewhere - hence nationalising the Canal. (In actual fact, the Soviet Union had already agreed to step in where the Dam was concerned, but it still made a good excuse).

France and Britain raged, and for a while war seemed inevitable. Certainly Eden's Conservative party all but demanded Nasser's head on a pike for this unconscionable insult to the British Empire-Sorry-Commonwealth. However, that complex Cold War manouvering raised its head once again. While Nasser enjoyed being a neutral party and playing the sides against each other, America preferred to keep Egypt, and as much of the Arab world as possible for that matter, reasonably content, lest they go to war with Israel. Therefore, they made it very clear that they

would not support Britain's sabre-rattling, and actively warned against putting it into practice. So they didn't.

All this was relayed to Britain on the BBC, just as every previous news event had been for over thirty years. For the first time, however, the country had an alternative choice, and arguably a better one, in ITN. The Corporation had some advantages, however: not just experience and name-recognition, but establishment credentials - in particular those of chairman Alexander Cadogan, the former diplomat who'd been at or near the centre of British foreign policy during and shortly after the War, and had been given his BBC post personally by Winston Churchill. He was also, not incidentally, one of the directors of the Suez Canal Company. A private line between the Chairman and the Prime Minister soon developed. One of its first uses was probably to discuss a near-unprecedented television broadcast on August 8th - a direct address from the Prime Minister.