

# Remembering Suez

By *British Politics Review* Guest Writer  
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**A crisis that changed the world order.** This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Suez crisis. Judging from Tony Blair's foreign policy, the question is whether Britain has learned anything from these events that changed world politics?

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It is fair to claim that the Suez Crisis of 1956 changed the power-balance of world politics. In short, it marked the end of an era dominated by the colonial powers of Britain and France, and it moved world authority across the Atlantic Ocean, to the United States of America. The whole event was deemed provocative and was condemned by the United Nations as well as the US. The American President Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted to show his "anti imperialist" attitude and wanted to be labelled the "peace" president. Eisenhower had an election in mind and he would not let this crisis destroy his ambitions. But Eisenhower won the election in 1956 and the Suez conflict was the last time America officially rebuked Israel, the country's main ally in the Middle East.

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Suez marked the end of imperialist activity for Britain, but most of all, it was a major humiliation for Prime Minister Anthony Eden who resigned just after. Lies and cover-ups, even in the House of Commons, destroyed much of Britain's standing on the international arena and in many ways put pressure on the country to rid itself with the Empire. The whole episode strengthened America's power over the west European countries. The French lost confidence in any future cooperation with Britain as Britain itself demonstrated that it put "the special relationship" with America first. France realised that it had to look elsewhere for support and, in the aftermath of Suez, created what was later to become the European Union, with the Treaty of Rome signed the following year (France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg).

The Suez Crisis also highlighted the fragility of world peace. All the involved parties were ready to use force when and if necessary, but thanks to the UN, Suez ended without major bloodshed. However, the incident clearly sharpened the divisions between the East and the West, and it furthermore gave rise to a pan-Arabian nationalism that we still see traces of in the region today. Saddam Hussein was one leader who clearly drew inspiration from Nasserism (The Economist, 27 July 2006).

Suez haunted British foreign policy for many decades. It was referred to as the "Suez syndrome" and it was not until Margaret Thatcher's premiership that Britain again showed itself on the international scene. The retaking of the Falklands in 1982 was by many seen as partially an attempt to drive out the demons of Suez, but also re-establish Britain as a world power. In fact, much of Thatcher's political project was to recapture some of the foreign ground lost as a result of the Suez Crisis.

And Tony Blair inherited much of Thatcher's foreign ambitions. He wanted to "make peace" with Europe and at the same time cultivate the

"special relationship" with America. Being close allies with Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Blair has not been afraid of using British troops on foreign missions. According to the editor of the New Statesman John Kampfner, "Blair has committed British forces to action five times in six years. No other British Prime Minister and few world leaders have come close in contemporary history... this mission has taken Blair from the first air strikes against Iraq in 1998, to the Kosovo conflict of 1999; from the deployment of troops in Sierra Leone to George W. Bush's attack on the Taleban and al-Queda in Afghanistan after 11. September - and then on to the final and decisive war against Saddam Hussein" (press release for Kampfner's book *Blair's Wars*, 2004, Free Press).

There is clearly a development from the years after Suez, via Thatcher, to Blair. Not only did Thatcher pave the way for Blair on the foreign scene, she demonstrated for the world that they lest not forget that Britain was once the world's leading imperial power. Blair took advantage of Thatcher's legacy but did perhaps go "a bridge too far" in proving his points.

The major lesson of Suez, however, is clearly visible in all of Britain's international activity; they play second fiddle to America, and Britain never engage in foreign operations without the blessings of the "big brother" on the other side of the Atlantic. It is America that gives Britain its legitimacy as a power to be reckoned with. And after Suez, the "special relationship" has seemed to be a clear priority, partly in order to avoid such blunders, but also because of the close ties the British feel they have with America.

Hence, it is safe to conclude that the Suez experience has been, and still is, present in British foreign policy. Many commentators in Britain feel that perhaps the lesson has been taken too far; that the relationship to America is too close, both in the war in Iraq and in the recent trouble in the Middle East, where Blair refused to join the other European leaders in calling for an immediate ceasefire. He rather waited for Bush.