

The Washi

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Suez Warmed Over

When former French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau recently acknowledged the collusion among France, Britain and Israel in the 1956 Suez campaign, he merely confirmed what almost everyone suspected at the time. Israeli Gen. Moshe Dayan has written that his country would not have acted if it had not been assured of a simultaneous British and French effort. It remains for the British principals—notably former Prime Minister Anthony Eden (Lord Avon) and former Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd—to admit the role they denied at the time, although Prime Minister Wilson now has virtually done it for them.

A subsequent decade of international turbulence has caused at least some re-evaluation of the moral outrage poured on the three collaborators. Of the three Israel had the most justification for her action because of the vicious fedayeen raids encouraged by Egypt. Britain and France moved nominally to protect the Suez Canal but actually to restore it to international operation after Nasser had nationalized it—and if possible to topple Nasser himself. Whereas the Israeli effort largely succeeded, the British and French action did not, partly because of inept and tardy military aspects and partly because of international pressure.

Such collusion probably would shock the world community at any time, but if the total campaign had succeeded the international tongue-clucking probably would have subsided relatively quickly. In the light of such unilateral actions of its own as the Bay of Pigs and the Dominican intervention, the United States might be less censorious today about what it then branded as an affront to international law.

More is known now about the responsibility which this country shared for the breakdown in communications between Suez. Lord Avon's memoirs and Lord Moran's diaries on Churchill make clear the immense suspicions aroused by what British officials regarded as the deviousness of the late Secretary of State Dulles. Paradoxically Mr. Dulles, having given Nasser a pretext for nationalizing the canal by his abrupt withdrawal of aid for the Aswan Dam, was working feverishly to avert the tragedy he saw looming.

Could the Suez operation really have succeeded in any case? One of the postulates—that Nasser could not really manage the canal—was demonstrably wrong. With some initial outside help Nasser has kept the canal functioning, although

it is still closed to Israel in violation of international covenants. Another postulate—that the world would be better off if Nasser had been toppled—is at least questionable. For all his receptiveness to Soviet influence and his meddling elsewhere, Nasser has worked to modernize his country and has brought an overdue sense of dignity to his people. Another leader without Nasser's personal appeal might have been more tractable from the standpoint of the West. But a revolutionary ferment in Egypt could scarcely have been avoided, and a less realistic leader might have been more troublesome.

What, then, did the campaign accomplish? It probably brought some military security to Israel against Arab threats to destroy her. But for Britain, and to a lesser extent for France, it was a disaster. The distraction may have encouraged the Soviet Union into more repressive measures in the Hungarian revolt. It caused the premature eclipse of Anthony Eden. Most of all, it brought home as nothing else the limitations on British power.

But there is a lesson too for even a superpower such as the United States. Suez grew out of resentment and obsession, yes; but it also stemmed partly from a rupture of effective diplomatic understanding between this country and its close allies. Britain and France conspired in secret, but a major reason was that their leaders believed the United States did not take sufficient account of their vital interests. The moral, if there is a moral, is that such breakdowns, like the New York blackout, can occur unexpectedly. The only preventive is a determined effort to keep understanding in constant repair.