

Why Britain must say no to America

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When Tony Blair meets President Bush this weekend to discuss how to deal with Saddam Hussein, he would do well to bear in mind events that occurred in the same region some half a century ago.

5 Then the demonic figure who "had to be stopped in his tracks before he became so strong as to be unstoppable" was one Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser, the Prime Minister of Egypt. His crime had been to seize, or renationalise, the Suez Canal, which was then run by an international consortium. The reasons why he did so were complex, but the act was quite rightly seen as a blow to Britain's entire position in the Middle East. The then Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, saw this as a re-run of the 1930s, of which his generation had had such bitter experience. If not quite
10 a Hitler, Nasser was certainly a Mussolini. In Eden's view Nasser had to be not only stopped, but "toppled". There must be what we would now term a "regime change", and military planning for this was undertaken immediately.

Unfortunately the legal position was not at all clear and Britain's allies, with the exception of France, were very unsupportive. The United States, under Secretary of State John Foster Dulles,
15 blew hot and cold. When Eden finally lost patience and cooked up his notorious conspiracy with France and Israel, whereby Israel was to attack Egypt while France and Britain intervened to "separate the combatants", President Eisenhower blew very cold indeed, and American intervention brought the operation to a humiliating halt. Nasser triumphed and survived, the hero of the Arab world. Eden did not. Yet when Harold Macmillan, Eden's successor, visited
20 Washington to try to mend fences, Dulles asked him: "But Harold - why didn't you go on and finish the job?" What indeed if we had?

It is great fun to go on swapping historical analogies so long as we do not take them too seriously. Nasser was no ruthless dictator like Saddam Hussein, a standing threat to his neighbours if not to the wider world; but that was how he was perceived in London at the time.
25 He was certainly a threat to Britain's hegemony in the region. His seizure of the Canal in itself could not be used as an excuse to topple him. Legally it was no more than a premature "renationalisation" of an Egyptian asset. Some other *casus belli* had to be found.

In the same way, the lack of any clear evidence connecting Saddam with 11 September means that some other *casus belli* must be found to justify the military attack that the government of the
30 United States seems determined to launch. Saddam is certainly in breach of his obligations to the United Nations with regard to his retention of "weapons of mass destruction", but that is a problem for the Security Council as a whole, not for any single member of it, however powerful.

Throughout the summer of 1956 Eden watched with increasing frustration as the cumbersome procedures of the UN made it increasingly probable that Nasser would get away with it. The
35 Pentagon is likely to find itself doing the same during the summer of 2002. If it, eventually, like Eden, loses patience and goes ahead with military operations to "topple Saddam", the British Government seems pledged to provide support.

If the Americans do launch such an attack, it would almost certainly be a military success - at least in the short run. But, like Suez, it would be launched in the teeth of international
40 disapproval, not least that of the entire Arab world. It would be condemned by a huge majority in the United Nations. Like Suez, it would be deeply divisive for Britain domestically - and given the increased ethnic diversity of our population, likely to be even more so than in 1956. Like Suez, it would split the Commonwealth - this time perhaps fatally. And, like Suez, it would be launched with very little idea of what would happen next.

45 For that was the real weakness of Suez. Having just evacuated Egypt because national feeling was making our position there untenable, we were proposing to install some puppet government that would have required the support of a British army of occupation if it was to function at all; an army whose presence would further inflame nationalism throughout the Middle East.

50 Here the analogy becomes alarmingly close. Nasser was a genuinely popular leader as Saddam is
not. But, unpopular though he may be, what alternative leader is available to replace Saddam,
who would not be seen simply as an American tool, and who could rule his deeply divided
country without the continuing hands-on support of American armed forces whose very presence
would further destabilise the region? And if the US believes that it could withdraw its troops and
55 leave peacekeeping to its wimpish European allies, it would be likely to receive a very frosty
answer - not least from our own overstretched Ministry of Defence.

There can be no doubt that Saddam is a very bad guy indeed, or that he is developing an arsenal
of very dangerous weapons. There is a case to be made for toppling him, but it will not be
convincing unless we know what will happen next. To voice our doubts is not to be in the least
"anti-American". It is simply to do for our allies the friendly service they did for us at the time of
60 Suez. We owe to our friends our best judgment; not our blind loyalty.

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