

A PASSAGE FOR TERROR—THE SUEZ CANAL: HOW
BRITISH MERCHANTS USED PUBLIC FEAR, 1860-1888

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Today, ocean-going container ships form the backbone of the global trade system, transporting all types of goods between nearly every pair of coastal cities on Earth. From the nineteenth century onwards, though, the greatest ocean highway has been the one that linked the Orient to the Old World, carrying massive amounts of each land's unique produce to eager consumers abroad. The Suez Canal is the single most important link in this route, saving millions of dollars in time and transporting everything from Saudi oil to Chinese toys. When most Americans think of shipping canals, they think of Teddy Roosevelt's triumph, the Panama Canal, which carried 5% of all global sea trade in 2013.¹ However, few realize that the Suez Canal carried 8-10% of global sea trade in 2014, up to double its American cousin's share.² The modern history of the Suez Canal dates back to Napoleon I, who became interested in building a passage across the Isthmus of Suez when he occupied Egypt in the late eighteenth century. His dream would be realized fifty years later by another Frenchman, Ferdinand de Lesseps, and his Suez Canal Company, which negoti-

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ated complex political waters and got the Canal dug. The world's trade routes were redrawn almost overnight. Sail-powered ships that circumnavigated the globe on a single round trip to India were replaced by steamships, and global trade in bulk commodities became possible for the first time. The Canal was a resounding success for all parties involved, improving the revenues of both merchants and the Canal Company and reducing travel times from London to India by two thirds. However, this new route, which bypassed British resupply colonies, terrified the English public. For years, England had leveraged her control of Southern Africa and the Maldives to exclude foreign traders from India. This allowed British merchants to establish a virtual monopoly on Far Eastern trade, which became a core sector of the British economy. With the opening of a new, French-controlled route, British politicians and citizens feared that France would use her control of the Canal to impede English commerce, although the French-dominated Canal Company treated vessels from all nations equally in both principle and practice. British shipowners were far less concerned, for they had a more nuanced understanding of the situation than the British public and did not need the support of the people, as the politicians did. The shipowners knew that Lesseps cared far more about money than about French glory and that the French merchant fleet was ill-equipped for the new route, allowing steamship-building Britons to remain the dominant traders. However, they disliked the French-run Canal Company because it was a corporation, and it kept Canal tolls at nine times the amount needed to run the Canal. The excessive fees, which the British merchants had no power to reduce, made them turn to their allies in Parliament to gain control of the Canal. During this era, Parliament was eager to aid the shipping companies' interests. Although geopolitics were an important consideration, British lawmakers were far more concerned with keeping the British monopoly on Indian trade, for merchants were highly influential in politics, and overseas trade was a major portion of the British economy. The Prime Minister purchased the indebted Egyptians' shares in the Canal Company, and when Lesseps still

refused to lower the tolls, Britain's leader ordered an invasion and occupation of Egypt. The British Army secured the Isthmus within a few weeks, and although the English government left the Canal Company's powers intact on paper, Lesseps was subsequently forced to yield to the will of British shipowners. The French builders of the Suez Canal could have exploited their control of the passage to jeopardize Britannia's rule of the seas, the possibility of which caused a panic amongst the British populace. However, this fear was unfounded, for the profit-hungry Suez Canal Company had no intention of quarrelling with the English. Nonetheless, British shipowners and their allies in Parliament exploited this fear to gain support for an invasion of Egypt that did not advance the interests of the British people, serving instead mostly to help English merchants reduce their Canal tolls.

Building the Suez Canal was a diplomatic effort more than anything, and given the British desire to maintain their pre-Suez control of all East-West shipping lanes, it was the French who spearheaded the project. In fact, France was the first state to express an interest in a shortcut via the Isthmus of Suez. Napoleon I, the great conqueror of Europe, had been interested in the East since he was young and recognized that a canal could loosen Britain's grip on India.³ In 1798, he ordered an expedition to Egypt, saying that the commander "shall have the Isthmus of Suez cut through, and he shall take the necessary steps to assure the free and exclusive possession of the Red Sea to the French Republic."⁴ Napoleon's hope would not die with him, though, and the idea of any Egyptian canal's "exclusive possession" by France would still haunt the British nearly a century later, long after it had disappeared amongst the French. The British sent a fleet to prevent Napoleon's expedition, but even Admiral Nelson could not stop the French Emperor.⁵ Ironically, what stole the glory from Napoleon was a shoddy surveying job that falsely reported an elevation difference of over 30 feet between the Red and Mediterranean Seas, rendering the construction of a canal impossible with the technology of that time.⁶ This miscalculation delayed serious consideration of a canal for 48 years.

In the meantime, though, the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation (P&O) Company, one of England's largest shipping concerns, had opened a popular passenger and mail route with a land transfer at Suez.⁷ With travel times of forty days, compared to between four and six months around the Cape of Good Hope, business was booming.⁸ This land route, although it would become obsolete once the Canal was built, was important because it laid the framework for British businessmen interfering in Egyptian politics. The P&O first flexed its political muscle during a tax dispute in 1840. The Pasha family, which ruled Egypt at the time, was making a fortune from customs duties, and the P&O grew tired of paying the high fees. Arthur Anderson, a director of the P&O, met with Egypt's king, Mehmet Ali, and forced him to lower the taxes, threatening to return to the Cape route.⁹ Since he needed the money from the P&O's ships, the monarch quickly agreed to Anderson's terms. This set the precedent that the "P&O's directors could indeed deputize for the Foreign Office in commercial matters."¹⁰ British foreign policy in Egypt would forevermore be determined by the shipping companies' interests, which would have profound effects once the Canal was built. With a multinational conglomerate running the Canal and numerous geopolitical interests at play, the Suez Canal Zone became an experiment in international law and the delicate colonial diplomacy of late-nineteenth century Europe.¹¹

In 1847, French engineer A.P. Bourdaloue released a groundbreaking survey showing that the two seas were nearly identical in height, and a Suez canal once again became a real possibility.¹² Once again, it was a Frenchman who sprang at the opportunity. Ferdinand de Lesseps, a former diplomat, saw the P&O's willingness to pay such high fees for the Suez route, as customs fees were only a portion of the Isthmian shortcut's expensive logistics. He reasoned that shippers would pay an even greater premium for a canal, which would eliminate the wasteful land transfer. Recognizing the potential profit, Lesseps decided to make the Canal a commercial venture, not a government one, and founded the Suez Canal Company. On November 15, 1854, Lesseps asked Said Pasha, the ruler of Egypt, for a land conces-

sion to build a shipping canal across the Isthmus of Suez.¹³ Pasha agreed, and the Canal Company received its official concession on May 19, 1855.¹⁴ In crafting the Canal Company, Lesseps allocated shares for sale to investors from every major nation, careful to allot an equal portion of the business to France and Britain so that the two nations could have a majority control over the Company.¹⁵ In an attempt to defund the project, though, the British refused to buy a single share, leaving France and Egypt with nearly all the Canal Company's stock.¹⁶ This would later have consequences for all parties involved. A French-controlled route to India was not popular either among the British people or in Whitehall, mostly because it had the potential to reduce England's virtual monopoly on Indian trade. Furthermore, the British public still believed that it would be impossible to dig such a canal. J.W. Blakesley, a British clergyman writing just after construction began in 1860, said that "English statesmen are surely too wise to enter upon a quarrel ostensibly to prevent foreign capitalists from wasting their money."¹⁷ Citing pseudoscientific evidence, he claimed that even if the French successfully dug across the Isthmus, the Nile's silt would clog any canal. At the time, construction was stagnating, and this lent credence to Blakesley's primary argument: that the undertaking was too great in the first place, and the Canal Company would never get the job done.¹⁸ His opinion reflected the logic of most Britons in 1860. Indeed, work on the Canal was proceeding slowly due to a lack of willing labor, and few believed that Lesseps would actually pierce the Isthmus.

Nonetheless, the British government took no chances and tried to stop Lesseps by voiding Pasha's concession. The Ottoman Empire conquered Egypt in 1517, and on paper, it kept its grip on the nation until the British invasion in 1882. However, the Sultan lost effective rule over the region in 1798, when Napoleon ousted the Turks, and Albanian militants took over after he withdrew.¹⁹ Although Egypt was technically still part of the Ottoman Empire, the Pasha dynasty, descended from the Albanians' commander, had near total control over the nation's internal matters.²⁰ The Pasha Dynasty ruled as a line of "Khedives," or kings, of Egypt throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

Throughout the project, Lesseps enjoyed the Pashas' support, as they welcomed foreign investment in Egypt as a way to westernize their country and make themselves richer.²¹ The Turks were still highly influential in Egypt's foreign affairs, though, and the British, who held considerable sway in Constantinople, pressured the Ottomans to block the Canal project. In response, Lesseps got the French Emperor's "assistance against the English Ambassador [to the Ottoman Empire]'s opposition."²² The Ottomans allowed construction of the Canal, and the project began in earnest when the French and Egyptians bought the shares that were originally allocated to England. It is worthwhile to note that, barring this particular incident, other Great Powers stayed out of the Anglo-French dispute. The Turks were a waning power that was forced to ignore Egypt in the face of far greater threats from Russia and Austria-Hungary.²³ In the West, Otto von Bismarck of Germany saw far more to gain in brokering Anglo-Russian cooperation against the French, which would further weaken Germany's oldest enemy, than in getting involved in Suez.²⁴ Bismarck manipulated the Russians into staying out of the dispute and tacitly supporting Britain so that he could have more "diplomatic options for himself in case Russia and Austria-Hungary clashed over the future of Turkey-in-Europe."²⁵ With the Germans and Russians avoiding Egypt, nineteenth century diplomacy in Suez would be confined to British, French, and, to a limited extent, Egyptian interests.

Unlike the case with the Panama Canal, the engineering of the Suez Canal was very straightforward. It was essentially a ditch dug through the desert, lacking the complex system of locks and dams that were needed in America.²⁶ Thus, while the Culebra Cut was the greatest obstacle in Panama, the challenges to the Suez route were almost entirely political. Realizing this, Lesseps courted Said Pasha, the Khedive at the time, to garner support for his Canal project. His approach reflected the French practice of working with the local government rather than coercing it. While the British used their economic and military power to force the Khedive's hand, as the P&O did in 1840, Lesseps was deferent towards him. In one letter from 1855, a few years before construction began, Lesseps wrote that "I hope your Highness

will continue to approve my prudence in conducting the undertaking you have been good enough to entrust to me."²⁷ With the Khedive's support, construction began in 1859. For the first two years, construction struggled due to the Canal Company's inability to find willing Egyptian workers, but in 1861, Lesseps received a massive influx of forced laborers from the Khedive.²⁸ Some 400,000 Egyptian peasants, each obliged by his government to work on the Canal for several months, would contribute to the Canal's construction over the following eight years.²⁹ The Canal finally broke through to the Red Sea on August 15, 1869, and changed global trade forever.

Prior to the completion of the Canal, most trade with the East was carried on British-owned sailing ships, but the moment that Lesseps pierced the Isthmus, the old routes and vessels became obsolete overnight. Before the Canal opened, the fastest way to carry cargo (passengers could use the Isthmus economically via the P&O's overland connection) to and from India was on a clipper ship, a light, sail-powered vessel that could circumnavigate the globe in the then-rapid speed of around seven months.³⁰ The problem with these ships, though, was their need to traverse the entire world in a single round trip. Because of the prevailing westerly winds and the need to round the Cape of Good Hope, these ships had to return to England via Cape Horn in South America. Another issue was that, since they were so light, the clippers could only carry expensive goods, like tea and cloth.³¹ This prohibited trade in bulk commodities, especially grain and cotton, which were cheaply produced in India and could be hugely profitable if a more economical route to Europe existed.³² The pre-Suez route was highly advantageous for the English because their control of Southern Africa gave them "undisputed command of the commerce to the East."³³ This was the root of British merchants' opposition to the Canal, although they also disliked it because clipper ships could not navigate the Red Sea, forcing them to spend massive amounts of money building steamships that could use Suez. When the Canal opened, though, it cut the London to Bombay distance by 42% on the outbound journey with even greater savings on the return.³⁴ This made the Suez route substantially cheaper and faster,

and the Canal “eliminated the demand for sailing vessels... [and] began the transfer of the trade of Bombay from sail to steam.”³⁵ Although some had feared that foreign competitors would jump into the fray and outcompete English merchants,³⁶ the British monopoly on Indian trade remained. In fact, the Canal allowed for much greater commerce with India because unlike the clipper ships, the Canal’s steamships could carry “bulky ‘common’ cargo” profitably.³⁷ This opened the lucrative export market for Indian grain and increased British exports, which in turn reduced local manufacturing and made the colony even more dependent on its European rulers.³⁸ In addition, Britain could also exert greater control in the Far East because troop relief times decreased threefold, doubling the size of the colonial army in India.³⁹ In May of 1878 alone, 8,400 British soldiers passed through the Canal going to or from India, with more than 58,000 troops transiting the Isthmus that year.⁴⁰ The profound economic consequences of the Canal only served to heighten British paranoia. Prior to its completion, English merchants feared being outcompeted by foreigners, and once it became indispensable, Britannia could not loosen her grip on the highway to India.

Even though the Canal would strengthen British interests in the long run, the French control of Suez made the English public fear losing its rule over India and the high seas. Alphonse de Lamartine, a French novelist and politician, outlined the British outlook on Suez when he said that “Egypt is Suez, Suez is India, and India is England... [Another nation] will never be able to take Egypt or keep it.”⁴¹ Lamartine understood that from the moment the Suez route opened, the desert Isthmus was inexorably linked with India. He also understood that the British were terrified of the French stealing India: the “keystone of the Empire.”⁴² To the people of England, “[p]rotection of India demanded that all the approaches be in British hands,” and in French ones least of all.⁴³ Before Lesseps announced his project, there were many people in England who supported a canal through the Isthmus both for its economic benefits and the influence that it would give England. Amongst these was Arthur Anderson, a managing director of the

P&O, who wrote in 1843 that from “a political point of view,” the benefits that a British-built canal “would afford to Great Britain... are almost incalculable.”⁴⁴ However, the moment that the Canal became a French endeavor, the British feared them more than the four-month journey via the Cape. Writers began spreading the idea that the French would usurp the British and become the world’s dominant power. One article, entitled “Visions from Suez,” asked its readers: “[a]re we sure that our hope may prove but a snare and a delusion, or that some encroaching rival may not... leave us to perish alone in the wide waters? France may be that rival. Her position is now superior for commercial purposes to that of England.”⁴⁵ This article’s goal was undoubtedly to strike fear into the British people. It emphasized that the Canal made France “superior” and that England would “perish.” The article also warned that England’s dominance would rapidly dwindle, like the Fall of the Roman Empire.⁴⁶ This account, although written in England, was republished in an Australian newspaper, halfway across the world. This reflects how the fear of losing the Canal reverberated through the entire British Empire, creating concern both at home and among British expatriates living overseas. In an address to powerful shipowners, a concerned Briton named O.C. Waterfield said that “those who made the Canal, believed that it would be in time of war a source of danger to our Eastern possessions...An English Canal would have been an addition to the strength of England; a French Canal could hardly be expected to produce the same result.”⁴⁷ These words reflect the public fear at the time. Waterfield made the statement that “those who made the Canal,” the French, intended for it to be “a source of danger” to India. The British people wanted an “English Canal,” not a “French” one. England’s trade with the East was dependent upon the Canal, which made the British vulnerable. Even the calmer critics noted that the Canal could frustrate “the monopoly [England] has enjoyed of the trade between the East and the West.”⁴⁸ Every article on Suez, though, emphasized the idea that the French would use the Canal to steal India from its British owners. These statements made the British public clamor to protect the Canal at all costs, paving the way for the British invasion of Egypt.

However, this fear was wholly unfounded. Lesseps and the French Empire never moved towards a French occupation of the Canal, preferring a peaceful approach that would maximize shipping traffic and, therefore, toll revenue. Ferdinand de Lesseps was a businessman who recognized that a war with the British was bad for his bottom line. He also understood that the British were his best customers, going to great lengths to placate them and stopping only when the shipowners' proposals threatened his profits and personal control of the Canal Company. From the beginning, Lesseps tried to get the British on his side. In 1856, when the Canal was still just an idea, Lesseps wrote to a British Member of Parliament, begging for his support. He noted that "[o]nly one difficulty has presented itself: this is the opposition of your government, which...has succeeded in delaying the formality of the ratification" from the Ottomans.⁴⁹ Lesseps, a former diplomat, did not threaten the British anywhere in this letter nor even hint at it. Instead, he simply asked the MP whether he truly had "any dread of a rival [French] policy" and whether opposing the Canal went against Britain's free-trade values.⁵⁰ These are not the words of a man who wanted to steal India but of one who was weary of political opposition to a genuinely harmless project. This letter demonstrates that Lesseps was certainly motivated by money and fame, but he had no desire to deceive the British, and his actions reflected this.

It is possible that Lesseps feigned innocence with this MP to gain favor, but if he had a secret agenda for the glory of *la patrie*, then he surely would have exploited it at home. In an 1856 memorandum to Napoleon III, he in fact asked the Emperor to issue a "declaration of peace, to introduce a clause to guarantee for ever to the traders of all countries a free passage for their ships and the neutrality of the maritime canal."⁵¹ Napoleon III was interested in propagating French influence abroad, so he would have been far more likely to support a canal that benefitted his empire rather than some businessman's pocketbook. The fact that, even in his private letters to the Emperor, Lesseps had no national agenda, confirmed that he was only interested in making a profit. Indeed, the British fear was not based on evidence of Lesseps' past actions,

but upon the notion that France could seize the Isthmus. He tried, albeit in vain, to make the British his allies, assuring them of the Canal's neutrality by making it a legal condition in the Khedive's concession to the Canal Company.⁵² He read the English press, and he saw the rising sentiment against his French-run project. Lesseps understood that if he did not placate the British, he could face an invasion of Suez and immediate dissolution of the Canal Company. In the letter to the Member of Parliament, he expressed his fear that the Canal would "rekindle a bad feeling between France and England," something that he emphatically wanted to avoid.⁵³ From the beginning, Lesseps tried to involve the British in the Canal. The Suez Canal Company "was conceived as an international company" that had to keep the Canal "open to all nations, at all times."⁵⁴ In addition, the British were allocated the same number of shares as the French to keep a balance of power.⁵⁵ Indeed, at every step, Lesseps tried to involve the British, while still protecting some of his own interests. Hubert Bonin, a contemporary historian, shares the common view that Lesseps was naïve, upholding ideals that would inevitably be crushed by one of the many powerful interests involved in Suez.⁵⁶ However, Bonin also believes that Lesseps was genuinely a "pure" capitalist and could never have survived in such a hostile environment without standing by his lofty principles.⁵⁷ If he had begun to support British interests over French ones, or vice-versa, then the offended nation would crush him. Even though all evidence pointed to Lesseps being an innocent businessman, the British remained distrustful, derailing his reconciliatory efforts and leading to a collision between the two nations.

Meanwhile, the British shipowners had grown tired of their inability to control Lesseps. The shipowners' feelings can never be known with certainty, but it is likely that given their deep understanding of the situation, they knew that the French posed no threat to England as a whole. Their main concern was with the price of Canal tolls, of which only 11 % was needed to actually cover the Canal Company's expenses,⁵⁸ although they also wanted the Canal to be widened into a two-way channel for faster transiting. Naturally, Lesseps had no desire to reduce tolls or improve Canal

infrastructure, as both of these would hurt his profits, and the shipowners came to see him as an obstacle to their interests. They had good reason to be angry, too, as the Canal tolls were egregious, accounting for 20-25% of the cost of running a steamer from England to India, and the Canal was only a one-way passage and running far over capacity.⁵⁹ The shipowners were further angered by their lack of representation in the Canal Company, even though the British government controlled 44% of the Company's shares after 1875.⁶⁰ This situation existed because Lesseps structured the shareholder voting system around his initial plan for numerous investors from each nation, giving a maximum of ten votes for each individual stockholder to keep a balance of power. However, since the British government was the sole English shareholder, it had just 10 votes to the 8,400 Continental votes.⁶¹ Furthermore, some 80% of the traffic through the Canal was British, but these men still had no say in running the Canal.⁶² They tried negotiating with Lesseps to address their concerns in 1876, but the most he gave them was a dubious agreement that contained no real concessions.⁶³ The exasperated merchants turned to their friends in Parliament for help, looking for any way to secure leverage over Lesseps, including a British invasion of Suez.

Lesseps could not have faced more steadfast opposition from the British government, either. Despite fluctuating between liberal and conservative control, the British government remained unified in its determination to preserve England's control of Suez. Benjamin Disraeli, the leader of the Conservative Party at the time, was an ambitious man and a strong advocate of imperialism. In 1875, the Khedive desperately needed to pay off his debts, so he decided to sell one of his most valuable assets: his 44% stake in the Canal Company. Lesseps asked him to divide his shares amongst various European governments, but the Khedive wanted a British company to run the Canal because he was desperate to please his English creditors.⁶⁴ Disraeli, who was the Prime Minister at the time, was happy to oblige the Egyptian ruler and secretly purchased the shares with a 4 million pound loan from the Rothschild Family. In a letter to Queen Victoria, he justified this bold action by saying that if the French had bought the stake, "the

whole of the Suez Canal would have belonged to France, and they might have shut it up!"⁶⁵ Disraeli enjoyed the vehement support of Lord Salisbury, an influential Conservative who would soon be appointed Foreign Secretary, as well as the grudging approval of Lord Derby, his Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.⁶⁶ Charles Abbot, the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office, supported greater English control in Suez because he understood that cool behavior towards France would aid British relations with Germany.⁶⁷ Abbot also wanted a British outpost adjacent to both the Ottomans and the Russians, as any Russian response to British actions in Egypt would exacerbate tensions between the Eastern European monarchies and further weaken them.⁶⁸ The Foreign Office subscribed to Abbot's reasoning and eagerly supported all British involvement in Suez. Queen Victoria, too, agreed with the ambitious plan from the outset.⁶⁹ Most importantly, Parliament supported Disraeli as well. When funding the purchase came to a vote in the House of Commons, it "was agreed to without a division" between parties.⁷⁰ Keeping the Suez Canal out of French hands became so much of a concern to the British people that even most of the Liberal Party supported Disraeli's actions.⁷¹ William Gladstone, the Liberal Party's leader during this era, was Disraeli's opponent in many respects, especially in his anti-imperialist views. Yet, when an opportunity arose to occupy Egypt in 1882 and kick the French out, it was Prime Minister Gladstone who ordered the invasion.⁷² Although he used the guise of "sav[ing] constitutionalism and the true revolution" of the Khedive's government to justify his actions,⁷³ he was acting solely to serve British interests, just as Disraeli had in 1875. Even though British politics of the day were highly polarized, both the Liberal and Conservative Parties were unified in their determination to preserve Britain's control of the Suez Canal. This allowed for decisive action by the British Government that would otherwise have never been possible. Even Lesseps' efforts to reconcile with the British only brought further suspicion. Lord Granville, the British Foreign Secretary in 1882, said at the time that the "[t]he old rogue is playing us tricks," reflecting the public's view of Lesseps.⁷⁴ However, although Granville spoke for the public in this case, he was anything but an average

citizen. Born into a wealthy family, Granville was an industrialist who owned a massive ironworks in Handley,⁷⁵ among many other businesses.⁷⁶ A prominent businessman, Granville would certainly have been sympathetic to the merchants' concerns. While he may have seen Lesseps as a trickster, it is also possible that he wanted to promote British industry. He stands as a shining example of the British government's apparent goal of helping the shipowners at any cost.

In dealing with Egypt, Parliament was eager to satisfy the shipping companies, as these merchants formed the backbone of Indian trade. There was a growing belief in British political spheres that "Britain's true power was increasingly determined by her economic prosperity."⁷⁷ During this era, Foreign Secretary Edward Stanley advocated strengthening Britain using "pacific development of its prosperity and its commercial power," rather than war.⁷⁸ Although Stanley's non-interventionist views were obsolete by the 1880s,⁷⁹ the idea of bolstering England's influence abroad through "commercial power" was popular among British leaders of the day. For example, in 1883, the Eastern Shipowners' Association (the seven shipping companies that did the most business with India) made a backroom agreement with the Canal Company over tolls and Canal maintenance.⁸⁰ This deal affected all British commerce with India, but it was negotiated by the merchants instead of the government. When one Member of Parliament asked Prime Minister William Gladstone what "arrangements have been made [between the government and the Canal Company], in the interests of British commerce," Gladstone merely replied that "arrangements have been made [by the Canal Company] with the Association of Shipowners [directly]...and we believe that those arrangements are satisfactory."⁸¹ Indeed, political leaders of the era let the shipping companies, not the government, negotiate all dealings with the Canal Company and most of those with the Khedive.

As the merchants grew increasingly desperate to control Lesseps, they began to support more radical forms of British intervention in Egypt, including a full invasion of the country. When

it came to an invasion, Parliament was especially eager to please the wealthy merchants, and the British military would eventually occupy Egypt in mid-1882. One MP, speaking just after the beginning of this occupation, said in debate that "the friends of England in Egypt... would be left in an awkward, difficult, and dangerous position" if England withdrew her troops and that England was not occupying Egypt for "Imperial purposes."⁸² This MP's statements were a thinly veiled way of saying that the invasion of Egypt was made on behalf of the shipowners—England's "friends...in Egypt,"—and not to serve the British Empire as a whole. However, this would not happen until 1882, and it was made possible by a long campaign by the merchants to secure public support for their goals. Parliament was eager to help the shipowners, but it could not have entered into something as expensive and controversial as a war without the backing of the people. For years, the merchants had fueled the public's fear of France to gain support for British involvement in Suez, finally enabling Parliament to invade Egypt in 1882 and giving the shipping companies the influence they desired in the Canal Company.

Using fear to gain public favor for questionable policy goals has been a tactic used by politicians and powerful individuals throughout European history. Time and again, fear proved a great motivator because it caused the general public to be anxious, supporting any government effort to counter the perceived threat. The shipowners' actions were far from unique in the era of New Imperialism. During the American Revolution, British politicians argued that Britain would lose her global dominance if the United States successfully seceded, thereby justifying the massive expenditure and human cost of the war. King George III of England wrote that "[t]he dye is now cast whether [Britain] shall be a great Empire or the least dignified of the European States."⁸³ King George's rhetoric took advantage of the British people's immense pride in their country's empire. He then exploited their fear of being less "dignified" than the peoples of other "European States" to argue in favor of the long, bloody war in America. Just as Suez would a century later, the war in America benefitted British traders infinitely more than it did the general

public, as English investments in a colony were worth far less if it gained independence.⁸⁴ The French government used this same tactic to convince its people of the need to conquer Indochina in the 1850s and 1860s. In the early 1850s, Vietnam was ruled by a native dynasty that disapproved of the French, who were trying to gain a major Asian colony for themselves. When the native Confucian rulers executed two French Catholic missionaries, Napoleon III ordered an invasion, saying that “[o]ur martyrs must be avenged; this will be my war.”⁸⁵ He exploited the post-revolution resurgence of Christianity in France to gain public support for his war.⁸⁶ The faithful population feared the Asian heathens and wanted vengeance for the “martyrs,” seeing this as a personal war and religious crusade. In reality, though, the war served to advance French business interests, which sought a monopoly on trade in Indochina.⁸⁷ In both the British response to the American Revolution, and the French conquest of Indochina, political leaders exploited their peoples’ fears to justify a war that did not benefit the general public as much as it did merchants and politicians.

Living with the memory of the American Revolution and the present reality of the Indochina conflict, British shipowners knew that terror was a powerful tool to gain public support and took advantage of the press’s fear-mongering. The end of “Visions from Suez,” which was published in 1870, predicted that a gloomy future “will undoubtedly prove true in the end, unless England shakes off the foolish apathy with regard to foreign affairs” and becomes “a power in the world.”⁸⁸ This was a blatant call to arms, telling the public that without military intervention, to which the government had been heretofore “apath[etic],” the end of England’s power “will undoubtedly prove true.” This article was published in *Once a Week*, a popular magazine that was widely circulated amongst the British middle and upper classes. It likely made a significant impact upon public perceptions of Egypt. The true impact, though, came from the sheer number of articles published at the time that argued the same point. The aforementioned piece in *The Times*, entitled “India and the Suez Canal,” proclaimed that protecting the Canal was tantamount to preserving Britain’s control of India and offers another example

of this opinion’s dominance in the press.⁸⁹ “Visions from Suez” and “India and the Suez Canal” spread the exact fear that the shipping companies wanted people to believe, so whether these articles’ writers were working for the shipowners or were simply British patriots, these pieces, and many like them, served as propaganda for the merchants.

During this era, *The Times* was arguably the most influential newspaper in England, especially among members of the middle class.⁹⁰ Its key doctrine was to “anticipate public opinion...but never break a lance against it.”⁹¹ To abide by this belief, the paper had to support the merchants’ interests because as the business elite, the shipowners’ opinions were echoed by the bourgeoisie as a whole. *The Times’* strategy of conforming to middle class opinion was echoed by other popular British newspapers at the time as well, essentially making the shippers’ beliefs the only ones that were expressed in the press. Since laymen got their limited knowledge of international affairs from newspapers like *The Times*, the only widespread outlook on Suez was the merchants’. This allowed a select few to hijack public opinion on such a major issue. Wealthy English businessmen used the press’s fearmongering to their advantage by building a public distrust of Lesseps and the Egyptians.

This tactic was hugely successful, making the British public wary of French and Egyptian threats to the Canal. In late 1881, the Khedive was overthrown by a domestic revolt, which established a nationalist military dictatorship that was less friendly to European involvement in the region.⁹² Lesseps and the French were not concerned, as they knew that any Egyptian government would enjoy the revenue from the Canal. However, British businessmen, primarily the shipowners but also British bondholders, who held 30 million pounds in Egyptian debt at the time of the invasion, were concerned about the instability in Egypt.⁹³ French influence in the region, combined with the coup against the Khedive, made the bondsmen’s and merchants’ investments in Egypt vulnerable. Companies like the P&O had no interest in delicate diplomacy, which would take a long time and hurt their stock prices, so the best way to protect their interests for the immediate future was

through a British occupation of Egypt.⁹⁴ Furthermore, Gladstone and the merchants finally had an opportunity to take complete control of Suez away from Lesseps, and the revolt made the British public rally behind them thanks to the successful fear-mongering campaign in the press. Lord Granville, also eager to please, demanded military intervention to protect the waterway. He asked for an international coalition to retake the area, knowing that the French would refuse to invade.⁹⁵ England took this opportunity to send her forces into Egypt, establishing sole control where there had once been a delicate balance among Britain, France, and the Khedive. The British Army proceeded to occupy the entire nation, purging French influence and establishing a British suzerainty with the Khedive returned as a figurehead.⁹⁶ Although they would later find several moral justifications for their invasion, the occupation occurred simply because, to the English, “control of Egypt meant nothing less than the control of the Suez Canal” and therefore control of India.⁹⁷ While this may seem a logical response to an imminent threat, it was not. In reality, the revolt “only served to give England an excuse for a military intervention.”⁹⁸ The French had recognized that there was no real threat. The Canal was a massive source of national pride for the French, so if they had perceived legitimate danger, they would have responded with force. The British government did not gain very much through this invasion, either. While it got slightly greater influence in Egypt, the French had never been a major menace and the Crown now had to pay the exorbitant cost of occupying a foreign country. Yet, the merchants continued their press campaign. *The Times* (of London) noted in 1883 that while “the canal is invaluable to Great Britain as the means of preserving our dominion in India...when the canal is endangered the material welfare of a vast community is forthwith in jeopardy.”⁹⁹ This article was written after the British had invaded Suez, but the fear of another power was still present. Even though the Queen’s troops walked the streets of Alexandria, the Canal could still be “forthwith in jeopardy.” This editorial kept the fear of Egyptian separatists and the French current, even though they presented less of a threat than ever. It exploited this concern to justify greater taxes for the Indians.¹⁰⁰ Even more important was

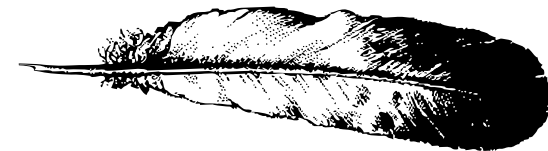
the subtle subtext of garnering support for the hefty British income tax increase that funded the occupation.¹⁰¹ Thus, the British public, more taxed than ever, actually lost from this campaign, and the only ones who benefitted were British businessmen, who padded their profit margins at the expense of the British people.

Once the British invaded, the Canal ceased to be the original international venture and fell under the control of its occupiers. The roots for the invasion were laid with the purchase of the Khedive’s Canal Company shares in 1875. This was “intended only to give the British a voice in the management of the waterway,” which Lesseps had previously denied them.¹⁰² Now, though, the British “had acquired a new power over the Canal Company by [their] conquest of Egypt.”¹⁰³ In an instant, the tables had turned. The British held the ultimate trump card: the “new power” to force the Canal Company’s hand and occupy the Canal for themselves at any moment. Fortunately for Lesseps, the British believed in obeying contracts to the letter,¹⁰⁴ and the merchants would not ask Parliament or the Crown to steal his Canal. What the shipowners could and would do, though, was use their control over the Egyptian government to allow the Canal Company’s concession to expire and transfer the Canal to British hands. Prior to the occupation, Lesseps had resisted the British shipowners’ requests for reform. However, “hemmed in on all sides by unfavorable circumstances, the [Canal] Company [now] had to accede” to British demands.¹⁰⁵ Lesseps, who was primarily interested in his profits, previously had no incentive to lower the tolls. With the added influence of Britain’s occupation, though, the British shipping companies, mainly the P&O, the British India Line, and the Orient Line, reached a satisfactory compromise in 1883 that gave them substantially more voting power in the Canal Company, promised future improvements to the Canal’s infrastructure, and significantly reduced Canal tolls.¹⁰⁶ The last of these concessions was a major victory for the shipowners and a fatal blow to the Canal Company, which became a utility for maintaining the Canal rather than the original profitable enterprise. The fact that the negotiations, between the largest British shipowners (who made up 91% of the British tonnage that passed through the Canal)

and Lesseps were held in the P&O's boardroom shows how, just as the P&O negotiated directly with the Khedive in the early days, companies were still in control of Britain's official commercial policy in Suez at this time.¹⁰⁷

The shipowners, finally satisfied with proper representation in the Canal Company, a guarantee of lowered tolls, and infrastructure improvements to speed passage times, ceased their assault on Lesseps. As the smoke cleared on the business front, there were still many concerns among politicians about the sudden seizure of the Canal. To prevent a war over Suez, the British agreed to the Constantinople Convention in 1888. The Convention's key principle was "equality as regards to the free use of the Canal,"¹⁰⁸ and it guaranteed free passage to all warships and merchant vessels in peacetime or war.¹⁰⁹ It established the Suez Canal Zone as a neutral place where warring nations could not fight, and this principle would be upheld until World War I.¹¹⁰ However, the Convention had very few enforcement provisions. Other than planning regular meetings between the signatory nations, which never actually happened,¹¹¹ the responsibility of enforcing the convention was left to the Egyptians. Since the Khedive was a British puppet, British rule of Egypt and Suez was effectively legitimized by the Convention, and France would directly sanction Britain's occupation in the Anglo-French accords of 1904.¹¹² Furthermore, most of those in the British government considered the Convention invalid anyway and routinely violated its articles.¹¹³ Historians of today, like Hubert Bonin, see British domination of the Canal as an inevitable progression that began with the purchase of the Khedive's shares and culminated with the British occupation of Suez.¹¹⁴ He notes how the early Anglo-French disputes over Suez ended in a "hegemony of British interests on the geopolitical environment of the [Canal] Company, which supplemented [Britain's] might within the circles of worldwide ship-owning."¹¹⁵ In the end, the Suez Canal lost Lesseps' ideal of internationalism and became a British entity. Even though the Constantinople Convention preserved the veneer of cooperation, Suez would remain a tool of English diplomats and businessmen until 1956.

With the signing of the Constantinople Convention in 1888, the battle between the British and the French over the Suez Canal was over. The British had triumphed, Lesseps kept his Canal Company, and the Great Powers would not revisit Egypt until World War One. The British were not peacemakers here, though, for there had never been an actual threat to British interests in Suez. Lesseps was a businessman who lacked political ambitions, but England's people feared him because shipowners had manipulated the press into fueling this terror. In the end, Egypt was destabilized, the British public paid for a costly occupation, and few improvements were made to the Canal's operations. Indeed, nearly every party involved ended up worse off than it was in 1880. The British shipowners, however, emerged from the occupation of Egypt richer and more powerful than ever before. They assumed none of the risk in the initial French-led project, but once the Canal was complete, they gained more from it than anybody. Rather than weaken England's links with India, the Canal made Britain's monopoly on Indian trade stronger than ever due to the new trade in bulk commodities, and these merchants were making large amounts of money. The widespread fear of the French, spread by the manipulated press, allowed the merchants' allies in Parliament to invade Egypt and helped the shipowners get rich with the support of the British public, which paid for the traders' war with hefty taxes during a long occupation. [9,242 words]



Endnotes

¹ Michelle Wiese Bockmann, "Panama Canal, Handling 5% of World Trade, Sees Delayed Expansion," *Bloomberg Business*, last modified January 17, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-01-17/panama-canal-handling-5-of-world-trade-sees-delayed-expansion>.

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³ Charles W. Hallberg, *The Suez Canal: Its History and Diplomatic Importance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 61.

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⁷ Freda Harcourt, "The High Road to India: The P&O Company and the Suez Canal, 1840-1874," *International Journal of Maritime History* 22, no. 2 (2010): 39.

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¹¹ Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 73.

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¹³ Nathalie Montel, *Le Chantier du Canal de Suez (1859-1869): Une Histoire des Pratiques Techniques* (Paris: Presses de l'Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées, 1998), 19.

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¹⁵ Elias H. Tuma, "Suez Canal: Another Dimension in the European Network," *Journal of European Economic History* 24, no. 3 (1995): 625.

¹⁶ Ferdinand de Lesseps, *The History of the Suez Canal: a Personal Narrative*, trans. Sir Henry Drummond Wolf (London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1876), 47.

¹⁷ J.W. Blakesley, "M. De Lesseps and the Suez Canal," *Macmillan's Magazine* 1 (1860): 416.

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¹⁹ Arthur Goldschmidt, *Modern Egypt: the Formation of a Nation-State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15-26.

²¹ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 292.

²² Ferdinand de Lesseps, *The Suez Canal: Letters and Documents Descriptive of its Rise and Progress in 1854-1856*, trans. N. D'Anvers (London: King, 1876), 245.

²³ Thomas Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 107.

²⁴ Geoffrey Hicks, *Conservatism and British Foreign Policy, 1820-1920* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 109-110.

²⁵ Otte, 103.

²⁶ Lesseps, *Personal Narrative*, 15-16.

²⁷ Lesseps, *Letters*, 167.

²⁸ Zachary Karabell, *Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 168.

²⁹ Osterhammel, 691.

³⁰ Joyce E. Chaplin, *Round About the Earth: Circumnavigation from Magellan to Orbit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 193.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

³² Farnie, 97-99.

³³ Hallberg, 316.

³⁴ Tuma, 623.

³⁵ Farnie, 99-100.

³⁶ Harcourt, 63.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁸ John Adams, "The Impact of the Suez Canal on India's Trade," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 8, no. 3 (1971): 239, <http://ier.sagepub.com/content/8/3/229>.

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⁴⁰ Hubert Bonin, *History of the Suez Canal Company 1858-1960: Between Controversy and Utility* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2010), 160.

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⁴³ *Ibid.*, 311.

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⁴⁸ Emily A. Haddad, "Digging to India: Modernity, Imperialism, and the Suez Canal," *Victorian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2005): 387, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/victorian_studies/v047/47.3haddad.html.

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⁵⁰ Ibid., 307.

⁵¹ Ibid., 245.

⁵² Hallberg, 280.

⁵³ Lesseps, *Letters*, 308.

⁵⁴ Tuma, 627.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 625.

⁵⁶ Bonin, 171.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁸ Farnie, 306-307.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 307.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 319.

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⁶² Waterfield, 16.

⁶³ "The Suez Canal—Modification of the Canal Dues," *Hansard UK Parliamentary Debate Records Online*, April 11, 1876, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1876/apr/11/the-suez-canal-modification-of-the-canal#column_1562.

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⁶⁵ William Flavelle Monypenny and George Earle Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 449.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 451-452.

⁶⁷ Otte, 95.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 95-96.

⁶⁹ Hallberg, 249.

⁷⁰ Fitzgerald, 300.

⁷¹ Monypenny and Buckle, 451.

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⁷⁷ Hicks, 130.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 131-132.

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⁹⁶ Robinson and Gallagher, 122.

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- ¹⁰² Ibid., 83.
- ¹⁰³ Farnie, 307.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 315.
- ¹⁰⁵ Bonin, 167.
- ¹⁰⁶ Farnie, 319-320.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 320.
- ¹⁰⁸ "Convention Respecting the Free Navigation of the Suez Maritime Canal." *The American Journal of International Law* 3, no. 2 (1909): 126.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 123.
- ¹¹⁰ David R. Woodward, *Hell in the Holy Land: World War I in the Middle East* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 15-16.
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- ¹¹³ Mostofi, 31-33.
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