

# Compare and contrast the British government's use of propaganda in the Suez crisis and the Falklands

Written by anon

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ANON, FEB 15 2010

The 1956-1957 Suez Crises/Tripartite Aggression and the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War each provide a rich insight into the use of propaganda by the British establishment in advancing its national and international aims, but with almost diametrically opposite consequences: the former is still, over half a century later, referred to as the British foreign policy blunder of the post-war era and death-knell of British super-power, the latter still (though by no means uniformly) evoked as the reclaiming of the 'Great' in Great Britain, thought to have been squandered at Suez. As such, the two events provide resourceful grounds for an exercise in comparative analysis and betray a wealth of clearly distinguishable propaganda systems. This essay will attempt to explain why the British propaganda systems deployed in the Middle East of the 1950's could not maintain the regional plans of imperial Britain in a strategically crucial part of the geopolitical world, compared to the propaganda systems animating the retaking of a sparsely populated rock 8000 miles away which in effect established Conservative hegemony throughout the 1980's. The problems faced by British propagandists were formidable in both scenarios, and indeed without the guiding hand of propaganda the Falklands conflict could have resulted in a humiliating defeat akin to Suez, even with successful ejection of the Argentineans. Instead, for students, the management of the media during the Falklands War "will go down in the history of journalism as a classic example of how to manage the media in wartime", [1] whilst Suez, with all British plans seeming doomed in retrospect, is remembered as such a failure of propaganda that "the Archangel Gabriel transmitting with infinite Power on The Last Trump could not (have sold) British co-operation with France and Israel to the Arab world." [2] Considering this great leap in British fortunes, this essay shall examine the faulty propaganda of Suez and explain how at best it could only slow Britain's expulsion from the Middle East, and at worst precipitate it. In contrast to this the essay shall explain the propaganda successes of the Falklands, and reveal how the intelligentsia behind Thatcher's war wielded propaganda with much more force than Eden's.

It is reasonable to presume that post-WW2 British plans in the Middle East were inevitably set to expire due to larger and uncontrollable events escalating in the region, and that no amount of information, diplomacy, propaganda and, eventually, military intervention could rescue Britain's designs. The forces working against Prime Minister Eden's attempts to retain direct influence over the oil rich countries, reject the American usurpation of Britain's perceived senior role over the fledgling nations, advance capitalist and democratic ideals said to represent Britain's progressive and prosperous nature - which would dually integrate Third World nations into profitable Western economic and security structures whilst protecting them from communist penetration - whilst securing passage to Indian Ocean trade - all in the era of Wilsonian national self-determination and anti-imperialism - combined (and these are just a selection of aggravations to British planners) to totally thwart any hope of long-term 'friendly' dependencies being established. Nevertheless, the Foreign Office, BBC External Services and the Information Research Department made exhaustive efforts to sway the train of history to British advantage. Initially Eden sort to muzzle the media, "even take over" [3] the BBC, which, over the course of the 5 month-long crises, backfired against him. From the 1952 Officers Revolution onward till the crisis, the media, especially the independent media institutions, largely followed Eden's condemnation of President Nasser and were receptive to his equivocation to Mussolini. There was close co-operation between the government and the media at the outbreak of the crisis and after a number of confidential round-tables the government was successfully able, with general support and veto and Official Secrets Act power over the BBC, hide the mass military build-up of British and French troops in Cyprus. [4] The BBC issued a

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number of current affairs programmes reinforcing the narrative of illegality regarding the nationalization of Suez and image of Nasser's government as an "unappeasable revolutionary dictatorship".[5] This propaganda offensive was coupled with relative silence on the growing domestic dissent. The dissent was muted because of the rhetoric Eden applied to the crisis, often referring to the 're-internationalization' of Suez as "a matter of life and death".[6] In using this stark rhetoric national security threats and Official Secrets Act licence could be invoked, whilst demanding an appearance of unity behind a war-time government. This artificial unity would again work against Eden as it was untenable in an escalation and would unravel when Eden relied on it the most. This occurred as the crisis worsened. By disallowing a direct interview with Nasser – which could have presumably been manipulated to indict him – and by disallowing major leaders of Commonwealth countries to voice their opinions – who also could have presumably been incentivised to sympathise with Britain's actions – the truth of the matter gradually slipped out. It transpired that Nasser's government was indeed a truly popular one, that the nationalization of the canal was legal since share-price compensation was offered, and that it was the back-tracking on funding promises concerning the Aswan Dam which provoked the nationalization.[7] As these facts seeped out Eden became more tyrannical with media relations, accusing the BBC of communist conspiracy, threatened to attach a Foreign Office official to monitor and restrain their functioning, and cut External Services funding for its 'neutrality'. In response the media turned on Eden feeling its integrity was at stake, and gave the Opposition and dissenters more airtime.[8] This is one example of how Eden mismanaged potentially supportive propaganda outlets. The question is why. Why did Eden become so paranoid and severe in his relation to what is often referred as British foreign policies finest asset, the BBC? Eden's poor use of media propaganda both domestically and internationally comes as a result of a much wider set of failings in British intelligence, all culminating to determine Eden's failure.

The wider sets of failings are manifold and comprehensive, some being based in unavoidable historical fact. The orthodox beliefs of Orientalism, which Edward Said would later declare a "discourse of domination" inextricably wrapped up with Western imperialism,[9] was stifling British attempts to befriend Arabs in the post-war era, and, due to the assertions of Orientalist discourse which considered the Arab to be in a terminal state of decline in the face of Western modernization, to be emotional and anarchic instead of rational and scientific,[10] and to be at the behest of Islam – considered an all-pervading force in Arab society, stultifying the advance of the West's finest attributes; logic, and objective/analytical thinking. These things being intangible to the Arab, and having weak character as a result, was an "unspoken assumption"[11] underlying propaganda efforts. This prolonged the parent-child complex pervading the West's relation to Arabs and ultimately harboured what can be described as the "the survival of the Victorian contempt for natives".[12] This bankrupt understanding poisoned British chances of success. Another faulty understanding operating against Britain in much the same way as Orientalism, was the pushing of anti-communist rhetoric. An Egyptian ambassador summed it up well, "Egypt doesn't support communism, but if America supports Britain in the Security Council, and Russia supports Egypt, Egyptians will quickly learn who their friend is." [13] Because Egypt did not consider the Cold War and communist subversion a pressing matter, seeing it as a Western conflict, promoting anti-communism in the Arab world only gave rise to further accusations of imperial plotting and hindered British causes.

Furthermore the divisive existence of Israel and Britain's role in its establishment, the rise of pan-Arab nationalism, US-Anglo rivalry for oil dominance which made ailing Britain a thorn in the side of US grand strategy – especially after Britain's war in defence of Abu Dhabi and Muscat from America's favourite Saudi Arabia and more so because of Britain's colonial and imperial history which America found embarrassing as it painted itself as harbinger of the new era of freedom – and because of the superficial tensions Britain produced between its Baghdad Pact members and Nasser's pan-Arab movement in attempting to create a rival bloc (which proved superficial upon the 1958 officers revolution in Iraq and then in Nasser's annexation of Jordan).[14] Each of these objections to British goals could afford a lengthy study, but here it suffices to say that combined they presented the chaps at the IRD with some serious overtime. And to an extent some admirable propaganda incursions were made. The children of elites were often schooled in Britain or at British Council schools in the Middle East, British books became the standard at universities in the Middle East, well-managed tours of London for journalists and leaders were arranged to demonstrate fine British character.[15] *Al Aalam* magazine was a particular success, becoming the *Vanity Fair* of early 50's Egypt. Along with its heavily subsidized costs (in part paid for by oil companies), it provided a harmonious view of Anglo-Arab relations, discussing happy Muslim communities in Britain, what fine Arabs the young men schooled in Britain have become, what Britain's technological prowess could offer to progressive Arab nations, and

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the wonderful Moor heritage in Europe.[16] Alongside this some negative propaganda was pushed, such as Russia's support for Zionism, Britain's acceptance of Arab moral high-ground over the Palestine issue, and the rapid modernization of pro-British Iraq.[17] Despite these advances of propaganda in the form of cultural diplomacy, despite some inroads made against the emotive monopoly of Cairo Radio from Radio Tripoli, from Baghdad radio, and black operations out of Cyprus, Nasser's embodiment of Third World solidarity and popular nationalism could not be stopped an old Europe had to move aside for history.

Prime Minister Thatcher was determined to shake off the trauma and prevailing morbidity of post-Suez declining Britain. She did so in an expertly executed propaganda offensive which, had it failed, could have had the same consequences as Suez. Thatcher's treatment of the media and her understanding of propaganda was in some ways more advanced than Eden's. Indeed, the very ideology of neo-conservatism that President Reagan and Thatcher believed in is one of incessant, seamless, profuse propagandizing, or more precisely, 'perception management' and 'reality creation'. [18] This conception of government's relation to the public was born in Walter Lipmann's study 'Public Opinion', and came to fruition with the neo-right in the 1980's. Lipmann, fearing the tyranny of the majority and rule of ignorance that he saw as the long-term state of democracy, called for "the abandonment of the omniscient citizen"[19] to be replaced by his version of Plato's philosopher kings – a specialized 'insider class' concentrated in intelligence bureaus free from the 'pseudo environment' of stereotypes and prejudices characterizing the public. Mass participation becomes a 'phantom' and the democratic nation-state a 'phantom republic' since "the common interests very largely elude public opinion entirely"[20] and as a result they cannot be trusted to leave the proverbial cave and must accept the puppet show of the rational specialized class. Ominous stuff to be sure, and along with the Freudian psychoanalytical mass manipulation techniques pioneered by Edward Bernays, the neo-right developed a profound knowledge of propaganda.

So how did Thatcher use these insights to decisively win an unlikely war as compared to Eden? Firstly Thatcher learnt the lessons of the Vietnam War, realizing that TV had long since replaced the radio and the free movement of camera-wielding journalists could dramatically alter public opinion in war time. To achieve the desired 'perception management' war images had to be tightly controlled, bad news had to be delivered piece-meal to insulate public sensitivity, and journalists permitted access to war theatres had to be carefully selected.[21] In this sense the Falklands provided an early example of media exclusion zones and 'embedded journalists' – due to proximity to troops journalists cannot resist building emotional attachment to the cause and as a result become cheerleaders.[22] By monopolizing knowledge of the realities of the Falklands crisis, Thatcher was able to dictate what propaganda theorists consider the 'essential trinity'; rhetoric, myth, and symbolism.[23] In this scenario rhetoric was used in the form of metaphor, the repetition of the 'our boys'- 'Argies' dichotomy and the successful determination of the official 'us' and 'them' categories became a major success Eden failed to materialize, since the Other in Suez was too vague and contradictory. Thatcher's Other was the official Other of 'Gotcha!' and 'Stick it up your Junta!' and instantly recognizable. This group act of recognition serves to dehumanize the Other and justify rejecting his common humanity.[24] Those refraining from the rhetorical narrative not only reject it, but effectively alienate themselves from the dominant 'us' identity internalized by the public and quickly become 'traitors' akin to the enemy – Tony Benn typically a 'namby-pamby ultra-leftist, always running scared" for example. This is the "darker side of jingoism"[25] and tabloid press, which found its true calling in enforcing definitions of Others guided by the wider neo-right agenda. What we are defined *against* rather than what we are *for* structures our universe.[26] In erecting such a strong mental picture of events dissent become marginalized, and even its ability to offer facts such as the British government's efforts to have the Falkland islanders accept Argentinean citizenship, deny full citizenship rights to Britain herself, granting the islanders veto rights over Argentina's leaseback arrangement, and, with warning, removing HMS *Endurance* – these facts, along with the use of 'British Military Forces' instead of 'our boys' are met with calls of defeatism.[27] Next is the construction of the myth, which the remoteness and ignorance of the Falklands made pliable.[28] The island was fantasised; its inhabitants were tea-drinking Brit's, who were proud to live under colonial rule and show allegiance to the crown.[29] Childish fantasies abound as the mythical community of the Falklands comes to define the Britain of nostalgia, thought to be lost forever in Suez, hence the reclaiming of the islands signifying national rebirth and entrepreneurial spirit. Operational security and 'good taste' were utilized to instill the myth and defend it from reality – British blood could not be shown and failures sensationalized as to not play into the enemies hands.[30] This led to an unspoken policy of self-censorship throughout the media which became a crucial element of the propaganda victory.[31] This all ties in with the domestic agenda of the neo-right, and is arguably why

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Reagan allowed British war operations in its 'backyard' – since Argentina was at the time the spearhead of American plans for the economic structuring of South America and recipient of Western weapons. With Thatcher's agenda initially failing at home, ratcheting up working-class patriotism to lubricate the urban unrest and chronic unemployment would earn her the support necessary to carry out the privatization of Britain and trickle-up economics that follow. This philosophy of deregulation is one Reagan firmly stood for and saw a partner in Thatcher, along with the main European NATO power, so, unlike in Suez, America allowed for militaristic British self-assertion seemingly out of step with its grand agenda.[32]

## CONCLUSION

In retrospect we can tentatively gauge the bearing of what Lipmann called the 'manufacturing of consent'[33], in the vehicles of rhetoric, myth and symbolism upon general perceptions of reality. In comparing these two seminal moments in the meta-history of British propaganda we can draw some conclusions. The obvious one is that propaganda can make or break a war effort. Had Eden been ruthless about staying in the Middle East he could have demanded the necessary propaganda; he could have descended to any level of anti-Jewish rhetoric, made formal apologies for British history, whip-up hysteria with false-flag operations and blame it on the Soviets, ad nauseam. He did not. History overtook him. Thatcher was more ambitious. She was willing to sacrifice 900 young men to protect the 200 non-mortally threatened inhabitants of the island, was willing to build 'Fortress Falklands' now permanently stationing 4000 soldiers – paying the price to protect the rural Britain of nostalgia is to turn it into an airport.[34] Like the rearranging of the British WW2 upper-class myth, of ancient Britannia defending 'human values' in a Blitzkrieg, to one of working-class communitarianism and soon demanding an egalitarian Labour government to reflect that. Or the myth of the America power elite in Viet Nam, that of a "glorious expression of the American dream" and capitalist efficiency triumphing over dark forces of communism soon becoming the standard 'nightmare' and 'quagmire' sabotaged by domestic subversion etcetera.[35] Likewise, Thatcher's war soon became a "savagely dehumanizing monetarist"[36] war, which, if honest to the rhetoric, would have been carried out in East Timor. Eden's war remains an honest failure. Thatcher's a dishonest success.

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