



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

What to Make of the Suez Canal Crisis

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1. The “Lessons” of History, Theory, and Statecraft

By Galen Jackson

In *Suez Deconstructed*, Philip Zelikow, the late Ernest May, and a team of scholars set out to provide students and foreign policy practitioners with a practical guide to navigating the complexities and uncertainties of international diplomacy. The book, Zelikow writes, is meant to serve “as a sort of simulator” to help readers grapple with the challenges that decision-makers confront in major crises.¹ The authors seek to accomplish this goal by focusing on the perspectives of all the major parties involved in the 1956 Suez crisis, which, in Zelikow’s words, “can offer a master class” for those seeking lessons for statecraft.²

As the authors show in rich detail, the episode was enormously complex: The crisis took place in the context of the Cold War and directly involved both the United States and the Soviet Union, positioning Washington against its NATO allies Britain and France, as well as Israel, while aligning the Americans with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s largely antagonistic Egypt. Further complicating matters, the crisis was directly linked to regional conflicts in the Middle East, especially the Arab-Israeli dispute; occurred early on in the nuclear age; contributed greatly to the eventual collapse of European colonial empires; and forced policymakers to operate in conditions of deep uncertainty. The objective of the book, Zelikow writes, is to force readers to ask themselves: “What would I do if I had been a character in this story, with the reasonably available information?”³ Readers, in short, are meant to come away from the book with deeper insights about the experience of crisis decision-making.

¹ Philip Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed: An Interactive Study in Crisis, War, and Peacemaking* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2018), 2.

² Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 2.

³ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 7.

Three Perspectives on *Suez*

This whole approach is certainly both novel and creative, a point on which the three reviewers in this roundtable, Jordan Hirsch, Madison Schramm, and Danny Steed, are agreed. In their respective reviews, each contributor highlights the book's unique structure. The book, Hirsch writes, "disorients" the reader by employing a "Rashomon-like structure." All three reviewers also agree that the book achieves, at least in part, its goal of providing students and practitioners with a guide to foreign policy decision-making. They write that Zelikow's "observation" chapters, in which he outlines and discusses what he refers to as each actor's "value judgments," "reality judgments," and "action judgments," offer the reader a valuable framework for thinking about how each side in the crisis viewed the situation. Finally, the reviewers agree that the book's focus on the Suez crisis is especially helpful, given their belief that future conflicts are likely to be similar in nature. Thus, both Hirsch and Schramm specifically refer to the war in Syria and potential conflicts over the South China Sea as scenarios where *Suez Deconstructed* could provide a useful lens. Steed likewise writes that the book's lessons will be particularly applicable "to the types of conflicts we have seen so far this century."

The reviewers, of course, found a few aspects of the book worthy of criticism and did not view its key takeaways exactly the same way. In her contribution, Schramm writes that *Suez Deconstructed* would have benefitted from more detailed discussion "of how intelligence and intelligence agencies affected each state's decision-making," as well as of the variation of views held by different policymakers within each country involved in the crisis. In her view, one of the book's principal contributions is that it forces readers to consider "other states' motivations in a crisis." Applying that lesson to the current crisis in Syria, she writes, "Policymakers would do well to unpack not just the level of Iranian involvement in Syria, but *why* Iran is involved at all."

Although he believes the book provides "nothing new" to "serious historians searching for new insights into the crisis itself" because that is not its main focus, Steed argues that one of its "implicit" lessons is "that the impetus and momentum for large policy decisions often passes between political actors, much like how momentum shifts among and between teams in sports." The book, he notes, suggests that France's determination to confront

Nasser illustrates this sort of dynamic, as Paris' refusal to change course had a significant impact on British policy.

For his part, Hirsch identifies two significant takeaways from the book. The first, he asserts, is that “policymakers are informed as much by honor and will as by interest.” Factors like prestige and status, he writes, played very key roles in shaping both French and British behavior in 1956. Second, Hirsch writes that *Suez Deconstructed* highlights “the centrality of relationships between statesmen, which drove events just as much as, if not more than, money, power, and ideas.” French-Israeli relations, he argues, were to a great extent a function of the emotional bond that existed between leaders on both sides. Similarly, he writes, the personal relationship between British Prime Minister Anthony Eden and the American secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, hamstrung the policies being pursued by the Western powers. Perhaps most importantly, Hirsch notes that many of the key decision-makers during the crisis were influenced to a considerable degree by their experiences from the 1930s and the road to World War II. “Together,” he writes, “these elements suggest that statecraft, particularly in a crisis, is not an entirely rational enterprise.” What *Suez Deconstructed* really shows, he therefore concludes, is “that statecraft is not only about impersonal forces, it’s about intangibles.”

The Need for Guidance

The reviewers rightly emphasize a number of valuable insights from *Suez Deconstructed*, but I see two key takeaways from the book that are somewhat different. The first has to do with methodology, and here the reviews by Steed and Hirsch provide helpful insights. Although, they observe, the book is extremely rich in historical detail and offers a new approach to learning about decision-making, there is something quite odd about it: *Suez Deconstructed* provides no explicit argument or set of arguments for readers.

Zelikow and May, of course, are very much aware of the pitfalls involved in teasing out “the lessons of history.”⁴ Indeed, Zelikow discusses this issue on the very first page of the book.

⁴ May, in fact, has co-authored an entire book on the matter. See Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

“There are,” he writes, “many studies of statecraft. But few of them help readers understand how to do it, so the skills do not necessarily advance.” Although history can be of assistance, “knowing exactly why a bridge fell down does not make you a civil engineer.” As for “parables” and “axioms,” they tend “not to amount to much more than a warning: Be careful. Consult with others. Don’t build on a mud pile. And don’t appease Hitler.”⁵ The authors’ decision to not lay out an explicit set of lessons based on their analysis of the Suez crisis is, then, intentional. The book’s approach, Zelikow writes, is meant to put the “burden on the reader to evaluate and compare these different viewpoints,” and deliberately avoids “inserting our own later judgments of whether we think the leaders were right or wrong.”⁶

This sort of approach, however, is problematic. To be sure, the organizational strategy the authors employ and the depth of their analyses of each side’s perspectives are, respectively, innovative and instructive. But for a book whose main objective is to serve as a guide to the practice of statecraft, it is quite puzzling that readers are left without much guidance as to what one should take away from the whole Suez story. The job of scholars, of course, is to make sense of the complex issues they study, such that the key insights derived from their analysis are clearly and logically spelled out. As one historian writes, “the facts never just speak for themselves.” One of the analyst’s principal tasks, in fact, is to “make them ‘speak’ by drawing out their meaning and providing appropriate commentary—that is, by bringing out the handful of major points [she/he] want[s] the reader to note.”⁷ *Suez Deconstructed*, however, avoids making these sorts of judgments. Even Zelikow’s insightful “observation” chapters, unfortunately, do not really leave readers with a sense of what the authors consider to be the key takeaways of each section. This, as Steed points out, is “a shame, because there is a clear need in the present era for wisdom to help guide decision-making.”

⁵ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 1.

⁶ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 124.

⁷ Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 190.

Drawing from Theory

In this respect, the authors might have capitalized more effectively on their innovative approach by integrating some of the methods that international relations scholars employ to study these sorts of issues into their analysis. Zelikow, however, explicitly rejects that way of studying statecraft. “Don’t look to political scientists to help,” he writes on the book’s first page. “They have better things to do.” Political scientists, he implies, are basically uninterested in making policy recommendations. “Policymakers,” he writes, “are to political scientists as insects are to entomologists. Only some of the more eccentric entomologists write how-to manuals to guide the ants.”⁸

There is no doubt that political science has its share of problems, and it is true that at least one influential scholar has recently highlighted the field’s dwindling influence on national security policy.⁹ Nevertheless, in saying that students and practitioners of statecraft have little or nothing to learn from political scientists, Zelikow perhaps goes too far. After all, when making decisions, policymakers are, in effect, relying on theoretical frameworks about how the world operates.¹⁰ Any policy analysis, Marc Trachtenberg writes, must “speculate about what would happen if various alternative policies were adopted by drawing on a certain general sense for how things work.”¹¹

And it is precisely in the realm of theory and in the formulation of generalizable knowledge that political scientists and international relations scholars have the most to offer. Consider, for example, one of the main substantive themes in *Suez Deconstructed*: Israel’s concerns about a potential shift in the balance of power in the Middle East and its attendant motivations to launch a preventive war against Egypt before the latter grew into an

⁸ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 1.

⁹ Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Incidentally, historians, whether consciously or not, must do the same thing. This is a major theme in Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, 30–50.

¹¹ Marc Trachtenberg, “The Problem of International Order and How to Think About It,” *The Monist* 89, no. 2 (2006), 222, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27903976>.

unmanageable threat.¹² International relations scholars have long recognized the incentives states have to launch preventive conflicts and, consequently, have posited that the risk of war is greater under such conditions.¹³ In that sense, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's concerns about this issue are hardly surprising, and framing the matter in those terms would have helped readers more thoroughly understand the significance of this sort of factor.

The same could be said for the way in which some decision-makers involved in the crisis interpreted the intelligence available to them. As Schramm points out, one of the reasons why people like Eden viewed flawed intelligence reports without skepticism was "because it confirmed what they wanted to believe." Psychological biases, in other words, resulted in suboptimal decisions. This, again, is an area where political scientists have provided important insights, ones that could help elucidate these sorts of problems and underline their significance to readers seeking policy-relevant knowledge.¹⁴

The point here is not to criticize the historical approach the book takes. In fact, that sort of approach can be extremely valuable. Instead, it is to highlight a missed opportunity for the authors to provide readers with more concrete policy takeaways. To be sure, there are real limits to what one can learn from studying something in a completely abstract way. In that sense, the book's rich historical discussion very effectively offers readers the chance to consider major policy dilemmas in a manageable way. Indeed, this is one of the main reasons why scholars like Trachtenberg consider it so important "to do the sort of work that can draw theory and history together."¹⁵

¹² For example, see Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 27, 45–48, 236–238.

¹³ For example, see Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987), 82–107, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010195>; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 73–104; Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ For examples of important political science literature in this area, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Deborah Welch Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

¹⁵ Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, 44.

But the analysis should not simply stop there. Readers need guidance, especially for a book like this one, when it comes to comprehending the significance of the events of 1956, as well as for evaluating each side's decision-making. Incorporating some international relations theory could go a long way in this regard, by helping readers understand what to focus on in the substantive chapters, as well as what the main implications are for statecraft.

The Primacy of Political Considerations

With this in mind, I would argue that the principal takeaway from *Suez Deconstructed* is quite different from what the other reviewers describe and perhaps different from what the authors intended it to be as well. One of the core insights of international relations theorists, especially those of a realist bent, is that considerations relating to power oftentimes are at the heart of international politics.¹⁶ Moreover, serious diplomatic problems can very easily arise when states ignore such considerations, or act contrary to what they would seem to prescribe. Indeed, individual states, as well as the international system as a whole, are likely to run into trouble when they fail to base their decisions on pragmatic, political calculations.¹⁷

And what stands out most prominently from the account the authors give in *Suez Deconstructed* is the extent to which the key actors in the story behaved in ways that simply failed to support the achievement of their political goals. The result, rather unsurprisingly, was that most of them ultimately failed to achieve their objectives. In fact, most of them emerged from the crisis either weakened or in a less favorable position than they otherwise might have been.

Take the case of Israel. To be sure, Jerusalem had an understandable concern about the Soviet Union's major arms sale to Egypt in 1955 and the effects it might have on the regional balance of power. Indeed, for international relations theorists it is hardly surprising that

¹⁶ For important works by realist scholars, see for example Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

¹⁷ Marc Trachtenberg, "The Question of Realism: A Historian's View," *Security Studies* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2003), 156-94.

Ben-Gurion was attracted to the notion of a preventive war that had the potential to topple Nasser's regime. "This is the only chance," he said, "that two not-so-small powers [Britain and France] will try to destroy Nasser, and we shall not stand alone while he grows stronger and conquers all the Arab world."¹⁸

But what *Suez Deconstructed* makes clear is that by late 1956, when the decision to go to war was reached, the situation appeared far less dire than it had the previous year. Within several months, Israeli intelligence reports had grown much less alarmist about the implications of the arms deal, and the threat no longer appeared so severe.¹⁹ But Ben-Gurion was ultimately persuaded to go to war anyway.

That decision, it seems, was made against his better judgment, for he clearly understood that Israel lacked a viable political strategy to deal with the consequences of the war. As Zelikow points out, Ben-Gurion felt that using force likely would not solve Israel's security dilemmas and might very well put Jerusalem on the defensive in the realm of international opinion.²⁰ Likewise, Ben-Gurion understood the need to have American support for the sort of operation Israel was planning in conjunction with France and Britain. Indeed, he had initially directed his advisers to stipulate to Israel's allies that the war had to be launched "with the knowledge of the United States." He was, he said, "most of all... worried about America. America will force us to withdraw. America does not need to send military forces. America can say that she is breaking diplomatic relations, stopping Israeli fund raising, loan guarantees and more, she will consider what's more important to her—we or the Arabs."²¹ Yet, even with this foresight, Ben-Gurion decided to go ahead anyway.²² The results, of course, were just what he had predicted. Jerusalem, in short, ultimately paid the cost of ignoring power and political realities when Washington forced Israel to withdraw from the Sinai early in 1957.²³

¹⁸ Quoted in Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 236.

¹⁹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 127, 332 n. 8.

²⁰ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 48, 196.

²¹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 200, 239.

²² According to Zelikow, Ben-Gurion seems to have been carried away by the thought of "restructuring the Middle East.... Visions of sugar plums danced in his head." Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 233.

²³ Another way to demonstrate the weakness in Israeli policy in 1956 is to compare it with Israel's stance in 1967, which resulted in a quite different American reaction. As one U.S. official put it roughly a year later,

The Israelis at least had other important strategic reasons for going to war. For example, they had an interest in strengthening their relationship with France, they recognized that Nasser might pose a threat to them in the longer term, and they had reason to believe that the French might prove more willing to assist them in developing a nuclear program if they went along with Paris' plan. But the same cannot be said for France and Britain.²⁴ To be sure, Paris and London had a strategic interest in the Suez Canal, but the Egyptians were having no trouble operating it.²⁵ As for Nasser's support for the Algerian rebels, French policy in that area was itself driven more by emotional considerations than by practical ones. In addition, neither country appeared to have a viable political plan in place for the period that followed the fighting. Finally, London and Paris repeatedly overstated the threat Nasser posed to their interests, comparing him to Hitler and Mussolini. Thus, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower informed Eden at one point that, aside from the fact that attacking Egypt would only serve to strengthen Nasser, it seemed to him that France and Britain were far too concerned about the Egyptian leader. The Europeans, he said, were "making of Nasser a much more important figure than he is."²⁶

These miscalculations, *Suez Deconstructed* suggests, seemed to stem primarily from the European powers' obsession with status and prestige.²⁷ "Eden," Jill Kastner and David

"[T]he situation in 1967 was different from that in 1957. The rights and wrongs were clearer in 1957 and the failure of the arrangements negotiated at that time were a major reason for our present difficulties." See Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, August 7, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967-1968* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), 453.

²⁴ On French-Israeli nuclear cooperation and its relationship to the Suez crisis, see Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 237, 265; Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 49-50, 52-60.

²⁵ In any case, the lease on the canal was set to expire in 1968. Moreover, Nasser had offered to indemnify the Europeans for the nationalization.

²⁶ Quoted in Zelikow, *Suez Deconstructed*, 144.

²⁷ Incidentally, this is another area where incorporating some concepts from international relations theory might have helped this message resonate with readers. On status and prestige, see for example Joslyn Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa," *Security Studies* 25, no. 3 (2016), 385-419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1195620>; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010), 63-95, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2010.34.4.63>.

Nickles write in the book, “was preoccupied with maintaining Britain’s great power status.”²⁸ The problem, according to one U.S. official, had a great deal to do with “Britain and France’s fear for their prestige.”²⁹ The connection between these sorts of feelings and the two countries’ overreactions to the nationalization of the canal seems clear. Nasser, Eden wrote to Eisenhower, simply could not be allowed to get away with it, otherwise “our influence and yours throughout the Middle East will... be irretrievably undermined.” The French, for their part, compared the move to Hitler’s remilitarization of the Rhineland.³⁰ Had they instead focused their attention more squarely on geopolitical concerns, their misguided attempt at regime change likely could have been avoided.

The same criticism could be made of Nasser’s policies. The Eisenhower administration, it seems clear, was initially eager to cooperate with the Egyptian president. Indeed, the White House was even willing to support an Israeli cession of part of the Negev desert in exchange for an Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement.³¹ But Nasser was simply unwilling to pursue a cooperative policy toward the United States, focused as he was on the “Arab Cold War” and his quest for leadership of the Arab world.³² Thus, even after the Americans supported Egypt in the wake of the Israeli-French-British attack, Radio Cairo continued to criticize U.S. policy.³³ Given this sort of attitude, it is hardly surprising that Nasser ultimately got himself into trouble in 1967 when he provoked a war with Israel that proved a disaster for Egypt and the rest of the Arab world.³⁴

²⁸ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 71.

²⁹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 161.

³⁰ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 207.

³¹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 26–27. The administration was also initially willing to finance the Aswan Dam.

³² The classic work on this issue is Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958-1970: Gamal ‘abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

³³ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 280.

³⁴ Nasser also subsequently got Egypt involved in a costly war in Yemen. On these mistakes and the road to the 1967 war, see Guy Laron, *The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 55–85.

Even the Americans, who for the most part did seem to pursue a policy in line with their key political objectives, were not entirely free from blame.³⁵ “Everyone,” Zelikow observes, “seems to have misjudged the strength, speed, and depth of Washington’s opposition to the Israeli-French-British assault on Egypt.”³⁶ To be sure, by October 1956 the Eisenhower administration had tried to make clear that it would oppose such an operation, but the Americans were not entirely unambiguous in this respect. Although he subsequently altered his position, Dulles at one point went so far as to tell his French interlocutors: “If... after [a diplomatic] effort has been made, Nasser rejects the conditions presented to him, the basis would exist for a strong action which would be supported by many countries in the world and by the United States.”³⁷ And even after the war had erupted, Eisenhower implied that he objected more to the “very poor vehicle” the Israelis, French, and British had used “in bringing Nasser to terms” than he did to the spirit of the policy itself.³⁸ The administration, then, likely could have moved more energetically to head off a conflict in the Middle East.

What all of this suggests, of course, is that decision-makers, rather than focusing their attention on what Hirsch calls “intangibles,” would be better served by basing their choices on strategic and political considerations. It surely was not in Israel’s interest to have a confrontation with the United States that resulted in a coerced withdrawal from the Sinai. Similarly, it was not in the interest of either France or Britain to ignore U.S. interests so blatantly at a time when Washington had considerable leverage to shape the behavior of both countries. Nor did it make sense for Nasser to alienate a superpower that appeared interested in developing a working relationship with him, for reasons that essentially had to do with prestige. All sides, in other words, would have been better served by pursuing

³⁵ Due to space constraints, I do not evaluate Soviet policy. In general, however, the Soviets do not seem to have pursued the sort of deeply aggressive strategy during the crisis that many writers now say they did. Their decision to arm Nasser, however, certainly did not square with an approach that took power and political dynamics into account. Not only did it fail to buy Moscow any great influence in Egypt, but it increased the likelihood of a Middle East war that it clearly did not want. And even if it had improved the Kremlin’s position with Nasser, it is unclear what exactly that would have gotten the Soviets in strategic terms.

³⁶ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 312.

³⁷ Quoted in Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 178.

³⁸ Quoted in Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 284.

policies more in line with realist principles. That, to my mind, is the real lesson to take away from *Suez Deconstructed*.

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2. A War for Our Time

By Jordan Chandler Hirsch

The Suez War of 1956 is rarely included in the pantheon of crises featured in the study of statecraft. Seminal works on strategy, such as Yale historian Donald Kagan's *On the Origins of War*, typically examine more famous episodes, like the outbreak of World War I or the Cuban Missile Crisis. Perhaps that is because Suez seems like a blip compared to other conflagrations of the era, such as the Soviet invasion of Hungary or the battle for Berlin. Seen as a "Middle East" war, Suez is sandwiched between the more "decisive" conflicts of 1948 and 1967. Suez also scrambled the traditional Cold War divisions that make for compelling study in other cases: At one point in the conflict, Washington aligned itself more closely with Moscow and Cairo than with London and Paris.

In *Suez Deconstructed*, Philip Zelikow, a historian at the University of Virginia and former counselor of the Department of State, argues that students of strategy have as much to learn from Suez as its much-studied cousins. In making this case, Zelikow is joined by Ernest May, who was a venerated Harvard historian, and the Harvard Suez Team, a group of six scholars recruited to conduct research for the project. The authors began their work

in the 1990s, but were interrupted, among other things, by Zelikow's service in government and May's death in 2009. Zelikow has returned to finish the book at an auspicious moment for examining the kind of war that Suez represents — a multi-power crisis, in which states of every size and strength play major roles.

Neither a work of political science nor pure history, *Suez Deconstructed* instead aims to be a historically rooted how-to manual for statecraft. The book seeks to convey the experience of “masterminding solutions to giant international crises,” Zelikow writes, by providing “a sort of simulator that can help condition readers just a little more” before confronting their own crises.³⁹ It sets up that simulation by scrambling the storytelling. First, *Suez Deconstructed* divides the crisis into three phases: September 1955 through July 1956, July 1956 through October 1956, and October through November of that year. In doing so, the authors hope to show that “most large problems of statecraft are not one-act plays” but instead begin as one problem and then mutate into new ones. This was the case with Suez, which began with Egypt purchasing Soviet arms and which became a multipronged battle over an international waterway.⁴⁰ Second, the book proceeds through these phases not chronologically but by recounting the perspectives of each of the six participants: the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, Israel, and Egypt. The goal — and the effect — is to deprive the reader of omniscience, creating a “lifelike” compartmentalization of knowledge and perspective.⁴¹

Zelikow encourages readers to assess Suez by examining three kinds of judgments made by the statesmen during the crisis: value judgments (“What do we care about?”), reality judgments (“What is really going on?”), and action judgments (“What can we do about it?”).⁴² Asking these questions, Zelikow argues, is the best means of evaluating the protagonists. Through this structure, *Suez Deconstructed* hopes to provide “a personal sense, even a checklist, of matters to consider” when confronting questions of statecraft.⁴³

³⁹ Philip Zelikow, Ernest R. May, and the Harvard Suez Team, *Suez Deconstructed: An Interactive Study in Crisis, War, and Peacemaking*, 2.

⁴⁰ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 2.

⁴¹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 3.

⁴² Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 4.

⁴³ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*.

The book begins this task by describing the world of 1956. The Cold War's impermeable borders had not yet solidified, and the superpowers sought the favor of the so-called Third World. Among non-aligned nations, Cold War ideology mattered less than anti-colonialism. In the Middle East, its champion was Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who wielded influence by exploiting several festering regional disputes. He rhetorically — and, the French suspected, materially — supported the Algerian revolt against French rule. He competed with Iraq, Egypt's pro-British and anti-communist rival. He threatened to destroy the State of Israel. And through Egypt ran the Suez Canal, which Europe depended on for oil.

Egypt's conflict with Israel precipitated the Suez crisis. In September 1955, Nasser struck a stunning and mammoth arms deal with the Soviet Union. The infusion of weaponry threatened Israel's strategic superiority, undermined Iraq, and vaulted the Soviet Union into the Middle East. From that point forward, Zelikow argues, the question for all the countries in the crisis (aside from Egypt, of course) became "What to do next about Nasser?"⁴⁴

Israel responded with dread, while, Britain, France, and the United States alternated between confrontation and conciliation. Eventually, the United States abandoned Nasser, but he doubled down by nationalizing the Suez Canal. This was too much for France. Hoping to unseat Nasser to halt Egyptian aid to Algeria, it concocted a plan with Israel and, eventually, Britain for Israel to invade Egypt and for British and French troops to seize the Canal Zone on the pretense of separating Israeli and Egyptian forces. The attack began just before the upcoming U.S. presidential election and alongside a revolution in Hungary that triggered a Soviet invasion. The book highlights the Eisenhower administration's anger at the tripartite plot. Despite having turned on Nasser, Eisenhower seethed at not having been told about the assault, bitterly opposed it, and threatened to ruin the British and French economies by withholding oil shipments.

⁴⁴ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 28.

Throughout, *Suez Deconstructed* disorients. As the story crisscrosses from terror raids into Israel to covert summits in French villas, from Turtle Bay to the Suez Canal, names and places, thoughts and actions blur. Venerable policymakers scramble to comprehend the latest maneuvers as they struggle with the weight of history: Was Suez another Munich? Could Britain and France still project power abroad? Would a young Israel survive?

The Lessons Are There if You Look for Them

By utilizing its Rashomon-like structure, the book evokes the harrowing nature of high-stakes diplomacy: the incomplete intelligence, the uncertain signaling among allies and adversaries, and the sheer number of contingencies that leaders must account for in navigating a multifaceted confrontation. But aside from Zelikow's brief observations, it leaves readers to contemplate these factors on their own. In that regard, *Suez Deconstructed* is less interactive study than study-by-fire. The approach conveys much about the atmospherics of decision-making, and Zelikow is right to prefer it to platitudes and aphorisms about strategy. But it may be difficult for readers to compose Zelikow's checklist without further guidance.

Even so, it is possible to extract several key lessons about statecraft. Chief among them is the extent to which policymakers are informed as much by honor and will as by interest. Britain and France, for example, ultimately joined forces to invade Egypt, but they did so for different reasons and with different degrees of resolve. As Zelikow notes, in the mid 1950s, France, recently beaten in Indochina, seemed beleaguered, while Britain "still seemed big," boasting a "far-flung network of bases and influence."⁴⁵ But appearances could deceive. France was led by men who "had been heroes of the resistance" during World War II and were determined to restore their country's honor.⁴⁶ Outwardly strong, meanwhile, Britain suffered from a gnawing sense of exhaustion.

This imbalance of morale would shape each nation's actions during the crisis and contribute to Suez's strange outcome. France's Socialist-led coalition, Zelikow writes, was

⁴⁵ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 15.

⁴⁶ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 15.

“driven by ideas and historical experience.”⁴⁷ It possessed a vision of restoring French pride and a dedication to defeating what it saw as “antimodern throwbacks” in Algeria backed by a Mussolini-like figure in Cairo.⁴⁸ It was thus undeterred when complications arose and “more creative in [its] policy designs.”⁴⁹ But because Washington, Moscow, and Cairo all judged France by its seeming lack of material power and its recent defeats alone, they underestimated its will.⁵⁰

British leaders, equally eager to topple Nasser and more capable of acting independently than the French, nevertheless struggled to overcome their nation’s fatigue. Initially behind the government’s desire to punish Nasser, the British public, as the book details, “[lost] its appetite for military adventure” as diplomacy commenced.⁵¹ British Prime Minister Anthony Eden had long argued for the need to reconcile with anti-colonialism and with Nasser, its chief Middle Eastern apostle. The British public, tired of war, could not long support Eden’s reversal. London ultimately joined French-Israeli strikes not so much out of conviction but to save face — avoiding the embarrassment of abandoning the demands it made of Nasser.

The second lesson that emerges is the centrality of relationships between statesmen, which drove events just as much as, if not more than, money, power, and ideas. One of the central drivers of the war, in fact, was the bond between French and Israeli statesmen. France’s Socialist leaders had all fought in the French Resistance during World War II. They sympathized with Israel, feeling morally obligated to prevent another massacre of the Jewish people and, as one author in the book describes, viewing Israel’s struggle “as a sort of sequel” to the fight against fascism.⁵² The Israelis, many of whom were former guerilla fighters themselves, easily related to the French and appreciated their support. Paris and Jerusalem grew closer for practical reasons as well: France sought Israel’s aid in addressing the Algerian revolt. But the relationship extended beyond material interest. As one chapter relates, during French-Israeli negotiations regarding the attack on Egypt, “there was an

⁴⁷ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 125.

⁴⁸ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 125.

⁴⁹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 226.

⁵⁰ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*.

⁵¹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 210.

⁵² Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 63-64.

emotional connection between [the French and Israeli leaders] that documents do not easily capture.”⁵³ The affection between French and Israeli officials repeatedly propelled the war planning forward.

If intimate ties catalyzed the invasion of Egypt, so, too, did combustible ones — none more so than the rancor between Eden and Dulles. Eden detested Dulles as moralistic, legalistic, and tedious (as related in *Suez Deconstructed*, he once described Dulles with the quip, “Dull, Duller, Dulles”).⁵⁴ Their mutual disregard plagued U.S.-British cooperation. At key moments, Eden believed, Dulles would intervene with a maladroit statement that would harm planning or undermine British leverage. In early October 1956, for example, Dulles stated that there were “no teeth” to the diplomatic plan that the powers had been devising and that when it came to issues of “so-called colonialism,” the United States would “play a somewhat independent role.”⁵⁵ For Eden, feeling isolated, this statement “was in some ways the final blow,” spurring him to join the French-Israeli initiative.⁵⁶

The statesmen of the Suez Crisis were haunted by history as much as they were guided by pride and personality — another striking theme that surfaces in *Suez Deconstructed*. Zelikow begins his overview of the world in 1956 by stating that “[t]hey were a wartime generation,” nations that had “lived through conclusive, cataclysmic wars, some more than one.”⁵⁷ Those experiences permeated their approaches to the crisis. French and British leaders could not help but see Nasser as a 1930s potentate. Indeed, after the crisis, Guy Mollet, the French prime minister in 1956, compared Suez to “Algeria, Spain, and Munich.”⁵⁸ As one author in the book explains, “‘Algeria’” meant Nasser’s role in fomenting the Algerian revolt. ‘Spain’ represented the parallel between Israel and the beleaguered Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s,” which was destroyed as the French government did nothing, and “‘Munich’” represented the failure of the democracies

⁵³ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 202.

⁵⁴ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 77.

⁵⁵ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 219.

⁵⁶ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 219.

⁵⁷ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 11.

⁵⁸ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 67.

to stop dictators in time.”⁵⁹ Although the British — policymakers, the press, and the public — did not share the Algerian and Spanish analogies, they, too, saw in Suez “the lesson of World War II: appeasement of dictators led to more demands and, eventually, to war.”⁶⁰ For Israel, Nasser’s threat to drive the Jews into the sea was especially haunting. And for Nasser, Dulles’ brusque revocation of the offer to finance the Aswan Dam was yet more colonial degradation. *Suez Deconstructed* offers a vivid sense of how difficult it is for policymakers to step back from their own experiences, let alone embody the perspectives of their counterparts. It is a rare quality in world leaders to be able to make historical analogies without fully embracing them, thereby becoming trapped.

Applying History’s Lessons to Today

Together, these elements suggest that statecraft, particularly in a crisis, is not an entirely rational pursuit. This is a vital lesson for today’s leaders. For much of the past 70 years, the wars most prominent in the American imagination have been nuclear standoffs and insurgent street fights. The wars of the coming decades, however, are likely to look more like Suez than Berlin or Iraq. They will likely be multi-state conflicts, in which states of every size and strength play major roles. These contests will be byzantine. Like Suez, they will be local skirmishes and global crises simultaneously. They will feature webs of overlapping rivalries and alliances (and rivalries *within* alliances), strategic and ideological considerations at multiple levels, and high-stakes signaling amid confusion and disinformation.

Such conflicts have already begun to emerge, and policymakers have largely failed to adjust. In Syria, for example, two great powers (the United States and Russia) and three regional powers (Israel, Iran, and Turkey), as well as a paramilitary terrorist organization, Hezbollah, have vied for influence in the midst of a failed state, wracked by civil war, with myriad factions and a lingering Islamic caliphate. In East Asia, meanwhile, claims over islands in the South China Sea could spark a multi-power war in a global economic hinge point — one that could quickly draw in the United States. These conflicts have not become

⁵⁹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*.

⁶⁰ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 207.

worldwide conflagrations (despite, in the case of Syria, the unimaginable toll on Syrians themselves). But in a time of geopolitical flux, when nations probe wobbly balances and crumbling power hierarchies, the relevance of Suez — a crisis that occurred before the Cold War’s ossification, and in many ways was caused by the uncertainties of the pre-Berlin-Wall world — becomes all too apparent.

To navigate this environment, policymakers will need to grapple with everything from budgetary constraints to new forms of power projection. But at bottom, they will need to recall the elements that have long moved leaders and nations, but have recently been forgotten: pride and emotion, personality and temperament, context and history. In other words, they will need to understand that statecraft is not only about impersonal forces — it’s about intangibles. The Suez crisis is an ideal history from which to glean that understanding, and *Suez Deconstructed* gives readers an enlightening and engrossing opportunity to gain it before facing a crisis of their own.

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3. Suez Deconstructed: Muddying the Waters to Clarify Decision-Making

By Madison Schramm

For over sixty years, scholars have investigated the political crisis that erupted in the wake of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. These works have tended to focus on discrete elements of the conflict, emphasizing, for example, the logic of economic diplomacy,⁶¹ British politics,⁶² or Israeli border security.⁶³ In the recently published *Suez Deconstructed: An Interactive Study in Crisis, War, and Peacemaking*, Phillip Zelikow, Ernest May, and the Harvard Suez Team provide an important service to current and future policymakers by illuminating not just what to think about a given crisis, but *how* to think *in* a crisis.

The United States will face a number of foreign policy challenges in the years ahead, including the rise of transnational right-wing populism, the international (and domestic) consequences of climate change, and ending America's "endless" wars while avoiding leaving behind dangerous power vacuums. Analysts and policymakers alike would do well to follow the lessons that this book has to offer: namely to rigorously analyze the motivations and priorities of one's opponents *and* partners, and to be wary of simple parables.

⁶¹ See Diane B. Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Guy Laron, *Origins of the Suez Crisis: Postwar Development Diplomacy and the Struggle Over Third World Industrialization, 1945-1956* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013).

⁶² See Leon D. Epstein, *British Politics in the Suez Crisis* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964); Saul Kelly and Anthony Gorst, eds., *Whitehall and the Suez Crisis* (New York: Frank Cass, 2000).

⁶³ See Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949-1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Michael B. Oren, "Escalation to Suez: The Egypt-Israel Border War, 1949-56," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 2 (1989): 347-75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200948902400208>.

Suez Deconstructed has somewhat of an unorthodox organization. Designed as a teaching tool to assist students and policymakers, the text is structured to facilitate the careful assessment of state decision-making. The book is divided into three sections: The first section examines how the leaders from each of the involved countries in the Suez Canal crisis perceived Nasser prior to nationalization of the canal. The second section discusses how decision-makers in each capital responded to Nasser's nationalization of the canal. The final section explores what actions decision-makers took leading up to and following Israel, Britain, and France's invasion of Egypt. The authors draw from memoirs, newspaper articles, and primary source material from the Soviet Union, Israel, France, Britain, the United States, and Egypt.

In the introduction, Zelikow and his co-authors ask readers to remain cognizant of three questions while appraising each state's decision-making throughout the crisis: First, to consider "value judgments," or how states characterized the imminent challenges they faced; second, to evaluate "reality judgments," or how policymakers from each country weighed the facts on the ground; and lastly, to examine how each state designed its policies and strategies. Following each section, Zelikow offers observations organized around these three questions. This structure forces readers to grapple with the complexities of crisis decision-making and allows the authors to convincingly challenge the notion that the outcome of the crisis was, at any given point, a foregone conclusion.

The Optics of a Crisis

The organization of *Suez Deconstructed* provides an excellent template for assessing state decision-making. Through this, the authors succeed in illustrating the complexity of the crisis. Like most conflicts, the Suez Crisis is not a simple tale. It is precisely for this reason that the lessons from the text are so rich.

By assessing each state individually, the authors provide substantial evidence that the actors involved had different interests and threat hierarchies. For example, while both U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower and Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev were consumed by the Cold War, only the United States was preoccupied with the Israeli-Arab conflict and Egyptian politics. French perceptions were unduly motivated by the Algerian revolt, while the British were motivated by their waning influence in the Middle East. Egyptian leaders

were concerned about the future leadership of the Middle East and their own economic development, while Israel was preoccupied with its border security.

In descriptions of international conflict, analysts frequently treat complex, multi-player conflicts as dyadic — examining only two actors, despite the fact that more states were critical to determining the contours of decision-making. However, by considering all parties to the Suez Crisis individually, Zelikow, May, and the Harvard Suez team illustrate the precarious nature of foreign policy decision-making. For example, the British decision to go through with Operation Musketeer — the codename for the planned British-French invasion — cannot be divorced from Britain's coordination with the French and Israeli governments and their respective perceptions of Nasser. Although the parsimony of analyzing a crisis from one vantage point or level of analysis can be enticing, the authors illuminate how the bipolar nature of the Cold War, the personalities of individual policymakers, and domestic politics all affected different states at different times throughout the crisis.

Historical narratives often present a simple sequence of events with a mono-causal explanation. However, as the authors of *Suez Deconstructed* illustrate by approaching the crisis from multiple vantage points, crises are multi-causal and the perceptions of individual actors rarely converge neatly. U.S. foreign policy decision-makers can particularly benefit from this lesson. Consider the current crisis in the South China Sea: The focus tends to be on U.S. and Chinese foreign policy. However, this ends up marginalizing the roles of other claimant and non-claimant states, ultimately resulting in a narrow interpretation of the conflict with less predictive leverage for policymakers. Think, for example, how the 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines changed the balance of power in the region. With the election of Duterte, the United States lost the Philippines as a close partner in pushing back against China's nine-dash line.

Understanding how Duterte and (and other leaders in the region) view the disputed islands will be essential to determining the best path forward for U.S. foreign policy in the region.

This brings us to another important lesson — how to assess the motivations of other states in a crisis. Zelikow and his co-authors illustrate well the challenges of accurately interpreting motivations and actions. Prime Minister Eden and his cabinet, for example, put their trust in the intelligence from an MI6 contact, Lucky Break, who told them that Nasser

was increasingly under the Soviets' thumb, because it confirmed what they wanted to believe. Debatably, the biggest obstacles to interpreting the motivations of other states are our own biases.

It is important to understand what states are doing as well as *why* they are doing it. Consider the current crisis in Syria: Policymakers would do well to unpack not just the level of Iranian involvement in Syria, but *why* Iran is involved at all. Using the rubric outlined in the text, policymakers must ask themselves what are Iranian leaders' motivations for their country's military and financial involvement. Without understanding this, it is unlikely America will be able to determine what Iran will do next and craft policy accordingly.

The authors also challenge some of the conventional wisdom regarding the crisis itself. For example, previous analyses often point to the Czech Arms Deal as the point at which U.S. and British opinion turned against Nasser. However, the arms deal was actually a key factor in convincing Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Anthony Eden to support financing of the Aswan Dam project. In *Suez Deconstructed*, the more critical turning point for the United States seems to have been the failure of talks between Nasser and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, while for the British it was the summary firing of the commander of the Arab Legion in Jordan, John Glubb.

Another piece of conventional wisdom the authors challenge is the conception that Eden's illness can fully account for his decision-making in 1956. His botched gall bladder surgery and associated illness is frequently used as an explanation for his hawkishness during the crisis. As the authors point out, however, both U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Eisenhower were hospitalized at different points throughout the crisis as well, and yet there is no evidence that their illnesses increased their support for coercive action in Egypt.⁶⁴ Furthermore, other important actors, like British treasury secretary, Harold Macmillan, at least initially largely agreed with Eden's assessments, challenging the claim that Eden's illness can independently explain his decision-making.

⁶⁴ Rose McDermott, *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Suez Deconstructed succeeds in demonstrating the problems with reducing complex historical events to simplistic narratives or analogies. The authors explain: “Nor will readers get much practical help from the stories that end in thin parables, in axioms that do not seem to amount to much more than a warning: be careful. Consult with others. Don’t build on a mud pile. And don’t appease Hitler.”⁶⁵ This lesson can be usefully applied as U.S. policymakers continue to try to understand Russia’s interference in America’s 2016 elections. Analysts should be cognizant of the temptation to reduce the threat from Russia into an oversimplified strongman narrative about Vladimir Putin, and instead should ask themselves some important questions: Is Russian election interference new? Why was Russia more successful in 2016 than in the past? And how will the current scope of the U.S. investigation into the election interference affect Russian behavior in 2020?

Conclusion

While *Suez Deconstructed* ably presents the difficulties that decision-makers face in a crisis and challenges reductionist accounts of history, the book left a few interesting topics under-explored, no doubt due to the already substantial breadth of the volume.

First, the book lacked a sufficient discussion of how intelligence and intelligence agencies affected each state’s decision-making. How did the analyses from MI6 and the CIA inform British and American thinking? There were important distinctions between the agencies with regard to their assessments of Nasser and Egypt as well as their individual organizational capacities. While the CIA and American officials had befriended the Free Officers, the group within the Egyptian military that led the coup in 1952, the British were still disadvantaged by their reliance on the Wafd party, a popular and powerful group under the monarchy. During the Suez crisis, Eden widely shared the intelligence from Lucky Break, claiming Nasser had developed deep ties with the Soviets. This seemed to confirm his prior suspicions and support his chosen course of action to attack the canal. However, U.S. intelligence was more measured regarding the threat of Nasser and warned that direct Soviet involvement, rather than being a foregone conclusion, would result only if military action were taken against Nasser. While the authors note in the conclusion that “Part of it

⁶⁵ Philip Zelikow, Ernest R. May, and the Harvard Suez Team, *Suez Deconstructed: An Interactive Study in Crisis, War, and Peacemaking*, 1.

has to do with the peculiar influence that British intelligence exerted in that year, and not in a helpful way,”⁶⁶ this topic deserved more concerted investigation. What can this teach us about the influence of intelligence during a crisis?

Second, there was more to explore regarding the variation in threat assessment *within* each state. The American and British ambassadors to Egypt, for example, seemed to take a much more moderated tone than leaders within the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and the British Ministry of Defense. Although his concerns were dismissed by many in Washington, U.S. Ambassador to Egypt Henry Byroade explicitly challenged plans for Operation OMEGA — a plan developed under Eisenhower in the spring of 1956 to erode Nasser’s power and build up support for King Saud in Saudi Arabia as a new leader in the Middle East. Similarly, British Ambassador to Egypt Sir Humphrey Trevelyan was much more moderate in his assessments of Nasser than government officials in London, and it seems he was not immediately informed of British military planning. How did the sidelining of these ambassadors’ voices affect American and British decision-making during the crisis?

Despite some of these shortcomings, however, *Suez Deconstructed* adds depth and perspective to existing accounts of the 1956 crisis. Scholars and policymakers alike will benefit from the insights of the text, namely that policymakers ought to rigorously assess the motivations and goals of all states involved in a crisis and be wary of simplistic narratives. Ultimately, *Suez Deconstructed* illustrates the challenges of decision-making and the complexities of international crises, providing important lessons for contemporary U.S. foreign policymakers.

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⁶⁶ Zelikow, et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 322.

4. Deconstructing History's Lessons for Statecraft

By Danny Steed

The Suez Crisis holds quite a special place in U.K. history, and not a happy one at that. It was, more than any other country, Britain's failure — so much so that it can be very easy to forget the role that other countries played in a crisis that continues to be rich in lessons for current and future policymakers. The crisis itself has been described in numerous ways over the decades: Chester Cooper, former CIA officer and diplomat, labelled it “The Lion's Last Roar,”⁶⁷ hinting at the end of British imperial might. From the Egyptian point of view, journalist Mohamed Heikal called the crisis, “Cutting the Lion's Tail,”⁶⁸ — a clear bias that it was less the result of British failure and more of Egyptian success under the leadership of Col. Gamal Abdul Nasser. For others, “The less said about Suez the better,”⁶⁹ such has its ghost haunted political memory in a way that is only rivalled by the 2003 Iraq War.

With such positions firmly ingrained in the historiography of Suez, one can rightly ask what is there that is new to add? Philip Zelikow, the late Ernest May, and the Harvard Suez Team offer their recent book, *Suez Deconstructed*, which, in this author's opinion, certainly proves American-Israeli historian Michael Oren's view that Suez is a “crisis for all seasons”⁷⁰ from which observers are certain to draw lessons on all sides. Adopting Oren's view implicitly, Zelikow and his co-authors seek to offer an historical work with a new objective: Instead of trying to simply unearth new historical insights into the crisis, the work is offered as a way to generate lessons on statecraft itself.

⁶⁷ Chester L. Cooper, *The Lion's Last Roar: Suez 1956* (London: Harper and Collins, 1978).

⁶⁸ Mohamed H. Heikal, *Cutting the Lions Tail: Suez Through Egyptian Eyes* (London: Corgi Press, 1988).

⁶⁹ Peter J. Beck, “The Less Said About Suez the Better’: British Governments and the Politics of Suez's History, 1956-67,” *English Historical Review* Vol. CXXIV (June 2009): 508, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cep146>.

⁷⁰ Michael B. Oren, “Suez: A Crisis for all Seasons: A Review Essay,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 104-07, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.1994.0028>.

As Zelikow notes in his introductory remarks, “There are many studies of statecraft. But few of them help readers understand how to do it...”⁷¹ In order to try to do just that, the book combines the efforts of the Harvard Suez Team,⁷² whose scholars offer their own country-specific chapters on the six key players involved in the crisis — Britain, Egypt, France, Israel, the United States, and the Soviet Union — highlighting each country’s view of events. Typically, such an attempt would be presented in the style of an edited volume, but this work differs because the structure is driven by Zelikow’s guiding hand.

The book is split into three acts, each of which poses a central question: What to do about Nasser’s Egypt? What to do about the crisis? And what to do about the war? The overall analytic underpinning distinguishes between “value judgements,” “reality judgements,” and “action judgements,” which each of the six actors must consider. This matrix is put forward in order to draw lessons about statecraft from the leaders who were making decisions at the time. The traditional weakness that afflicts most volumes with numerous contributors is variance in quality and consistency of direction throughout. This, however, does not afflict *Suez Deconstructed*, whose direction and consistency must be commended.

One point of criticism to note is that serious historians searching for new insights into the crisis itself will be disappointed. Ultimately, there is nothing *new* in the historical detail on offer, and those with a familiarity with the events of Suez will be able to digest its content very quickly. Having said this, the work will hold strong appeal for those without such prior grounding, as a very useful “one-stop-shop” to the crisis whose strength lies in its inclusivity of all players involved. This, no doubt, is the core target: not only students who are searching for broader guidance and lessons to take on their way to careers as practitioners but, one also hopes, for established practitioners (be they in military or political service) who are continuing their studies.

⁷¹ Philip Zelikow, Ernest R. May, and the Harvard Suez Team, *Suez Deconstructed: An Interactive Study in Crisis, War, and Peacemaking* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 1.

⁷² Which originated as a teaching project at Harvard and grew into a broader funded project.

Dissecting History

Given this objective, the areas of the book with the most to offer are Zelikow’s “observation chapters” between each section, as these serve to weave the historical narrative into the broader lessons that the authors are seeking to extract from this historical episode. In so doing, Zelikow succeeds, most of all, in showing readers how no country’s policy position at Suez was fixed and that the journey each participant took was, in reality, a very messy affair with numerous changes throughout. Moscow was employing its “opportunistic strategy.” Israel was “riveted to [its] local problems,” while Britain was concerned less with the global Cold War than with its own “regional influence in the Middle East,” and the French were preoccupied with the Algerian revolt. The Egyptians had clear concerns but unclear options, and Washington was alone in needing to “juggle concerns about all three levels of conflict.”⁷³ Nobody, therefore, arrived at the Suez Crisis in a political vacuum. And although this is a well-established fact in the Suez historiography, it could have been emphasized more explicitly as a broader overarching lesson for statecraft, given that the context these actors were already operating in greatly informed the value judgements that were then taken into the crisis itself.

Zelikow’s transitional chapters are valuable in revealing how each country’s value judgements greatly informed its belief about what courses of action were available and, consequently, what action judgements it then reached. Britain, which had the most skin in the game, as it were, was the country most concerned and arguably the most predictable in its (eventual) response in resorting to the use of force against Egypt. American attitudes are rightly highlighted as seeming “to fluctuate, from person to person or one day to the next.”⁷⁴ This caused much consternation in London, but those changeable attitudes did evolve into a measured view against the use of force by President Dwight Eisenhower that Britain was ultimately at great fault for ignoring by opening hostilities against Egypt.

One particular observation that Zelikow makes is of note: the French push to use force. So often, the historiography on the Suez Crisis is focused on the collusion — the conspiracy

⁷³ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 124–25.

⁷⁴ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 224.

between Britain, France, and Israel to find a pretext to invade Egypt — particularly the British government’s role therein because of its ardent denials after the fact. Thus, it is often overlooked that in the latter stages of the crisis it was the French who became the driving impetus for the use of force against Egypt. Zelikow’s view on this matter, informed greatly by Charles Cogan’s chapters on Paris, judges the French as being “more creative in their policy designs.”⁷⁵ Here, the French are rightly credited in that their policy design more accurately appealed to London’s desires to use force against Egypt while anticipating Israeli concerns about having an emboldened Egypt on its doorstep at the same time. This, in turn, identifies another lesson for statecraft that seems left implicit at this stage of the book: that the impetus and momentum for large policy decisions often passes between political actors, much like how momentum shifts among and between teams in sports. At the moment when Britain was seriously contemplating a humiliating reversal on the diplomatic front, “it is the French who throw Eden a lifeline of political and military opportunity.”⁷⁶

The final observations that Zelikow makes — “What to do about the war?” — are instructive in illustrating which countries were the most instrumental in halting the crisis, America being the most paramount. Zelikow is quite right that everyone “seems to have misjudged the strength, speed, and depth of Washington’s opposition” to the use of force.⁷⁷ This included Nasser, who, although ultimately anticipating the British resort to force, certainly did not plan for Eisenhower to rescue him “from a gamble that could have turned out so catastrophically”⁷⁸ for his regime, as it had for his forces. The French blamed British military lethargy and over-caution for the failure to re-secure the Suez Canal and depose Nasser every bit as much as they did American political opposition, whereas Moscow and Cairo, of course, both tried to claim that it was their curbing of imperialist ambitions that was the ultimate reason for the cessation of hostilities — not the far more decisive role of American displeasure with its allies’ actions. While French criticism of British military performance was certainly valid, it was the steadfast refusal of America to condone the use of force that was the decisive factor in halting the crisis.

⁷⁵ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 226.

⁷⁶ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 227.

⁷⁷ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 312.

⁷⁸ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*.

Lessons Worth Learning

Suez Deconstructed is a fine work that does not shy away from attempting a new approach to analysing a much-discussed moment of intense geopolitical contest in order to try and identify broader lessons in statecraft for current or future policymakers. In this, the book succeeds but, in this reviewer's opinion, only implicitly, as readers are left to categorize those lessons for themselves. While the book makes clear the lessons learned by the countries involved — for example, the French learned that its government must retain as much independence for its military as possible⁷⁹ — the broader lessons for statecraft itself are curiously not made explicit, even in Zelikow's otherwise superb observational chapters.

That's a shame, because there is clear need in the present era for wisdom to help guide decision-making, particularly for time-poor leaders who operate in ever faster cycles of events, dominated by information flows that are seen as increasingly unreliable and permeated with "fake" news. Scholarship that categorizes and explicitly outlines advice for policymakers is sorely needed, yet readers will need to extract some of these lessons from *Suez Deconstructed* for themselves, including that context in the political world is always multi-dimensional, with each country bringing its own unique viewpoint to the table and trying to shape one another's when attempting to influence the policy agenda. Despite the lack of explicit articulation, Zelikow's three levels of conflict remain effective in ensuring readers empathize with which level mattered more to which participant. For those seeking careers in diplomacy or as analysts, this kind of empathetic reasoning will serve as a key professional skill.

Other lessons include the important role that context plays in driving the value judgements an actor makes in approaching any political event or crisis, the influence of those value judgements in conditioning an actor's belief in which courses of action are available and possible, that personal relationships between leaders matter every bit as much — indeed perhaps even more so — than established national ones (as seen in the fluctuating relationship between the Eden and Eisenhower governments, in particular), that calculating and anticipating the desires and reactions of other actors is a most uncertain pursuit based,

⁷⁹ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 321.

at best, on shaky information, and that policy momentum can easily pass between nations (as evidenced by Britain’s loss of impetus for the use of force that was then taken up by the French).

These lessons highlight a relevant broader lesson that certainly applies to the types of conflicts we have seen so far this century: those that feature the lack of control of any one actor on events, especially as those events proceed. While a nation may initiate a policy course of action (including the use of force), the dynamics of events and the effects of actors with their own contexts and policy desires shapes a future reality that policymakers did not intend. For those in positions of authority, it is important to remember that the policy outcome will rarely match with the ideal one was striving for in the first place. Policy positions will need to adapt to circumstances, and policymakers will need to exercise understanding about what other actors — especially allies — desire.

Suez Deconstructed certainly merits a place on any course’s reading list for the Suez Crisis because of its efforts to draw broader lessons of statecraft, even if imperfectly achieved. The real difficulty that the book highlights is the meta-challenge for history as a discipline itself, namely, the sheer difficulty of robustly unlocking and categorizing the lessons of historical episodes for future practitioners to learn from. In this, Zelikow rightly notes that Suez becomes such an instructive study “because it is so humbling,”⁸⁰ and, for Suez in particular, one is reminded that the crisis’ biggest truism is, in fact, the biggest truth of all: that Suez really is, in the words of Kipling, “No End of a Lesson.”

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⁸⁰ Zelikow et al., *Suez Deconstructed*, 323.

5. Author Response: Lessons Learned

By Philip Zelikow

This is an excellent roundtable. All the reviewers grasped, understood, and welcomed the innovation in the research design, and everyone appeared to have profited from it.

Galen Jackson, who introduced the roundtable, struggled with my early remarks about the similarity of international relations (IR) theory to entomology in relation to the practical advice they give to the objects of their study.

Entomology, as well as IR theory, are perfectly respectable scientific pursuits. Jackson makes the IR theorists' argument that policymakers act on theories, usually implicit, about the world. By adducing, articulating, and testing such theories, IR theorists argue that they thereby can improve the quality of policymakers' thought, assuming the policymakers attend to the scientific findings.

People do act on theories about people and the world. Usually they carry a number of such theories in their head simultaneously, most of which often have some measure of validity under certain circumstances. Few such theories are invariably true.

The practical problems in application thus become apparent. It is these practical problems that play out in each individual's interactive judgments assessing reality, juggling values, and evaluating possible actions. There are more interactions in each individual's government which, in turn, interact with such compound judgments in the other governments involved. This is what my co-authors and I attempted to break down and illuminate in *Suez Deconstructed*.

There can be value in slapping theoretical labels on some of the judgments in these complex mixtures, to say — as Jackson does — that here the Israelis are worried about a changing

power situation (though this too fluctuates) or there we see a known psychological pattern. If that helps a theoretically conversant reader follow some facets of the story, all the better.

But if we authors inserted these hindsight theoretical labels on each of the many varieties of behavior exhibited in this study, the net effect would make them less lifelike. The first risk is that we would typecast behavior in ways that do not fit the multi-causal reality. The second risk is to invite the associated generalizations about the implications of the theorized behavior, generalizations that might not be valid in that case.

This combination of selective typecasting, plus their associated generalizations, can be deadly (sometimes literally). It is a pathology occasionally exhibited by some of the characters in our story. The entomologists may wish to notice and extract such data for their disciplinary purpose. But such labeling would detract from our goal, which was to heighten philosophical realism and practical insight.

In the other reviews, I was only puzzled in reading Danny Steed's statement that the book added nothing new to historical knowledge about the Suez crisis (a statement which Jackson quotes in his overview). The actual substance of the review essays by both Jordan Hirsch and Madison Schramm seem to repeatedly belie that assertion — it is even belied somewhat in Steed's own piece.

One such contribution, that at least one reviewer appears to have misunderstood, is my argument that Israel was a big winner — not a loser — in the crisis. I thought that came through in the book, prefigured by a remarkable statement David Ben-Gurion made to the Israeli cabinet. Part of the irony of Israel's gain is that their 10 precious years of border security and relative peace came, in part, from the innovative creation of the U.N. Emergency Force — which was not Israel's idea at all. In fact, the book's little creation story of this force makes another small contribution.

But it is my fault I did not attempt to list and spotlight these and the many other ways my co-authors and I thought we were adding to the historical understanding of the Suez Canal crisis. So many facets of this seemed to emerge from our approach, some relatively subtle but vital. Reassuringly, the reviewers actually and frequently display their grasp of many

such points. That is a mark not only of their conscientious engagement with the book — it is also, in turn, a testament to the selection and recruitment of the reviewers by *TNSR*.

The striking takeaway from the essays in this roundtable is the reviewers' common hunger — really an almost desperate hunger — for me to spell out more of the lessons, to distill and feed readers the axioms of good statecraft. As if that's really how people learn it.

What's happily evident to me, from the reviews, is how much these particular readers have already learned from their engagement with the book, working through the details of the situations, experiences, and varied perspectives. That is usually how people learn in real life.

Philip Zelikow holds chairs in history and in governance, both at the University of Virginia. His scholarship focuses on critical episodes in American and world history. He has served at all levels of American government, including policy work in the five administrations from Reagan through Obama.

