In July 1956, following the abrupt withdrawal of the possibility of Egypt securing U.S. and British funding for the construction of the Aswan High Dam, Australia joined the United Kingdom in seeking to reverse the nationalization by Egypt of the Suez Canal Company. The Aswan Dam project was the centrepiece of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's plans for the modernization of the Egyptian economy.

Although subsequent negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations made progress toward resolving the dispute, Anglo-French forces invaded Egypt in early November 1956, supposedly to protect the Suez Canal from fighting between Egypt and Israel. In fact, the attack, launched initially by Israel in late October, was part of a plan conceived by France and Israel, and coordinated with the United Kingdom, that sought to achieve the overthrow of Nasser through the humiliation of a major military defeat. The outcome – a cease-fire followed by withdrawal imposed on the UK and France by President Dwight Eisenhower, the humiliation of British Prime Minister Anthony Eden and the UK government, and the end of Eden’s political career—was as inevitable as it was predictable.

Though not a party to the conflict, Australia was affected: Australia’s diplomatic relations with Egypt were severed by the Egyptians on 6 November 1956 and were not restored until late 1959. In effect, Australia became part of the United Kingdom’s imperial twilight in the Middle East.

Ellen Gray’s article makes a welcome contribution to scholarship on the part played by Australia in regard to the Suez crisis. It does so by examining the role of the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies who, in early September, at the request of the United States and Britain, led a delegation representing Canal user countries to Cairo seeking, without success, to persuade Nasser to relinquish control of the Canal. Her analysis seeks to challenge what she identifies as perceptions that Menzies’ lack of success in Cairo was due to his loyalty to Britain. She argues, instead, that several factors doomed the Menzies mission to failure.

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The supporting evidence offered by Gray covers a great deal of the story very well indeed. The essential argument of the article, that “a culmination of complex factors” (104), some of which were beyond Menzies’ control, resulted in the failure of Menzies’ mission is incontrovertible. In its elaboration and interpretation of the evidence along those lines, however, the article also contains some contestable assertions.

I have four specific criticisms. First, Gray begins with the assertion that W.J. Hudson attributes the outcome of the failed discussions to Menzies’ supposed “blind loyalty” to the British Empire (87). She writes:

The most authoritative proponent of this view paints Menzies as a man easily seduced by Anthony Eden, the British prime minister, into deliberately interpreting the Committee’s mandate narrowly to bully Nasser into surrendering to British demands (87).  

That misinterprets Hudson’s compelling argument that ‘blind loyalty’ to the British (and the notions of Britishness in Australian politics and society that are his central theme) drove the Australian approach in a general sense. Hudson’s views are shared by other notable historians who wrote at the time, including W. MacMahon Ball as well as by the leading biographer of Menzies, Allan Martin. Hudson in fact does not, in the pages cited or the book as a whole, attribute the outcome of Menzies discussions in Cairo to ‘blind loyalty’ to the British.

Hudson acknowledges that Menzies shared Eden’s concern not to engage in “interminable negotiations” (79) with Nasser—a logical stance, given that Nasser’s interests would be best served by engaging in such discussions while defusing user country concerns by demonstrating that the Canal would continue to operate effectively under Egyptian control. Hudson also acknowledges the “probability” (92) that Menzies was determined to accept nothing other than outright surrender to the proposals he was tasked with putting forward. But Hudson does not argue that this was a feature of the objectives or content of the Menzies/Nasser discussions. For my part, I am mystified by the reference to my article (105), which does not address the Cairo discussions at all, but focussed mainly on the Australian approach to the Anglo-Egyptian negotiations during the early 1950s regarding the termination of the presence of British military base facilities on the Canal.

My monograph, *Australia, Menzies and Suez*, published in 2019, and a newly-released volume of Australian archival documents (co-edited with Matthew Jordan) *Australia and the Suez Crisis 1950-1957* examine the Suez Crisis and Menzies’ role in it in detail. Like Hudson, I found at the core of Menzies’ approach a sense of loyalty to Britain and a shared British identity, sentiments strongly shared among his Cabinet colleagues. Gray’s article correctly notes that Menzies had prepared his sales pitch quite intensively before going to Cairo. But the archival record demonstrates that in Cairo Menzies was focussed on the task at hand, which was the presentation of a case on behalf of the Canal users in which Menzies was personally invested. The modalities of the presentation no doubt reflected an understanding between Eden and Menzies.

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4 Bowker, “Playing Second Fiddle in a Dysfunctional Orchestra,”

that negotiation would be avoided, but the content of the proposals presented by Menzies mainly reflected the views of U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and the Canal users, to which the British were only one of several contributors.

It is also worth noting, in regard to the question of whether Menzies erred in failing to demonstrate willingness to negotiate, that it seems that at that juncture, Nasser was not particularly interested in engaging in negotiations either. Before Menzies arrived Nasser told a U.S. diplomat that although it might take the Menzies committee two days to present its case, it would only take Nasser one hour to present his position. In his discussions with the delegation he said arrangements could be made on “questions of finance and tolls” but he firmly rejected the substance of the case Menzies put to him. Nasser’s detailed written response to the letter from Menzies placing the proposals of the delegation on the record was both entirely dismissive of the proposals and devoid of any suggestion that the Egyptian position was negotiable.

Second, the portrayal of Menzies’ approach to the Anglo-American relationship in the Suez context is questionable. Gray argues that Menzies:

actively sought to strengthen the Anglo-American relationship, a key pillar of Australian foreign policy. Menzies’ subsequent failure to negotiate successfully with Nasser was the result of his obliviousness to the fact that the Anglo-American partnership was not united in its practical approach to resisting Egypt, and his inability to see that it could not be the foundation on which Australia’s Suez policy stood.

The archival evidence is quite clear that Menzies was far from oblivious to the disagreement between London and Washington over Suez. Menzies was in possession of correspondence between Eden and Eisenhower highlighting Eisenhower’s rejection of Eden’s arguments for the use of force, which he withheld from his Cabinet colleagues. He was surely aware of the personal rancour between Eden and Dulles. While Menzies sought afterwards to play it down, there was friction in Cairo between Menzies and the U.S. delegate, Loy Henderson, who Menzies discovered, to his consternation, had been instructed by the State Department to explore the possibility of negotiation.

Menzies also chose to ignore U.S. advice. From the outset of the crisis, Dulles had told Menzies of his concerns at the prospect of Britain and France “taking quick and firm military action to bring Nasser to heel” and told the London conference of Canal user countries that “there should be no ultimatum to Egypt” arising from the meeting. Under Secretary of State Herbert Hoover, who was later to play a key part in the U.S. response to the crisis, and other State Department officials had in blunt terms reinforced the message. No record exists in the Australian archives of Menzies’ meeting with Eisenhower on 3 August 1956, at which it is highly likely Eisenhower would have reiterated his opposition to

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9 I thank my research assistant, Miguel Galsim, for finding the information discussed here.


the use of force. Indeed, having over the past ten years reviewed some 20,000 documents on the subject of Australia’s role in the Suez Crisis, I have seen no evidence that Menzies, Foreign Minister Richard Casey, or the Australian Cabinet was disposed to align Australia with the United States in regard to Suez during the Cairo discussions, or indeed at any stage. Menzies’ main concern, throughout the crisis and in its immediate aftermath, was to persuade Eisenhower of the correctness of Eden’s approach.

Menzies did not go to Cairo for the sake of Anglo-American accord; he went there hoping to restore ‘international’ control over the Canal, because that was deemed to be in Australia’s interests; because he was standing up for Britain’s place in the region and the world; and because he was willing (indeed keen) to carry the ball for Eden and Dulles.

Like the remainder of his Cabinet (with the exception of Casey, and Defence Minister Phillip McBride, each of whom took a more sophisticated view of what was involved) Menzies was determined that Nasser needed to be put in his place, and that Britain was not to become, in Dulles’ words, “another Portugal.”14 He was scathing about the concern of Eisenhower to seek solutions to the crisis through the United Nations. Eleven days after Eisenhower had imposed his will on the UK and France, and effectively ended Eden’s political career in the process, Menzies wrote to Eisenhower in the most condescending manner, robustly defending Eden’s approach while appealing for reconciliation between the two powers based, in effect, on endorsement of Eden’s actions.15

At the wider political level, and in much of the bureaucracy as well, the identification of Australia with notions of a British identity, and the interpretation of events mainly through British lenses was consistent throughout the crisis, despite the lack of candour of Eden and his colleagues. The risk to Australia’s relations with the United States of giving such strong support to Eden was barely mentioned in Cabinet discussions or in briefings. And unlike the approach to the crisis taken by Prime Minister Lester Pearson of Canada, there is no archival evidence that Menzies sought to bridge the differences between Washington and London beyond rhetorical appeals to Eisenhower and Dulles.

Third, the article’s depiction of the Menzies mission as a dismal failure could be more nuanced. Menzies was at pains to show his was not a “negotiation” but rather a presentation and explanation of the proposals arising from the London conference of Canal user countries. He was keen to attribute some blame to Eisenhower for the outcome, but he was hardly bothered by it: he had gained a measure of international prominence and positive political focus within Australia for playing a part, and the outcome in Cairo stood him in good stead with Eden and others whose approval he desired.

From British and French perspectives, Nasser’s refusal was an outcome they welcomed, as part of ‘clearing the deck’ for attempting to fulfil their undeclared ambition of Nasser’s removal from power.16 It would be reasonable to assume that from Dulles’s perspective, the Menzies mission, like the Suez Canal Users Association fiasco that came in its wake, was a means of buying time for tempers (hopefully) to cool in London.17 In that limited sense, Dulles was at least somewhat successful.

The discussions between Menzies and Nasser were not acrimonious, although it probably would have mattered little to the personal and political calculus of either man if they were. In fact, the only moment at which tempers were raised between Menzies and Nasser, and Nasser threatened somewhat theatrically to walk out, came when Menzies told Nasser rather clumsily that Egyptian refusal to accept international administration of the Canal would be “the beginning of trouble” and


that “only if there were no agreement your people can be imposed upon.”

Although Nasser and his colleagues were offended by Menzies’ imperious style, the vilification of Menzies in the Egyptian media as an imperialist mule came a little later.

Fourth, the article discusses developments in the wider picture without making clear connections between those developments, how Menzies acted in Cairo, and the results of his mission. The article overstates the notion that provocative military preparations by the French and British shaped the outcome in Cairo. Nasser had already told the Americans that he expected the Western powers to attempt to use military force against him when a pretext arose. Heikal claims that Nasser repositioned Egyptian forces in the Sinai accordingly. And although it appears Nasser believed the prospect of war receded during August, the Egyptian High Military Command prepared plans on 1 September anticipating a British attack. Menzies’s warning to Nasser that the use of military force should not be excluded—which was clearly beyond his brief from the London Conference—therefore was unlikely to have made a difference to the Egyptian president.

The article contains no evidence to demonstrate that UK/U.S. tensions made any difference to what Menzies presented in Cairo and to the reception he received. It is one thing to say the British and French wanted Menzies to fail (which is highly likely); it is quite another to demonstrate that their actions imposed themselves on the proceedings. Menzies for his part showed no evidence of being aware that Eden wanted him to fail; and I have seen no evidence that the British or the French sought to undermine the mission. Gray notes correctly that Menzies seized upon reported comments by Eisenhower to rationalise his inability to win his case with Nasser, and later complained to Eisenhower about it, but that was plainly disingenuous political posturing, perhaps with a view to his memoirs, on Menzies’ part.

Simply put, the case Menzies presented to Nasser failed on its merits, against the background of a determination on Nasser’s part to be rid of the vestiges of western colonialism. It did not need any additional western subterfuges, ulterior motives, or clever footwork by Dulles and/or Eden to have Menzies chair the committee, to achieve that result. Nor does the article make a convincing case that Menzies’s performance in Cairo was adversely affected by the ulterior motives and machinations of others.

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