

Hugh Gaitskell condemns Tory War Decision as

AN ACT OF DISASTROUS

FOLLY

A slashing indictment of the Tory Government's "disastrous" policy in Egypt and the Middle East, was delivered by Hugh Gaitskell, Leader of the Labour Party in the House of Commons on October 31st, 1956, a few hours after British armed forces began their attack in Egypt. Mr. Gaitskell, in a speech which brought forth loud and prolonged applause, described the Government's armed intervention in Egypt as "an act of disastrous folly".

Below is the text of the speech.

Mr. Gaitskell said:—

LAST night, we begged the Government to give us an undertaking that they would refrain from using armed force until the Security Council had completed its deliberations or we had had another chance of discussing the matter here. I must say for myself that I had hoped, even after the Government's refusal to give us that undertaking, that wiser counsels might still have prevailed.

We are this afternoon still left to some extent in the dark about what Her Majesty's Government have done. I must ask the Prime Minister now to repair the omission from his speech and to tell us, "Yes" or "No," whether, on the expiry of his ultimatum, instructions were given to the British and French forces to occupy the Canal Zone.

Hon Members: Answer!

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman will be good enough to read the statement which the French and our Government issued at the conclusion of our meeting yesterday—(HON. MEMBERS: "Tell us."); I have not the words with me here—he will see perfectly

clearly that we made it apparent that if agreement was not reached we should consider ourselves free to take whatever action—

Hon. Members: Answer!

Mr. Gaitskell: Of course, we all know that that is true, but what the Prime Minister did not say in that statement was whether such action would be taken immediately upon the expiry of the ultimatum.

The Prime Minister: I now have the words here.

Mr. James Callaghan (Cardiff, South-East): But what has happened?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is a master at sitting and shouting. He seldom stands.

Mr. Callaghan: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I should like to ask him a question to which 50 million people in this country will want to know the answer. Are British troops engaged in Egypt at this moment? Have they landed, or where are they?

The Prime Minister: As I said yesterday—

Hon. Members: Answer!

Mr. Speaker: Order. The debate cannot really proceed profitably if hon. Members do not listen. If hon. Members think that they can demand an answer to a question by shouting, it is not true. It is not really right. I do counsel the House to treat these grave matters with decorum.

Mr. R. T. Paget (Northampton): On a point of order. How can we debate a war when the Government will not tell us whether it has started?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. and learned Member must do the best he can with the material at his disposal.

The Prime Minister: I am not in any way prepared to give the House any details—(HON. MEMBERS: "Resign!")—of the action which will follow the statement which I clearly made yesterday, that British and French forces will intervene in whatever strength may be necessary to secure compliance.

Mr. Gaitskell: This really is a fantastic situation. It is not only hon. Members on this side of the House, but it is the whole House and the whole country that are waiting for an answer to this question.

When we adjourned last night, all of us knew from what the Government said, or were certainly led to suppose, that the decision was going to be made in the course of last night because of the Government's refusal to give us the undertaking for which we asked. I ask the Prime Minister once again. I do not ask him to disclose troop movements. (HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!") No, I ask him simply to tell the House and the country, and, indeed, the whole world, whether the decision has been finally taken that British and French troops shall invade the Canal Zone of Egypt.

The Prime Minister: I made perfectly plain yesterday that if we did not receive an answer we would take military action at the expiry of the period. I am not going to give the House—(HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!")—and the right hon. Gentleman does not ask it, any kind of account of what that action, of what those plans with our Allies, might be; but I will tell him that we stand by what we said, and we shall carry it out.

Mr. Gaitskell: I am at a loss to understand why the Prime Minister should be so reluctant to give this essential item of information frankly and freely to the House of Commons. I can only assume, however, from what he has said that this decision has been taken, and that, therefore, British and French troops are at the moment on the move.

If that is not so the Prime Minister owes it to the House and to the country to say that it is not so, so that we can then conclude that there is still time to prevent fighting. He is evidently reluctant to do that, and I think my hon. and right hon. Friends must draw their own conclusion. All I can say is that in taking this decision the Government, in the view of Her Majesty's Opposition, have committed an act of disastrous folly whose tragic consequences we shall regret for years. (HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!") Yes, all of us will regret it, because it will have done irreparable harm to the prestige and reputation of our country.

Sir, this action involves not only the abandonment but a positive assault upon the three principles which have governed British foreign policy for, at any rate, the last ten years—solidarity with the Commonwealth, the Anglo-American Alliance and adherence to the Charter of the United Nations. I cannot but feel that some hon. Gentlemen opposite may have some concern for these consequences.

The Prime Minister said yesterday that he had been in close consultation with the Commonwealth. What were the results of this close consultation? I do not think that there was ever much doubt about what the attitude of the Government of India was likely to be,

and we now know. There has now been a special announcement, and in case hon. Members have not seen it, I will read it, stating that the Government of India considers Israel's aggression and the ultimatum of Britain and France a flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter and opposed to all the principles of the Bandoeng Conference.

The statement went on to say:

"The Government of India learn with profound concern of the Israeli aggression in Egyptian territory and the subsequent ultimatum delivered by the United Kingdom and France to the Egyptian Government which was to be followed by an Anglo-French invasion of Egyptian territory."

I do not think that there is much doubt that substantially the same attitude is likely to be adopted by Pakistan and Ceylon. But it is not only the Asian members of the Commonwealth who are concerned. There are the older Dominions. It is a remarkable and most distressing fact that Australia was unable to support us in the United Nations Security Council. On one resolution Australia abstained, on the other resolution she voted against us. The Australian Government have said that they are still not in sufficient command of the facts to be able to make a full statement. So it does not seem as though the close consultation has been so very close after all.

The Canadian Government, through the mouth of their Foreign Secretary, have expressed in the coldest possible language their regret at the situation which has arisen. They have also made it plain, through Mr. Pearson, that they were not consulted in advance before this ultimatum was sent. (HON. MEMBERS: "Shame.") The New Zealand Prime Minister has said, in substantially the same words as the Canadian Foreign Minister, that he regrets the situation which has arisen and that he was unable to say whether he supported the United Kingdom or not.

This is a tragic situation and I cannot but feel, I repeat, that hon. Members, some of whom I know to be sincerely concerned with the maintenance of this unique institution the British Commonwealth, must, too, in their hearts, feel the deepest anxiety at what has happened.

The second pillar of our foreign policy I described as the Anglo-American Alliance. Some of us on both sides of the House have worked very hard in the last ten years to strengthen and improve that alliance, and to us at least this is a terrible situation. Of course, it is true that from time to time there have been disagreements between America and Great Britain, but in the light of what has happened in the last 24 hours, I am bound to conclude, with the American Press, that a far greater strain is now being placed upon the Anglo-American Alliance than ever before.

What did we do? We found ourselves in the position of actually vetoing a United States resolution in the Security Council. Let me pause for a moment and examine that particular question. The Prime Minister told us just now that this resolution contained a condemnation of Israel as the aggressor. I have not been able to get a full copy of the resolution but, strangely enough, the reports in the Press do not refer to that part of the resolution at all. What they refer to is the part of the resolution which called upon Israel immediately to withdraw her armed forces between the established armistice lines, and urged all members to refrain from the use of force, or threat of force, in the area in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations.

If it is true, as the Prime Minister says, that the United States resolution contained a condemnation of Israel, then why did not the Government move a different resolution which excluded that part of the United States resolution from it but adopted the other part? Surely that would have been possible, and it

would have been extremely likely, I venture to say, in those circumstances that there would have been unanimous support for it.

But no such action was taken and we are bound to draw the conclusion, in the light of what Sir Pierson Dixon said, that the reason why in fact no such amended resolution was put forward by France and Britain was that, in the view of their representatives, it would serve no useful purpose at this stage, as their countries were about to take direct action to intervene and stop the fighting. I do not think that there is very much doubt that the Prime Minister's flimsy explanation of why we would not support the United States resolution is of no value whatever.

We are told that in this matter we have been in close communication with the United States. Those were the words which the Prime Minister used yesterday. And yet, even as late as yesterday afternoon, the State Department put out a notice to the effect that it had no prior intimation of what was going to be done. It is perfectly clear that no opportunity whatever for discussion with the United States was allowed or permitted.

I do not know how far the Prime Minister has had an opportunity of reading the dozens of messages, coming over the tape, which are showing the American reaction to his decision. He will be a little depressed, I am afraid, if he does. I will quote only one, which happens to have appeared in the *Evening News* and which, I think, summarises the position pretty well :

"The British and French decision to ignore President Eisenhower's eleventh hour appeal to call off their armed intervention in Egypt has shocked and angered Washington. It is regarded not only as a reckless move which has brought the world to the edge of major war, but a calculated snub to President Eisenhower himself. The fact that the news of the Anglo-French air drop came only hours after Britain had used its first United Nations veto to kill the American cease-fire proposal further outraged the Americans."

There have been reports in the Press of what Mr. Dulles has said and what he has described as a "piece of trickery" on the part of Britain and France. Again, I can only say that those of us who feel as I do, and as I thought some hon. Members opposite felt, that the Anglo-American Alliance was the basis for the maintenance of peace, ought to be a little disturbed by the reports which are now coming in.

Even worse is the effect on the third pillar of our foreign policy which has now been so wantonly attacked by the Government—our support for the United Nations. Indeed, it is our attack upon the principles and the letter of the Charter which is the reason that our action has been so coldly, indeed hostilely, received by both the Commonwealth and the United States.

In the first place, there is the veto of the United States' resolution. The Foreign Secretary has frequently made play with the fact that the United Nations is not much good because anything that is put forward is vetoed. Who was responsible for the veto this time? Only the British and French Governments, and if it had not been for their action there would have been a unanimous resolution of the Security Council. I can only describe this as a major act of sabotage against the United Nations.

Secondly, and even more serious, is our own intervention, our own armed intervention, in this matter. Any impartial observer must recognise that this is in clear breach of the Charter of the United Nations. Whatever doubt there may be about the degree of aggression in the Israeli invasion of Egypt, the extent of the provocation which she suffered, there can, unfortunately, be no doubt about the nature of the British and French aggression. It is clear beyond all peradventure.

We are now faced with this situation. The Egyptians have, of course, as they were bound to do, protested to the Security Council against the threat of force, and no doubt very shortly against the act of force. There will, therefore, be a further debate in the Security Council. No doubt the British and French will be able once again, unaided, to veto any decision of the Security Council. They may be very proud of that, but it will not impress the public opinion of the world. The next stage will be, without doubt, the reference of this whole matter to the Assembly of the United Nations.

I wonder whether the Government can give us any idea of how many other members of the Assembly of the United Nations the British and French Governments think they can enrol in their support. I very much doubt whether they will have a single supporter. It is only too obvious that if this matter is pressed, as it will be, in the Assembly of the United Nations, there will almost certainly be a two-thirds majority against us. It is a terribly serious situation. The whole power of the United Nations can be invoked to stop us. Is that what the Prime Minister really wants? Is that what hon. Members reckon is going to happen, and are they satisfied with it?

The Prime Minister's only defence in this deplorable episode is the story that it is necessary to go in under international law to protect British lives and property, and yet the very first bit of news we hear is not that the ships are to be protected but that they have been told to go round the Cape. If that is so, and if the ships have gone round the Cape—it is all announced in the papers this morning—what is it all about?

In any case, this is, frankly, the flimsiest possible excuse. Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary brushed aside some interjections from this side of the House about Hong Kong and Singapore. Perhaps he did not understand. Let me try to explain it to him. In Hong Kong there is a large Chinese population. In Hong Kong there were recently some serious riots. Have not the Chinese Government the right to intervene in Hong Kong to protect the lives of their nationals? Will the British Government say that they have no such right, and if they say that they have no such right, how can the British Government claim this right when it comes to intervening in Egypt?

In Singapore, about which Questions were asked today, there have been some riots. There is also a substantial Chinese population there. The Chinese Government could perfectly well intervene in Singapore and say that they were bound to do so and entitled to do so under international law to protect the lives and property of their own nationals. It has been set a wonderful example by the British Government. The terrible thing about what the Government have done is that it sets such an example to every potential aggressor in the world.

There can be no doubt at all about what the view of the world as a whole is on this decision of the British Government. They look upon it as a transparent excuse to seize the Canal to carry out the policy of force from which the Government were deterred by public opinion here and in the world in August and September; and, indeed, what the Prime Minister has just said about the 18-Power proposals only lends further colour to that view.

There is, indeed, an even worse story which is going around and to which I hope we shall have some reference from the Government. It is the story that the whole business was a matter of collusion between the British and French Governments and the Government of Israel. I am asking that the Government indicate the truth about this. I will read again a

despatch from Washington on this subject, from the same newspaper:

"There is no longer any doubt in the minds of American officials that Britain and France were in collusion with the Israelis from the beginning, and sanctioned the invasion of Egypt as an excuse to reoccupy the Canal Zone. Strenuous denials by British and French diplomats have failed to shake Washington's conviction that this was the case."

The despatch goes on:

"American opinion appears to be shared by virtually all delegations to the United Nations."

It is also believed—and we cannot blame people for believing this—that the 12-hour ultimatum was decided upon precisely to prevent public opinion this time from operating effectively to stop the Government.

What will come out of all this? First, there is the question of Israel. I cannot believe that it is in the true interests of Israel to be associated with the re-occupation of the Canal Zone. After all, in the long run the people of Israel, somehow or other, have got to live with the Arab States. They are entitled to ask for proper security and again and again from these benches we have asked for that for them. But, if they are looked upon as simply "stooges" of Britain and France, a kind of advance guard of Western imperialism, then any prospect of a peaceful settlement with the Arab States is gravely endangered. To the many friends I have in Israel I make the appeal that they at least should now accept the resolution of the United Nations Security Council, insofar as it called upon them to withdraw their forces within their own frontiers, and do that forthwith.

In the Canal Zone we may seize territory, we may defeat—and, no doubt, will quite easily defeat—the Egyptian forces. Then what do we do? Do we stay there indefinitely?—(An HON. MEMBER: "Temporarily.")—The hon. Member says that it is temporary. At what point do we leave the Canal Zone and what exactly are we to leave behind, except a legacy of bitterness and hatred greater than anything which has existed before? I must say, that the Prime Minister's own comment to-day, that before we left we should have to make sure that this did not happen again, leads one to suppose that he has no real intention of evacuating the Canal. If he has, it is up to him to say the circumstances in which he thinks that withdrawal will be possible, even from his own point of view, but I cannot advise my hon. Friends to place very much reliance upon that.

There are even graver possibilities. The Arab States, as, of course, we all knew they would, have indicated their solidarity with Egypt. I do not know what kind of action they may take about oil supplies. It is possible that the intervention of America against us may be of some assistance there, and thank goodness for it. Does the Foreign Secretary, or the Prime Minister—(HON. MEMBERS: "Oh.")—Well, I should have thought that hon. Members might see an advantage, where the Arab world is concerned, in having at least one of the three major powers in the West indicating that it does not participate in, or support, our action in the Canal Zone.

There there is, of course, the shadow of Russian intervention.

The Lord Privy Seal (Mr. R. A. Butler): Does the right hon. Gentleman want that?

Mr. Gaitskell: No, we do not hope for that, but we are bound to point out these dangers and, indeed, some of us supposed that the Lord Privy Seal would have had a little more courage than he appears to have shown and would have pointed them out inside the Cabinet. It is surely abundantly clear that the whole of this operation is simply another effort to dictate policy on the Canal Zone just at the point when a negotiated settlement appeared to be in sight—(HON.

MEMBERS: "Oh.")—Yes, on the basis of the Indian plan, on which the Foreign Secretary, I am glad to say, recently made a not unfavourable comment.

There are wider implications in this matter, for this reckless and foolish decision has been taken just at the moment when events in Poland and Hungary had given the free world its greatest hope and encouragement for ten years. In the battle of ideas, to which the Prime Minister referred in a debate not so long ago, we could legitimately feel that the ideas of democracy and liberty had won a sensational and exciting victory. Now this act of the Government has done untold damage to the democratic cause throughout the world and, above all, in those vital, uncommitted areas of the world on which, we are all agreed, special concentration should be made.

Hon. Members may cheer their own Prime Minister and they may jeer at us and laugh at our faith in the United Nations and may rejoice—I know that some of them do—to be back in the days of the nineteenth century; but all this, I ask them to believe me, will not stop the wave of hatred of Britain which they have stirred up—(HON. MEMBERS: "Shame.")—All this will not rebuild the shattered fabric of Anglo-American understanding; all this will not restore unity in the Commonwealth; all this will not make up for the deadly blow which the Government have dealt the United Nations.

We, as Her Majesty's Opposition, have had to consider what attitude we should adopt to the war on which the Government have so recklessly embarked; we understand, let me say, the gravity of the decision we have to take. We were not, I repeat—and I make no complaint, I merely state it—consulted by the Government in this matter. They did not seek our consent and they indicated last night that we were completely free to make our own decisions. I must now tell the Government and the country that we cannot support the action they have taken and that we shall feel bound by every constitutional means at our disposal to oppose it.

I emphasise the word "constitutional." We shall, of course, make no attempt to dissuade anybody from carrying out the orders of the Government, but we shall seek, through the influence of public opinion, to bring every pressure to bear upon the Government to withdraw from the impossible situation into which they have put us. As a first step to that end we shall move a Motion of censure in the strongest possible terms to-morrow.

We shall do that because we consider it our duty in the present crisis both to do everything in our power to save the country from the disasters which we believe will follow the course set by the Government and to proclaim to the world, loudly and clearly, that there are millions and millions of British people—as we believe the majority of our nation—who are deeply shocked by the aggressive policy of the Government and who still believe that it is both wise and right that we should stand by the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the United States Alliance. We shall do this because we believe that there are millions of people who think with us and who have lost all faith that such policies can any longer be pursued by the present advisers of Her Majesty.

[Mr. Gaitskell's speech was followed by loud and prolonged applause and by persistent cries for the resignation of the Prime Minister.]

Further copies of this leaflet may be obtained from:—

THE LABOUR PUBLICATIONS DEPT.,
TRANSPORT HOUSE, SMITH SQUARE,
LONDON, S.W.1.

PRICE £2 per 1,000, carriage paid.