

July 26, 1956

Speech by President Nasser, Alexandria, July 26 [1956] (Extract)

Citation:

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<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/291038>

Summary:

Eighty-seven years after the Suez Canal's completion in 1869 and less than two months after the last British troops had left it in June 1956, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) on July 26, 1956, nationalized the Suez Canal Company.

Nasser announced the step in the text printed here: a speech that would become a classic in the annals of twentieth-century decolonization worldwide. The English translation used here is included in a documentary publication printed in 1956 by the US State Department in Washington, DC, titled *The Suez Canal Problem*; it is an excerpt of the whole speech.

Nasser pronounced the speech in the Egyptian Mediterranean city of Alexandria in front of a crowd of tens of thousands, during which he also uttered the code word signaling his security forces to occupy the company's assets and offices in Egypt. Nasser's step took the world by surprise. The French government, the Suez Canal Company's Paris headquarters and its many French shareholders, and the British government that was the company's largest shareholder and that on July 23, following Washington's lead, had retracted a 1955 offer to back a World Bank loan to Egypt: all they were outraged. (France and Britain would fail to reverse nationalization in court; the outcome, in Britain, of the ensuing Franco-British-Israeli attack is the focus of another document dated 1956 in this collection). Diametrically opposed was the dominant reaction among Egyptians, other Arabs, and people in newly independent and still colonized countries. They were ecstatic. The reason was not so much that Nasser nationalized the canal in order to find a new way to finance a dam at Aswan, on the Nile, although that project was a linchpin of Egypt's modernization, a history analyzed in Guy Laron's *Origins of the Suez Crisis* (2013). The reason was more existential. Nasser's act turned himself, Egypt, and by proxy the entire non-white world from a passive object of history into an active subject. "Die of your fury," Nasser told the Americans, and by extension Europe's descending imperial powers. And by calling the shots—"Today, citizens, the Suez Canal Company has been nationalized. This order has been published in the Official Journal. It has

become a matter of fact”—he symbolically subjugated Britain and France, humiliating those once so powerful empires as only a non-white ex-colonial subject could. Even a cut as historic as India’s independence, in 1947, had not hurt Britain this much. Technically speaking Britain had co-initiated that final act of the British Raj, and it was a loss of a limb, however crucial. Nasser, by contrast, had stabbed the empire in its very heart—a story classically narrated in Keith Kyle’s *Suez* (1991).

Original Language:

English

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Original Scan