

# The Polls and Newspaper Appraisal of the Suez Crisis

BY JEAN OWEN

During the Suez crisis, the *New York Times* carried several reports from England and France which purported to show how the populations of those countries backed their governments in their stand on the Nasser problem. In comparing these reports with survey results, Miss Owen found that they described a French unanimity which did not exist and implied that the British government enjoyed a degree of support it did not have.

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**D**URING last year's Suez crisis the *New York Times* made several assessments of the support given the British and French foreign policy by their respective publics. Its reports, compared with the results of public opinion polls conducted in those countries during the same period and published late last year in the French review of public opinion *Sondages*, show graphically how imprecise and frequently misleading even the best such impressionistic reports are.

This is the picture of French public opinion as presented by the *Times*. On August 30 Harold Callender wrote from Paris: "For the civilized nations Nasser is no longer a possible partner," wrote Andre Francois-Poncet, the distinguished French diplomat. This is a common French view, which causes skepticism regarding the feasibility and the value of an agreement with President Nasser and leads this very pacific country to contemplate and to prepare military action." He went on to say that the view that "the elimination of President Nasser would be a short cut to saving France's threatened position across the Mediterranean . . . is held by millions of Frenchmen and by the Government."

By such a qualitative analysis it is of course impossible to tell whether this "common French view" represents a large or small majority, or merely a plurality.

On September 6 Mr. Callender got more specific and spoke of "the singular unanimity that appears to support the French Government's policy of using force if necessary." On November 3, after the Anglo-French intervention had taken place, a *Times* article from Paris was headlined "Parisians Feel Intervention Was Necessary to Stop 'Dictator' Nasser." In this article W. Granger Blair spoke of "the satisfaction of the French over coming to grips at last with the man they consider the root of much of their trouble in North Africa. . . . None of those spoken to were happy at the thought of war. But over and over again would come this statement: 'In principle we

are against war, against fighting, but. . . .’ It was the qualifying ‘but’ that carried the weight of their argument.”

On November 9, a few days after the cease fire, Harold Callender again referred to “the almost totalitarian unanimity that appeared to prevail when M. Mollet and Sir Anthony framed their Suez policy,” which “has given way to widespread recrimination now that the policy is deemed to have failed.”

The statements of the *Times*’ London correspondents were far less sweeping, and they differed from the Paris articles by referring to polls and other non-impressionistic means of assessing public opinion. On August 15 Kenneth Love wrote: “The Government view is that Egypt has already initiated the use of force and that Britain would be justified in using it as a last resort. Sir Anthony has sought to assess the popular attitude toward his policy through Conservative party organizations and analyses of letters received by London and provincial newspapers. He believes he enjoys majority support.” On August 31, Mr. Love referred to “a recent Gallup poll” which “indicates that a majority of the people support the Government’s handling of the Suez dispute.” He contrasts this with “the hardening opposition and alarm in Liberal and Laborite political and newspaper circles.”

The September 6 dispatch from Paris said that French unanimity of support for the Government policy of “using force if necessary is lacking in Britain.”

Leonard Ingalls’ November 3rd article in the *Times* was headed: Many Britons Believe Eden Acted Rightly—Others Fear A Major War.” He wrote: “If Sir Anthony Eden were to go into the streets of London today he would find considerable support for his Government’s Middle East policy.”

The November 16 article again referred to poll results, and politicians’ sensitivity to them. Drew Middleton wrote that the Labor party was toning down its opposition to Government policy because of “the realization, emphasized by public opinion polls and reports from the constituencies, that at the moment the opposition lacks the support of the industrial masses who hold the power of electoral decision in Britain.”

Thus was created the impression of a sharp contrast between the way the British and French publics reacted to their Governments’ handling of the Suez crisis. In France during most of the period covered there was apparent unanimity of support for the Government’s policy; no mention was made of dissenting views. It was as if the French people spoke with one voice, and then when it was all over and the venture failed they spoke again with one voice, this time in reproach.

In Britain the impression was given that there were decided differences of opinion on Suez, and that the Government kept a majority behind it but not a very strong one. One of the striking differences between London and Paris

dispatches was the frequent references in the London articles to poll material, "reports from the constituencies," and even attempts to analyze letters received by newspapers as ways of finding out how the public actually felt. This was apparently not a difference in focus between correspondents but between the politicians of the two countries.

Poll data showed no such striking contrasts. At the beginning of September, when the *Times* was talking of French unanimity, a nationwide poll gave these results:

France  
Aug. 28-Sept. 4, 1956

In view of the existing situation, the French and English Governments have made certain military preparations in the Mediterranean. Do you approve or disapprove of these measures?

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Approve    | 50%   |
| Disapprove | 29  |
| No opinion | 21  |
|            | <hr style="width: 50px; margin-left: auto; margin-right: 0;"/> 100% |

Support, yes; unanimity, no. At that time only 20 per cent of the French public polled advocated taking military action "if Egypt does not accept the decisions made by the majority of the powers participating in the London Conference." Forty-nine per cent thought political and economic action should be taken, 18 per cent thought nothing should be done, and 18 per cent expressed no opinion. (Percentages add to more than 100 because some people said military *and* economic and political action should be taken.)

At the beginning of November, after the intervention and before the cease-fire, French "unanimity" consisted of a seven per cent margin between supporters and critics of the Government's policy. These are the results of a poll taken among 520 Parisians November 2-3, 1956:

Do you approve or disapprove of the military action of France and England, in Egypt?

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Approve    | 44%   |
| Disapprove | 37  |
| No opinion | 19  |
|            | <hr style="width: 50px; margin-left: auto; margin-right: 0;"/> 100% |

At the beginning of August sentiment in Britain was stronger for military action than it was later in the month in France. Between August 4 and 6, 33 per cent of those interviewed said that "If Egypt doesn't accept the decisions of the Conference, we should take military action against her." Forty-

seven per cent were for economic and political action; 20 per cent had no opinion.

At the beginning of November the weight of sentiment in Britain was *against* the military intervention:

Great Britain  
November 1 and 2

Do you think we were right to undertake a military action in Egypt, or not?

|                |      |
|----------------|------|
| Were right     | 37%  |
| Were not right | 44   |
| No opinion     | 19   |
|                | 100% |

This sentiment later shifted, so that by November 22-25, when another poll was conducted, supporters of Government policy outnumbered critics by a considerable margin:

Great Britain  
November 22-25

Do you think we were right to undertake a military action in Egypt, or not?

|                |      |
|----------------|------|
| Were right     | 49%  |
| Were not right | 36   |
| No opinion     | 15   |
|                | 100% |

The *Times'* newspaper reports of British and French public opinion during the Suez crisis were quite inadequate. They described a French unanimity which did not exist. They implied the British government enjoyed a degree of support which it did not have. At the time military action was first contemplated, neither public supported the idea. At the time of the actual intervention, the polls showed a rather close balance between approval and disapproval of the military action, in both countries, although in France the balance was in favor, in Britain, against. Of course, these polls are not strictly comparable since the French poll of November 2-3 was of Parisians only.

Two main reasons suggest themselves to explain the disparity between press and poll reports. The first is the obvious one of the difference in technique. Impressionistic journalistic methods cannot hope to attain the precision of a public opinion poll. Related to this is the second possibility that the sources most readily available to the press have a bias in a definite direction, which is pro-Government. Press contact with Government circles is no doubt much more frequent than contact with say, members of the white collar and laboring classes. However much correspondents may talk of "the man on the

street," it seems evident that in this case at least the *Times* correspondents were much more influenced by their contact with pro-Government opinion, and also possibly by their own pro-Government or conservative views.

The contrast between Paris and London reports also stimulates speculation. One cannot help noticing the interest of British politicians in actual public opinion throughout the country and how closely they geared their actions to public sentiment. There is no evidence of this in the Paris dispatches. It is doubtful that this is just a difference in reporting. It is more probable that this reflects the difference in the political situation and general intellectual temper of the two countries. In France conservative governments (at least in foreign policy) have held power for some time despite the existence of a large Communist minority. Although this minority has no influence on Government policy, its opinions are reflected in the polls. For example, at the end of August a majority of French factory workers opposed the military preparations that were being made, yet there was no mention of this sentiment in the *Times*. One gets the feeling that differing French views are separated by a gulf so deep there can be no compromise but only the triumph of one view or another. In this situation the minority view was effectively silenced. In Britain a pluralistic situation is accepted; opponents are at least on speaking terms and a more truly democratic governmental process seems to exist.

These contrasts between polls and newspaper reports raise one more question. What the newspapers are reporting on may be "effective" public opinion. It seems to this writer that their reports would be more useful if they were able to define more precisely just what sort of "public opinion" they were talking about.