

## **When the Suez Canal was born, hoping to unite two Civilizations**

### ***PARTING THE DESERT: THE CREATION OF THE SUEZ CANAL***

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If, as Zachary Karabell observes in "Parting the Desert," the Suez Canal is no longer the power in the world that it once was, the opening phase of the war in Iraq briefly rescued it from the shadows. Circled on maps and prodded by the marker pens of many a retired general, the Canal was, for a moment at least, back at the center of things. As we read accounts of how the waterway would serve as an emergency shortcut for the military hardware that had been refused passage through Turkey, we were given a reminder of the Canal's reign as an emblem of Progress.

The creation of Ferdinand de Lesseps — the French visionary who was later brought low by the first, illfated attempt to drive a channel through Panama — the Canal was always destined to be more than a triumph of engineering. The cultural critic Edward Said is not always to be trusted on matters geopolitical, but it is hard to quarrel with his view of Suez as the ultimate symbol of the union of two civilizations: "De Lesseps and his canal finally destroyed the Orient's distance, its cloistered intimacy AWAY from the West, its perdurable exoticism," wrote Mr. Said in his controversial book "Orientalism." ". . . After De Lesseps no one could speak of the Orient as belonging to another world, strictly speaking. There was only 'our' world, 'one' world bound together because the Suez Canal had frustrated those provincials who still believed in the difference between worlds."

Although the project, completed in 1869, was a product of French ambition and ingenuity, it soon became a symbol of British prestige. In 1875, desperate to find money to pay Egypt's enormous debts, the country's ruler, the khedive Ismail, sold the nation's shares in the operating company. Although the British had always been hostile to the building of the Canal (Lord Palmerston had long ago dismissed the initial idea as a "bubble scheme" for gullible capitalists) Benjamin Disraeli prevailed on Queen Victoria to buy out Ismail as a means of tweaking the noses of both the French and the Germans. It was a momentous step. From that moment, the word "Suez" would have a special resonance in British, evoking first imperial grandeur and what we now like to call "imperial overstretch." While, for Americans, the Alamo represents heroic failure and endurance, "Suez" epitomized the moment, during the Anglo-French-Israeli campaign of 1956, when Britain's ruling class realized, once and for all, that it had lost an empire.

For the Egyptian people, the crisis seemed to foreshadow a new era of self-assertion and economic independence. The hopes proved illusory. Gamal Abdel Nasser's brand of nationalism proved no more of a success than Ismail's. The Arab world has been living with the consequences ever since.

Mr. Karabell — whose most recent book was an account of Harry Truman's 1948 election victory — devotes most of his attention to the negotiations and politicking involved in making the French dream a reality. Although his quiet, undemonstrative prose hardly does justice to the epic scale of the enterprise, Mr. Karabell deftly sketches in the cultural and economic background.

Lesseps, as Karabell prefers to call him, emerges as an iron idealist confronted by skepticism and resistance at almost every turn. Although a network of canals had linked the Mediterranean and the Red Sea in antiquity, the notion of creating a direct channel for modern shipping seemed, to many, little more than a fantasy. (Napoleon had commissioned a survey after leading his invasion, but a faulty topographical calculation had led his experts to conclude that the project was doomed.)

A diplomat by training, Lesseps was not the sole creator of the new scheme, but his single-minded determination — and his ability to charm critics, potentates and investors alike — proved decisive in the end. (The fact that his cousin was Louis Napoleon's wife, the Empress Eugenie was obviously no handicap either.) By the time that Europe's nobility assembled for the spectacular opening ceremony, the Canal had taken on a mythic quality. It was, in a sense, the Apollo project of its day.

Still, Mr. Karabell cannot help striking a melancholy note at the close. Lesseps himself lived to a ripe old age, but died in disgrace in 1894 in the aftermath of the Panama debacle. The huge number of ships that have passed through the Canal's waters are a testament to his vision, but today the traffic is declining. Modern oil tankers are often, it seems, too large for the channel, and the cost of canal dues means there is not much more of a burden in taking the longer route around the Cape of Good Hope. Ismail was deposed in 1879, having failed in his goal of transforming Egypt into a modern, selfconfident nation. One small anecdote conveys the aura of hopes unfulfilled. Just before the Canal's opening, a French sculptor tried to persuade Lesseps to allow him to build a lighthouse in the form of an immense robed statue guarding the northern entrance of the Canal at Port Said. Conceived as a modern counterpart to the Colossus of Rhodes, the structure would have been known as "Egypt Bringing Light To Asia". Lesseps and Ismail, however, turned down the idea on the grounds of cost.

The sculptor, Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi, was obliged to go elsewhere. Nearly two decades later he created "Liberty Enlightening the World" in New York harbor. A landmark was born. The future lay in the West rather than the East.

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