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BY MELVIN GOODMAN

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## ***Bombast in the Black Sea: the Latest British Provocation***



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Post-World War II British foreign policy has included a number of provocative steps that have weakened British standing; created complications in the international arena; and raised the possibility of serious confrontation. In the 1950s, the British were the ringleaders in the last gasp of European colonialism: a British-French-Israeli conspiracy to topple Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and occupy the Suez Canal. In the 1980s, the British ended up in a war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands, projecting power over thousands of miles to save British sheepherders. In the 1990s, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher goaded President George H.W. Bush to pursue war in Iraq ("don't go

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wobbly on me, George) at a time when Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was trying to arrange for an Iraqi troop withdrawal from Kuwait to prevent war. In the 2000s, Prime Minister Tony Blair was the only West European leader to enthusiastically support the U.S. invasion of Iraq, supplementing the lies and chicanery of the Bush administration to justify war. This month, the British send a destroyer into the Black Sea to challenge the Russian occupation of Crimea, which complicates Western relations with Russia at a time when Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin are moving awkwardly to end the free fall in their bilateral relations and to institutionalize a diplomatic dialogue on central issues such as arms control and cybersecurity.

#### *The Suez Canal and the Brink of War*

Less than two weeks before the U.S. presidential election in 1956, Israel invaded Egypt in order to set the stage for the British-French invasion. With Western preoccupation in the Middle East, the Soviet Union threatened to intervene on behalf of the Arabs and stepped up the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's opposition to the invasion allowed the United Nations to negotiate a cease-fire in Egypt. In the aftermath of the Suez crisis, the United States effectively replaced Britain as the guarantor of stability in the Middle East, creating a commitment that remains the underlying premise of U.S. policy in the region. The Middle East has become America's briar patch, and the discontinuity in the region in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq points to the need for reassessing our commitment.

Neither the White House nor the Central Intelligence Agency had any notion of the British conspiracy regarding Suez despite the exchange of sensitive information that was typically part of the British-American intelligence committee. Eisenhower was furious with London, telling his aides that "Those who began this operation should be left to work out their own oil problems—to boil in their own oil." The British-French decision was particularly counterproductive in view of their dependence on Middle Eastern oil to manage their economies. Israel was similarly short-sighted because its role in the invasion told the Arab states that Israel was simply an outpost of European colonialism. Less than a month later, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden was forced to resign, continuing to falsely claim that "there was not foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt."

#### *The Wasteful War over the Falklands*

There are few better examples of the failure of diplomacy than the unnecessary war over the Falklands. British governments had been trying to arrange a diplomatic compromise for two decades, but each time bowed to public pressure that opposed taking down the

Union Jack on the Falklands. London had no contingency plans for the operation, and secretly relied on a great deal of military assistance from the United States, including air-to-air and anti-ship missiles; amphibious assault ships; and fuel and tanker aircraft. U.S. intelligence from the CIA was essential as was allowing Britain to use our secure communications satellites. Nearly 1,000 lives were lost in a war that effective diplomacy could have prevented.

There were lessons from the Falklands that could be applied to the many chicken hawks who believe that we can challenge China in the South China Sea or protect Taiwan. The Falklands was a minor war, but a large air-naval combat operation. It demonstrated the vulnerability of combat ships (for example, today's U.S. Pacific Fleet) to anti-ship missiles (today's China's arsenal) as well as the difficult logistic challenges over distant power projection. An Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges said it best: the war in the Falklands resembled a "fight between two bald men over a comb." A Sino-American confrontation in East Asia would be a threat to the entire international community.

#### *British Bombast in the Black Sea*

There is a Russian folk saying: "don't try to skin the Russian bear before it is dead." This is exactly what Britain did when it sent the destroyer H.M.S. Defender into the Black Sea to challenge the Russian incorporation of Crimea. Instead of military confrontation, the West should simply fail to recognize the incorporation, which is what NATO did throughout the Cold War vis-a-vis the incorporation of the Baltics into the Soviet Union. The mainstream media believe that Russia's "red line" regarding Ukraine is hollow, but that assumption should not be pressed too far. Moscow legitimately viewed the actions of the destroyer as a provocation, and sent at least 20 warplanes to buzz the ship in addition to dispatching a Coast Guard vessel to draw alongside. This feckless British gesture did nothing to alleviate Ukraine's difficult position between Russia and the West.

Several days later, 32 nations, including the United States and Ukraine, conducted the Sea Breeze military exercise, a land, sea, and air training operation in the Black Sea. U.S. manipulation of the political ferment in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 served to worsen the geopolitical situation in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. Britain's post-Brexit maneuvering to establish its credibility is more likely to create greater tensions as Putin presumably will demonstrate that his "red line" is not hollow. Putin understands that the United States will not acknowledge Russian sovereignty over Crimea, but he won't ignore deliberate and premeditated provocations.

If you add Brexit and the excessive military force in Northern Ireland over the years to the list of British self-inflicted wounds since the end of the Second World War, an incredible picture of failure and futility takes shape. These British steps were calculated to protect its international reputation even when it couldn't protect its colonial possessions. The United States has pursued a false illusion of political and military predominance in similar fashion with comparable setbacks in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Southwest Asia. Both Britain and the United States are guilty of "historic myopia," and have paid an exorbitant price in terms of blood and treasure.

*Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. A former CIA analyst, Goodman is the author of [Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA](#) and [National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism](#), and [A Whistleblower at the CIA](#). His most recent book is "American Carnage: The Wars of Donald Trump" (Opus Publishing), and he is the author of the forthcoming "The Dangerous National Security State" (2020)." Goodman is the national security columnist for [counterpunch.org](http://counterpunch.org).*

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