

The Suez and Panama Canals and the Age of Empire (Document-based Essay)

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Historical Context: “Whosoever commands the sea commands trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.” Sir Walter Raleigh (c.1610).

The Suez Canal, which opened in November, 1869, and the Panama Canal, built between 1904 and 1914 by the United States, were prodigious technological, financial and logistical achievements during the “Age of Empire” that preceded World War I. They supported the expansion of global trade by making sea routes much shorter. As air travel did in the second half of the twentieth century and computerization is doing today, they made the world a much smaller place. Construction of the canals also supported European and United States economic, political and military domination of other regions of the world.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 transformed world shipping. Before the canal was built, ships traveling between Europe and Asia had to sail around the southern tip of Africa, a voyage of approximately

10,000 miles. The Suez Canal meant that the trip from London, England to Bombay, India was shortened by more than 4,000 miles. The canal saved nearly two months time on a one-way trip. In the book, *Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal*, author Zachary Karabell calls the construction of the Suez Canal the greatest engineering feat of the nineteenth century. It also spurred nationalist ambitions. Egyptians hoped the canal would lead to a national renaissance and renewed power in the eastern Mediterranean. The French believed the canal would advance their status as the standard-bearers of Western civilization. British merchants and businessmen invested in the canal with an eye on global economic domination. The canal fell under British control by 1875.

The idea of a canal was originally considered in ancient Egypt around the 13th century BC. In the modern era, Napoleon Bonaparte introduced the idea of building a waterway connecting the Mediterranean and Red Seas during the French occupation of Egypt in the late eighteenth century. In 1854, Muhammad Said became the ruler of Egypt and granted Ferdinand de Lesseps, a French diplomat, the right to build a hundred-mile-long canal across the isthmus of Suez. Design, financial arrangements and construction took fifteen years. Nearly 100 million cubic yards of sand and sediment had to be removed. The canal channel was originally 20 feet deep, 72 feet wide at the bottom and 190 feet wide at the surface. Initially, the trip through the canal by steamship took about 40 hours. When the Suez Canal was completed, it was a symbol of progress in the industrial world and a sign that East and West could coexist and cooperate. The Suez Canal finally reverted to Egyptian control in 1956.

Construction of a canal across the Isthmus of Panama was considered by Spanish conquistadors as early as the 1520s. A survey was ordered and a working plan for a canal was drawn up in 1529. However, it was not until 1819 that the Spanish government authorized the construction of a canal and created a company to build it. These plans were interrupted by revolutionary movements in Latin America. Surveys made between 1850 and 1875 showed two



French Postcard of de Lesseps at Suez Canal Opening. Source: <http://www.allianceportsaid.com>

possible routes, one across Panama and another across Nicaragua. In 1876 an international company was organized that obtained permission from the Colombian government to construct a canal on the Panama route. When this company failed, Ferdinand de Lesseps, the builder of the Suez Canal, and a French company took over the project.

When the U.S. gained a global empire with territory in the Caribbean and the Pacific following the 1898 Spanish-American War, it envisioned a canal to tie this empire together. The canal would dramatically reduce the time and mileage needed for travel between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, saving 18,000 miles on a trip from New York to San Francisco.

In 1903, the United States instigated a rebellion in the Panama territory of Colombia to secure permission to build the canal. The Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty granted the United States a perpetual lease on a 10-mile strip of Panama and permission to complete construction along the de Lesseps route. The Panama Canal is approximately 51 miles long and cost \$400 million to build, which is the equivalent of approximately \$8 billion today. Administration of the Panama Canal was turned over to local authorities in 1999 after 96 years of U.S. control.

Construction of the Panama Canal under the direction of U.S. army engineer Colonel George Goethals involved battles against disease, such as malaria and yellow fever, as well as the development of new engineering techniques, designing a lock system, and mobilization of a work force of about 25,000 people from across the Caribbean. Along the route of the canal there are a series of three sets of locks which lift ships over the central mountains and equalize the water levels of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.



Miraflores lock on the Panama Canal. NYT

Theme Question: Should construction of the Suez and Panama canals best be viewed as technological and economic achievements or as imperialist adventures by France, Great Britain and the United States?

Task: Carefully read the document-based question and the historical context. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the theme question if you had no documents to examine?

Read each document carefully, and answer the questions that follow.

Formulate a thesis that directly answers the theme question.

Write a well-organized essay supporting your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and your general knowledge about the topic.

1. “A Big Shortcut. World Ditch: The Making of the Suez Canal.” *The New York Times*, November 22, 1964.

“In order to understand the historical importance of the Suez Canal, one must look at a map of the world. . . One can see at once that the opening of a passage between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea was a matter of immense strategic and economic importance, for it created an alternate route from Europe to the East, both for potential traders and for warriors. The discovery of the Cape of Good Hope route had led to a shift of commercial supremacy in the Eastern trade from Mediterranean to Atlantic ports. Thus it is not surprising that the idea of digging a canal through the 100-mile strip of desert which separated the Mediterranean from the Red Sea held a special appeal. . .”

Questions:

Why is the Suez Canal strategically and

2. World Map

economically important to Europe?
 How would the Suez Canal promote the growth of European imperialism?



Question: Locate the Suez and Panama Canals on this world map. Why are these canals of strategic and economic importance?

3. British Cotton Cloth Exports to India, 1814-1835

| Year | Export of plain British cotton | Export of dyed British cotton | Total British cloth export to India |
|------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1814 | 213,408 | 604,800 | 818,200 |
| 1821 | 9,423,352 | 9,715,374 | 19,138,726 |
| 1828 | 30,411,857 | 12,410,220 | 42,822,077 |
| 1835 | 39,459,172 | 12,318,105 | 51,777,277 |

Questions:

1. What is happening to British cotton cloth exports to India from 1814-1835?
2. Why would these statistics be an argument in favor of construction of the Suez Canal?

4. British Control over Egypt and the Suez Canal. Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa>

Earl of Cromer, First British Viceroy of Egypt (1908). “Egypt may now almost be said to form part of Europe. It is on the high road to the Far East. It can never cease to be an object of interest to all the powers of Europe, and especially to England.”

Ham Mukasa, official secretary to the Katikiro of Buganda (1902). “[It] is a marvelous thing and shows how the Europeans can always do whatever they set about doing. It is as long as from Mengo to Wakoli’s, eighty-seven miles, and is all cut through the sand, and is so deep that it will take vessels seven stories high. It is not wide - one could throw a stone or an orange across from side to side; and when two ships meet they tie up to posts on the bank to let the other pass.”

Questions:

1. Why does the British viceroy believe Great Britain’s actions in Egypt are justified?
2. What is the attitude of Ham Mukasa toward the Suez Canal and European actions in Africa?

5. Shipping on the Suez Canal, 1870-1895

Source: Daniel Headerick (1981). *The Tools of Empire*. Oxford: NY.

| Year | Ships | Tons | Year | Ships | Tons |
|------|-------|-----------|------|-------|-----------|
| 1870 | 486 | 436,609 | 1885 | 3,624 | 6,335,753 |
| 1875 | 1,494 | 2,009,984 | 1890 | 3,389 | 6,890,094 |
| 1880 | 2,026 | 3,037,422 | 1895 | 3,434 | 8,448,383 |

Questions:

1. What is the general trend in shipping on the Suez Canal between 1870 and 1895?
2. The number of ships leveled off while tonnage increased. How would explain this phenomenon?

6. President Gamel Nasser of the United Arab Republic (Egypt), *The New York Times*, September 15, 1956.

“[Egypt] stands solidly and staunchly to preserve her dignity against imperialistic schemes of a number of nations who have uncovered their desires for domination and supremacy. . . . Egypt nationalized the Egyptian Suez Canal company. When Egypt granted the concession to de Lesseps it was stated in the concession between the Egyptian Government and the Egyptian company that the company of the Suez Canal is an Egyptian company subject to Egyptian authority. Egypt nationalized this Egyptian company and declared freedom of navigation will be preserved. But the imperialists became angry. Britain and France said Egypt grabbed the Suez Canal as if it were part of France or Britain. The British Foreign Secretary forgot that only two years ago he signed an agreement stating the Suez Canal is an integral part of Egypt. Egypt declared she was ready to negotiate. But as soon as negotiations began, threats and intimidations started. . . . [The Arab world] believe[s] in international law. But we will never submit. We shall show the world how a small country can stand in the face of great powers threatening with armed might. Egypt might be a small power but she is great inasmuch as she has faith in her power and convictions. I feel quite certain every Egyptian shares the same convictions as I do and believes in everything I am stressing now. We shall defend our freedom and independence to the last drop of our blood. This is the staunch feeling of every Egyptian. The whole Arab nation will stand by us in our common fight against aggression and domination. Free peoples, too, people who are really free will stand by us and support us against the forces of tyranny. . . .”

Questions:

1. Why does Egyptian President Gamel Nasser claim Egyptian sovereignty over the Suez Canal?
2. In your opinion, why is Egyptian President Nasser giving this speech?
3. Do you agree with Egyptian President Nasser? Explain.

7. The United States role in the 1903 Panamanian Revolution.

A. Telegram from United States Secretary of State Hay, June 9, 1903. The Colombian Government apparently does not appreciate the gravity of the situation. The canal negotiations were initiated by Colombia, and were energetically pressed upon this Government for several years. The propositions presented by Colombia, with slight modifications, were finally accepted by us. In virtue of this agreement our Congress reversed its previous judgment (favoring Nicaragua) and decided upon the Panama route. If Colombia should now reject the treaty or

unduly delay its ratification, the friendly understanding between the two countries would be so seriously compromised that action might be taken by the Congress next winter which every friend of Colombia would regret.

B. Convention between the US And Panama (November 18, 1903). “The United States of America and the Republic of Panama being desirous to insure the construction of a ship canal across the Isthmus of Panama to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and the Congress of the United States of America having passed an act approved June 28, 1902, in furtherance of that object, by which the President of the United States is authorized to acquire within a reasonable time the control of the necessary territory of the Republic of Colombia, and the sovereignty of such territory being actually vested in the Republic of Panama”

C. The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, 1904. “It is not true that the United States feels any land hunger or entertains any projects as regards the other nations of the Western Hemisphere save such as are for their welfare. All that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. . . We would interfere with [Latin America] only in the last resort, and then only if it became evident that their inability or unwillingness to do justice at home and abroad had violated the rights of the United States or had invited foreign aggression to the detriment of the entire body of American nations.”

Questions:

1. Where does the United States want to build a canal?
2. In your opinion, why did Secretary of State Hay send this telegram?
3. What was the purpose of the 1903 agreement between the United States and Panama?
4. How did the United States benefit by supporting an independent Panama?
5. How did the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine define the U.S. relationship with Latin America?
6. In your opinions, were U.S. actions in Panama justified or an unfair imperialist action? Explain.

8. Nicaraguan Poet Rubén Darío warns Theodore Roosevelt (1904)

You are the United States, you are the future invader
of the native America that has Indian blood,
that still prays to Jesus Christ and still speaks Spanish.
You think that life is fire, that progress is eruption,
that wherever you shoot you hit the future. No.
The United States is potent and great.
When you shake there is a deep tremble
that passes through the enormous vertebrae of the Andes.

Be careful. Viva Spanish America!
There are a thousand cubs loosed from the Spanish
lion.
Roosevelt, one would have to be, through God himself,
the fearful Rifleman and strong Hunter,
to manage to grab us in your iron claws.
And, although you count on everything, you lack one
thing: God!

Questions:

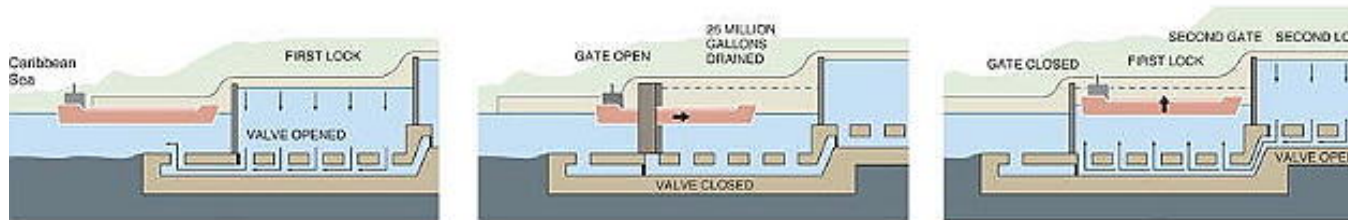
1. How does Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío view the United States role in Latin America?
2. In your opinion, why does Darío take this position?

9. Problems in the Construction of the Panama Canal

A. "Fear of Disease Delaying Canal" (*Chicago Daily News*, November, 1920).

"One of the most important things which has been delaying an agreement on the Panama Canal is the necessity of securing to the United States extraordinary police powers to enforce sanitary regulations. The early experiences of the French on the isthmus were terrible on the extreme, and any administration here in Washington which should permit an epidemic of cholera, yellow fever, dysentery, or other serious fatal attack would invite political defeat. The problem of sanitation for the Panama Canal becomes more serious every time it is examined. The Washington government has been forced to take the position that, during the time of active building operations, when thousands of men will be congregated in close quarters, and when the newly turned, damp soil will invite malarial fevers in every form, it will be absolutely necessary for the United States to have actual police control of a strip of territory at least three miles wide on each side of the canal."

B. Bringing Ships over a Mountain: How a Canal Lock Works



The water level in the first lock drops to sea level. The ship enters and the gate is closed. A valve in the next lock is opened raising the water level in the first lock and lowering the water level in the second lock. When the water levels are equal, the ship enters the second lock.

Questions:

1. What diseases interfered with construction of the Panama Canal?
2. What solution was proposed to combat these diseases?
3. What solution was proposed for bringing ships over mountains that separated the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans?

10. Turning over the canal to Panama

"Washington and Panama reported in Agreement on Elements of a Treaty," *The New York Times*, June 2, 1977, 6.

"United States and Panamanian negotiators have drafted substantial portions of a general Panama Canal treaty and have prepared a second treaty designed to guarantee the canal's neutrality. . . . Sources said the draft treaty sets Dec. 31, 1999, as the date when Panama would take complete control of the zone and when the United States military bases would be closed."

"To Cheers, Panama Takes Over Canal," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2000, 16. "As the United States turned over the Panama Canal to Panama today, many Panamanians said the occasion felt like Independence Day. 'The canal is ours,' President Mireya Morocoso shouted to cheering thousands in front of the old Canal Commission building. . . . 'I tell the men, women and children of my country that there will be no more fences, no more signs blocking our entrance,' Mrs. Morocoso said as she spoke under a heavy rain. 'This territory is ours again. . . .' In an attempt to avoid anti-American demonstrations, American military officials on Thursday quietly lowered the Stars and Stripes at the canal headquarters, where it had waved since 1914, when the canal was inaugurated. . . . The zone's 147,000 square miles, with a major complement of American military and civilian installations, cut across Panama and was often seen as a colonial vestige. 'It divided Panama into two separate territories and gave the United States a level of

sovereignty reminiscent of a colonial era more appropriate to the 19th century than to the 20th,' Mr. Caldera [head of the American delegation] said."

Questions

1. When was the new canal treaty negotiated and when did it go into affect?
2. How did Panamanians respond to the transfer of authority over the canal from the United States?
3. The head of the American delegation said that in Panama, the United States had a "a level of sovereignty reminiscent of a colonial era more appropriate to the 19th century than to the 20th." Do you agree with this statement? Explain.