

Interview with Jean François-Poncet: the international background to the Val Duchesse negotiations (Paris, 16 March 2007)

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[Jean François-Poncet] Christian Pineau was Minister for Foreign Affairs. He too was a supporter of the European idea, but I think I recall that, during the negotiations, he did not come to Brussels once. He left it up to his Junior Minister, Maurice Faure, to conduct the negotiations. I should add, however, that, like Guy Mollet, he had other things on his mind.

We must not forget that the war in Algeria was at its height, and an event took place in the middle of the negotiations: this was the operation that France and Britain embarked on in order to regain control over the Suez Canal by military means. This was an operation that involved dropping paratroops on the canal, which they very swiftly took over, and it was destined to bring in the Israelis. The intention was probably to topple Nasser from power. The immediate objective was of course the Suez Canal; oil supplies to Europe were of strategic importance; then there was another indirect motive, namely, that France was hoping that were Nasser, the spokesman for Arab nationalism at the time, to disappear from the scene, this would discourage the Algerian independence movement and thereby facilitate negotiations for a peace agreement in Algeria. But things panned out otherwise. Why was this so? It was because the Soviets on the one hand — but more so the Americans: Eisenhower had not been warned, was furious, hurt and furious, and he put pressure on Britain that led Britain to halt the operation; in particular, what made Britain draw back was that the American treasury threatened no longer to support the pound sterling. If this threat had been carried out, the pound would have collapsed, so the British gave up.

It is interesting to see the contradictory consequences for Britain and France of this episode. Britain drew the conclusion that henceforth they had to follow directly in the wake of the United States, from which it has never deviated since — right up to the Iraq affair. France drew the conclusion that if an existence facing the United States and the USSR was wanted, Europe must be unified and neither France, nor Britain, nor Germany had sufficient power on their own; together, however, they would be capable of making their voices heard and ensuring that they were listened to.