

British Naval Supremacy and Anglo-American Antagonisms, 1914–1930

DONALD J. LISIO



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During World War I, British naval supremacy enabled Great Britain to impose economic blockades and interdiction of American neutral shipping. The United States responded by starting to build "a navy second to none," one so powerful that Great Britain could not again successfully challenge America's vital economic interests. This book reveals that when the United States offered to substitute naval equality for its emerging naval supremacy, the British, nonetheless, used the resulting two major international arms-control conferences of the 1920s to ensure its continued naval dominance.

DONALD J. LISIO is the Henrietta Arnold Professor Emeritus of History at Coe College. His previous publications include *The President and Protest: Hoover, Conspiracy, and the Bonus Riot* (1974) and *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily Whites: a Study of Southern Strategies* (1994). He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Professor Lisio now lives in San Diego, California.

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Abbreviations

AC	Austen Chamberlain Papers, University of Birmingham Library, Birmingham, England
ADD MSS	Additional Manuscripts Collection, Lord Robert Cecil Papers, British Library, London, England
ADM	Admiralty Papers, Public Record Office, Kew, Surrey, England
BED	British Empire Delegation
BEDM	British Empire Delegation <i>Minutes</i> , CAB 27/350, Public Record Office
BOR	Sen. William E. Borah Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division, Washington, DC
BGMN/2	Unpublished Biography of William Bridgeman, Bridgeman Papers, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, England
BP	Earl David Beatty Papers, National Maritime Museum Greenwich, England
CAB	British Cabinet Papers, Public Record Office
CAB, NPC	Cabinet, Naval Program Committee Papers, Public Record Office
CCP	Calvin Coolidge Papers, Microfilm Series I, MF 73/1289, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division
CHAR	Winston S. Churchill Papers, Chartwell Collection, Churchill College, Cambridge University, Cambridge, England
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence Papers, Public Record Office
CP	William R. Castle Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library West Branch, Iowa
DBFP	<i>Documents on British Foreign-Policy, 1919–1939</i> , Series Ia, III: <i>European and Naval Questions, 1927</i> , ed. W.L. Medicott, et al. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1970)
EC	Executive Committee, Chief Delegates, 1927 Geneva Naval Conference

FLNA	Further Limitation of Naval Armaments Sub-Committee Papers, Public Record Office
FRUS	<i>Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1926 – 1927</i> , Government Printing Office, 1927
GB	General Board, United States Navy
GBDCS	General Board Disarmament Conference Series, Record Group 80, National Archives, Washington, DC
GBM	General Board <i>Minutes</i> , Naval Historical Center, Washington Naval Yard, Washington, DC
GBR	General Board Report
GBS	General Board Study
GBUSN	General Board, Records of the Department of the Navy, National Archives, Washington, DC
GD	Hugh Gibson Diary, Hugh Gibson Papers, Hoover Institution Stanford University, Palo Alto, California
GP	Hugh Gibson Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California
JP	Hilary P. Jones Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division, Washington, DC
KF	Frank B. Kellogg File, Gibson Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California
KP	Frank B. Kellogg Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota
LC	Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC
LCP	Lord Robert Cecil Papers, British Library, London, England
LCR	Lord Robert Cecil Resignation Papers, Public Record Office
MC	Microfilm Reel Number
MCDS	Memorandum of Conversation File, Department of State, Record Group 43, National Archives
MH	Sir Maurice Hankey Papers, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge University, Cambridge, England
NA	National Archives, Washington, DC
NCP	Neville Chamberlain Papers, University of Birmingham Library, Birmingham, England
NI	Records of the Office of Naval Intelligence, Record Group 39, National Archives
N.I.D.	Naval Intelligence Division, Admiralty Papers, Public Record Office
NO	Records of the Bureau of Ordnance, Record Group 74, National Archives
NWC	Naval Historical Collection, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island
PCF	Preparatory Commission File, Hilary P. Jones Papers, Library of Congress
P.D.	Plans Division, Admiralty Papers, Public Record Office
PP, HHPL	Presidential Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa
PRO	Public Record Office, Kew, Surrey, England

Records	Japanese Foreign Ministry, <i>Documents on Japanese Foreign Policy, Records of the Conference for the Limitation of Naval Armament held at Geneva from June 20 to August 4, 1927</i> (Nihon Gaike Junebo Kaigun Gumbi Seigen Kaigi, 1982)
RG	Record Group, National Archives
ROSKCC	Stephen Roskill Papers, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge University, Cambridge, England
SBP	Stanley Baldwin Papers, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, England
SD	Diary of Adm. Frank H. Schofield, General Board Disarmament Conference Series VI.3, Records Group 80, National Archives
SF	William B. Shearer File, Presidential Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library
SLGF	Sir Shane Leslie-Godfrey Faussett Papers, Churchill College Archives
SMP, GB	Senior Member Present, General Board
TC	Technical Committee, Geneva Naval Conference
TR	Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. Papers, Limitation of Armaments File, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress
WBP	William Bridgeman Papers, Shropshire County Record Office, Shrewsbury, England
WBPCC	William Bridgeman Papers, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge University
WCP	Winston S. Churchill Papers, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge University

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Introduction

This is a study of British insistence on preserving its naval supremacy during the 1920s and the resulting resurgence of Anglo-American naval and diplomatic antagonisms leading up to, including, and following the climactic Geneva Naval Conference of 1927. Following the end of the Great War in 1918, as Germany's mighty warships lay at the bottom of the sea and France and Italy recovered from devastating invasions, three great Allied naval powers engaged in a naval arms race to ensure supremacy in the ocean regions vital to their national security and prosperity. Japan's modern navy and its Twenty-One Demands on China challenged America's Open Door policies while its occupation of the Marshall, Caroline, and Marianas island chains threatened the ability of the United States to defend the Philippines. Much more immediate, however, was the renewed clash with Great Britain over America's doctrine of "freedom of the seas."

During World War I, but before Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare and the United States consequently joined the Allied Powers in 1917, the vital interests of the United States and Great Britain collided repeatedly over differing interpretations of the complex issue of neutral rights at sea. Having declared neutrality, American leaders believed that British naval blockades, interdiction of American cargoes, lengthening contraband lists, and blacklisting of American firms accused of trading with the Central Powers threatened the prosperity of the United States. British resistance to President Woodrow Wilson's interpretation of freedom of the seas eventually convinced Wilson that only a navy "second to none" could enforce America's neutral rights, and in 1916 Congress authorized the creation of the world's most powerful navy.

Not surprisingly, the British were deeply concerned with this new challenge to Great Britain's naval supremacy, especially as its diplomats failed to persuade Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference to alter his rapid naval buildup.

At first Great Britain attempted to compete in building the most powerful battleships, but the enormous expense coupled with a faltering postwar economy soon prompted it to welcome the invitation of Wilson's successor, President Warren G. Harding, to the first international naval arms-control conference. Nonetheless, while Harding and his Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes substituted the concept of naval equality with Great Britain for Wilson's naval supremacy, the British had not forgotten that blockade and interdiction had worked well during the War and were therefore determined to preserve these strategies. Thus, at the naval arms-control conferences at Washington in 1921–1922, at Geneva in 1927, and, in the negotiations between President Herbert Hoover and Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald before the 1930 London Conference, British diplomats cooperated with Admiralty strategists to forestall treaty provisions which would diminish Great Britain's power to impose blockade and interdiction during a future war.

This is the story of the continuation of the Anglo-American clash over freedom of the seas, one which would erupt once again in full fury at the second naval conference in 1927. The Washington Conference had succeeded in limiting capital ships – battleships, battle cruisers and aircraft carriers. But as skillful British diplomacy had stymied limitation on the numbers of auxiliary cruisers, destroyers, and submarines, the second conference, at Geneva, sought to rein in a new naval race in these powerful warships. However, high hopes for the success of the second international effort were dashed by unexpected British demands for cruiser supremacy rather than equality in the very warships best suited for blockade and interdiction. The failure of this conference prompted a bitterly disillusioned President Calvin Coolidge to switch suddenly from being a staunch advocate of naval limitation to a champion of naval supremacy. Indeed, to punctuate his disillusionment, Coolidge canceled plans to meet with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and the Duke of York at the 1927 opening of the "Peace Bridge" connecting Canada and the United States and instead successfully pressured Congress to build a cruiser force more powerful than Great Britain's.

This crisis in Anglo-American relations had its immediate origins in the furious reaction among naval leaders in Great Britain, the United States, and Japan to the diminution of naval power forced on them by treaties agreed to at the Washington Conference in 1921–1922. With the lessons of World War I still fresh in their minds, these naval strategists were more convinced than ever that regional naval supremacy in the ocean areas vital to national prosperity and security was being sacrificed by naïve politicians and diplomats engaged in untested, unverifiable, unenforceable, and thus totally unreliable treaties. By 1927, at the advent of the second conference, naval leaders had come to the realization that international arms-control negotiations were inherently risky and that they must therefore become more actively involved in this new experimental diplomacy.

Naval leaders understood as well that they must also become more assertive in shaping domestic naval policy. This is illustrated by the untold story of repeated clashes between Admiral Sir David Beatty, Chief of the Admiralty's Naval Staff, and former First Lord of the Admiralty and now Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill. These clashes arose over Beatty's desire to strengthen England's postwar naval forces, most especially in the as yet unrestricted auxiliary cruisers. Alarmed by the capital ship reductions and prevented from replacing these vessels for ten years, Beatty worried over Great Britain's eroding ability to protect its Empire from future Japanese encroachments in East Asia and its equally important ability to enforce blockade and interdiction strategies against a neutral United States during a future war in Europe. Churchill agreed with Beatty on the need for naval supremacy and was enthusiastic about building the newest, most powerful 10,000-ton, 8-inch-gun cruisers. But as Chancellor of the Exchequer, he wanted to avoid asking Parliament for a tax increase to build all twenty-one of these cruisers, requested a one-year delay in beginning their construction, and thereby generated increasingly acrimonious relations with Beatty.

As a former First Lord of the Admiralty during World War I, Churchill believed that military power was based on economic capability, and, as the then current Chancellor of the Exchequer, he argued that by deploying its scarce government resources to stimulate and rebuild a faltering postwar economy, Great Britain could ensure even greater military capability in the near future. He justified this economic priority and the short naval construction delay by the absence of any imminent Japanese naval threat. Beatty's rejection of a one-year delay, however, generated a series of internal Cabinet clashes during which Beatty successfully employed threats of Admiralty resignations and skillful political infighting to achieve Cabinet approval for immediate construction, but of only sixteen rather than the twenty-one cruisers that Churchill had promised to build.

Withholding vital information was an additional means that Beatty unhesitatingly employed against the British Cabinet and against the Americans both before and during the 1927 Geneva Naval Conference. He believed that his evasive tactics were essential to keep secret strong American objections to his proposed capital ship and cruiser construction savings, proposals that were instrumental in persuading a grateful yet unwitting Cabinet to allow the Admiralty to control the negotiations at the second conference. Even more important was the imperative to prevent domestic political critics and rival foreign navies from uncovering the serious combat weaknesses in the expensive new cruisers which he had rushed into production only to discover that baffling deficiencies in the newly designed 8-inch-gun had opened the way for both the Americans and the Japanese to build superior cruisers. The shocking perception of this British naval weakness convinced him that the most effective way to prevent rival naval powers from building superior 8-inch-gun cruisers was to capitalize on the overwhelmingly popular approval for ending the naval

arms race in these auxiliary warships by engineering and controlling a second international conference. At this 1927 conference, Beatty surreptitiously planned to safeguard British cruiser supremacy by substituting the less expensive 6-inch-gun for the 8-inch-gun, by outlawing the 8-inch-gun on all future warships, by securing agreement to an unlimited number of smaller British 6-inch-gun cruisers, and by offering additional capital ship and cruiser savings so compelling to American and Japanese politicians that they would override the objections of their naval advisers, just as President Harding and Prime Ministers David Lloyd George and Hara Kei had done during the Washington Naval Conference five years earlier.

The failure of Beatty's poorly planned and executed Admiralty strategy resulted in continuous disputes within the British Cabinet, punctuated by repeated threats of resignation, Churchill's skillful maneuvering, and finally, a diminution of the Admiralty's political influence. More disturbing was the serious diplomatic rift with the United States, a rift highlighted by Coolidge's success in rallying Congress to construct more 10,000-ton, 8-inch-gun cruisers than authorized by Parliament, and the consequent sudden, unexpected escalation of the naval arms race.

Digging deeply into unpublished military documents and the personal papers of these military leaders should encourage historians to evaluate more fully the military strategists who influenced interwar arms-control diplomacy. Published documents seldom reveal the most important underlying military thinking, motives, and objectives at these peace conferences, or the behind-the-scenes manipulations and deceptions sometimes employed by negotiators. We need to know the degree to which military strategists at the various arms reduction conferences in the 1920s and 1930s, and perhaps since, used arms-control diplomacy as a new, more subtle, means of warfare – war at the peace table.