CONCLUSION: PEACE AND NAVAL DISARMAMENT

“This treaty ends, absolutely ends, the race in competition in naval armament,” Charles Evans Hughes assured the assembled audience, presenting the final draft of the Washington Naval Treaty. “At the same time it leaves the relative security of the great naval powers unimpaired.”¹ It was the crowning achievement in the career of one of the most talented American leaders never to serve as president, and a moment filled with irony. Hughes, former governor of New York and Supreme Court justice, had been the Republican nominee for president in 1916 and only narrowly lost to Woodrow Wilson. Now, in February 1922, as secretary of state in the isolationist administration of President Warren G. Harding, he had the honor of presenting the product of negotiations he had conducted over the previous three months in the spirit of the fourth of Wilson’s Fourteen Points, which had called for disarmament “to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.” Coming after the reduction of the German navy by the Treaty of Versailles and the virtual destruction of the former tsarist fleet in the Russian civil war, the Washington conference of 1921–22 completed the cycle of naval disarmament, reducing by negotiation the fleets of the five remaining naval powers: Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy.

The course of the Great War at sea had confirmed the deterrent capacity of capital ships, and that they did not have to be risked in combat in order to have strategic relevance. As a consequence, just ten

were sunk during the war, of which four were lost in port by accident or sabotage, joined by two more, one Russian and one Austro-Hungarian, sunk after those navies had stopped fighting. Thus, at war’s end, 116 of the 128 capital ships commissioned by the eight largest belligerent navies since HMS *Dreadnought* in December 1906 remained afloat, far more than anyone could justify maintaining in peacetime. But as the peace conference opened at Paris, no one would have predicted that, just three years later, at Washington, a treaty would be signed imposing tonnage quotas that, as initially applied, allowed the five leading navies combined to maintain just sixty-three capital ships. Tirpitz’s prewar navy laws reflected the general assumption that capital ships would have a twenty-five year service life, yet the wholesale scrapping of vessels under the postwar regime of international limits, much more than wartime losses, reduced the average service life for dreadnoughts and battle cruisers commissioned between 1906 and 1918 to just over thirteen years. Never before had so many ships that had cost so much money seen so little action during so few years in service.

**The Paris Peace Conference: the naval dimension**

Notwithstanding the central role of the prewar German naval buildup in the tensions leading up to the war, and of German behavior on the high seas in bringing the United States into the conflict, naval matters attracted very little attention at the Paris Peace Conference. Nevertheless, the Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919, by the Allied leaders and representatives of the new German republic, remains an important postscript to the Great War at sea in that it determined the fate of the world’s second largest fleet and, independent of the subsequent Washington naval arms control regime, placed unique limits on the future German navy.

In its final form, the treaty included 440 articles, of which just seventeen concerned the German navy.² These “naval clauses,” Articles 181–197, limited postwar Germany to six pre-dreadnought battleships, six light cruisers, twelve destroyers, and twelve torpedo boats. No submarines were allowed and, owing to the general ban on German

Conclusion: peace and naval disarmament

military aviation, no aircraft carriers. All warships already interned were declared surrendered, and those in excess of the new quotas not already turned over to the Allies were to be surrendered within two months of the ratification of the treaty, most notably the eight older dreadnoughts of the Nassau and Helgoland classes, including the decommissioned Rheinland, none of which had been required to go to Scapa Flow in November 1918. All ships that had functioned as auxiliary cruisers were to be disarmed and returned to civilian use, and all surface warships and submarines under construction in German shipyards were to be scrapped, with the additional provision that machinery or other components of dismantled vessels could not “be sold or disposed of to foreign countries.” Germany also had to surrender all “submarine salvage vessels and docks for submarines.”

These provisions left Germany not just with a much smaller navy, but one that was obsolete even by prewar standards, including an armored tonnage roughly equal to that of Spain and not much greater than that of Sweden. The primary units were battleships from the 13,200-ton Braunschweig and Deutschland classes, and cruisers from the 2,650-ton Gazelle and 3,300-ton Bremen classes. Reflecting how old and relatively harmless these ships were, the Allies eventually allowed Germany to spare another two of its pre-dreadnoughts, two light cruisers, four destroyers, and four torpedo boats as reserve, training, or depot vessels. The battleships were not to be replaced until twenty-five years after their launching dates (1927 at the earliest), with shorter limits of twenty years for the cruisers and fifteen years for the destroyers and torpedo boats. The treaty limited newly constructed armored warships to 10,000 tons with 11-inch (28-cm) guns, cruisers to 6,000 tons, destroyers to 800 tons, and torpedo boats to 200 tons. The treaty also limited the manpower of the navy to an all-volunteer, long-service force of 15,000, including 1,500 officers. Reserves were not permitted, and merchant mariners were not allowed to receive any naval training. Ashore, naval fortifications on Helgoland and some of Germany’s Baltic islands were to be demolished and no new works built. The last of the naval clauses, Article 197, temporarily restricted “the German high-power wireless telegraphy stations at Nauen, Hanover and Berlin” from making transmissions for the first three months after the treaty took effect, without specific permission from the Allies. It added the provision that “during the same period, Germany shall not build any more high-power wireless telegraphy stations in her own
Defiance indeed occurred, but wireless played no role in coordinating it. For seven months after their internment, the best ships of the High Sea Fleet remained isolated at Scapa Flow while the Allied powers deliberated the fate of Germany. During the first months of 1919, the
crews were further reduced by periodic repatriations of sailors, the last of which, on June 18, left the fleet with a total of less than 2,000 men, roughly one-tenth the number needed to operate the ships at full strength. While there were no British guards posted aboard the ships, the Germans nonetheless were prisoners aboard the interned vessels, not allowed to go ashore and, aside from Reuter and his immediate staff, not allowed to visit from ship to ship. As a legacy of the revolutionary upheavals at Kiel and Wilhelmshaven, the ships had left Germany under the red flag, hoisting their battle flags while at sea. Most had at least the remnants of sailors’ committees aboard, and the degree of authority exercised by officers varied from one vessel to another. Overall, discipline was never very good, and almost no work was done to maintain or even clean the ships, which grew progressively dirtier as the months passed. The admiral fared no better than any other officer; the sailors’ committee aboard the flagship Friedrich der Grosse made Reuter’s life so miserable that in March 1919 he requested, and received, permission from the British to relocate his quarters to the light cruiser Emden. Meanwhile, officers and sailors alike suffered from hardships imposed by their captors. With their wireless sets confiscated, the Germans at Scapa Flow received very little news and only censored mail, and thus even Reuter remained largely ignorant of developments in the outside world, aside from what the local British commander, Vice Admiral Sir Sydney Fremantle, chose to share with him.

Article 31 of the Armistice specified that “no destruction of ships or of materials [is] to be permitted before [their] evacuation, surrender, or restoration,” yet even before the High Sea Fleet steamed into internment, the Naval High Command had discussed the possibility of scuttling the ships in the North Sea en route to Britain. Scheer and his staff decided at the time not to sink the fleet, fearing what the Allies would do in retaliation, yet by some accounts Reuter left for Britain with the understanding that, if or when the time came, the ships were to be destroyed rather than surrendered. But the Allies postponed this day of reckoning, because the Armistice, initially defined as a

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4 Ibid., pp. 61–82.
one-month cease-fire, had to be extended repeatedly to accommodate the protracted negotiations at Paris. As early as January 1919 Reuter and his staff discussed scuttling the fleet. In May, he began laying plans to do so, after receiving news that the final peace terms were likely to require the surrender of all of the ships at Scapa Flow. Finally, acting on knowledge that the latest extension of the Armistice was due to expire on June 21, Reuter circulated orders for the individual ships to prepare to scuttle that day.6 Fremantle neglected to inform him that the truce had been extended yet again to give the negotiators another seven days to put the finishing touches on the treaty; he even took his squadron out for exercises on the morning of the 21st, leaving only a handful of light vessels at Scapa Flow to guard the interned warships. Ironically, Fremantle, knowing that the German fleet would be surrendered under the treaty, had discussed with his superiors provisions for seizing the ships on the 21st to prevent Reuter from scuttling them, but owing to the further extension of the Armistice the British had made no plans to take action on that date.

At 11:20 on the morning of June 21, Reuter’s Emden raised the signal to scuttle the fleet. Even with seacocks and watertight doors open, it took a while for the orders to have any noticeable effect, but by noon some of the dreadnoughts had begun to list, at which time Reuter had the ships raise their battle flags, last seen when Beatty ordered them hauled down seven months earlier, so that each could go under with its flag flying. At 12:20, upon receiving word that the scuttling was underway, Fremantle ordered his squadron back to Scapa Flow and, in the meantime, directed the vessels he had left behind to take measures to beach as many of the sinking ships as possible, but of the capital ships ultimately only the Baden was thus spared, and by the time Fremantle arrived on the scene at 14:30, nothing more could be done. Reuter’s men abandoned their ships after raising their battle flags, but as they rowed ashore British guards fired on some of the lifeboats, killing nine men, including Captain Walter Schumann of the dreadnought Markgraf, and wounding another twenty-one.7 When they finally returned to Germany in January 1920, the 1,860 survivors of the great scuttle were welcomed as heroes.

7 Ibid., p. 163, includes a casualty list.
Once they recovered from the initial shock, the British were somewhat relieved that the High Sea Fleet had disposed of itself, for the ensuing negotiations over the distribution of the ships were bound to have been acrimonious. Admiral Wemyss went so far as to call the scuttling “a real blessing.”

The French and Italians, who had coveted the German ships as reparations, afterward shifted their attention to the fate of the much smaller Austro-Hungarian navy. The surviving dreadnoughts, pre-dreadnoughts, armored cruisers, and older lighter vessels of the defunct Dual Monarchy all were eventually distributed among the victors and either scrapped or sunk in some form of target practice, but Italy commissioned two of the newer light cruisers and seven destroyers, while France commissioned one light cruiser, one destroyer, and the submarine _U 14_ (ex- _Curie_), which reentered French service under its original name. Among the minor Allies, Yugoslavia was left to patrol its long Adriatic coast with just a dozen torpedo boats, while Greece received one Austro-Hungarian destroyer and split the remaining unclaimed torpedo boats with Romania and Portugal. The landlocked successor states of Austria and Hungary were limited to patrol boats on the Danube, a harsh reality that did not stop Admiral Horthy, Hungary’s interwar leader, from taking considerable pride in his small riverine navy.

Meanwhile, from among the smaller vessels of the High Sea Fleet that were neither scuttled, scrapped, nor retained by the postwar German navy, France ultimately commissioned four light cruisers, nine destroyers, and ten submarines; Italy, three light cruisers and three destroyers; Belgium, fourteen torpedo boats; and Poland, six torpedo boats.

The Washington Naval Conference and the postwar naval balance

Wilson considered the signing of the Treaty of Versailles to be the high point of his public life, yet by June 1919 the seeds of his ultimate failure had already been sown. In midterm elections to Congress held in November 1918, just days before the Armistice, the American public

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returned a Republican majority whose leaders subsequently refused to ratify the treaty because they opposed the participation of the United States in the League of Nations, the fourteenth and, in Wilson’s view, most important point in his vision for the postwar peace. In September 1919, during a speaking tour to build public support for the treaty, the president suffered a debilitating stroke, then spent most of the rest of his term in office in his bedroom at the White House. In the elections of November 1920, the Republican isolationist Harding won the presidency, and Republicans secured an overwhelming majority in Congress; later the same month, the League of Nations opened in Geneva without the United States participating. As far as the American government was concerned, the Versailles Treaty and the League became a dead letter. In July 1921, a joint resolution of Congress formally declared the state of war with Germany to have ended. But there was also the matter of disposing of Wilson’s Naval Act of 1916, designed to give the United States a navy “second to none,” with a battle fleet of thirty-five capital ships, including a dozen topping 40,000 tons displacement. In Wilson’s last year in office, the Republican-dominated Congress had questioned whether the program served any purpose other than to incite a new naval arms race with Britain and Japan. The legislators slashed funding for the program, and upon taking office the Harding administration was keen to find a face-saving way to kill it.

It fell to Hughes, in his role as Harding's secretary of state, to plot a course out of the dilemma. Adding to the sense of urgency, in March 1921, shortly after Harding’s inauguration, Lloyd George reaffirmed Britain’s intention to maintain a navy at least as large as anyone else’s, and also proposed the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese treaty of 1902, which the Americans had assumed would be allowed to lapse after the war. In this atmosphere Hughes seized upon the notion of offering up the American fleet plan as part of a general treaty of naval arms limits, and in August 1921 the United States issued invitations to a conference in Washington to discuss the matter. France and Italy promptly accepted, and Japan, though skeptical, agreed to participate out of fear of being left empty-handed in case the Anglo-Japanese alliance was not renewed. After first threatening not to attend, Britain ultimately sent a high-profile delegation including Arthur Balfour, the former prime minister and former First Lord of the Admiralty, along with Admiral Beatty, the postwar First Sea Lord (1919–27). Japan’s delegation was led by Admiral Tomosaburo Kato, a former fleet
commander who had served as navy minister since 1915, and included Vice Admiral Kanji Kato, head of the Naval Staff College. Premier Aristide Briand led the French delegation, while the Italian delegates included journalist and politician Luigi Albertini, future author of one of the most detailed and influential accounts of the outbreak of the war in 1914.

By the time the conference opened on November 12, 1921, economic realities had already forced Britain, France, and Italy into unilateral decisions to decommission and scrap large numbers of warships. Of the forty-five British dreadnoughts and battle cruisers in commission at the Armistice, three were slated for conversion to aircraft carriers, one (Canada, renamed Almirante Latorre) was delivered, albeit belatedly, to Chile in 1920, and another seventeen were stricken or sold for scrap, and broken up starting in 1921. The latter included HMS Dreadnought itself, sold in May 1921, obsolete after a service life of just fourteen and a half years. The thirty British pre-dreadnoughts still on hand at the end of the war were all disarmed, decommissioned, or scrapped between 1919 and 1922. France kept its seven dreadnoughts, but disarmed or decommissioned twelve of its sixteen remaining pre-dreadnoughts, scrapping most of them between 1920 and 1922. Italy likewise kept its five surviving dreadnoughts, but disarmed or decommissioned seven of its eleven remaining pre-dreadnoughts, which were scrapped between 1920 and 1923.

Because the destruction of the German fleet had left the British with no serious rivals in Europe, their delegation came to the conference seeking only to keep their navy equal to or larger than the American navy, and were heartened when Hughes, in a dynamic opening speech, called for all capital ships then under construction to be scrapped and none laid down for a period of ten years, and for the United States, Britain, and Japan to fix their capital ship tonnage at a ratio of 5:5:3. This bold proposal offered up the capital ships authorized in Wilson’s Naval Act of 1916, of which fifteen were under construction but none yet completed, to which Hughes added the US Navy’s two oldest dreadnoughts and thirteen newest pre-dreadnoughts, in all thirty battleships totaling nearly 850,000 tons, leaving the United States with roughly 500,000 tons in capital ships. Hughes proceeded to outline similar sacrifices the United States would expect, in return, from Britain and Japan, to get them down to their capital ship quotas of 500,000 tons and 300,000 tons, respectively. Entering the conference, the British wanted a 3:3:2 ratio of capital ships for the three leading
The Washington Naval Conference

naval powers and thus readily accepted 5:5:3; they also did not object to the tonnage quota because the sacrifice Hughes demanded of them, nearly 600,000 tons, included several ships the Admiralty was already scrapping or had decided to scrap. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the proposal prompted the Manchester Guardian to observe that in a single speech, Hughes had sunk more British battleships than “all the admirals of the world had destroyed in a cycle of centuries.”

The Japanese, in contrast, had great difficulty with the American terms, which would require Japan to give up its long-term strategic goals of having a navy 70 percent as large as that of the United States, including an “eight-eight” fleet of battleships and battle cruisers. Having devised those goals himself in the prewar years, Tomosaburo Kato came to the conference prepared to argue for nothing less than a 10:10:7 standard, but that ratio, combined with a Japanese tonnage quota high enough to accommodate sixteen capital ships, would have fixed the capital ship quota for the United States and Britain at roughly 800,000 tons apiece, far more than they wanted or needed. Though taken aback at Hughes’ opening speech, the elder Kato soon concluded that Japan had no realistic alternative but to accept the American proposal. His capitulation outraged Kanji Kato, who wanted absolute parity with Britain and the United States as a matter of principle, and considered 10:10:7 a generous compromise. Japan ultimately agreed to 5:5:3 in exchange for a ban on the United States or Britain building or upgrading any Pacific fortifications west of a line stretching from Alaska’s Aleutian Islands to Hawaii to Panama. But the Japanese also had to accept two other agreements negotiated during the Washington conference, both largely driven by everyone else’s suspicion of Japan: the Four-Power Treaty, in which the United States and France joined Britain and Japan in pledging to maintain the status quo in the Pacific,


in exchange for the latter two allowing the Anglo-Japanese alliance to lapse, and the Nine-Power Treaty, including Italy along with China, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Belgium, affirming the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of China.

France and Italy were not mentioned in Hughes’ opening speech, and throughout the conference never exercised as much influence as the three leading naval powers. Their negotiating positions were simple enough: the French navy wanted to maintain its advantage over the Italian, while the Italian navy sought to gain on the French. Briand did not hesitate to disagree with Hughes even though France owed the United States $4 billion, exasperating the American statesman, who could not help but note that Balfour, whose country owed the United States much less, was far more circumspect even though the stakes for his country were far higher. Because the German example of unrestricted submarine warfare had reenergized a faction within their navy that promoted commerce raiding in the tradition of the *Jeune École*, the French also wanted no limits on units smaller than capital ships, to enable them to build a postwar fleet centered on cruisers, destroyers, and submarines. Italy entered the conference dreaming of Franco-Italian naval parity, but hoping for a quota 90 percent of France’s strength and willing to accept 80 percent. Whereas France wanted Franco-Italian limits on numbers or tonnage of warships placed higher, to force Italy to build more in order to achieve parity, Italy wanted Franco-Italian limits to be placed as low as possible, so that it could have parity or near-parity without further short-term investment in naval construction. After considerable posturing, the French accepted parity with Italy, at the relatively low tonnage figure the Italians wanted on the condition that the ratios did not apply to cruisers, destroyers, or submarines. Their insistence that submarine construction should remain unregulated clashed with the British position that the outlawing of submarines should at least be discussed, but once the French got their way on submarines, the British joined them in insisting on no limits for cruisers, which Britain felt it needed more of, to defend its global interests, and destroyers, which everyone needed for antisubmarine warfare.14

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The Washington Naval Treaty, signed on February 6, 1922, included capital ship tonnage quotas of 525,000 tons for Britain and the United States, 315,000 tons for Japan, and 175,000 tons for France and Italy. Based on the limit of 35,000 tons per new capital ship applying to replacement ships begun in 1931 and after, once the ten-year “naval holiday” expired, the quotas would have led to a naval balance by 1942 in which Britain and the United States each had fifteen capital ships (down from twenty-two and eighteen, respectively, in 1922), Japan nine (down from ten), and France and Italy five apiece, although the French and Italians specifically reserved the right to spend their 175,000 tons as they saw fit, on greater numbers of smaller battleships or battle cruisers. The treaty limited the primary armament of new capital ships to 16-inch (40.6-cm) guns. Special provisions in the treaty allowed Britain to lay down two battleships before 1931, the 33,300-ton Nelson and Rodney (built 1922–27), because its existing capital ships, on average, were several years older than their American or Japanese counterparts. France and Italy likewise each received permission to lay down a new battleship as early as 1927 for the same reason. A separate provision for aircraft carriers included tonnage limits of 135,000 tons for the United States and Britain, 81,000 tons for Japan, and 60,000 tons for France and Italy, with no restrictions on when new units could be built. Carriers were limited to 27,000 tons, but to facilitate the conversion of unfinished capital ship hulls to carriers, some 33,000-ton carriers were allowed (two apiece for the three leading navies, one apiece for France and Italy). As with existing capital ships, all hulls being converted to carriers were allowed an additional 3,000 tons for upgraded armor. The treaty defined a capital ship as “a vessel of war, not an aircraft carrier, whose displacement exceeds 10,000 tons... which carries a gun with a caliber exceeding 8 inches (203 mm),” thus leaving unregulated all warships of 10,000 tons or less, armed with 8-inch or lighter guns.15

At the Washington Conference, the United States abandoned the quest for a position of naval preeminence it could easily have achieved but had no desire, at this point in history, to assert. In this

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respect the universal acclaim with which the American public and political leadership greeted the Washington Naval Treaty was consistent with the majority of Americans rejecting the Versailles Treaty, the League of Nations, and, in general, the mantle of world’s leading power (military and naval as well as economic) that was there for the taking after the First World War. In the aftermath of the Second World War a far more assertive United States finally embraced Wilsonian internationalism, accepting its commitments and costs, but from the perspective of 1922 such a sacrifice seemed unnecessary. In presenting the final draft of the naval treaty to the conference, Hughes echoed the sentiments of virtually all his countrymen in asserting that “no more extraordinary or significant treaty has ever been made.”

Even though the treaty cost Britain its traditional status of leading naval power, a position it had fought so hard and spent so much to maintain as recently as the prewar naval race with Germany, the British public and political leadership greeted the agreement with an enthusiasm surpassed only by that of the Americans. Most recognized that Britain could no longer afford to maintain its traditional hegemony, and in any event the concession of parity had been made to a country it could not envisage fighting in the future. A clear majority shared the sentiments expressed by Lloyd George in the House of Commons when he called the treaty “one of the greatest achievements for peace that has ever been registered in the history of the world.” Briand fared much worse in presenting the treaty to the French public; indeed, his acceptance of capital ship parity with Italy toppled his government and delayed France’s ratification of the treaty for over a year, until July 1923. Right-wing nationalists were especially hard on the treaty. Charles Maurras, leader of Action Française, went as far as to call it “Trafalgar II.” Meanwhile, for Italy, capital ship parity with France represented an exception to the general lack of respect it received from its fellow victors as a consequence of its poor showing during the war. Ultimately, neither the French nor the Italians took full advantage of their quotas under the treaty during the years in which it remained in effect. Neither navy exercised its right to lay down a new battleship

17 Quoted in *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 508.
later in the 1920s, even though by then Italy had decommissioned one of its original dreadnoughts and France had lost one to shipwreck. The French built one aircraft carrier, but the Italians declined to match it, as the Fascist government of Benito Mussolini, coming to power eight months after the treaty was signed, focused its rearmament efforts on the Italian air force.

The response to the treaty in Japan was far more negative than in France, and Japanese behavior afterward did not bode well for future peace in the Pacific. Whereas Briand’s role in negotiating the treaty cost him the premiership in France (albeit only temporarily), in Japan the well-connected Tomosaburo Kato became prime minister as a reward for his statesmanship, but also on the reasoning that only by making a senior admiral the head of government would the government be able to compel the Japanese navy to comply with the treaty. After the elder Kato died of cancer in August 1923, the “treaty faction” within the navy, which considered it prudent for Japan to accept the new limits, lacked a strong leader, and as the years passed few Japanese politicians and fewer admirals remained faithful to the letter of the treaty, much less to its spirit. Reflecting the sensibilities of Kanji Kato and the “fleet faction,” the Japanese were aggressive in doing whatever the rules allowed, and sometimes more, in contrast to the British and Americans, who, like the French and Italians, ultimately let their navies slip below the strength permitted under the limits. The Great Depression and subsequent London Naval Conference in 1930 resulted in the further extension of naval arms limits, but Kanji Kato outlived Tomosaburo Kato by sixteen years, long enough to lead the “fleet faction” within the Japanese naval officer corps into a political alliance with Japanese army leaders in charting the course to the Second World War, and to a conflict in the Pacific that would far surpass the Great War at sea in its size and scope of operations. By then, Britain’s desire to avoid another war at all costs resulted in the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935, in which the British unilaterally brought Nazi Germany into the interwar naval armaments regime by granting the Germans the right to a navy 35 percent the size of the British, or roughly equal to the existing treaty limits for France and Italy. The final nail in the coffin of the postwar regime of naval arms control came the following year, when Japan repudiated all the restrictions, making dead letters of the Washington and London treaties.
“As far as I am concerned, war with America starts now.”\(^{19}\)

These alarming words were spoken by Kanji Kato not when Japan repudiated the naval arms limits in 1936, but fourteen years earlier, when his country agreed to sign the Washington Naval Treaty. Inasmuch as the dramatic reductions negotiated at Washington in 1921–22 reflected a goal articulated in Wilson’s Fourteen Points and embraced by most of the victors, they were, for the world’s navies, a direct extension of the peace process. Countless observers, at the time and ever since, have argued that the Great War accomplished little other than to sow the seeds of a much more destructive conflict a generation later. Kato died two years before his navy’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbor brought Japan the war he had prophesied in 1922, yet he was among the first to see in the outcome of the First World War the inevitability of the Second.

**The Great War and naval warfare**

A generation later, after another, greater naval war had been fought, critics of the Washington Conference pointed to its emphasis on regulating capital ships – dreadnoughts and battle cruisers – as being less than forward-looking, and yet, from the perspective of the time, the focus could not have been elsewhere. These ships had withstood the challenge of the submarine, and torpedo bulges would help to protect their hulls from more lethal torpedoes in the postwar era. In the interwar period the proliferation of synthetic systems of fire control, gradually replacing the analytic systems that had yielded such poor results in 1914–18, would make dreadnoughts and battle cruisers even more formidable against rivals on the surface. But where the submarine had failed to spark a revolution in naval warfare during the First World War, air power would succeed in doing so during the Second, demonstrating that surface superiority mattered little against an enemy that controlled the skies over the sea in question, either with land-based or carrier-based aircraft. Despite being fitted or retrofitted with scores of anti-aircraft guns, the capital ship would not measure up to the challenge from the air in the conflict of 1939–45.

From the perspective of the early 1920s, however, the main lesson of the conflict at sea was that a fleet-in-being of capital ships, even when at anchor most of the time, both deterred and determined the enemy’s actions. Not only had the concentration of German capital ships in the High Sea Fleet compelled Britain to concentrate its forces in the Grand Fleet, but Austria-Hungary’s four dreadnoughts in the Adriatic proved to be the determining factor in Allied actions well into the central Mediterranean. In the Baltic, the presence of Russia’s four dreadnoughts dictated the size and scope of German movements, even though they very rarely left port. Most dramatically of all, the lone German battle cruiser Goeben, as the Turkish Yavuz Sultan Selim, had a disproportionate effect on Allied naval operations in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean, especially in the first half of the war but even into 1918. Within the context of the Great War, the deterrent capacity of capital ships meant that they did not have to be risked in combat in order to have strategic relevance.

The submarine earned pride of place as the emerging naval weapon of 1914–18, yet while unrestricted submarine warfare had made life miserable for the Allies, German U-boats did not come close to inflicting the sort of misery on the British home front that the British surface-ship blockade caused within Germany. Some antisubmarine measures pioneered in the First World War would be improved upon in the Second, in particular the use of depth charges, aircraft patrols, and of course the convoy system, while others, most notably the extensive antisubmarine barrages, were not, but one unmistakable lesson of the Great War had been that surface superiority trumped undersea superiority, just as decisively as air superiority, in the next world war, would trump surface superiority. The surface fleet advantage of the Allies in general, and of the British in particular, had been the key to the victory at sea. Even though the British navy lost as many dreadnoughts and battle cruisers as all other belligerents combined and, for pre-dreadnought battleships, more than the total lost by all other navies, Britain’s victory in the prewar naval arms race provided such a wide margin of material superiority that such losses could be sustained without seriously jeopardizing the Allied war effort. The strategy of distant blockade, so frustrating for the blockaders, had worked not only in the North Sea against Germany, but in the Adriatic against Austria-Hungary as well, and in both cases it had been enforced with a preponderance of capital ships. With good reason, these ships emerged from the war with their
strategic primacy intact, and their place in the postwar negotiation of arms limits reflected this reality.

In the postwar years, the centrality of the blockade in the Allied naval victory became obscured by international political considerations. The Allied (and especially British) narrative of the war at sea understandably emphasized the righteousness of the cause, building upon the rejection, by the general public in the Allied countries, of Germany’s wartime attempt to equate the immorality of unrestricted submarine warfare with the immorality of the blockade. Documentation of, and reflection upon, the importance of the blockade, and especially the pre-war planning behind it, would have undermined that narrative, especially since the U-boat campaign had emerged from the circumstances of the winter of 1914/15, when the last of Germany’s cruisers were being swept from the seas, and was far less premeditated. Thus, through a variety of means, British authorities down to the 1960s suppressed or censored published materials related to the blockade, and strongly discouraged frank or detailed discussion of it in the memoirs of those most involved in its planning and execution.20

When Admiral Beatty, in his honorary capacity as Lord Rector of the University of Edinburgh, gave a speech at that institution in 1920 defending navies and their role in the world, he succumbed to just this sort of self-censorship. He couched his references to the strategy of blockade in the vaguest of terms, avoiding use of the word “blockade.” Starting with the premise that “personal inconvenience is . . . the factor that decides whether a struggle shall continue,” he acknowledged that navies may cause such “inconvenience” to an enemy state “by cutting off those supplies from overseas upon which the nation is dependent,” including “its food, its clothing, its manufacture, its commerce, and its munitions of war.” Rather than associate this strategy directly with the recent Allied victory, he spent the rest of his speech detailing, from the Peloponnesian War to the Great War, the importance of a strong fleet in empowering a state to avoid being blockaded. Keeping faith with the concepts that had dominated the prewar discourse on sea power, Beatty invoked “the work of the American, Admiral Mahan,” noting that “nowhere was its effect greater than in Germany.” Indeed, in his emphasis on a strong fleet as the antidote to blockade, he used essentially the same Mahanian arguments that Tirpitz had employed to

justify German naval expansion before the war, only with a distinctive British twist. Emphasizing the role of the navy in the establishment and growth of the British Empire, the general tone followed his quoting of Sir Walter Raleigh: “Whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade commands the riches of the world and, consequently, the world itself.” But in a speech full of examples of navies entangled in the global struggle for wealth and power, Beatty concluded by drawing a thoughtful (though clearly partisan) distinction between the power of the state as reflected in navies compared with armies: “Sea power is . . . essentially a power for peace; unaggressive itself, it is a shield against aggression. If wisely employed, it will not excite the odium of others, nor the suspicious jealousy that is the lot of those who pin their faith in armies. Hence there is no greater fallacy than to speak of ‘navalism’ as the sea counterpart of ‘militarism.’”

There was nothing unique about Beatty’s conclusion, at least from the naval perspective; indeed, nearly a century later, the same logic underpinned a US Navy advertising campaign touting the American fleet as “a global force for good.” Thus, there was no small irony in the postwar quest for international arms reduction focusing on the leading fleets, despite the contention that they did not endanger the peace as much as the most powerful standing armies or the emerging air forces. Because land and air forces (except for those of Germany) remained unregulated, the relative weight of navies in the universe of armed might available to a state declined. A bitter Anglo-American disagreement about whether and how to extend the Washington limits to cruisers, resolved in the London Naval Treaty of 1930 in a compromise that pleased no one, reflected second thoughts on the part of both Britain and the United States about their ability, post-Washington, to exploit the diplomatic value of naval power worldwide in anything approaching the traditional sense. From the days of wooden sailing ships down to the Great War, most international crises had involved some level of “gunboat diplomacy,” ranging in weight from a single small warship to a squadron or entire fleet, depending upon the stakes involved. But the world in which every Great Power, even a near-landlocked Austria-Hungary, possessed a fleet respectable enough to play this game had

now passed. The postwar regime of naval limits left just three true Great Power navies – the British, American, and Japanese – which the outcome of the next world war would reduce to just one, the American, eventually challenged worldwide during the Cold War by the Soviet fleet before again, by the dawn of the twenty-first century, being clearly in a class by itself. Seen in this light, the Great War at sea and its immediate aftermath represents a watershed in the history of navies in general, a giant step in the direction of a world in which Beatty’s “power for peace” would rest not in the fleets maintained by most or all great powers, but in a single “global force for good,” a formidable weapon in the arsenal of a lone superpower.