

Building a Navy 'Second to None': The U.S. Naval Act of 1916, American Attitudes Toward Great Britain, and the First World War

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the impact of the First World War on American attitudes toward Britain, focusing specifically on the genesis and shaping of the U.S. Naval Act of 1916. The administration of President Woodrow Wilson had struggled to maintain United States neutrality in the first thirty-two months of the war, but events in the war at sea strained relations between the U.S. and Germany, as well as between the U.S. and Great Britain. These events will be considered, and it will be argued that although the U.S. reluctantly postponed the implementation of the act, it remained a potential point of contention between the U.S. and Britain.

In the summer of 1916 the United States Congress passed the Naval Bill, the largest and most ambitious appropriation bill in the history of the U.S., for shipbuilding and other naval supply, support, and personnel expenditures. Not only did it provide the U.S. Navy with more money for the 1916-17 fiscal year than ever before, but it was the first year of a three-year appropriation, something that Congress had never previously done. The bill appeared to be aimed at creating a navy that was either second only to the United Kingdom's Royal Navy or, more ambiguously, one that was 'second to none'.¹ Moreover, once completed in 1919, it was anticipated that there might be a second three-year appropriation bill to build on the accomplishments of the first. In effect, the two bills would have ushered in a new era of U.S. power and ambition, locating the origins of the growth of American military and global influence in the era of the First, rather than the Second, World War. The

¹ 'second to none' could carry the connotation of parity with the Royal Navy or of superiority to the Royal Navy. The 1916 bill was to be the first of a two-step appropriation process, followed by a second bill in 1919.

Naval Bill, signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson in August 1916, was a significant departure for the progressive Democratic administration, one that had shown little interest in building up the armed forces in the previous three years. The bill also provides a bit of an interpretive problem for historians who choose to see Wilson as either a committed pacifist or a staunch idealist. Ironically, it was the entry of the United States in the First World War in April 1917 that prevented the 1916 law from being realised and it was Wilson's own negotiations after the war that shelved the subsequent building programme.

Nevertheless, the bill was an important piece of legislation, unprecedented in the history of U.S. defence spending at the time of its signing. Surprisingly, the bill and its significance is largely missing from the published historical examination of the Wilson administration, the U.S. in the First World War, or the U.S. Navy in the modern battleship era.² Arthur S. Link, in his magisterial multi-volume life of Wilson, does not examine the president's 1916 defence legislation in any depth.³ John Patrick Finnegan's fine work on the 'preparedness campaign' has a helpful chapter on the naval bill, but is mainly focused on the history of the preparedness movement at large and the army bill of the same year.⁴ Phillips Payson O'Brien's analysis of Anglo-American naval relations is very helpful in setting the context for the bill, and its

² The only scholarly study is a solid overview of the act in Joseph W. Kirschbaum's dissertation, 'The 1916 Naval Expansion Act: Planning for a Navy Second to None', (PhD diss., George Washington University, 2008). Kirschbaum surveys the genesis and passing of the bill and questions its strategic aims.

³ See Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises, 1915-1916*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), vol. IV, pp. 334-338. More recent one-volume biographical treatments by August Heckscher (1991), Kendrick A. Clements (1999), H.W. Brands (2003), John Milton Cooper (2009) and A. Scott Berg (2013) likewise give little attention to this bill. The same can be said of the biographies of Wilson's chief aide, Edward House, by Geoffrey Hodgson (2006) and Charles E. Neu (2015), as well as of the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, by Lee A. Craig (2013).

⁴ John Patrick Finnegan, *Against the Specter of a Dragon: The Campaign for American Military Preparedness* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1974). Justus D. Doenecke's *Nothing Less Than War* (Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011) and Richard Striner's *Woodrow Wilson and World War I: A Burden Too Great to Bear* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) provide some recent and valuable broad context for the preparedness debates. For older, reliable and judicious general studies, see two titles from the 'New American Nation' series: Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era: 1910-1917* (NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954) and Robert H. Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson and World War I: 1917-1921* (NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985).

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aftermath, within a broad study of the two countries over a period of thirty-six years.⁵ David F. Trask provides an excellent study on Anglo-American naval relations during the period of 'association' with some important insights into the decision to shift the building programme from capital ships to destroyers and other anti-submarine craft, though his monograph focuses more on the operational cooperation during the war.⁶ Seth P. Tillman's monograph on Anglo-American relations during the Paris Peace Conference provides some insight into the negotiations that led to the abandonment of the U.S. naval building programmes, as part of the broader issues of peace making.⁷ The present work is focused on the naval bill mainly in the context of U.S. perceptions of Britain and the Royal Navy in the aftermath of the battle of Jutland 31 May/1 June 1916. While there is some discussion of Wilson's intentions regarding the proposed bill, this analysis is largely dedicated to the Senate discussion of the bill, which took place after the battle of Jutland. The paper explores some of the arguments of key U.S. Senators who referred to Britain and its Royal Navy, as well as to the 'lessons' of the battle of Jutland. The intent is to discern senatorial perceptions of Britain, the Royal Navy, and the battle of Jutland and how these were used rhetorically to advance arguments for – and against – the dramatically revised naval bill. After the U.S. declared war against Germany in April 1917, it reluctantly postponed the implementation of the act until the end of hostilities, though the act remained a potential point of contention between the U.S. and Britain throughout the war and the subsequent peace conference. The paper will also briefly assess the ways in which Anglo-American relations affected the bill once the U.S. entered the war and during the peace negotiations that followed. Though the paper will primarily assess the reasons for the shaping and passing of the act, it will also examine U.S. perceptions of Britain and the Royal Navy, an important aspect of Anglo-American relations.

When the First World War broke out in August 1914 Woodrow Wilson immediately declared his country's neutrality in the developing conflict. During the first months of the war he also expressed his opposition to both the British blockade of the North Sea and the German deployment of U-boats in the approaches around

⁵ Phillips Payson O'Brien, *British and American Naval Power: Politics and Policy, 1900-1936* (NY: Praeger Publishers, 1998).

⁶ David F. Trask, *Captains & Cabinets: Anglo-American Naval Relations, 1917-1918*, (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 1972). See also Edward B. Parsons, *Wilsonian Diplomacy: Allied-American Rivalries in War and Peace* (St. Louis MO: Forum Press, 1978) for a broader, 'allied' discussion of these and related issues.

⁷ Seth P. Tillman, *Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

Britain. These actions he asserted, infringed upon the rights of neutral states, like the U.S., to trade with both belligerents. Despite his own affinities toward Britain Wilson attempted to be, as he asked of his countrymen and women, neutral in both word and deed. 'We must', he asserted to the Congress on 19 August 1914, 'be impartial in thought as well as in action, must put a curb upon our sentiments as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as a preference of one party to the struggle before another'.⁸

The U.S. government took some precautionary measures in the next sixteen months, but avoided any temptation or pressure to significantly arm the country for any active role in the war. Indeed, both Wilson and his Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, resisted any move to rapidly or dramatically increase the size of the U.S. Navy, the main arm of overseas defence. However, events were soon to challenge Wilson's position. The sinking of the *RMS Lusitania* on 7 May 1915 and Britain's insistence on further restricting neutral trade with Germany, led to U.S. protests against both countries that appeared to be without effective substance. Wilson was outraged with the German U-boat attack on the *Lusitania* and warned the German government to abandon its policy of unrestricted naval warfare, but was also frustrated by British restrictions on U.S. trade to continental Europe. The German government did abandon its U-boat attacks, though only temporarily, while Britain's blockade remained in place and continued to exasperate the president.⁹

Domestic politics and international events soon pushed the administration in other directions. A diverse amalgam of groups advocating for increasing armaments soon coalesced into the 'preparedness movement'.¹⁰ Individuals such as former President Theodore Roosevelt and soon-to-be-retired Admiral Bradley Fiske called for a strong navy, and the movement was gaining momentum in light of German

⁸ Woodrow Wilson, 'Message to Congress', 63rd Cong., 2nd Sess., Senate Doc. No. 566 (Washington, 1914), pp. 3-4.

⁹ See the aforementioned works by Doenecke and Striner for more detail on these issues. John W. Coogan's excellent analysis, *The End of Neutrality: The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights 1899-1915* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), demonstrates the inconsistencies, and ultimately non-neutral nature, of Wilson's policies regarding the blockade. For a comparison of the legal and ethical issues of the blockade policies and the U-boat campaigns, see Isabel V. Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: Making and Breaking International Law during the First World War*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). British policymakers consistently challenged Wilson's views that the two were morally or legally equivalent.

¹⁰ For an excellent overview of the movement, stronger on the army than the navy, see Finnegan, *Against the Specter of a Dragon* (1974).

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aggressions and British intransigence. Privately, in the aftermath of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Wilson instructed his Secretary of the Navy in the summer of 1915 to investigate a bolder defence spending initiative for 1916. Daniels convened the advisory General Board of the Navy, made up of senior naval administrators and advisors, with the task of developing a programme to address essential U.S. needs and interests. With a presidential election in the offing for 1916, Wilson decided to openly shift his position. In his annual address to Congress, on 7 December 1915, Wilson called for bold new army and navy programmes. With regard to the navy, the president largely endorsed the General Board's recommendations and announced a

programme to be laid before you [that] contemplates the construction within five years of ten battleships, six battle cruisers, ten scout cruisers, fifty destroyers, fifteen fleet submarines, eighty-five coast submarines, four gunboats, one hospital ship, two ammunition ships, two fuel oil ships, and one repair ship.

He continued, asserting that,

If this full programme should be carried out we should have built or building in 1921...an effective navy consisting of twenty-seven battleships of the first line, six battle cruisers, twenty-five battleships of the second line, ten armored cruisers, thirteen scout cruisers, five first class cruisers, three second class cruisers, ten third class cruisers, one hundred and eight destroyers, eighteen fleet submarines, one hundred and fifty-seven coast submarines, six monitors, twenty gunboats, four supply ships, fifteen fuel ships, four transports, three tenders to torpedo vessels, eight vessels of special types, and two ammunition ships. This would be a navy fitted to our needs and worthy of our traditions.¹¹

Wilson decided to take the political initiative for the General Board's five-year programme by appealing directly to some of the most sceptical potential voters in the country, those in the Midwestern states, in early 1916.¹² In a seven-city tour in

¹¹ Woodrow Wilson. 'Third Annual Message', 7 December 1915. It should be noted that contemporary American sources use 'battle cruiser' (American usage) instead of the British 'battlecruiser'.

¹² As an aside, and as an indication of the importance Wilson attached to the success of the forthcoming army and navy bills, this was one of the president's first trips outside of Washington, D.C. since his inauguration in early 1913.

January and February, Wilson stated his opening arguments in support of his preparedness bills.¹³ On 29 January, in Cleveland, Ohio, the president explained to his audience that 'You have been told that [the U.S. Navy] is second in strength in the world. I am sorry to say that experts do not agree with those who tell you that'. In order to soften the point he was about to make, Wilson asserted that 'Reckoning by its actual strength, I believe it to be one of the most efficient navies in the world, but in strength it ranks fourth, not second'. Efficiency was not enough, however, 'you ought to insist that everything should be done that it is possible for us to do to bring the Navy up to an adequate standard of strength and efficiency'.¹⁴ Two days later, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Wilson reiterated this message, shifting slightly from the contrast between efficiency and strength to one between quality and quantity. Defending his administration's efforts to date, he argued that 'There has not been any sort of neglect about the Navy. We have been slowly building up a Navy which in quality is second to no navy in the world. The only thing it lacks is quantity'. He intended, he asserted, to address that through the naval appropriations bill before Congress, with a proposed programme to rapidly expand the size of the navy within five years.¹⁵ Later that evening, in Chicago, Illinois, the president elaborated on his administration's accomplishments to date, in adding 56 ships, including three dreadnoughts (in 1916 alone); six thousand sailors; a naval air arm; and over ten million dollars more in appropriations annually. Instead of another round of annual 'piecemeal' appropriations, however, Wilson noted that the new bill was a fully-funded five-year proposal for naval expansion.¹⁶

As the speaking tour was winding down, Wilson appealed to his audiences for supporting a navy 'to be proud of', as a force 'practically impregnable to the navies of the world' and 'adequate for the defense of both coasts'.¹⁷ On the last day of his tour, the president pushed his rhetoric beyond this, however. Speaking to an audience in St. Louis, Missouri, Wilson made many of the same points as before, but concluded his naval arguments by musing, 'Do you realize the task of the navy? Have

¹³ Speeches in Cleveland, Ohio (29 January) through St. Louis, Missouri (3 February). He also spoke in New York, New York on 27 January and Pittsburg, Pennsylvania on 29 January. His Midwest tour included Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Chicago, Illinois (both on 31 January), Des Moines, Iowa (on 1 February), and Topeka, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri (both on 2 February).

¹⁴ Speech of 29 January 1916, in *Addresses of President Wilson, January 27-February 3, 1916* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1916), p. 25. Wilson's claim of 'efficient' was more rhetorical than real.

¹⁵ Speech of 31 January 1916, in *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁶ Speech of 31 January 1916, in *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

¹⁷ Speech of 2 February 1916 (Kansas City, Missouri), in *Ibid.*, p. 59.

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you ever let your imagination dwell on the enormous stretch of coast from the [Panama] canal to Alaska—from the canal to the northern coast of Maine?' He then asserted, erroneously, that 'There is no other navy in the world that has to cover so great an area of defense, as the American navy, and it ought, in my judgment, to be incomparably the greatest navy in the world [emphasis added]'.¹⁸

Even Wilson's allies were flummoxed. Benjamin Tillman, then chair of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee, wrote the president on 14 February:

Dear Mr. President: I wish you would tell me exactly what you want me to say about the size of the Navy. You have been quoted in the newspapers as having said in your speech at St. Louis that you desire the United States to have a Navy 'Incomparably the greatest Navy in the world'. If you used those words, I think you owe it to yourself, and to the Party, too, to explain to the country just what you meant by the 'Greatest Navy in the world'.

Tillman pointed out that 'You know, of course, that England's very life depends on the control of the ocean, because her people would starve except for the food they import...', and opined, 'it would be a fatal blunder for the United States to enter on such a [naval] race with her; and I also believe it is our solemn duty to have the second greatest navy afloat [emphasis in the original]'.¹⁹

Tillman was so shaken by Wilson's words that he ordered his messenger to wait for the president's response. Wilson replied later that day,

That sentence of mine about 'the greatest navy in the world' was an indiscretion uttered in a moment of enthusiasm at the very end of my recent speaking tour, and was not deliberately meant. What I earnestly advocate at the present time is the carrying out of the programme which I proposed to the Congress in my annual message.²⁰

In an amusing conclusion, when Congress ordered the president's preparedness speeches to be printed and bound, the offending passage 'the greatest navy in the

¹⁸ Speech of 3 February 1916, in Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (hereafter, *PWW*), v 36. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 120-21.

¹⁹ Tillman to Wilson, 14 February 1916, in *Ibid.*, pp. 173-74.

²⁰ Wilson to Tillman, 14 February 1916, in *Ibid.*, p. 174.

world' was corrected to read 'the most *adequate* navy in the world' [emphases added].²¹ Though the public and press responses to the president's appeals were mixed, Wilson now urged Congress to take the initiative. He was kept informed of the bill's progress by congressional leaders, and his aides kept pressure on them.

The naval appropriations bill was brought to Congress in early 1916. The House of Representatives Naval Affairs Committee held extensive hearings with members of the administration (such as Secretary Daniels and his Assistant Secretary, Franklin Delano Roosevelt), the chief administrative naval officers, and others to ascertain the needs of the Navy (especially the recommendations of the advisory General Board of the Navy).²² As the committee worked through the hours of evidence and testimony, it took a decidedly modest position regarding the naval building programme and the necessary appropriations to support it. The committee leaders introduced a bill to the full House on 27 May that proposed a naval building program that totalled \$241,500,000 in new spending, with \$160,000,000 budgeted for the fiscal year.²³ The committee did not ask the House to approve a single new battleship, deciding instead to concentrate on the construction of five battlecruisers (the U.S. Navy had none in 1916), as well as a number of other classes of ships, additional personnel, etc. The president and the General Board of the Navy had requested a good deal more, with total spending amounting to \$500,000,000 over five years.²⁴ After nearly two weeks of debate, lasting from 27 May through 2 June, the House overwhelmingly approved appropriations in a vote of 363 for and 4 against, with 7 'present' (abstentions) and 60 'not voting'.²⁵ Though the House bill did exceed the General Board's budget request for 1916-17, it adhered to the House committee's recommendations to

²¹ Speech of 3 February 1916, in *Addresses of President Wilson*, p. 68.

²² See, for example, the biography of *Admiral William Shepherd Benson: First Chief of Naval Operations*, by Mary Klachko and David F. Trask (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987) for the views and actions of Benson on the Navy Department's recommendation.

²³ HR 15947, 'a bill making appropriations for the naval service for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1917, and for other purposes'. 26 May 1916, 64th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (hereafter, *CR*), p. 8751, for debate the following day. The previous year's bill was \$149,000,000 (or more than \$91,000,000 less). This bill was less than what was requested by the president and was for one year only. The *Congressional Record* is the official daily record of the debates in the House of Representatives and the Senate. It is printed by the Government Publishing Office and made available to every member of Congress, the president, and federal depository libraries across the United States for reference.

²⁴ 13 July, *CR*, p. 10924.

²⁵ 2 June, *CR*, p. 9190.

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build battlecruisers instead of battleships and limit the programme to one year. The bold five-year programme proposed by President Wilson in December 1915, based on the recommendations of the General Board, had been pared to a well-funded, but ultimately less ambitious House one-year appropriations bill.

Three events occurred between the House and Senate debates. First, the Democratic Convention met in St. Louis from 14 – 16 June. Wilson was nominated for a second term as the man who kept the U.S. out of the war, maintaining his support from the less interventionist wing of the party; while the modest naval House appropriations bill allowed him to offer a measured armament programme, preventing those in the preparedness movement from claiming that the president was doing nothing for defence. The other two events were the battle of Jutland and the British blacklist of U.S. manufacturers.²⁶ While the latter event did not cause the very different Senate naval appropriations bill, the battle of Jutland did provide context for the subsequent debates in the Senate, as well as substance for the rhetorical points made in them. And, though it is not possible to determine the extent to which Jutland affected the outcome of the deliberations about the bill, it is clear that the assertions regarding Great Britain and the Royal Navy shifted from the more critical perspectives of the U.S. naval officers on the General Board and the sceptical views of many representatives in the House to the more respectful observations of a good number of the senators who spoke on both sides of the debate.

The Senate Naval Affairs Committee introduced its own version of the naval appropriations bill to the full Senate in an unusual manner on 13 July. The new chair of the committee, Virginia Senator Claude Swanson, rather than presenting a competing bill to the one recently passed by the House, used an unusual parliamentary tactic by introducing an amending bill that would almost entirely replace the House bill.²⁷ The bill that was introduced was audacious in scope and ambition. The committee asked the Senate to endorse a bill that proposed spending well in excess of the House bill. The Senate, if it approved the bill, would appropriate \$319,000,000 for the 1916-17 fiscal year and an estimated additional \$488,000,000 in spending over the next two years to immediately begin to build four dreadnought or superdreadnought battleships and four battlecruisers (one less than the House bill),

²⁶ 31 May / 1 June and 18 July, respectively (the blacklist was issued during the final three days of the Senate debates).

²⁷ Swanson had replaced Benjamin Tillman, who was not well during the committee's deliberations. Tillman did help introduce the bill when it was introduced to the Senate. Both were Democrats.

along with funding additional ships, a naval air service, new naval yards, personnel, and other items.²⁸ The Senate bill proposed a total of ten new battleships, six battlecruisers, and ten scout cruisers over the *three-year* building plan.²⁹ According to some estimates in the Senate, the proposed U.S. naval building programme would surpass those which were undertaken by the German navy under Tirpitz that were responsible for the decade-long Anglo-German naval rivalry prior to the Great War.

The Senate debates are interesting for a number of reasons. First, they demonstrate some interesting 'official' perceptions of Britain and the Royal Navy. Consistent throughout is a genuine respect for both, especially in the aftermath of the battle of Jutland. Second, they offer some insights into how senators perceived the war and, more specifically, what lessons they derived from the naval war and, in particular, the battle of Jutland. The introductory speeches in support of the bill set the tone for what followed. In his speech on 13 July, Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina (and, until recently, chair of the Naval Affairs Committee) invoked Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan's navalist views, asserting 'the history of the world teaches one sure lesson—that naval supremacy ultimately means national pre-eminence and triumph'; and in particular, '[i]t has been the great navy of Britain that has enabled her to carry her rule, civilization, and commerce to every continent, in every clime, and among every people'. Tillman went on to argue that 'The great war now raging in Europe is further emphasizing the advantages accruing to Great Britain from her naval power'.³⁰ Though some of this power was exerted in assisting her allies and empire, and transporting her troops and munitions, the senator also noted that Britain had imposed 'unjust restrictions' on U.S. commerce, thus necessitating a U.S. Navy 'large enough to demand and enforce our rights'.³¹ And, though Tillman had spoken of 'naval supremacy' in his extensive overview, he assured his audience that 'I have consistently advocated that the United States should be the second naval power in the world. We have no occasion to apprehend danger from Great Britain as from other nations', especially as Britain did not maintain a large standing army.³²

²⁸ When passed, the Senate bill totalled nearly \$317,000,000.

²⁹ This would effectively accelerate the General Board's original proposal, from five years to three.

³⁰ 13 July 1916, *CR*, *Ibid*.

³¹ 13 July 1916, *CR*, pp. 10922-23. Tillman did not explain how the bill would accomplish this.

³² 13 July 1916, *CR*, p. 10924. Tillman's point was that, though Britain had the largest navy, it could not, unlike Germany (which was *both* a naval and a military power), pose an invasion threat to the U.S. This point is consistent with Tillman's letter to Wilson (see above).

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Tillman then drew some preliminary conclusions about the battle of Jutland, based on the comparative performances of battleships and battlecruisers. 'Very recently in the present war', he observed, 'it has been demonstrated that the theory upon which all nations have acted, that the dreadnaught, the heavy armored fighting ship, is the backbone of the Navy, is sound'. Tillman explained that, 'Therefore the Senate committee cut down the House authorization of battle cruisers by one, leaving four battle cruisers...and added four dreadnaughts or superdreadnaughts' from none in the House bill, in order to construct a total of eight capital ships.³³ Thus, in Tillman's early assessment of Jutland, the House bill had overestimated the value of battlecruisers and underestimated the battleship; the Senate bill addressed this by authorising immediate battleship construction and expanding capital ship construction overall.

John Weeks of Massachusetts, who also argued in support of the bill, pointed out in the first full day of the debate, on 17 July, that with the exception of Russia, 'the United States has made less effective provision for the future than any of these first-class sea-power nations' prior to the Great War.³⁴ He added that the range and speed of capital ships were major factors in determining the course and outcomes of three of Britain's naval engagements of the war, including most recently, the battle of Jutland. Weeks advocated a balanced fleet, with small cruisers, destroyers, and submarines complementing the capital ships envisioned in the bill; 'quite as large in proportion to our battle fleet as that are now in the English Navy'.³⁵ This proportion, Weeks implied, would not challenge Britain's overall primacy. Because the U.S. would still have fewer capital ships than Britain, the proportional increases in other ships to which Weeks referred would leave the Royal Navy's primacy unchallenged.

The 'lessons' of Jutland also dominated the speech of Porter McCumber of North Dakota, albeit somewhat confusingly. McCumber quoted from Admiral John Jellicoe's initial assessment of the reasons for the uneven engagement between British battlecruisers and German battleships. Despite British battlecruiser losses, McCumber argued that he would support amendments to the naval bill that would *decrease* the number of proposed battleships and *increase* the number of

³³ 13 July 1916, *CR*, p. 10926. It should be noted that the *CR* uses 'dreadnaught' (American usage) instead of the British 'dreadnought'.

³⁴ 17 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11183. Weeks rebutted the claims made in the president's Midwest speeches and was comparing the U.S. authorizations for battleships, battlecruisers, scout cruisers and destroyers with those of Britain, Germany, Japan, France, Italy and Russia. Weeks was a Republican.

³⁵ 17 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11184.

battlecruisers. 'We do not need a Navy greater than that of Great Britain;' but, he concluded, 'we do need a Navy that is sufficient in power to enable us to defend all of our outlying possessions against any naval power' as well as a merchant marine, and 'the necessary equipment to support and attend the great Navy which we are providing to-day'.³⁶ McCumber agreed with Tillman and Weeks that though the U.S. Navy should be expanded, it need not challenge the Royal Navy.

Thomas Sterling of South Dakota drew different conclusions than McCumber about Jutland, deferring to the evolving views of the General Board and naval experts. The recent battle provided new 'lessons which very properly, as it seems to me, have changed expert opinion and brought it to realize the necessity for more battleships', as opposed to none in the House bill. 'Hence the reason for four battleships of the dreadnaught type, to be built as soon as practicable under the terms of this bill'.³⁷

For many of those who argued in support of the Senate bill, the battle of Jutland provided the necessary rationale. The House bill was deemed to be inadequate to the new circumstances of naval war, while the Senate bill 'balanced' the U.S. fleet and enhanced the country's naval power.

Not all of the senators were interested in limiting U.S. naval ambitions to second place, though they were in a distinct and very small minority. Wesley Jones of Washington, for instance, contested Tillman's and McCumber's stated willingness to concede first rank to the Royal Navy, asserting that 'We should build our Navy with no nation in view but the United States. If we should have rank as compared to other navies, there is more reason for its being first than second'. Quoting from a previous speech (from 1902, when he was in the House of Representatives), Jones made the point that 'we should have a Navy the equal, if not the superior, of any nation on earth, England not excepted. Our position in the world's affairs to-day demands this'.³⁸ Jones was, however, unique in the Senate debates in his advocacy of U.S. naval primacy.

Charles Thomas, Senator from Colorado, opened the debate for the opposition when deliberations began on the naval appropriations bill. Thomas opposed the bill for a number of reasons, referring often to the claim that the bill would make the U.S. Navy second to Britain and pointing out that 'we are still defenseless as against that nation whose navy is larger than ours'. Though Thomas was only making a rhetorical point and conceded that the U.S. and Britain would probably not wage war

³⁶ 18 July 1916, *CR*, pp. 11207-09. McCumber was a Republican.

³⁷ 18 July 1916, *CR*, *Ibid*. Sterling was a Republican.

³⁸ 18 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11209. Jones was a Republican.

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against one another, he suggested that the U.S. might still need to contend with 'a combination of the smaller-navy nations'.³⁹ This thinking, he asserted, would lead to a naval competition with Germany and other naval powers, as well as to the growth of militarism in the U.S. itself.

Thomas referred specifically to the battle of Jutland and the 'effect upon public sentiment of the result', which, he pointed out, were being used to justify the Senate's dramatically-expanded-upon naval appropriations bill. 'Great Britain has the greatest navy in the world; necessarily its annual appropriations have been greater than those of any other country;' he asserted, 'but not until the beginning of this war did Great Britain at any time in its history make an appropriation of \$270,000,000 for naval purposes'. The House bill exceeded that amount and the Senate committee rejected because it was 'too small'.⁴⁰

He later challenged some expert testimony from naval officers in the initial House hearings that seemed to favour the faster battlecruisers to battleships. The experiences of Jutland now suggested otherwise: 'A number of battle cruisers, the first time that they appeared in any great force in a naval battle, were sunk.... I have [now] heard it stated that Jutland has demonstrated that the battleship was still the backbone of the fleet'.⁴¹ Thomas inferred that the experience and lessons of Jutland warned against the predictions of the experts. The new push for battleships might soon be deemed insufficient or simply wrong under the evolving circumstances of war.

George Norris of Nebraska, also speaking in opposition to the bill expanded upon Thomas's assertions and pointed to the changing nature of the war at sea. When the House was considering its own appropriations bill, it provided for the construction of battlecruisers, not battleships, as 'the swift ship with the big gun was what we wanted.... Therefore, we wanted battle cruisers'. Jutland, however, changed these priorities; so, the Senate 'found that we needed battleships as well. It was found that while the battle cruiser was useful it was not the only pebble on the beach'. Norris

³⁹ 17 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11162.

⁴⁰ 17 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11161. Thomas probably overstated his first point. It is unlikely that the battle of Jutland would have influenced 'public sentiment' in support of the House bill given that the battle 'ended' on 1 June, one day before the vote in the House. Reporting on the battle – either from official British or German accounts, or from newspapers – would have been sketchy to non-existent on the day of the House vote. He also over-represented the House appropriation.

⁴¹ 17 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11165.

cautioned that 'even now the experts do not know what the lessons are that we can learn from that battle'.⁴²

Norris, a leading isolationist, also pointed to the logical inconsistencies of those advocating for a 'big navy' policy. 'Some of the people who believe in this program say that we do not want the biggest navy, but that we want the second largest navy; that we want to be second only to England'. But, many of these were the same people who warn that the U.S. could be at war with any power or powers, at any time. 'If that be true, then why should we not say we have a navy and an army bigger than the combined armies and navies of all these countries', including Britain?⁴³ Norris, who did not support the bill, was challenging (more effectively than Thomas) the rationale of those who did, especially as the bill fell short of completely 'protecting' the United States and its interests.⁴⁴

Norris also discussed the limits of naval power, noting that though Britain was allied with France, another great naval power, 'their combined efforts have not been able...to drop a single shell from a naval vessel upon German soil. With her great navy England was unable to take the Dardanelles...'.⁴⁵ If Britain could not take the Dardanelles, he concluded, how effective was having a 'great navy' and how plausible was it that Germany or Japan could successfully cross an ocean to attack and invade the U.S.?

Moses Clapp of Minnesota pointed out the following day that any real threat to the U.S. could not include Great Britain, 'for if it does then the Administration and Congress are guilty of a want of preparation that is almost criminal on our part', given the 4,000-mile unguarded border between Canada and the U.S. Clapp went on to pose the question, 'Why, indeed, is that?' To which he proffered a response, 'Because every American knows, as every Englishman knows, that there can never be war with England and the United States' and therefore, 'do[es] not reckon her fleet as one of the fleets we must meet in naval preparations'.⁴⁶

⁴² 17 July 1916, *CR*, pp. 11187-88. Norris was offering an amendment that would postpone the implementation of the appropriations until the president had secured a conference for armaments and arbitration, with part of the U.S. Navy serving in an international navy. This was tabled at the conclusion of the 17 July debate.

⁴³ 17 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11188.

⁴⁴ This is one of the criticisms of the bill raised by Kirschbaum.

⁴⁵ 17 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11189.

⁴⁶ 18 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11205.

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'The same conditions', he continued, addressing the concerns raised by others regarding Japan, 'that make war with England impossible make impossible war with any nation to which England sustains a relation where she is under obligation to take part in war as a part of that relation'. Clapp avoided the rhetorical points of Thomas and Norris regarding the comparative strengths of the U.S. and Royal navies by asserting the congruity of interests between the United States and Great Britain.⁴⁷

Robert LaFollette of Wisconsin, in one of the lengthiest speeches on the appropriations bill over a two-day period, also spoke in opposition to it. On 19 July, LaFollette began by noting that 'interests...behind the preparedness program...do not fear Germany, do not fear England...; but they do want a large Army, they do want a large Navy'. Reading from statements from military and naval experts in House committee testimony and in the press, the senator noted that U.S. coastal defences were strong and capable of withstanding an enemy naval attack. 'Against the opinions of the doughty warriors of the Senate, great though their military wisdom may be', he goaded,

I put the judgment of Gen. Weaver, who says that 'we have the best coasts defenses of the world'; the judgment of Gen. Miles, who says that 'our coasts are as well defended as the coasts of any country, with the same high-power guns and heavy projectiles, better in some respects than the guns mounted at the Dardanelles, which have resisted the most powerful ships of war of the British and French Navies'; and the judgment of Admiral Fletcher, who says that 'this war has conclusively demonstrated that it is impossible for sea craft to successfully attack land fortifications'.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Another perspective on the Canadian-U.S. border was offered by J. Hamilton Lewis earlier in the debate. He decried the:

...hundred years old [treaty] between the United States and Great Britain, which exists yet, which seems to forbid the construction of ships for naval uses or of ships at all upon the Great Lakes. ...[W]hy our Government continues to allow that obstruction to remain as it now exists against a shipyard on the Lakes...I do not understand.

What is better understood are, perhaps, Lewis's motives. As a senator from Illinois, he was attempting to get funding for a new naval shipyard north of Chicago, in his home state. (13 July 1916, *CR*, p. 10949.)

⁴⁸ 19 July speech, quoted in *CR*, 20 July 1916, pp. 11330-31. LaFollette also cited British advisor Alexander Telfer-Smollett on the requirements to transport the men and equipment to launch an attack of two corps – 72,000-96,000 troops.

LaFollette then explored the lessons of the recent battle of Jutland. 'The supreme thing in the Navy, we are told, is the battleship'. This, he argued, was why the Senate proposed to add ten over the course of the three-year appropriation bill, as opposed to none in the one-year House bill. 'The battleship is the standard of the strength and power of the Navy'.

'We are told', he continued, '...that the recent naval battle at Jutland demonstrated that the battleship is to be taken as the test of naval strength. Now, accepting that, let us see where our Navy stands, and what it is our duty to do'. The senator read from testimony given before the Naval Affairs Committee of the House that the U.S. had a navy ranked 'second or third' in the world. Admiral Fletcher was asked if the U.S. Navy could provide 'decided resistance' against any naval power and replied 'Not against all nations' and, later, 'Not against the most powerful nation'.⁴⁹ Admiral Fletcher later identified that 'most powerful nation' as 'England'; LaFollette concluded (for the day) that it was interesting that 'Germany, with a navy only a little more than half as big as that of Great Britain, by adding to it the modern accessories of defense, [had] prevented Great Britain from landing [an invading army] on German soil'.⁵⁰

LaFollette returned to his speech on 20 July. The senator again used House committee testimony to argue that the goal of the experts was more ambitious than previously or explicitly stated. In an extensive interrogation, quoted at length by LaFollette, Congressman Witherspoon had pushed Admiral Fletcher to compare the strength of the U.S. Navy to its possible competitors, beginning with the Royal Navy. If the two navies were to go head-to-head, Witherspoon asked whether the U.S. could resist the Royal Navy, to which Fletcher responded 'We could resist them; but we would probably be defeated'. Witherspoon followed up, asking whether the U.S. could resist *half* of the Royal Navy, assuming the other half would need to protect Great Britain and its interests overseas. Fletcher responded: 'That question I would not like to pass judgment upon'. Under subsequent cross-examination, Fletcher admitted that the U.S. Navy should be able to withstand the German, French, Japanese, Russian, Italian, or Austro-Hungarian fleet. In the end, the admiral reiterated that 'England has a navy so much more powerful than that of any other nation in the world that she could easily keep control of the seas'. 'So this German bugaboo', LaFollette pointed out, 'goes down before the testimony of the commander in chief of the Atlantic Fleet'.⁵¹

⁴⁹ 19 July speech, quoted in CR, 20 July 1916, p. 11332.

⁵⁰ 19 July speech, quoted in CR, 20 July 1916, p. 11333.

⁵¹ 20 July 1916, CR, p. 11333. Congressman Witherspoon died shortly after this cross-examination.

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What, then, LaFollette asked, is the intent of the Senate appropriation bill? In short, he answered, 'the scheme of the appropriations for which the Senate proposes to stand in this bill, is the building of a navy equal to or greater than that of England'; a scheme, he asserted, that constituents at home would oppose.⁵² After reading additional testimony regarding the post-war prospects of the leading naval powers, LaFollette pointed out that the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs

has committed us to a program of building a navy as large as England's navy was before the war. Yet the testimony of the very man who recommended that policy is that England, at the end of this war, will not have as big a navy as she has now or any reason for maintaining as big a navy as she had at the beginning of the war. So the logic of the whole business is that we shall come out of this affair at the end of 10 years with the biggest navy in the world, bigger than that of England.⁵³

LaFollette's argument was a direct attack on the assurances of Senators Tillman and McCumber that the amended bill would not challenge Britain's naval primacy.

But, LaFollette posed, 'what do we want a Navy equal or superior to England's for, anyway? Are we to make war on England? Is England to make war on us?' Nobody 'has suggested that England is preparing to make war upon us...'.⁵⁴ LaFollette's answer, after this lengthy presentation, was straightforward (and perhaps not a little simplified). In the end, the preparedness campaign was driven by those who sought to profit by a rapid U.S. arms build-up and who intended to use the newly expanded army and navy to protect their interests in – and control of – overseas markets and empire. It was for these reasons that LaFollette proposed an amendment to the appropriations bill that would prohibit the use of the new fleet for these purposes.⁵⁵

It was only on 21 July, the final day of the Senate debate, that Britain's blacklist of U.S. companies was commented upon. Charles Thomas was the first to bring up the

⁵² 20 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11334.

⁵³ 20 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11336.

⁵⁴ 20 July 1916, *CR*, *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ In making his case, he leaned heavily on an extended analysis of British history from the *Pax Britannica* of Lord Palmerston through the Boer War that borrowed from the writings of J.A. Hobson, specifically his *Imperialism: A Study*, published in 1902.

blacklist that had been made public three days earlier.⁵⁶ He agreed with LaFollette that there was not 'the need for such a huge addition to our Navy' as proposed in the Senate bill. 'There is a need for some addition,' he asserted, 'a need which is emphasized by the recent blacklisting of many of the merchants and mercantile corporations of this country by the British Government'. Thomas added that, given 'the widespread sympathy in this country for the allies', the British blacklist, 'coming at this time, is most unwise and wholly inexplicable'. 'Our citizens have the same right to trade with the enemies of Great Britain that they have to trade with the subjects of Great Britain', Thomas continued, but came to a more modest conclusion than some of his peers. What was needed was 'a well-balanced fleet, thoroughly equipped and generally capable of enforcing such rights as these'; the House bill was sufficient to accomplish this enforcement and 'all other emergencies which may confront this and succeeding administrations'.⁵⁷

The debate came to a conclusion, and the Senate passed the naval appropriations bill with 71 yeas, 8 nays (and 16 not voting).⁵⁸ The House bill and the Senate bill next went to a conference committee in order to resolve the differences between the two appropriation proposals. Wilson spent the next three weeks lobbying House committee members to adopt the Senate amendments. On 18 August, the House agreed to accept nearly the entirety of the Senate version of the bill, appropriating \$313,384,889.24 (only a little under \$3.5 million less than the original Senate bill).⁵⁹ President Wilson signed the bill into law on 29 August. In the end, the bill 'provided for 157 naval vessels to be built in three years; [and an] immediate increase in enlisted strength to 74,700', and provided the president with emergency authorisation to increase the enlisted strength to a total of 97,000.⁶⁰

Because the House bill was relatively modest, limited to one year and concentrated on battlecruisers, it had not seriously challenged Britain's predominance at sea. The

⁵⁶ Although on the first days of the debate there were references to Britain's embargo, Thomas makes the first and only significant reference to the recent blacklist. Thomas had spoken previously in the debate on 17 July (see above).

⁵⁷ 21 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11355.

⁵⁸ 21 July 1916, *CR*, p. 11384. Thomas, Norris, Clapp and LaFollette were joined by Senators Charles Curtis (Kansas), Asle Gronna (North Dakota), James Vardaman (Mississippi), and John Works (California) in opposition to the bill. Six of the eight were progressive Republicans, two were Democrats (Vardaman and Thomas). One of the Senate seats was open, due to the death of Edwin Burleigh (Maine) in June.

⁵⁹ 18 August 1916, *CR*, p. 12830.

⁶⁰ *Naval Investigation: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Naval Affairs of the U.S. Senate* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1921), p. 3027.

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Senate bill, however, with more spending, more capital (battlecruisers and battleships) and other ships, and more personnel and construction capacity, to be accomplished within an accelerated timeframe of three years, was something different altogether. Nevertheless, for most senators, the bill was not intended to pose a threat to the Royal Navy or Britain. Most of LaFollette's colleagues disagreed with the progressive Wisconsin senator and his opposition to the bill, though they could not agree on the scope of the U.S. building programme they supported. Some senators took up the phrase of building a navy 'second to none' – in effect, working toward naval parity with Britain⁶¹ – while others asserted that the bill would make the U.S. the second largest naval power, after Britain. Considering the vast sweep of the legislation, the Senate debates reveal a stunning lack of consensus about what the bill was trying to accomplish.

While few senators viewed Britain as a potential threat to the United States – if not immediately, then in the aftermath of the Great War – most saw Britain not as an enemy, but as a prospective partner in the post-war world. These senators were often the most effective in advocating for a strong navy. Again, most of those senators who referred to either the Royal Navy or Britain did so in a manner that demonstrated respect, sometimes begrudging, for the senior naval power and hope for continued good Anglo-American relations.⁶² Though there was lingering criticism over the British blockade, the Senate debates provide few examples of the blockade – or the blacklist, for that matter – becoming a strain or a breaking point in those relations. As Arthur Marsden points out, U.S. wartime trade did not suffer as much as U.S. pride. The former, he asserts, was due to the measured policies of the British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, and the minister of blockade, Lord Robert Cecil.⁶³ The British authors of the blockade and blacklist policies, 'were right to

⁶¹ Or, *primacy* over Britain. As noted, the phrase is decidedly ambiguous.

⁶² It should be noted, however, that this observation is based on the Senate debates regarding the appropriations and may not account for unexpressed points of view. Additionally, with the notable exception perhaps of Admiral William Sims, most of the senior U.S. naval administrators and officers were critical of – and unwilling to concede primacy to – the Royal Navy. As later demonstrated by the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Fleet (and, later, Chief of Naval Operations), Admiral Ernest King, these naval attitudes continued through the Second World War.

⁶³ Arthur Marsden, 'The Blockade', in F.H. Hinsley (ed.), *British Foreign Policy Under Sir Edward Grey* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 488-518. Marsden's conclusions agree with those of Arthur J. Marder, *From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, v. II (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). While Coogan agrees that Grey *appeared* to moderate the

believe that the United States would tolerate the stringencies of 1916', even though they 'were straining American forbearance a little more than they realized'.⁶⁴ The Senate debates capture some of that strained tolerance, which fell well short of the point of rupture.⁶⁵

Though the president had successfully lobbied for – and signed – the largest naval appropriation bill in U.S. history, setting the country on a path to become a world power, Wilson's own goals for the 1916 naval building programme are not entirely clear.⁶⁶ What is clear is that he and congressional leaders consistently referred to the Royal Navy, either explicitly or implicitly, as the standard by which U.S. naval power would be measured. On at least three occasions, Wilson indicated that he wanted the U.S. Navy to be 'greater' or 'bigger' than the Royal Navy. His 'indiscretion uttered in a moment of enthusiasm' in February, in St. Louis, might have been just that. There is some evidence that this enthusiasm was not without substance; however much his comments may have been an 'indiscretion', Wilson still seemed to harbour ambitions for U.S. naval power.⁶⁷ After the naval appropriations bill had been signed into law, the president discussed Anglo-American relations in light of the

blockade (because of his measured and diplomatic approach to the U.S., and Wilson's receptiveness to this approach and his own Anglophilic tendencies), he asserts that Grey's own position on Britain's blockade policy was more aggressive than represented by either Marsden or Marder. See Coogan, *The End of Neutrality* (1981), pp. 246-47.

⁶⁴ Marsden, 'The Blockade', p. 512.

⁶⁵ The U.S. Congress did pass a bill in September that gave Wilson the authority to retaliate against the blockade, but the president did not act on that authority.

⁶⁶ Both because there is much – and often contradictory – documentation regarding some issues and because there is little to no documentation regarding others. As mentioned, Wilson not only waived over the extent and intent of the naval building programme, but he also shifted his position regarding the merits of capital ships, as opposed to destroyers, small anti-submarine craft, and submarines (in 1917, he seemed to favour the latter, in late-1918/early-1919, the former). On the other hand, the president did not articulate a position as to whether the U.S. navy was to become an independent power or work in concert with others, such as Britain or France; and he did not communicate a clear strategic vision for U.S. naval power.

⁶⁷ See O'Brien, *British and American Naval Power* (1998), p.117. However, see Klachko and Trask, *Admiral William Shepherd Benson* (1987), who refer to the subsequent cabinet meeting when Wilson was pressed on this. The president responded that '...it was the one thing I said in my swing around the circle that I absolutely believe' (p.48, quoted from Josephus Daniels, *The Wilson Era* [Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press], p. 41).

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British 'blacklist' of U.S. businesses with his close friend and aide, Edward House on 24 September, asserting 'Let us build a bigger navy than hers [Britain's] and do what we please'.⁶⁸ And again, at the end of 1918, Wilson used the threat of an additional naval appropriations bill for 1919 (which would challenge British naval supremacy) as a way to gain compliance from his allies with the covenant of the League of Nations. Even some congressional leaders suspected that the president's goal for the U.S. Navy was nothing less than naval primacy. For those few, like Senator Jones, that should be the ultimate aim; while for senators such as LaFollette on the left and Tillman on the right, it was unnecessary and unwanted.

As it turned out, the Naval Appropriations Act of 1916 was amended in July 1917, after the United States declared war on Germany and coordinated its naval building programme with the needs of its allies (particularly Britain). This was the result of a number of factors. First, the German government announced on 31 January 1917 that it was resuming unrestricted submarine warfare the following day. The Wilson administration severed diplomatic ties to Germany four days later, on 3 February. This, the timely revelation of the Zimmermann telegram by the British government later that month, and German attacks on U.S. shipping in late March led Wilson to ask Congress for a declaration of war on 2 April.⁶⁹ Because the German government had encouraged Mexico to go to war against the U.S. and its U-boats had sunk American ships, any debate over the moral or legal equivalency of German and British policies was rendered moot. Second, successful cooperation was established between the U.S. and Royal navies in early 1917, due to the efforts of U.S. naval emissary Admiral William Sowden Sims and the British Admiralty. The day after his arrival in Britain, Sims was briefed by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, on

⁶⁸ House Diary, 24 September 1916, in Link, ed., *PWW*, v 38, pp. 258-59. The comment was prompted by House relating to the president that:

It was my opinion that the real difference with Great Britain now was that the United States had undertaken to build a great navy...and we were rapidly taking the position Germany occupied before the war. No one in England would probably admit that the things I mentioned were causing the growing irritation against us, but it was a fact nevertheless.

See also Michael Simpson, ed., *Anglo-American Naval Relations 1917-1919* (Aldershot UK: Scolar Press, for The Navy Records Society, 1991), p. 486. The 'blacklist' was a list of foreign firms – eighty-seven of which were U.S. – with which British subjects could not communicate or trade.

⁶⁹ The resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare refocused allied priorities to U-boat defence. The declaration of war against Germany was approved by the Senate on 4 April and the House on 6 April.

10 April, regarding the extent of the German U-boat menace and Sims, in turn, urged the president and Navy Department to send much-needed assistance as soon as possible. Sims made it clear that the allies desperately needed destroyers and other anti-submarine equipment.⁷⁰ Third, the British government, now directed by David Lloyd George, sent a high-level diplomatic mission led by the new foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, to the United States. During this mission, from 22 April to 22 May, Balfour urged that U.S. shipbuilding should concentrate on destroyers and other anti-submarine ships.⁷¹ Though the discussions were inconclusive during the mission, Balfour and Colonel House demonstrated great flexibility throughout the negotiations and drew the president deeper into the issue as they continued to pursue some diplomatic accord on the issue.⁷² And fourth, by July, the General Board had come to the conclusion that the 1916 naval building programme had underestimated the gravity of the German submarine threat.⁷³ Wilson agreed and decided to meet directly with Sir William Wiseman, the head of British intelligence in the U.S., on 13 July, informing him of his decision to recommend revising the priorities of the naval programme passed in 1916. Wilson commented that 'capital ships were no longer of great value in naval warfare; the future belonged to destroyers and submarines'.⁷⁴ Instead of a programme that had been weighed in favour of producing more capital ships, the president now asked Congress for an amended programme that shifted to the construction of destroyers and other anti-

⁷⁰ Plans for liaison between the two countries actually predate the U.S. declaration of war. The U.S. subsequently sent six destroyers in late April, and was preparing to dispatch others. Alan Dobson adds that Sims and Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly, commander of Britain's anti-submarine forces, had a particularly successful relationship; in *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 37.

⁷¹ Balfour was in the United States for a month and addressed the U.S. Congress on 5 May, the first British minister to do so. Wilson, who was in the presidential balcony, broke with precedent and joined Balfour on the floor of the House after his speech to congratulate him. Balfour's temperament and prestige, as a former prime minister, made a very positive impression. See R.J.Q. Adams, *Balfour: The Last Grandee* (London: John Murray, 2007), pp. 326-28. For more on the Balfour Mission, see David Woodward, *Trial by Friendship: Anglo-American Relations 1917-1918* (Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), pp. 44-68.

⁷² These negotiations continued into the summer.

⁷³ See, also, Kirschbaum's dissertation 'The 1916 Naval Expansion Act'. Kirschbaum argues that the approved naval construction lacked strategic and tactical purpose for the war as it had evolved by 1915-16.

⁷⁴ This summary statement is from Trask, *Captains & Cabinets* (1972), p. 119.

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submarine craft in order to counter German U-boat attacks and serve Allied interests.⁷⁵ This new bill was passed swiftly by a very receptive Congress.

There is an interesting post-script to the Naval Appropriations Act of 1916. As mentioned above, in late 1918, the president informed Congress of his intention to completely fulfil the original act of 1916 and asked the legislature to supplement it with another three-year naval building programme.⁷⁶ At the beginning of the Paris Peace Conference in early January 1919, Wilson was pushing his allies to adopt the covenant of the League of Nations, without emendation, as part of the peace treaties to be negotiated. If the allies did not agree to adopt the covenant, 'he would seek authority from Congress to build the biggest navy in the world'. 'This', according to Stephen Roskill, 'would be done by not only completing the huge 1916 programme, but by seeking authorisation for the repetition of that programme which had been presented to Congress with the support of the administration in December 1918'.⁷⁷

Though the tensions over the general aspects of the covenant were resolved fairly quickly, Wilson's threat was a prelude to tense on-going negotiations between the U.S and Great Britain. As the U.S. Congress was weighing the proposed 1919 naval building programme, the British government pushed for clarity. In a later memorandum, the acerbic Admiral William Shepherd Benson, then chief of U.S. Naval Operations recalled a meeting in March 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference between himself, U.S. Secretary of the Navy Daniels, the First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy, Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, and the First Lord of the Admiralty, Walter Long.

Benson recalled that Long was concerned that the completion of the 1916 naval building programme and the newly proposed 1919 programme constituted a direct challenge to Britain's naval supremacy. Long responded 'that Great Britain could not

⁷⁵ Admiral Sims, who was appointed to command the U.S. naval forces in Europe (shortly after he arrived in Britain in April 1917), asserts that it took him months to convince Wilson and Daniels of the urgency of the German U-boat threat to Britain. See William Sowden Sims, *The Victory at Sea* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920) and Elting E. Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy* (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

⁷⁶ In his Annual Message to the Congress.

⁷⁷ Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars, I: The Period of Anglo-American Antagonism 1919-1929* (NY: Walker and Company, 1968), pp. 89-90.

feel satisfied in coming out of the war with the tremendous losses she had sustained in men, money and ships...[as] a second-rate sea power'.⁷⁸

Benson challenged Long's opposition to the U.S. naval programme, asserting that the U.S. Navy had never contemplated war against Great Britain, and that he 'had frequently referred to the fact that we should have a navy equal to that of England' in order to meet any threat from Germany, Japan, or other power. He added, inconsistently, and in his customary blunt manner, 'Well, Mr Long, if you and the other members of your Government continue to argue along the lines you are proceeding [upon] this morning, I can assure you that it will mean but one thing, and that is war between Great Britain and the United States'.⁷⁹ The threat was not only contradictory, it was also not long-lived.

As events played out over April, these issues were resolved; or, rather, they were effectively postponed until the 1921-22 Washington Conference.⁸⁰ Wilson's aide, Colonel House, met with one of the leading representatives of the British Foreign Office, Lord Robert Cecil, and reached a satisfactory *quid pro quo* over these and related concerns. In return for British support of the U.S. position to include the Monroe Doctrine within the League of Nations covenant, Cecil pushed for concessions on the existing and prospective U.S. naval programmes. On 10 April, after consulting with Wilson, House 'told Cecil that the President would consider a postponement of work on ships already authorized [by the 1916 act] but not yet in construction and would also consider a suspension of the supplementary three-year

⁷⁸ Long's argument summarized the precise points raised by LaFollette in July (see above).

⁷⁹ 'Memorandum by Benson on Anglo-American Talks on Naval Building at the Paris Peace Conference, March 1919', dated 16 May 1921, in Simpson, *Anglo-American Naval Relations 1917-1919* (1991), p. 598. Benson's initial point – that the U.S. never contemplated war against Britain – was disingenuous. The U.S. Navy often staged battle exercises pitting a 'U.S.' fleet against a 'British' rival fleet. Many senior U.S. naval officers saw Britain as the prospective enemy (or, at the least, a powerful rival).

⁸⁰ For a good synopsis of how the issues were resolved, see Tillman, *Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference* (1961), pp. 287-294ff., and Marder, *From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, v. V (1970), pp. 224-48. See also, Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars* (1968), p. 91 (and elsewhere) for this and the Washington Conference.

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naval program then before Congress'.⁸¹ These agreements effectively resolved British immediate concerns regarding a post-war Anglo-American naval race.

Taken alone, the Naval Bill of 1916 provides interesting insights into the politics, diplomacy and strategy of the U.S. both before and after it entered the war. The Senate deliberations over the bill demonstrate that many on both sides of the debate viewed the Royal Navy as the standard by which naval strength was measured. Most of those senators who did so had no expressed desire to challenge Britain's immediate primacy at sea, though a few hoped for eventual parity over the long-term.⁸² Senators both for and against the bill referenced Britain's naval experiences during the war – and especially the battle of Jutland – to support their arguments. For those who favoured the bill, Jutland provided ample preliminary evidence that battleships performed better than battlecruisers and demonstrated the urgency of the U.S. naval building programme. For those who did not, the inconclusive naval battles of 1914-1916, including Jutland, confirmed their views that the U.S. did not need to embark on the large and costly Senate bill. Though there were some senators who commented on Britain's use of naval power to enforce its blockade, none proposed to challenge that policy by force. The Senate debates largely avoided the service prejudices within the U.S. Navy or the rhetorical positions of some in the House of Representatives against Britain or the Royal Navy.

Whether Wilson's government in 1916 or 1919 had seriously intended on building 'a navy equal to that of England' or the 'biggest navy in the world', the United States did seem poised to challenge the Royal Navy's long-standing primacy at sea. For Britain, the pre-war Anglo-German naval race was won, but though this prospective post-war Anglo-American naval rivalry threatened to be more difficult, it was not as dangerous, as British policymakers again succeeded in mitigating the priorities and aims of the original bill. Though Wilson has often been seen as somewhat of an idealist, an internationalist, and a man of peace, there was also a different side of the president and U.S. policy that emerges from this study, a side which steered the U.S. government into enacting one of the most ambitious naval building programmes in its history in 1916. That Wilson was also willing to compromise suggests that Anglo-American relations, based on mutual respect and interests, remained an important part of his approach to foreign and naval affairs.

⁸¹ Tillman, p. 292. Wilson formally withdrew his supplementary bill (that sparked the 'naval battle of Paris' with Benson and Daniels and their British counterparts) in May. The President also agreed to annual naval conversations with Britain.

⁸² Only one, Wesley Jones of Washington, explicitly called for U.S. naval superiority. See above.

In the event, even with Wilson's initial threats of 1919 (which were reiterated by Daniels and Benson), the Congress was in no mood or hurry to adopt the president's 1919 programme and challenge Britain's naval primacy. Wilson's willingness to negotiate with Britain in April 1919 reflected this reality. Nor was the nation at-large interested in underwriting the cost of the proposed ambitious programme. The war had been won and peace seemed secure. This would remain so until the threat of another, greater war led the next Democratic president, and Wilson's former assistant secretary of the Navy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to push for a new expansion of the U.S. Navy.⁸³

⁸³ Not only was FDR significant in pushing the 1916 bill through the Congress, Senator Swanson, chair of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee, played a central role. Swanson would become FDR's Secretary of the Navy and serve from March 1933 until his death in July 1939. The first U.S. battleship to be built in nearly twenty years, the *U.S.S. North Carolina*, was launched in June 1940.