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## **Losing the Initiative in Mercantile Warfare: Great Britain's Surprising Failure to Anticipate Maritime Challenges to Her Global Trading Network in the First World War**

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"It [Commerce raiding] is doubtless a most important secondary operation of naval war, and is not likely to be abandoned till war itself shall cease; but regarded as a primary and fundamental measure, sufficient in itself to crush an enemy, it is probably a delusion, and a most dangerous delusion, when presented in the fascinating garb of cheapness to the representatives of the people."

– Alfred Thayer  
Mahan, 1890<sup>[1]</sup>

Mahan's words are poignant in the context of this title, in that they illustrate the type of singular sentiment that is often held up to explain the Royal Navy's seeming preoccupation, in the late Victorian era, on the decisive sea battle as a means to achieve "Command of the Seas." The accepted "doctrine of the day," as typified by Mahan is, of course, only one possible candidate; others that have been suggested include a changing strategic situation, the fast pace of technological change, a declining financial and industrial power-base and a shortage of manpower.

Historians have traditionally tended to view this phenomenon in terms of the great power rivalries within Europe at the time.<sup>[2]</sup> The statesmen of the day, they maintain, thought of sea power in terms of its deterrence value and the prestige that went with the possession of a "Line of Battle," a sentiment that had changed little since the days of Trafalgar. In this regard, it was the numbers of major warships fielded and their cost that was paramount, and things like their fighting efficiency were very much a secondary consideration. It was this line of thinking that led to the adoption in Britain of what became known as the "two-Power standard" for sizing the battleship fleet.<sup>[3]</sup> Admittedly aimed more at France and Russia in the beginning, conventional history would have the development of Tirpitz's "Risk" Fleet as becoming sufficiently powerful by 1902 to become an increasingly dominant factor in the naval estimates. By 1904, having already over-extended the naval purse to maintain the "two-Power standard" in battleships, while at the same time being forced to counter the French developments in armored cruisers, the Admiralty was facing not only an increasingly recalcitrant Treasury but also fresh calls for yet more naval expenditure, to counter this new battlefleet<sup>[4]</sup>. Their solution, in

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the short term, was to recall a large proportion of the fleet back to home waters in order to match the increasing numbers of battleships in Europe. In the longer term, of course, the whole situation was complicated by the advent of *HMS Dreadnought*.<sup>[5]</sup> Clearly, in a Navy pre-occupied with matching the battlefleets of its rivals and facing the spiraling costs of so doing, there was little room, or so the story goes, for any consideration of other naval missions, particularly the protection of trade, which, apart from being inherently difficult, seemed in no immediate danger. However, while the notion, that the German fleet alone became the driving force behind naval strategy is convenient, in so far as it supports the political accounts of the lead up to the First World War, it really only tells a part of the story.

More recently others have suggested that the retrenchment of the Fleet in home waters was not only necessary for financial reasons but it was also to allow the modernization of the Navy to proceed along the lines suggested by Sir John Fisher.<sup>[6]</sup> In brief, Fisher realized that, set against a backdrop of the continuing exponential increases in the costs of fielding a first rate fleet and the relative decline in strength of the country as an industrial and economic power, radical innovation was required in the way the Navy approached the whole question of naval superiority if her position of pre-eminence was to be sustained.<sup>[7]</sup> While he himself may have had a broader and more informed view of what sea power provided in relation to the British Empire's commercial lifeblood, this aspect of his thinking was somehow not preserved in the progression through the naval race of the first decade of the Twentieth century. It is this failing that needs to be investigated, not so much in terms of an exclusive concentration on facts alone, but with more emphasis on how these facts were received and acted upon by the majority of the decision-makers in question. The output of the Navy, like that of any complex bureaucracy, must ultimately depend both on the pressures governing its financial viability and, perhaps more critically on the human factors, the corporate culture and the societal context of the times. To settle on one, or a combination of material factors, over and above all of these more intangible elements, seems unnecessarily simplistic and this approach may be guilty of what one historian has termed "the reductive fallacy that reduces complexity to simplicity, or diversity to uniformity" by confusing a contributory factor with the explicit cause.<sup>[8]</sup>

The purpose of this short paper then is twofold: First, in reviewing many of these proposed "causes" for the mercantile protection oversight, it becomes apparent that although no one, single element can be called "decisive," they all contributed to a mounting background pressure on the leadership. Second: it explores a related and broader idea that, given these pressures, a more likely explanation for the collective lack of action on the trade protection problem was the bureaucratic and parochial resistance on the part of Britain's naval elites; in effect, a resistance to thinking as broadly as the situation demanded. Trade protection simply didn't "rate" when compared to the "glamour" associated with that quintessence of naval tasks; achieving "Command of the Seas" by a decisive naval engagement of the enemy fleet. Although the Navy had a long

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history of merchant ship protection and convoying, it had been as a source of supply for expeditionary armies that this had been warranted and never something as fundamental as the food supply for the nation itself. The scale, importance and hence difficulties of the problem in 1914 were altogether new, and naval officers in general, with no background in economics, showed neither the aptitude nor, more importantly, the inclination to deal with them.

## The Cultural Shock of the Industrial Age and "Total" War

Winston Churchill, in his celebrated histories of the British nation, maintains that the First World War differed from all wars, before or since, in terms of its ferocity, breadth of impact and destructive power<sup>[9]</sup>. Whole nations and populations, rather than mere armies, were thrown into the struggle and while this might seem obvious and unremarkable to us, eighty years further on and with the salutary experience of another World War behind us, there is considerable evidence to support the contention that this came as a traumatic shock to the European civilizations in 1915. The universal shock and horror of "first time" events, such as the early Zeppelin raids on London and the sinking of the *Lusitania*, have been well documented, and was probably inevitable but other, more perceptive editorials in the wake of these tragedies tend to support the assertion that there was a considerable time lag before such events became accepted as routine.<sup>[10]</sup> This implies that a large and widespread cultural re-adjustment was underway in the early years of the war.

The second major upheaval concerned the economy. The First World War was probably the earliest point in history where a country's industrial and economic potential was to emerge as a decisive consideration in the war plans. Although there had been smaller conflicts in the Industrial Age, their limited nature or speedy military conclusions meant that the industrial productivity, and hence economic vulnerabilities, of the belligerents had never needed to become prominent considerations in the minds of the planners. It was only the titanic struggle between the older European empires that unexpectedly became "bogged down" in the mud of the Western front, which provided the necessary pressures. Although individual armies in previous conflicts had been successfully deprived of logistical support by careful trade interdiction, never before had two, non-self-sufficient, industrial economies been pitted against one another in a struggle, where the exploitation of economic vulnerabilities was to prove every bit as crucial to success as any military prowess.

The changes in the British economy that were to make the First World War a very different experience for her must be traced back to the 1846 decision to repeal the Corn Laws. Faced with some very real difficulties in reliably feeding her burgeoning population within their means, the government of the day removed the duty on imported produce in an attempt to lower prices, increase accessibility and get a secondary market in imported staples.<sup>[11]</sup> The effect was immediate and far-reaching due to the

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interference of two, unrelated but enormous and coincident social revolutions. One was the rise of industrialism and mercantilism in Europe and the other, the unforeseen successes of the New World farming enterprises.<sup>[12]</sup> By the last third of the nineteenth century, the United States and Canada had emerged as great food powers and their combined productivity threatened to overwhelm the smaller, rural European economies. In response, Britain's great economic innovation of the late Victorian period was to replace the home grown grain with imports, thereby freeing up the labor and investments hitherto employed in farming to be redirected into trade and manufacturing. This met with brilliant success, in that the surfeit of labor was exactly what the manufacturing industries needed and the resultant growth propelled Britain into a position of unrivalled economic power.

The downstream effects were also fairly quick and irreversible: Britain's trading future, and her mercantile empire were assured and she moved quickly into the predominant position of power in Europe by virtue of the size of her merchant marine. Since British ships dominated the long haul ocean routes, she quickly came to control this imported grain and, by the eve of 1914, grain accounted for over 17 percent of cargoes landed by weight.<sup>[13]</sup> Even this however understates its import to the British merchant marine, which, by virtue of specialization, handled far more grain over international routes than any other nation. In contrast, to her mercantile success however, her self-sufficiency in staples had declined exponentially and, by the same date, more than half of her required calories came from abroad. In short, she had become an import economy, whose exports were rarely large enough to pay for all these imports. The resultant deficit was only sustainable due to her investment and insurance services and the fact that she ran almost half the world's ships.<sup>[14]</sup> The significance of this for the Navy was that grain, and hence by inference the Merchant Marine, had, for the first time, become a strategic commodity necessitating proper consideration and protection in the war plans.<sup>[15]</sup> This it seems they were slow to appreciate.

The final aspect that needs to be considered in assessing the context of the times is the very rapid and bewildering pace of technological development that typified the age. Nowhere was this more keenly felt than in the world of naval procurement and although there is no time here to go into all the many and varied aspects of the resultant naval "revolution," an exception needs to be made for the advent of steam propulsion, a development that had a crucial impact on two aspects of the protection of shipping problem.

The first of these was essentially a modernization issue. In short, since the mobility of navies had been greatly improved by steam propulsion, it was no longer possible to hide obsolete fleets at the farthest outposts of empire, where their lack of competitiveness would be less of an issue. Provided the necessary coaling stations were held, a modern battlefleet was quite able to travel global distances in a fraction of the time that a sailing fleet might take. It therefore offered the possibility of successfully reacting to a crisis in

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a far-flung corner of the world, while still remaining within sufficient reaction time of a developing situation in its assigned theater. Clearly wireless communication was the other great enabler in this area. This presented large navies like the British and French, who had traditionally used less effective units as “station” cruisers, with a dilemma. At a stroke, their modernization bill was increased many fold, since the retention of obsolescent units on foreign stations, was no longer an option in the face of such rapid power projection. Of course, the corollary was, that if you could build sufficient of them, these modern fast ships ultimately offered huge economies in these very same station craft since, theoretically, they could be entirely dispensed with, provided the necessary reactivity could be guaranteed from the nearest main naval base.<sup>[16]</sup> In practice however, there was rarely sufficient political confidence to allow this strategy to be implemented. The foreign service departments were invariably loathe to do without the reassurance of a “local” cruiser and most navies had to strike a compromise on this point, something that became increasingly expensive to maintain.

The second main effect of steam had to do with its increasing adoption by the merchant marine. Freed from the need to follow reliable wind patterns, the trade routes became more dispersed and thus a widespread feeling developed that held that individual merchant ships would be much more difficult to find and protect in wartime.<sup>[17]</sup> This thinking was, to a certain extent, encouraged by the ship owners themselves, who showed great energy and initiative in opening up unique, and therefore profitable, routes for their steamers and who resisted most vehemently any attempts made to regulate their sailings. It was also supported by no lesser authority than Great Britain's premier naval strategist, Sir Julian Corbett.<sup>[18]</sup>

However, while cultural shocks like these can provide a catalyst for change, they alone can never provide the whole story to explain why an organization chose to follow a particular course of action. To gain a better appreciation of this dynamic at work, it is necessary to look at how such innovation and change was likely to be received by the decision-makers and, in essence, whether the underlying culture within the organization was receptive and open to fresh and innovative thinking.

## **The Protection of Trade in Theory and Practice**

Returning to Corbett, he was dismissive of merchant protection on two counts. First, he maintained that the sheer size of the British Merchant Marine was its best protection. Any would-be interdicting fleet was simply not big enough to make the necessary impact. Secondly, since the belligerent would have to make a sustained and extensive effort over a long period of time if they were to have any effect at all, it would be necessary for them to first provide some security for their raiders. This meant gaining and maintaining Command of the Seas, which had to be an unlikely scenario given the predominance of the Royal Navy over any other maritime power of the day. The path then for the Royal Navy seemed clear: maintain “Command of the Seas” and all else

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would naturally follow.<sup>[19]</sup> Incidentally, Corbett was equally dismissive of the time honored convoying techniques, citing that the circumstances had changed in such a way as to make this a positively dangerous strategy. This opinion seemed to benefit from extensive work at the War College, where all the various developments in shipping technology had been carefully analyzed. In short, his proffered view maintained that since the advent of steam propulsion had dispersed the world's trade across the oceans and away from the "trade winds" routes, it was no longer effective or practical to gather them together again. In fact, to do so was effectively reducing their natural protection as it focused them into a vulnerable target.<sup>[20]</sup>

This latter view on convoying was a surprising one for a man of Corbett's reputation to take, particularly given the clear logic of the numerical superiority argument. It shows little appreciation of the problem from the prospective raider's point of view. While concentration certainly made the chances of a successful encounter more profitable (as there might be more ships to sink), on the converse, it dramatically reduced the probability of that encounter ever taking place at all. A single raider, whether submarine or cruiser, had statistically a much better chance in encountering one of a broad front of merchantmen advancing over a wide swathe of ocean, than he ever did in intercepting a single convoy over the same space. Also, given the limits of the technology of the day and the likelihood of convoy escort, the raider would be most unlikely to be able to capitalize on any successful convoy interception, beyond the sinking of a single ship.<sup>[21]</sup> The companion vessels would have likely scattered at the first signs of trouble and, lacking sufficient speed advantage, a second attack was unlikely. Thus the advantages to the convoy seem as valid as ever, and his thesis flawed on two counts. In fairness though, it has to be said that he viewed the risk of diverting naval assets away from strategically more profitable efforts as his main objection to convoying and, in this, he was arguably correct under the circumstances, at least until the provision of sufficient escort types made the lesser task viable concurrently.<sup>[22]</sup> What is unequivocal however, is that despite its shaky logic, nobody in the Admiralty chose to challenge this point.

It is this seeming blind acceptance of flawed thinking by the professional naval officers of the day, or else their total indifference to the subject, that bears the most examination. While the writings of a naval theoretician may or may not have been influential, what seems staggering is the paucity of intellectual and professional thought on this subject from naval and government records.<sup>[23]</sup> Illustrative of this are a number of flawed assumptions in contemporary naval thinking that you might have expected a seasoned professional to correct, or at least to debate, at an early stage. Many even seemed to misunderstand the one great strength that the Royal Navy had; namely that it was so numerically superior that the chances of it facing superior forces on the shipping lanes was really quite small and that, as a result, the real threat here was from individual or small groups of raiders working in concert with one another, and hoping to use the vast expanses of the ocean as their shield from detection. For example, most contemporary naval trade protection plans seemed fixed on the idea of providing protection to the key

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trade "bottlenecks" around the world, in the hope that at least a minimum effort might bring about the best returns, in terms of the numbers of vessels potentially shielded.<sup>[24]</sup> While admittedly spreading the protection over the most ships, these proposals took no account of the viewpoint of the enemy. From a raider's point of view, any sortie into waters likely to be protected by superior forces and where maneuverability might be limited, would appear to be a poor choice for anyone intending to make a prolonged impact on trade, no matter how enticing the concentration of potential "prey" might be. It would seem far more sensible to attack in the open seas, where the chances of successful evasion were dramatically improved. Similar misconceptions surrounded the tendency to view the trade routes as narrow and precise "highways" which could be defended by a "systematic" cruiser patrol.<sup>[25]</sup>

A third aspect that had a bearing on this was the seeming reluctance by most military men of the day to consider anything else but the offensive in warfare. While accepting this as a general "conditioning" that had undoubted benefits in other areas, the offensive "hunting down" of raiders in the sea lanes was not a good answer to this problem and yet it seemed the one thing that the Admiralty were at pains to stress, often to the exclusion of other considerations.<sup>[26]</sup> There is a certain duplicity of thought here that is difficult to reconcile. Almost in the same breath that Corbett and others were extolling the virtues of dispersal of the merchant fleet as a passive defense in itself, the professional naval officers seemed to make the entirely illogical deduction that protecting cruisers would be better suited to actively hunting for the relatively small numbers of raiders spread over the world's oceans rather than instead, concentrating in the area where the enemy must operate if his weapons are to be effective.<sup>[27]</sup>

Perhaps even more damning however are their open admissions that they simply hadn't given the problem a great deal of thought.<sup>[28]</sup> While some of this can reasonably be put down to the lack of organized planning that typified most naval operations of this era, it is ironic that these admissions came at a time when Great Britain was arguably facing the most serious threat yet made to her seaborne trade routes. In the 1880s the French, facing an overwhelming superiority in the British battlefleet that they were clearly unable to match, attempted to introduce an asymmetric war fighting strategy that, amongst other things, sought to optimize the expected strengths in the French fleet (in cruisers and torpedo craft) against known weaknesses in the British operation, specifically the protection of her maritime commerce. The French admirals, of the movement that became known as the "*Jeune Ecole*," reasoned that, with a large number of fast, commerce destroying cruisers working the shipping lanes, Britain's trade could be sufficiently affected so as to cause a collapse in the commercial insurance markets that would, in turn, bring ruin to the British economy.<sup>[29]</sup> The key of course was speed and endurance in the cruisers, together with a "fixing" and attrition of the superior British battlefleet by an inferior French fleet supported by an active coastal defense made up of flotillas of torpedo craft. It was hoped that British plans to blockade the French in time of war would thereby expose her battlefleet to unacceptable losses at the hand of this

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"*defense mobile*." Provided the cruisers were still able to sortie and proved powerful enough to overwhelm the majority of British station cruisers, fast enough to run from battleships and numerous enough to make a difference, they might yet prove sufficiently threatening to cause Britain to seek terms.<sup>[30]</sup> The point here is that it would not be unreasonable to assume that all this activity in this one area by a potential belligerent might cause an equally searching review of trade protection measures on the part of Great Britain. This, it appears, was not the case and the only obvious response seemed to be the starting of a British armored cruiser program, aimed at matching that of France.<sup>[31]</sup>

Finally, another contributory factor may have been Great Britain's prevalent attitudes towards international law. There seemed to be an innate belief in British society at large that, in time of war, the laws and customs of the sea, with regard to blockades and the interference with merchant traffic, would be followed by belligerent powers.<sup>[32]</sup> In particular, there was good reason to believe that international law, such as it was, would be upheld, particularly with regard to the rights of passage of neutrals on the high seas. Under these circumstances, and with an increasing share of British imports being carried in "neutral bottoms" there was at least the beginnings of an argument that maintained that the threat of commerce raiding may be exaggerated. Perhaps only the mercurial Lord Fisher had a more pragmatic view on the laws of war and neutrality. Fisher had a deep suspicion of international agreements, not so much because of their sentiments but because, in his experience, such restraints in wartime were quickly set aside. Great Britain had, rightly or wrongly, been molesting merchant shipping in most of her wars up to this point and, despite the continual creeping litigation of international law, he fully expected this to resume in any large maritime struggle. Although the 1856 Declaration of Paris had been a convenient thing to sign while at peace, it was suitably vague on the issue of what actually constituted the "Contraband of War" that Fisher was not unduly concerned. Meanwhile, as a signatory and the world's largest carrier, Britain stood to gain from improved immunities and rights during the struggles of others and, should she ever become besieged herself, her cargoes would have more security if they traveled in "neutral bottoms."<sup>[33]</sup> Besides, it was politically more astute in peacetime to be seen to conform with Liberal opinions, provided that any such accommodation offered no irreversible disadvantage. The only thing that seemed outside the spirit of the declaration was the offensive use of blockade by Great Britain but, with "Command of the Seas," guaranteed, the navy would have sufficient freedom of action to pick and choose those parts of the law that she was prepared to uphold.<sup>[34]</sup>

In sum therefore, while there was clearly a lot of misinformation available to the Admiralty on the subject of trade protection, what seems equally certain is that there were no systematic attempts made, at the organizational level, to separate myth from legend. While the occasional Admiral picked up on aspects of the problem that impinged on his own "pet" beliefs or responsibilities, these seemed to be soon forgotten after he had left office. One can only deduce from this that the organization, as a whole, was either not receptive or else incapable of the necessary analytical thought that might have resulted in



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a more coherent, long-term approach. It was almost as though, despite some clear warnings from the French in the 1890s, they had somehow pre-determined that such systematic analysis was simply not a part of their professional duty as naval officers.

## **The Specifics of the German Threat and, in particular, the Submarine**

While all these points may shed light on the general "receptiveness" of the organization to these issues, it would be incorrect to extrapolate these across to the maritime threat posed by Germany in the run up to the First World War without some additional comment on the specific circumstances of the case. After all, some have argued that it was precisely the perceived inferiority of the German commerce-raiding threat, as compared to the French, that led to the almost fatal perpetuation of this complacency. Possessing only a small cruiser fleet, limited coaling facilities and pre-occupied with the building of the High Seas Fleet, the Germans seemed unlikely contenders for mastery of the sea lanes. Their U boat flotilla was small and had been assigned defensive duties around the main fleet concentration areas and the Germans themselves seemed uncertain as to the value of the submarine.<sup>[35]</sup>

This was hardly unexpected. For one thing and given the aforementioned "shocks" that society was struggling to come to terms with concerning the "totality" of modern warfare, there is a body of opinion that holds that, in the pre-war period, there were certain aspects of warfare that, although technically possible, were unlikely to merit serious attention from the planners. This was simply because, with their indiscriminate effects, they were so unlikely to be accepted as morally and politically sound by society as a whole.<sup>[36]</sup> It followed that time spent in their preparation was likely to be time wasted. The true, offensive potential of the submarine as a commerce raider seemed to fall into this bracket. Even figures as well respected for their vision and pragmatism as Lord Fisher found the prospect of unrestricted commercial sinkings, no matter how well justified from a practical point of view, a hard sell to the naval establishment, surprisingly even to those whom he had "hand-picked" for their vision.<sup>[37]</sup>

However, if his grasp of the weaknesses in international law showed a singularity of purpose, Fisher was less clear when it came to the threat of the submarine. Specifically, he seemed unable to recognize that their depredations on the trading routes, with or without forsaking international law, could seriously threaten even a power of Great Britain's magnitude. There is an inconsistency in his thinking here that is difficult to explain. On the one hand, his work with the oil commission led him to extol the virtues of a submarine "cruiser" with "the endurance to travel to the Argentine" and a full load of torpedoes, while on the other, he seemed incapable of a straight answer to Arthur Balfour's enquiry as to whether British trade was vulnerable, even to the smaller German vessels then coming into service.<sup>[38]</sup> He seems content instead to brush this off with the opinion that, since Britain's geographical and naval situation was so superior, Germany would simply lack sufficient resources to make a submarine blockade effective.<sup>[39]</sup>

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Finally on the purely military side, and an issue of a more technical nature, there were serious reservations as to the efficacy of using submarines in the commerce-raiding role and many naval tacticians of the time therefore dismissed the threat as insignificant. Herbert Richmond's sentiments were probably typical: "the submarine has the smallest value of any naval vessel for the direct attack upon trade. She does not carry a crew that is capable of taking charge of a prize, she cannot remove passengers and other persons if she wishes to sink one."<sup>40</sup>

In the end of course, both Corbett and Fisher were proved right: The enormous naval and mercantile superiority of Great Britain proved simply too much for Wilhelmian Germany to absorb. The point however, is surely that the complacent British attitudes and mediocre analytical abilities that were prevalent at the time, were ill deserving of this good fortune. Had the German strategy been more consistent toward a systematic use of the U boat from the beginning, there is good reason to believe that their depredations against British trade may just have caused sufficient panic in Whitehall that, without any analysis to support their theories, the fact that Germany was inevitably destined to fall short of her goals, might have remained concealed from their Lordships over the timeframe of some crucial political decisions.

While a lot of the British failings can be excused on the grounds of the many social, cultural and military revolutions that were in train at the time, the arrogance to assume that a perceived "secondary" mission like the protection of trade was somehow not a part of their professional duties, cannot. Some analytical research into these problems, backed up by manoeuvres, may have gone a long way to re-assure the political leaders of the veracity of Corbett's hypothesis while, at the same time, bowling out the misconceptions over things like convoying and port overcrowding that were to cloud the later decision-making. This is all the more staggering given the clear warnings from the French some thirty five years beforehand.

Equally interesting is the clear conclusion that while all these profound changes had contributing effects, no single one was decisive. Rather it was the culmination of their effects, coupled with the suffocating complacency, ignorance and confusion that reigned in the Admiralty at the time that ensured that relevant facts remained concealed from those who might have made use of them. Even that most influential and conniving of Admirals, Lord Fisher, who, apart from being inconsistent in many of his revolutionary thoughts, was himself incapable of completely shaking the bureaucratic inertia that clogged naval decision-making at the time. This has to cast doubt on some of the more extreme claims that have been made as to his influence on both the Navy and his ability to manipulate his political masters for his own ends.

In fairness of course, these problems were much easier to describe than they were to solve. In simple terms, if battlefleets were to win "Command of the Seas" in Mahanian fashion, they needed to bring superior gunpower and armour to bear. This necessitated

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that they be concentrated, while of course the merchant marine had become widely scattered. Alternatively, if the navy had been directed to protect the shipping lanes, they would have been most unlikely to be able to challenge an enemy fleet and would, themselves, have become vulnerable. Given these conflicting pressures and the obvious imperative to nullify the strategic value of the High Seas Fleet, it is easy to condone the Admiralty's inaction on the basis that the trade protection dilemma was effectively "insoluble" within the means available. The truth however is that the problem was far from insoluble, a fact that was subsequently proven by later research. Worse still though, has to be the realization that the failings of naval bureaucracy kept the British leadership insufficiently aware of these facts and therefore not in a position to make an informed judgment.

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[1] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890), 539 (hereinafter cited as Mahan, *Influence*). Text in parentheses was added by the author. While some may be tempted to regard this quotation as being presented out of context, in that it was presumably referring to the historical period under discussion (1660–1783), this is not strictly the case. Appearing as it does at the end of the book, where the author was attempting to sum up the key findings, he liberally sprinkles hints of parallels with the 1890s world in which he was writing. In the same breath, he also goes on to maintain that "*only by military command of the sea by prolonged control of the strategic centers of commerce, can such an attack be fatal*" an observation that he backs up as being timeless in that he footnotes it with a discussion on cruiser warfare in the 1880s.

[2] Arthur J Marder's classic work on the Royal Navy in the "Dreadnought" era, *From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961–1970 (five Vols)) is perhaps the best known, and in particular Volume One, *The Road to War*. For other accounts, see also George Mongor, *The End of Isolation: British Foreign Policy, 1900–1907*, (London: 1963); W L Langer *The Diplomacy of Imperialism*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1935) and Samuel Williamson, *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914*, (Cambridge MA: 1969). Paul Kennedy also has a useful summary in his article *The Development of German Naval Operational Plans against England, 1896–1914*, *The English Historical Review*, Vol 89, 1975, 48–55.

[3] In 1889, the then First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord George Hamilton first explained his new formula to Parliament. "I think I am correct in saying that the leading idea has been that our establishment should be on such a scale that it should at least be equal to the naval strength of any two other countries....Supremacy at sea must, after all, be measured

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by the number of Battleships we can put into the line." See *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol 333 (1889).

<sup>[4]</sup> There is increasing evidence to support a theory which maintains that it was this arms race of the 1890s in armoured cruisers, and not just the later one (in *Dreadnoughts*), that was the real cause of Britain's undoing. See CAB 37/56/8, Lord Selborne's Navy Estimates for 1901–2, and especially page 5–6, in which he makes reference to Britain's estimate of the French intent and the fact that "Britain has already started to build the ships that could meet these armoured cruisers, although not yet in sufficient numbers." The implicit intent to match the French seems clear. While it is certainly true that the Admiralty did not allow the battleship building rates to suffer, there is no doubt that many foresaw that this resultant, high rate of naval expenditure was unsustainable, even in the medium term. A good account of this can be found in Nicholas Lambert's key work *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), Ch 1. While the expense was bad enough, what was really crippling was the usage of manpower. From 1903 onward, as the bulk of these large cruisers were being delivered (and before the *Dreadnoughts* were a consideration), we see the first strong references to the need for both economies in construction and operation. While certainly still debatable, Lambert's thesis attributes this need for economy as the central cause behind the retrenchment of the Royal Navy towards home waters from 1904 onwards.

<sup>[5]</sup> Leaving aside the details of this revolutionary naval unit, there is no doubt that its impact on fleet procurement and the naval balance of power was profound. In effect, its characteristics were so revolutionary as to render obsolete, whole classes of ships almost overnight. This had a disproportionate effect on navies like Great Britain, who had invested vast sums of money to gain superiority with the previous generation of ships. Suddenly they were faced with the harsh realization that much of this recent procurement was wasted and that, in order to maintain their naval pre-eminence, they would need to make an additional, huge investment in this new technology. Conversely, it offered a great opportunity to smaller and ambitious rivals like Germany who, provided they possessed a powerful military industrial complex, just might be able to manufacture these new *Dreadnoughts* at a similar rate to Great Britain. If this could be achieved, it offered, in effect, a "short cut" to a comparable naval strength with Great Britain at a fraction of the overall cost that the latter power would have to pay – an opportunity that would effectively have been impossible without the "zero-ing" effect that this step change in naval capability presented.

<sup>[6]</sup> The recent and noteworthy works in this area include Jon Sumida's *In Defense of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology and British Naval Policy, 1889–1914*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) which centers more on the impact of declining financial support for

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the Navy and its consequent decision to resort to radical technological innovation as a means of effecting a saving whilst, at the same time, improving the quality of the British Fleet, and Nicholas Lambert's *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, which, while recognizing the financial catalyst, instead focuses more on the "naval" and personal aspects of Jackie Fisher's thinking and in particular his ability to manipulate the political figures of the day for the Navy's ends.

[7] As an indication of the problems facing those responsible for financing the Navy, Jon Sumida demonstrates, in Chapter One of *In Defense of Naval Supremacy*, that between the years of 1889 to 1904, the unit price of a battleship more than doubled in real terms and that the figures for cruisers increased by a staggering, factor of five. Even more telling, this seemed to be coupled with a decrease in their combat-effective lives, from 25 years to 15 or less.

[8] David Hackett Fischer, *Historian's fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, (New York: 1970) 172.

[9] Winston S Churchill, *The World Crisis*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), Vol 1, 2.

[10] See the headlines of any major British or American Newspaper on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1915 for examples of this. Perhaps the most instructive in terms of the people's sentiment though are the popular press. "Lusitania sunk by German Pirate! The Huns carry out their threat to murder" screams the *Daily Mirror* while the *Daily Sketch* was not far behind with "The Huns sink the Lusitania." For a more balanced and longer term view, The *Literary Digest*, Vol 51 No 21 (November 1915), 1139 is typical, quoting many Newspaper editorials after the *Ancona* sinking in the Mediterranean on 8 November 1915 and asking the question how it is that we can take a calm and measured approach to such wanton slaughter. It quotes the *Boston Herald* as saying "the horror of sending innocent women and children to the bottom of the sea would appall the world in any other period than this." This was a full 6 months after the *Lusitania* sinking.

[11] A brief but useful synopsis of these pressures is contained within Peter Clarke's reference text, *Hope and Glory* (London: Penguin Group, 1997), Ch1, 7–40.

[12] Avner Offer, in his excellent economic study, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) gives a good description of these contrasting pressures. See Chapters 6–11.

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[\[13\]](#) Ibid.,85.

[\[14\]](#) Ibid.,83.

[\[15\]](#) Ibid.,83.

[\[16\]](#) There is evidence that Fisher in particular, who openly abhorred the wastage of men and equipment on colonial duties, became a firm advocate of the “swing fleet” theory. The theory was, that powerful battlefleets, stationed at what he called the five “keys” of the world (important trading choke points), would be able to provide sufficient protection of Britain’s vital interests at a fraction of the cost of the many “station cruisers” that were positioned all around the world at the time. See P K Kemp (ed) *The Fisher Papers*, (London: Navy Records Society, 1960), Vol I, p. 161. (Hereinafter referred to as *FP*).

[\[17\]](#) For a good description of the principle that the effective vulnerability of sea-borne trade is not in direct but in inverse proportion to its volume, see Julian S Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, with introduction and notes by Eric J Grove (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), pp 275–276. Originally published by Longmans, Green and Co., 1911.

[\[18\]](#) Of course this should be tempered by the context of the times. The reforms conducted in the Royal Navy by Jackie Fisher in the first decade of this century were completely comprehensive. Not only was he eager to bring the fleet into the technological age of things like the steam turbine, the aeroplane and the submarine, but he also had the common sense to realize that he would need to focus considerable effort from the academics and strategists into the development of suitable tactics for these new “tools.” Like others of his day, he was prone to collecting the brightest and most promising thinkers into a privileged group and personally taking an interest in their careers to ensure that they ended up in particular positions where he could best use their talent. Corbett was selected to join this “Fishpond,” as it was colloquially known, and soon found himself at the War College in Portsmouth. This establishment was specifically targeted by Fisher to provide the brains for his new revolutionary fleet. But while Corbett is today widely recognized as one of the premier maritime thinkers of his day, the intrusion of a pure academic into the sacred realm of naval tactics and strategy would have been greeted by healthy scepticism at the turn of the last century. Notwithstanding, it is likely that his work would at least have been known to most naval officers of influence and there is good reason to suppose that his thinking on these issues was accepted as a most

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welcome respite to what appeared to be an annoyingly insoluble problem. There was certainly little incentive to question such sentiments.

<sup>[19]</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles*, 261–279.

<sup>[20]</sup> *Ibid.*, 270–1. Corbett believed the convoy inherently vulnerable on account of the excessive smoke and noise that such a concentration of shipping would emit. While this became more valid with the advent of aerial shadowing and wireless telegraphy, the opposite effect, that of clearing the seas of the many lone detection opportunities, was far more pertinent to an individual raider operating alone.

<sup>[21]</sup> This was of course dramatically reversed in WW2 with the "Wolf Pack" tactics when, with the advent of airborne search and radio communications, groups of submarines could be coordinated and positioned along a single convoy's track with sometimes devastating results. In WW1 however, all searching was independent and, with only a moderate speed on the surface, a single submarine, lucky enough to find a convoy, was most unlikely to be able to bring more than one vessel to account before the remainder scattered at high speed.

<sup>[22]</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles*, 266.

<sup>[23]</sup> For the best survey of Admiralty attitudes to the protection of trade dilemma see Bryan Ranft's essay entitled "The Protection of British Seaborne Trade and the Development of a Systematic Planning for War, 1860–1906" in Bryan Ranft's (ed) *Technical Change and British Naval Policy, 1860–1939*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 1–22.

<sup>[24]</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. As Ranft maintains, this seems to be an example of the cardinal mistake of assuming that the enemy will attack in the place where you are best prepared to deal with him. Significantly, it has not been born out in practice before or since and, perhaps most surprisingly, it reached its ascendancy during a period of history (the 1880s) when the French were actively attempting to plan perhaps the most systematic and serious threat that there has even been to British Trade worldwide. There is little evidence that even they, with their powerful armoured cruisers, were seriously considering anything other than open ocean raiding. For the best resume of "*Jeune Ecole*" thinking, see Theodore Ropp's *The Development of a Modern Navy: French Naval Policy, 1871–1904*, (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 155–180.

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<sup>[25]</sup> Ibid., 6, but see also James R Thursfield's *Naval Warfare*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1913) 93–110. Thursfield actually maintains that the advent of steamships resulted in a distinct "narrowing" of the trade routes which made them defendable. What he didn't seem to consider was the sporadic sailings along them that would have made an adequate defense almost impossible with the numbers of cruisers allocated and gave the clear advantage to the raider. Thursfield, although not a naval officer, was a frequent contributor to the publications that were likely to have been read by them (Brassey's Naval Annual etc) and, as such, there is a likelihood that his writings would have been influential.

<sup>[26]</sup> See ADM 116/900B and specifically the War Orders issued to the CinC Home Fleet in April of 1902 and ADM 116/866B, the minutes of an Admiralty meeting on the protection of trade in wartime, almost exactly three years later in April of 1905. In this latter document you find a rejection of the idea of convoying, on account of the huge size of the problem and because the use of cruisers as escorts would "remove them from the more effective work of hunting down the enemy's commerce destroyers." Quite how this "Hunting" was more effective, is not explained, although this sentiment seems to have been widely accepted, given its appearance in a wide variety of publications.

<sup>[27]</sup> Ranft, *Technical Change*, 13.

<sup>[28]</sup> Ranft, in *The Protection of British Seaborne Trade*, quotes a number of senior British naval officers as admitting their failings in considering the protection of trade. Notable amongst these were Admiral Sir Astley Key (First Sea Lord, 1879–85) who offered the vague solution that, in times of threat, "the first thing we must do is to cover the seas with our cruisers." Admiral Sir Arthur Hood (First Sea Lord, 1885–9) was little better in merely advocating a concentration on "protecting the trade routes" without being specific as to what this implied for the Navy. See Ranft, *Technical change*, 3–8. Finally, even the more progressive Admiral Sir John Fisher (First Sea Lord, 1904–09) came out in favor of the "dogging, hunting down and destruction of every enemy cruiser" more out of an emotional attachment to this sort of offensive warfare rather than with the benefit of some rational thought as to what this might entail for the hunters. See *FP*, Vol 1, 162, in which Fisher was describing a hypothetical strategic disposition and scheme of employment for the future fleet.

<sup>[29]</sup> For an excellent summation of Admiral Theophile Aube's ideas, see Ropp's *The Development of a Modern Navy*, 155–180. Aube was the early leader of a group of thinkers that became known as the *Jeune Ecole* (quite literally the "young School"). With



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a few exceptions, the *Jeune Ecole* was composed of junior and middle grade officers who were angry at the complacency and inactivity in the naval leadership and were anxious to implement reforms based more on merit than birthright. Central to this was the concept of decentralization, whereby younger officers, in command of smaller and more lethal ships, were to have more "say" in the direction that the Navy took. Although often dismissed by historians in favor of an analysis of their asymmetric strategy, it is important to note this social reforming aspect of this movement. It also explains the deepening enmity that developed within the French Navy after the involvement of an increasingly partisan political sponsorship. In the end, it was this political turbulence that eclipsed the original thinking and led to a polarizing of principles that, given their transience when compared to warship procurement, proved disastrous for the development of a coherent, long term plan to modernize the Navy.

<sup>[30]</sup> Starting with the *Jeanne d'arc* of 1899, France produced a whole series of these large and fast "armoured cruisers" that were openly aimed at exploiting British trade. The key was their speed, which had to be faster than the average battleship, a long endurance and their protection, which needed to be a complete shell of Harvey steel armour. This, theoretically, would make them very durable in an oceanic raiding situation and, with their powerful armament of quick firing guns, they were designed to be a worthy match for the types of obsolescent battleships that just might catch them unawares and unable to flee. The problem was that these ships were immensely expensive to produce and used a greater compliment than an equivalent battleship.

<sup>[31]</sup> This produced the ships of the *Crecy*, *Monmouth*, *Drake* and *Black Prince* classes, whose appetite for manpower and resources outstripped even the battleships and which were largely blamed for the gross over-expenditure in the Naval estimates that caused so many problems in the early years of the last century.

<sup>[32]</sup> This wasn't altogether based on a whimsical notion of honor either. The British, for one, had first hand experience of the likely international difficulties that would ensue in attempting to circumvent these principles. As recently as 1899, they had had to abandon a blockading action against the Boers because of protests from America and Germany. See John W Coogan's work on US and British maritime rights, *The End of Neutrality* (London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 118, which outlines this as an issue of the difficulty in proving "continuous voyage." Acceptance of continuous voyage doctrine allowed a belligerent power to stop and search neutral ships bound for a neutral port, which was connected to or sympathetic to the enemy, if it could reasonably be assumed that contraband cargoes were aboard and were likely destined for that enemy. Naturally, neutral traders took exception to this infringement of their rights. Later, in 1905, the

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British themselves had forced the Russians to suspend commerce raiding in the Russo–Japanese war.

<sup>[33]</sup> Offer, *WWI, An Agrarian Interpretation*, 273.

<sup>[34]</sup> For a good illustration of his views on the fact that naval supremacy allowed you to manipulate the statutes of International law, see his correspondence with Viscount Esher in Arthur J Marder's *Fear God and Dread Nought*, (London: Jonathen Cape, 1956), Vol II, 453–455. (*FGDN*)

<sup>[35]</sup> While there was a brief "flirtation" with the idea of commerce raiding in 1904, (see Paul Kennedy's *The Development of German Naval Operations Plans against England, 1896–1914*, *The English Historical Review*, Vol 89, 1975, 64–65) this was never really treated seriously on account of an acute shortage of ships. It seems that the U boat was never considered for this role before some offensive patrols were undertaken in August 1914 which provided some encouraging results. For some discussion on this subject see Admiral Scheer's *Germany's High Seas Fleet in the World War*, (London: Cassell and Co, 1920), 34–41 & 215–229.

<sup>[36]</sup> Corbett seemed to sum up these sentiments most succinctly in *Some Principles*, p. 269: "No country would incur the odium of sinking a prize with all hands."

<sup>[37]</sup> Offer, in *WWI: An Agrarian Interpretation*, 283, cites an unpublished paper from Fisher called "*The Oil Engine and the Submarine*" written in December of 1913. In it, Fisher predicts that, given its crewing limitations, the submarines in a future war would be unable to obey the prize laws as laid down in international law, and would have no choice but to sink their prey on the high seas. This was immediately rejected on humanitarian and political grounds by key strategic and political thinkers such as Corbett, Churchill and even PM Asquith.

<sup>[38]</sup> Balfour's letter is significant in that it was the only pre-war reference this researcher could find that indicated that someone in high authority was even considering the eventuality of a submarine blockade against Great Britain. Interestingly, although Fisher never seems to give a straight answer, he embodied many of Balfour's concerns, almost word for word, into some of his later correspondence. Marder, *FGDN*, 485 & 488.

<sup>[39]</sup> *Ibid*, 485–6.

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<sup>[40]</sup> Arthur J Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), Vol 1, 364, citing an "Outline of a Memorandum re Submarines" written by Richmond as Asst Director of Naval Operations. As well as reinforcing the perceptions that the prize laws would be adhered to in wartime, these statements also hinted at severe technical difficulties if this were to be the case. In short, the submarine was tightly manned; she had a low and dangerous freeboard for small boat operations, even assuming that suitable boats were carried; she had little speed advantage over her prey, making around 11 kts on the surface even in her fastest configuration and was lightly armed, usually with only a single gun of medium caliber that was difficult to operate in any sea way. When compared to the cruisers of the day, she was a poor choice for a raider. Interestingly, Marder also records that Admiral Richmond was to admit his error on this point in some of the hand-written marginalia found on this document.