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*In World War I and again in World War II the United States and Great Britain enjoyed a close and cooperative relationship while fighting a common enemy. However, during the interwar period relations became strained at times for a variety of reasons. The Naval Conferences of this period reflect the successes, strains and problems encountered in Anglo-American relations during this period.*

# **THE NAVAL CONFERENCES OF THE INTERWAR YEARS: A STUDY IN ANGLO-AMERICAN RELATIONS**

by

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Alliance in war often seems to be the best preparation for rivalry in peacetime; and perhaps not surprisingly when one thinks of the unaccustomed pressures which war exerts on governments as well as on individuals. When the emergency is over it is natural that thoughts and policies should resume those more independent lines which common danger temporarily obscures. Yet war compels the recognition of priorities. And it is a chastening reflection on human wisdom—or the lack of it—that, in the return to the easier times of peace, men so often forget or deliberately ignore the correctness of those difficult choices which war had earlier forced upon them. One example of this is to be seen in relations between the United States and the United Kingdom between the two World Wars, and particularly in relations to naval affairs seen through the perspective of a series of conferences dealing with naval limitation and disarmament.

The naval conferences of the interwar years, and the story of Anglo-American relationships in that context, have already given rise to a wide range of historical studies and continue to do so. The purpose of this essay is not to summarize that literature or to deal with any single conference in detail; but rather to try to see the story in outline and as a whole as a commentary on a relationship which began and ended in alliance but which, in between, seemed often to thrive only on distrust and suspicion.

The treaties resulting from the Washington Conference of 1921-22 were, by any standards, a landmark in the history of arms limitation. It could be argued that navies are more easily dealt with in this way than either air forces or armies. Nonetheless, Washington, which formed the basis for the London Treaty of 1930, and was so near to doing the same for yet another treaty in 1936, represents a degree of success which the

League's Preparatory Commission on Disarmament and the Geneva Conference of 1932 never approached. Much of this was due to the perception and wisdom of many of those—both politicians and sailors—who either prepared the ground for the Conference or actually took part in it.

There undoubtedly was a good deal of suspicion—and sometimes animosity—shown in the views expressed in both Britain and America about the other in the 2 years before the Washington meeting. None of this, however, approached the virulent anti-Americanism expressed by Sir Warren Fisher 10 years later, or even the more controlled but certainly hardening suspicions of politicians and sailors on both sides of the Atlantic in the period of the 1927 Geneva Conference. Indeed, there were some whose awareness of long-term trends in world events was startlingly clear and who foresaw the likely future dependence of each country upon the other. This was certainly true of Lord Grey, formerly Britain's Foreign Secretary, when he stated the terms on which he would undertake a special mission to the United States in 1919.<sup>1</sup> It was equally true of the new British First Sea Lord, Lord Beatty. He argued that it was inconceivable for Britain to seek to continue an alliance with Japan "which can only have for its object protection against the United States;" and, more positively, urged upon his colleagues that an understanding with the United States, upon a basis of naval equality, should be their first aim, both for the sake of economy and "from the far mightier motive of a union between the English-speaking nations of the world."<sup>2</sup> There can rarely have been a more committed statement of the concept of the "special relationship." In other words, British and American negotiators at Washington still had a substantial fund of goodwill to draw upon despite the fact that there were attitudes of other kinds also at work.

What was less promising about the preliminaries to Washington was the degree of ignorance each country showed about the anxieties and plans of the other. In 1920-21 there was nothing to compare with the detailed exchange of views which preceded the two London Conferences and even, to some extent, that held at Geneva. This was not altogether surprising. It took time for each country to appreciate changes brought about by a major war and there had been no prewar discussions of issues of this kind. Of course, there were detailed plans and discussions within each country. But these plans and discussions were larded with doubts and hypotheses about the other, as, for example, in a Foreign Office view that it would be "of extreme difficulty" to draw up a satisfactory working agreement on Pacific matters with the United States, and that independently of considerations related to Japan.<sup>3</sup> It is true that America's failure to enter the League and her refusal to guarantee the security of France had left a bad taste in the mouth. While for the Americans the Anglo-Japanese alliance was an unpleasant fact and its continuation a distinct and even more unpleasant possibility. Yet there simply was not the evidence to support the view, in either country, that agreement with the other would be difficult, let alone impossible. Old prejudices and assumptions, no doubt with the help of some irritating memories of Britain's naval blockade on the one hand and the threat of America's 1916 building program on the other, took the place of serious argument. Whether, without Mr. Meighen's pressure at the Imperial Conference of 1921, the British Government would have opted for a renewal of the Japanese alliance it is impossible to say. But his very forcefulness on that occasion at least brought the debate much closer to solid, firm ground. And when the Washington Conference itself took place many vague fears proved groundless.

Given this somewhat unpromising background to the Conference, what was remarkable was how successful—and in how short a time—the Washington Conference proved to be. It would have been difficult to anticipate the amenability, even docility, of the Japanese both about China and the Pacific and about ratios in naval strength. But if there was a certain amount of luck in that respect it was surely wise of all concerned to limit naval discussions mostly to matters concerning battleships. This was in many ways the simplest issue of all. And once the Coalition Government in London had overridden its professional advisers on the subject of the proposed building holiday (an American proposal, incidentally), then little remained but the details. Of course, there was dissatisfaction with some of the terms of the agreement, particularly in the Royal Navy. But a race in battleship construction had been avoided and money saved, as well as rivalry avoided all around. What had begun in ignorance and suspicion ended in an awareness of mutual benefits.

If Washington suggested that good sense, an informed awareness of common interests and blood relationship could permanently overcome prejudice in Anglo-American relationships then it was misleading. In fact, what followed in the 1920's showed those relationships at their worst for a long time—whether before or since. At Washington, as has been pointed out already, discussion was largely confined to capital ships. Cruisers were dealt with to some extent but not to the point of danger. It was on cruiser programs, however, that the difficulties of the next 10 years were to hang. As students of naval history are well aware, the problems at issue between the United States and the United Kingdom in this matter were that of total cruiser tonnage and the size of individual ships. The Americans preferred larger ships with heavier guns; the

British smaller ships with lighter guns. But, and this was critical for the debate, the British argued that their worldwide spread of political and economic interests demanded an absolute and not a relative figure for their total cruiser tonnage. Their needs were greater, therefore their ships for trade protections should be more numerous. The Americans did not, and argued that they could not, agree. They demanded parity.

The curious thing is that a year or so before these problems were considered at the Geneva Naval Conference of 1927 the two countries seemed close to agreement. Going a stage further at Geneva by embodying agreement in a formal document, and even more so bearing in mind the comparative ease with which the Washington terms had been reached, therefore seemed to be in the natural course of events. The fact that events did not take that course probably accounts for some of the disillusionment about the prospects of common action between the two countries which affected some British politicians and sailors throughout the remainder of the interwar years.

At Geneva the Americans took their stand squarely on the statement that "equality with Great Britain is the sole basis on which a just treaty limitation can be imposed."<sup>4</sup> The British, with rather more argument, although equally inflexible, held to their claim of special need, justifying that need in emotional words used by Lord Balfour some years before when he claimed that "no citizen of the British Empire . . . can ever forget that it is by sea communication that he lives, and that without sea communication he and the Empire to which he belongs would perish together."<sup>5</sup> As for Japan, her delegation sat in the middle disguising, by an amenability even greater than that shown at Washington, that she was the real potential enemy with whom both the other powers should have been primarily concerned.

Geneva was a complete failure. Why, is a less simple matter. There were those in the United Kingdom who blamed themselves for inadequate preparation, particularly at the political level. And if one accepts the view of a contemporary that "technical arguments are only political arguments dressed up in uniform,"<sup>6</sup> then they were probably right. Certainly the strategic needs of the two countries—apart from their common opposition to the danger of Japanese expansion in east Asia—were sufficiently different to demand a great deal of explanation, explanation easier for politicians than for sailors to offer. But the explanation for what was, after all, unexpected failure at Geneva cannot end there.

The conference saw a display of sheer animosity of a kind which was not exhibited in public again, whatever the private views of individuals on some later occasions. And here the offense seems to have been greater on the American side. It may be, as Roskill quite reasonably argues, that the American Navy General Board and its representatives at Geneva used Britain simply as a cover to disguise policies which were anti-Japanese in purpose and, as such, unacceptable to many people in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Be that as it may, the combination of a "big-Navyite" American professional representation at Geneva with an anti-British press—typified by the Hearst newspapers—at home produced an atmosphere of national hostility and bitterness quite different from anything seen at Washington or, later, at London. Lord Bridgeman, the head of the British delegation at Geneva complained that "every little incident has been used to make mischief,"<sup>8</sup> and went so far as to say in a letter to King George V that it was "evident that no agreement which did not humiliate the British Empire was likely to find acceptance" with the Americans.<sup>9</sup> Bridgeman had had a good deal of trouble with his own colleagues in London, as well as

with the American negotiators in Geneva, and could be forgiven for being overwrought. But his complaints were not entirely exaggerated.

One would have expected the unforeseen bitterness of the Geneva discussions to make those involved in future negotiations at least more cautious even if not much wiser. The British could be forgiven for feeling sore and disappointed. But at least they had been warned. And if the Prime Minister, Baldwin, really thought (as he is reported to have said at this time) that America was "a hundred years behind us politically,"<sup>10</sup> then he and his colleagues had a clear obligation to behave accordingly. Yet a year later they acted in a way which belied their own assumed standards.

After Geneva, disarmament talks naturally reverted to the League's Preparatory Commission. The work of the Commission so far had given very little hint of a possible accord between the British and the French. The League, however, was concerned with general, not only naval disarmament and it was this which, basically, offered some prospect of closer accord between Britain and France. Concessions by one country in one area of military security might be met by concessions by the other country in another area. Besides, or so the French argued, they had some problems in naval matters vis-à-vis Italy similar in kind to those which Britain had in relation to the United States, the issue of parity in particular. Neither Italy nor America, so the French argued, would recognize these particular problems. So why should not Britain and France get together and enforce recognition by a common front? And the British, after Geneva, were in a frame of mind to accept a little consolation.

What now took place did so, it must be remembered, formally within the framework of the League's Preparatory Commission and the negotiations associated with the Commission's work. There

were talks between British and French naval representatives in Paris in November 1927. There was nothing necessarily sinister about this. It had been disagreement between the French and British which had led to a stalemate at the Commission's previous session, and it was quite natural to undertake bilateral talks in the hope of preventing a repetition of that deadlock. By early 1928 the French proposals had been considered within the Admiralty and passed on to Ministers. Although there were differences between the two national points of view, there seemed at least some hope that agreement might be reached on the basis of offering the French the flexibility of switching tonnage between different classes of vessels while giving the British what they wanted, i.e., a division of cruiser classes with emphasis on smaller, more lightly armed types. These were matters on which neither country had so far achieved its aims.

In early March 1928, views were being exchanged at the League's headquarters in Geneva between the French Foreign Affairs Minister, Briand, and the British Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain. It seems clear that the French were, from the beginning, pushing the pace in these talks, and Briand specifically compared Anglo-American with Franco-Italian relationships. "In each case," he argued, "our [i.e., French and British] overseas responsibilities were much greater, and our sea communications much larger [than those of Italy or America]. It would be to our mutual advantage, when the proper time came, jointly to press that these factors should form the basis of assessment of the cruiser strength that we could justifiably claim." And although there were differences to be ironed out, Chamberlain felt able to report to the Cabinet in London that "it was agreed that M. Briand's proposal was a sufficiently satisfactory basis of negotiation to recommend for the consideration of the Admiralty in the first instance and later

of the Cabinet." He added that there was now hope of an Anglo-French agreement when these matters came before the Commission in the summer of that year, thus ensuring British French support in possible subsequent negotiations, "whereas at present we had none, having alienated at the three power conference [Geneva] the Americans, who had been our ally at the Preparatory Commission".<sup>1</sup>

There is no intention here of going in detail into the events of the next 3 or 4 months, or of suggesting that France and Britain now worked hand-in-glove continuously. There were ups and downs in Anglo-French relationships, and even a fear on the part of the British that the French might try a deal with the Americans instead. But in late June 1928 the French produced an offer of mixed army and navy proposals, not very different in principle from Briand's March offer, which appeared to the British to be a workable compromise. In this, each country would, in proposals which the two countries would later put to the Preparatory Commission, get naval disarmament provisions to its liking, the French also scoring a second gain in proposals concerning army reserves. If neither participant used the word "deal" about these proposals, it was an obvious description from the viewpoint of any outsider. And a "deal" in such circumstances was bound to appear, even to pro-British Americans, as an attempt on the part of Britain by backstairs methods to try to get from a minor naval power what her naval equal had been unwilling to agree to at Geneva. And there were more than enough Americans who were not remotely pro-British and who were anxious to make the most of any opportunity.

Technically the British Government behaved properly, as in 1935 before the signing of the Anglo-German naval agreement of that year. The other interested powers were told of the details

and invited to comment. Unfortunately, proper diplomatic secrecy was not preserved. As in December 1935 with the Hoare-Laval discussions, details were leaked in Paris to the press while delicate diplomatic maneuvering was still going on. As so often, publicity heightened offense and made levelheaded discussion virtually impossible, particularly when an ill-considered French comment—of no official significance—suggested that Britain and France were now reverting to the pre-1914 entente.<sup>12</sup> The American Navy General Board regarded the draft terms of an Anglo-French agreement as even more objectionable than the British proposals at Geneva the year before, limiting, as they proposed to do, provision for large cruisers but doing virtually nothing to provide for restrictions on smaller vessels. It was clear that the Americans would have nothing to do with what their former allies had in mind, and the Anglo-French proposals died an ignominious death. The bitter debate, however, lasted on until near the end of the year.

The allocation of blame for this curious nonevent, with its undoubtedly harmful effect on Anglo-American relations, is something over which historians have differed widely. Roskill, in a very moderate summing up, argues it was unreasonable to heap so much blame on the British. To consider terms with France was perfectly proper from the point of view of the work of the Preparatory Commission; those terms originated not in Britain but in France; and they were fully communicated on a "for discussion" basis to the other powers directly concerned.<sup>13</sup> All that is true as far as it goes. But it is also true that the possibly inflammatory effect of the French proposals on known American susceptibilities should have been clear to any experienced negotiator, whether in the Foreign Office or the Admiralty, from the beginning.

Austen Chamberlain, it is true, had

been seriously ill, and appears not to have been sufficiently recovered to display his normal adept handling of affairs. Moreover, he had already been accused—both in the House of Commons and outside—of being exaggeratedly pro-French. Once the unexpected and unwelcome public debate had begun he gave too much opportunity for rumor to spread before making information officially available. The Admiralty, too, including the First Lord, Bridgeman, were not entirely without fault. It was quite proper for the Admiralty to give the French overtures serious attention and not everyone in the Department was enthusiastic about the various draft proposals. On the other hand, both before this episode and immediately afterwards the Admiralty was distinctly unenthusiastic about the principles of disarmament adopted by the Baldwin government. Now, in June 1928 with what the sailors wanted in sight, some of them pushed hard for an arrangement which they must have known would antagonize their American counterparts. What appears to have been lacking was a sense of reality about who mattered, and no irritation could excuse that misjudgment.

But the real tragedy lay elsewhere. There had been clear signs of anti-Americanism in Britain in 1927. Winston Churchill is a good example. And in 1928 he was even more vociferous on this score, arguing that an Anglo-French agreement on naval disarmament would be an expression of Britain's independence of America in this vital area. But there were now others who were as extreme as he. Baldwin's biographers quote a later comment on the Prime Minister that "he has got to loathe Americans so much that he hates meeting them" as originating in the events of 1927-28.<sup>14</sup> Hankey, Secretary to the Cabinet now and for a further 10 years, was equally explicit. And Hankey was no mere civil servant. He wrote to his immediate inferior, Tom Jones, in early

October 1928, complaining that Britain had been practicing the policy of conceding to America for too long and without any obvious gain:

We played up to America over the League Covenant, abandonment of the Japanese alliance and so on, always making concessions and being told that the next step would change their attitude. Yet they are, as a result, more overbearing and suspicious against us than anyone else . . . I would make no more concessions to the Americans and I am convinced that we cannot "square yardarms" over the naval agreement . . . You can't do business with them. The only plan I can see is to make an agreement with those with whom we can agree.<sup>15</sup>

This was undoubtedly the lowest point to which relations between the two countries sank in the interwar years. There could be nothing but losers in such a situation. But, fortunately, signs of an improvement were not far off. Both heads of government, Coolidge and Baldwin, were determined to mend the bridges broken in the past 18 months and were already busy doing so before the end of the year. Both seem to have reached the conclusion that naval disarmament was too important a matter to be left to the sailors, although in terms of sheer intransigence no British sailor approached the performance of Adm. Hilary Jones, the American chief naval adviser at Geneva. And both heads of government were succeeded, Coolidge by Hoover and Baldwin by MacDonald some months later on, by new men even more committed to a new naval agreement than they had been themselves. To add further incentive there were the effects of the American Cruiser Bill which received Senate approval in early February 1929. On the one hand, the British were made even more painfully aware of American ship-

building potential and of the virtual impossibility of competing with it. On the other, the Bill itself increased opposition to the "Big-Navy" program and party in the United States, thus increasing pressure on the President to reach a further limitation agreement with the other naval powers.

In this favorable atmosphere the London Naval Conference of 1930, which prolonged the battleship building holiday for a further 6 years and, most notably, brought cruisers within the scope of the 1922 ratios, was a success as remarkable in its own way as Washington. Despite some rumblings of discontent the Japanese agreed to continue their inferior status and to widen its scope. More important for our immediate purposes agreement was reached, on paper at any rate, between the previously widely different views about large and smaller cruisers. As part of that agreement the Royal Navy resigned its claim to an "absolute" complement of 70 cruisers and accepted a total of 50 instead. Whatever the unsettled issues in the background, this was the bright light of day compared with the gloom of 1927-28. But it should be remembered that the ground had been most carefully prepared for the London Conference, both within each country and between them, the latter particularly at a political level.

The most startling change in 1930 was undoubtedly the British acceptance of a future cruiser total well below any figure considered previously. Several things are worth noting in this context. First, MacDonald was in full charge of events on the British side as Baldwin had not been. MacDonald was still a political force to be reckoned with. He was not, in this Ministry, his own Foreign Secretary, but he knew quite well what he wanted and was determined to get it; for him this was a matter ultimately for political decision. Moreover, with his sights on the full Geneva Conference on Disarmament due to open in the spring of 1932,



failure over further naval limitation would be an unacceptable prelude to the wider issues yet to be tackled. Secondly, MacDonald and the Foreign Secretary, Henderson, did consult the Admiralty in detail, and both Admiralty and Committee of Imperial Defense records bear witness to that. Of course the sailors were reluctant to give way and made that clear to the Prime Minister; but they cannot, as senior advisers to Ministers, have been unaware that their advice was only one component in the process of decisionmaking. To the end of his life Admiral Chatfield, soon to be first Sea Lord and, despite the claims of Beatty, surely the most influential sailor of the interwar years, maintained that MacDonald had deceived his naval advisers. A fairer judgment would be that the Prime Minister accepted his own proper responsibilities. But, thirdly, however reluctantly the Royal Navy accepted the about-face in their previous cruiser demands embodied in the London terms, they did so with two warnings which it was perfectly proper to give. One, that the much lower cruiser tonnage which Britain was now allocated was acceptable only "if the European situation was so improved as to give reasonable security for ten or twelve years, with a chance of further improvement." Two, that the Royal Navy "could regard naval requirements as satisfied for a limited period with a number of 50 cruisers [only] provided proper provision was made in the meanwhile for the steady replacement of our war-built cruisers."<sup>16</sup> On the first, the Foreign Office still felt able, on balance, to forecast peace or at least no major war for 10 years; but clearly such a forecast could be proved wrong. On the second, the Labor Chancellor of the Exchequer, Snowden, was adamant in his resistance to the increased expenditure involved in a replacement program, and he had his way.

From the British point of view there

was from the beginning a big question mark against the continued viability of the terms reached at the first London Conference. The actual terms of the cruiser clauses were basically unsatisfactory from Britain's point of view. Those clauses did not specify total numbers of cruisers which could be retained in future, but did limit by total class tonnages, i.e., overall totals of 8"-gun and 6"-gun ships. Within these totals each country had freedom of choice how and what to build up to a maximum tonnage of 10,000 tons for any one vessel. For example, Britain's total tonnage allocation would allow her to build 50 ships of an average displacement of 6,750 tons, some with 8" and others with 6" guns, building less or more according to the tonnage for each selected ship. America and Japan were correspondingly free. But the British had all along claimed that their problem of trade protection, with its demand for numerous light cruisers, was different from anything which faced the Americans and Japanese. Yet if these two countries were to opt for greater firepower and displacement in their cruisers for the fleet work on which their own needs were concentrated then Britain would be faced with the problem of trying to deal with such vessels both in fleet and in convoy operations with the smaller cruisers which she herself wanted to concentrate on.

In other words, the London Treaty represented a quantitative rather than a qualitative limitation and, in that respect, from Britain's point of view was less satisfactory than Washington had been. The great achievement of the latter, as Chatfield was to put it, "was not in limiting numbers of total tonnages but in stopping the principle of going one better."<sup>17</sup> Those who are familiar with Corbett's analysis of the battle cruiser or hybrid type problem in the early 20th century will understand the arguments involved here.

This matter became of importance in

the years immediately after the London Treaty was signed. In October 1931 the Japanese announced a "Replenishment" program including two large cruisers of 8,500 tons displacement and an unusually heavy armament of 15 6" guns. The British on the other hand were engaged in building cruisers of the *Leander* class, with a displacement of 6,500 (later 7,200) tons and an armament of eight 6" guns. Obviously a *Leander* cruiser would be heavily out-gunned by the new Japanese type. The Admiralty hoped that for the time being the Geneva Disarmament Conference would solve this problem by imposing a displacement limit on 6"-gun cruisers, i.e., a qualitative limit, and decided simply to wait and see. Nevertheless it was decided that Britain's larger 6"-gun types would eventually have to be provided "with greater armament if required to meet the larger and more powerful cruisers now being constructed by other powers."<sup>18</sup>

Nothing happened at Geneva. What was worse from Britain's point was an American decision in June 1933 to copy Japan's lead. Part of the reason for this decision was the new President's (Roosevelt's) wish to provide work for the unemployed. But within the Navy General Board (as in the Admiralty in London) there was a continuing debate on cruiser displacement and armament. Now, in the spring of 1933, it was decided to build a new class of cruiser of nearly 10,000 tons displacement and armed, like the new Japanese ships, with 15 6" guns. These became known as the *Brooklyn* class.

The true strategic picture was now becoming clear—as, in many ways it ought to have been in the 1920's. Anglo-American quarreling was an emotional family luxury, not the unavoidable result of distrust based on a realistic appreciation of the likelihood of war. Indeed, in November 1933 the Defense Requirements Sub-Committee in London was expressly instructed to

omit all consideration of preparations for war against the United States in the rearmament program it was to draw up that winter. That instruction only made explicit what had long been assumed in practice. The real potential enemy was Japan. What America did was important for Britain only in its practical implications for what Japan might be induced to do as a consequence. America would naturally be similarly concerned about the implications for herself of competitive shipbuilding between Japan and Britain.

In London two moves were decided upon in face of these unwelcome developments. First, the Admiralty asked for and was given permission by the Prime Minister to plan for a new class of large heavily armed cruisers. By the autumn of 1933 this had settled into what became known as the "M" class of about 9,000 tons displacement armed with 12 6" guns. The displacement figures make it clear that the Admiralty were properly concerned with Japanese and not with American plans. The second move was altogether more debatable in terms of Anglo-American relationships. It was suggested—originally, it seems, by the Treasury which was disturbed by the prospective cost of competitive cruiser building—that an approach should be made to the Americans to see if they would agree to a postponement of current building programs in order to examine the possibility of a qualitative limitation which might be embodied in any agreement reached at the next general naval conference planned for the winter of 1935-6.

As one senior naval officer in London wrote—

We are now, in fact, witnessing the first steps in competitive building in a new type. We shall have to follow suit . . . this will make the problem of finding a lower qualitative limit for the 6" cruisers in 1935 more difficult

Whilst . . . this building is technically . . . within the provinces of the London Treaty, . . . it is of the utmost importance to take every possible measure to check it.<sup>19</sup>

These views formed the basis of the London approach to Washington suggesting that the Americans " . . . be prepared, pending a discussion between the three powers, to suspend the laying down of cruisers of this particularly large type, if Japan would agree to do the same."<sup>20</sup>

The American response was far from encouraging, partly perhaps because officials in Washington were taken by surprise. They were not convinced, certainly not willing to admit that what was happening were the first steps in a new naval arms race. Moreover, both America and Japan had already announced new building plans and had made contracts with shipbuilding firms, whereas Britain was still working out the details of her own plan. Finally, argued the Americans, the British proposal to delay was based "on the assumption that the maintenance of a definite treaty ratio requires a matching not merely of total tonnages within categories but of unit characteristics vessel for vessel."<sup>21</sup> Which was true.

The British were very dissatisfied with this aspect of the London Treaty. But the Treaty still stood. In the end no change was made and fortunately there was no diplomatic crisis as in 1928. Nonetheless some tempers were frayed and, certainly in London, expressions of anti-Americanism appeared once more. Neville Chamberlain, now Chancellor of the Exchequer, used the occasion of a Cabinet discussion of revised naval estimates to lament the bargaining of the Anglo-Japanese alliance for the Washington terms in 1922, a theme not far from the forefront of his mind for the rest of the interwar years.<sup>22</sup> A little later Warren Fisher, the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and probably the most hardened anti-American of them all,

wrote a bitter diatribe against the results of British "concessions" to the United States since 1922, bemoaning the fact that "Rule, Britannia!, that heartening battle song of England" had been "degraded into Rule, Columbia!" and quoting with obvious relish some words spoken by the famous military historian, Sir John Fortescue, at Oxford in 1911 that—"the Americans . . . must always prevail, and never give way; they must always take and never concede; they enjoy the flouting of our older community as a proof of their superiority; and they esteem a good bargain, even if gained by dishonourable means, to mark the highest form of ability."<sup>23</sup> Unbalanced words, perhaps, and not of a kind which many would have indulged in. But the fact is that this formed part of that attitude of "nonexpectation" of help or even interest from the United States which lasted in Britain down to and after the beginning of the Second World War. This will be mentioned again later.

But these attitudes were not the complete story and there was also a ground swell of Anglo-American understanding which became increasingly evident during preparations for the second London Naval Conference of the winter of 1935-36. The work of that Conference will not be dealt with in any great detail in this essay. Japan had given 2 years' notice to terminate her adherence to the existing treaties and, although she sent representatives to London in December 1935, she refused throughout—as she had done in preliminary talks—to continue the Washington ratios demanding instead a Common Upper Limit, "a figure which the country feeling most vulnerable deemed necessary for herself"; in other words, no limit at all. Since the other principal members of the Conference, America and Britain, were unwilling voluntarily to abandon limitation by ratios which had lasted for so long, Japan withdrew her representatives in mid-January

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1936, leaving only observers behind. Thereafter the remaining powers did reach some agreement on the displacement and armament of battleships and on cruiser matters, some of the latter being of considerable importance to Britain. But the fact that Japan announced in June 1936 that she would not adhere to the treaty and, in March 1937, that she would not accept the battleship limitations agreed to by the other powers, left those powers in a situation in which they simply could not avoid competitive building to safeguard their interests should they eventually go to war against Japan. Roskill's judgment that "the whole [London] proceedings were a colossal waste of time and effort, since the treaty finally signed did not in fact have any significant success in achieving the naval limitation for which the conference was convened,"<sup>24</sup> sounds harsh but is correct.

On the other hand, the second London Conference, and the discussions which preceded it, were not unimportant from the particular point of view of Anglo-American relations. The Conference was much more carefully prepared for than any of its predecessors and that proved beneficial. For example, the main British series of official papers dealing with this subject at a ministerial level runs from April 1934 to the end of October 1935, numbers just under 80 items, and covers records of private talks between individuals all the way to major policy statements. In addition to that series there are also minutes of a large number of official meetings. In fact, some discussions preceded the first of these papers and really began directly the cruiser negotiations of 1933 so ignominiously collapsed.

During this preparatory stage there were, as one would expect, some substantial differences between the two powers, quite apart from differences between each of them and third parties.

The British wanted a reduction in future

battleship displacement and armament; the Americans were not willing to go below 35,000 tons and 14" guns. The British argued that the deteriorating international situation demanded a return to their earlier claim for a much greater overall cruiser tonnage than that agreed to in 1930; the Americans, still intent on "parity," strongly disagreed since public opinion in the United States was thought to be opposed to the kind of building program which parity would involve if the British had their way. But, and more important than detailed qualitative and quantitative limitations was the fact that America in 1934-35 faced one potential enemy, Japan.

Britain, on the other hand, was increasingly apprehensive of a situation in which she might be faced by a hostile Germany and Japan at the same time. As a result of this fear there was a strong body of opinion which regarded a policy of friendship and accommodation with Japan, a return to the spirit of 1902, as the correct objective for British policy to aim at. In the spring of 1934 Neville Chamberlain, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, later to be Prime Minister, and in some ways the most determined and influential man in the Government, urged his colleagues to see that Germany was the long-term threat to Britain's security and that Britain, in the 1930's as before 1914, could not cope with war in Europe and in the Far East at the same time. Since the real enemy was in Europe, then appeasement was necessary in the Far East, although appeasement backed by some semblance of strength—"showing a tooth" as it was called.

His most recent biographers have pointed out that Baldwin—second in command in the National Government of 1931-35 and Prime Minister after that—and MacDonald, Prime Minister until 1935, were less committed to this proposed policy than was Chamberlain.<sup>25</sup> Both strove to keep open the

lines of communication to Tokyo and to Washington. But the Americans were well aware of the pressures in Whitehall to come to some sort of accommodation with Japan. Indeed, as Norman Davis, the principal American negotiator on disarmament affairs in these years, reported to the Secretary of State, with two potential major enemies to face at either ends of the world Britain was unlikely to favor more committed co-operation with America unless the latter agreed to some specific understanding between the two powers vis-à-vis Japan, and that that understanding was formally ratified by the Senate.<sup>26</sup> Baldwin and his contemporaries had some reason to be doubtful about the value of American promises which could so easily be broken by the operation of America's constitutional separation of powers. In addition they were afraid—although the opening of official archives after the war showed with how little justification—that if the British took too strong a line with Japan they might thereby promote a closer link between Japan and Germany.

This atmosphere of doubt and mistrust between Britain and America reached its peak during the autumn of 1934 when bilateral talks between British and Japanese representatives took place in London. There were sharp reactions in the American press, and the President wrote to warn Davis that if the British preferred Japan to the United States then he, Roosevelt, would feel compelled to approach the British Dominions direct to make them "understand clearly that their future security is linked with us."<sup>27</sup> In the end, no such drastic course was necessary. In October 1934 Chamberlain wrote in a private letter that—"I have no doubt we could easily make an agreement with them [i.e. the Japanese] if the U.S.A. were out of the picture. It is the Americans who are the difficulty and I don't know how we can get over it."<sup>28</sup> But Chamberlain was wrong. Now, as before

this and afterwards, Britain found it impossible to negotiate acceptable terms with Japan whether at a naval, commercial or political level; however much the British continued to doubt whether they would get effective help from America in time of trouble, there was nothing to do but wait and see. A return to something like the old Anglo-Japanese alliance was no longer possible, and Anglo-American relations could only gain from that slowly developing realization. Lessons had been learned the hard way but they had been learned.

As a result the London Conference, whatever its lack of formal success, contributed much to the improvement of Anglo-American relations. Those individuals who contributed most included ministers, civil servants and sailors. Of the latter Admiral Standley and Admiral Chatfield must qualify for special mention. And it is because of this episode, among so many others, that students of British history so much need a full-length biography of the latter. To paint a picture of unruffled friendship and collaboration from now on would, however, be fatuous. It was not merely that there were practical difficulties which obstructed the growth of sentiment into practical alliance; sentiments themselves were by no means of one kind. Old emotions died hard, even when Japan's ambitions became clear beyond serious doubt. In all their major prewar appreciations the British Chiefs of Staff refused to place any great reliance on American help in the desperate danger which threatened the British Commonwealth. At best they expected the United States to "be a friendly neutral, probably willing to modify the Neutrality Legislation in our favour, but not likely to intervene actively unless at a later stage."<sup>29</sup> Since the earlier stages were expected to be critical ones then the prospect was bleak.

But there were more hopeful signs, for example, Eden's conduct of affairs

during the Far East crisis of the latter months of 1937, both at and on either side of the Brussels Conference. During that Conference Eden wrote to King George V that his main object was to "ensure the closest possible co-operation with the Government of the United States," adding that—"Even though such co-operation may not emerge in definite joint action in the present crisis, the future of world peace depends to so great an extent upon Anglo-American co-operation that Mr. Eden feels that no effort should be spared to consolidate it."<sup>30</sup>

What, more specifically, Eden was looking for from the United States was a willingness to cooperate in sanctions against Japan, and even a joint Anglo-American naval presence in the Pacific as a deterrent to Japanese aggression. Roosevelt's actions, however, were more restrained than some of his words, and the Americans rejected both courses of action, leading one senior British official to sum up the American record at this point as "a poor performance, and a warning to us—if such were needed—of what to expect from them."<sup>31</sup> That was unfair to Roosevelt himself. Besides

there were many in England who disagreed with Eden's policies—including the Prime Minister. And disagreements over the Far East were, as much as those on policy towards Italy, what forced Eden to resign in February 1938.

But Eden's efforts were not altogether wasted. At the very beginning of 1938 Captain Ingersoll of the U.S. Navy's Plans Division arrived in London, had a long interview with Eden, and then began talks at the Admiralty a few days later. Once more the fruit was slow to ripen. But these talks and what slowly developed out of them implied a growing realization of common interest and of the need to recognize that interest by plans for common action. The first stones in the building of a new alliance were, however hesitantly, now being laid.

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### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Norman Gibbs is Chichele Professor of the History of War, All Souls College, Oxford. He is author of *Origins of the Committee of Imperial Defense* and a contributor to the *Cambridge Modern History*. His most recent book is *Rearmament Policy*, volume 1 in the series *Grand Strategy in World War II*.

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### NOTES

1. This episode is dealt with in detail in the doctoral thesis of Professor J. K. McDonald, "British Naval Policy and the Pacific and Far East, 1919-1922," submitted for examination in Oxford University in 1975.
2. Admiralty file 116/667, Case 5846; see also C.P. 645.
3. C.I.D. memorandum 122-C.
4. Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars* (London: Collins, 1968), v. I, p. 502.
5. C.I.D. memorandum 816-B.
6. Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), p. 369.
7. Roskill, p. 509.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 508.
9. Middlemas and Barnes, p. 371.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
11. The quotations in this paragraph are all taken from Cabinet Paper 81 (28).
12. Middlemas and Barnes, p. 373.
13. Roskill, p. 548.
14. Middlemas and Barnes, p. 375.
15. Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, Keith Middlemas, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), v. II, pp. 144-148.
16. N. H. Gibbs, *Rearmament Policy v.I Grand Strategy in World War II* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976), p. 29.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.
18. Admiralty Papers 167/86; Board Minutes of 17 March 1932.
19. Admiralty Papers 116/2998; memo of 7 September 1933.
20. Foreign Office Papers, F.O. 371/17383; memo of 9 September 1933.
21. U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1933*, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1948), v. I, pp. 386-388.
22. Cabinet Conclusions 57 (33).
23. Papers of the Naval Conference, 1935 (N.C.M. (35)) no. 3, pp. 3-4.
24. Roskill, v. II, p. 320.
25. Middlemas and Barnes, chap. 28.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 777.
27. Roskill, v. II, p. 297.
28. Gibbs, p. 394.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 797.
30. Sir Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), p. 540.
31. B.A. Lee, *Britain and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 42.

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Author's Note:

It is a great privilege and pleasure to be invited to participate in this tribute to Rear Adm. Henry Eccles as sailor, author and teacher. As an Englishman who has enjoyed Henry Eccles' company in England and New England it seemed to me appropriate to select not only a naval topic but also one which is concerned with the development of Anglo-American relations. His American friends will know of the admiral's great pride in and loyalty to his own country. Those of us who have enjoyed his company in England will be aware of his considerable knowledge of and concern for the welfare of this other country also. N.G.

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