ADMIRAL WILLIAM S. BENSON AND THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF SEA POWER

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by

William M. Wurl

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Thesis written by
William M. Wurl
B.A., Baldwin-Wallace College, 2005
M.A., Kent State University, 2009

Approved by

Dr. Clarence E. Wunderlin, Jr          Advisor
Dr. Kenneth Bindas                     Chair, History Department
Dr. Timothy Moerland                   Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Dedication and Acknowledgements

To my grandparents:
The late Mike Friedrich
And my pen pal,
Virginia Friedrich

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Introduction:

Conceptions of Sea Power

It is not the taking of individual ships or convoys, be they few or many, that strikes down the money power of a nation; it is the possession of that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy’s flag from it, or allows it to appear only as a fugitive; and which, by controlling the great common, closes the highways by which commerce moves to and from the enemy’s shores. This overbearing power can only be exercised by great navies, and by them (on the broad sea) less efficiently now than in the days when the neutral flag had not its present immunity.

The necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs…from the existence of a peaceful shipping, and disappears with it, except in the case of a nation which has aggressive tendencies, and keeps up a navy merely as a branch of the military establishment.¹

This thesis will examine the American sea power tradition, the ideas expressed by U.S. Navy officers regarding the contribution the maritime services made to national power and prosperity. In particular, this study will focus on the relationship between the two key components identified by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, historian and naval theorist, in the above discussion of “overbearing power” and “the existence of peaceful shipping”: the nation’s naval service and its merchant marine. In doing so, this thesis will explore the power-political and mercantile-commercial dimensions of the American sea power tradition formulated in the four decades before World War I and the influence

of those dimensions on Admiral William S. Benson, wartime chief of naval operations (CNO) and postwar member of the United States Shipping Board (USSB).

It has been argued that Mahan is “the point of reference and departure for any work on sea power.” For the purpose of this thesis, Mahan is both historian and naval theorist as he argued sea power was related to national power and prosperity. As a theorist, Mahan argued a country, with the sea as its border, took advantage of it to transport goods to overseas markets and expect necessary or luxury goods from the distant markets in exchange. It was usually the “wish,” Mahan noted, that such shipping was done by the country’s own vessels. The merchant shipping, in its travels overseas, must have protection from its country in the form of a navy. There was also the need for safe harbors and bases from which the trade route was protected. In these places goods could be sold and collected for home markets. Mahan observed that these were the policies of maritime states. Mahan as historian proved his argument by the actions of the British Empire, which took advantage of its geographical position to become a great power. However, Mahan gradually de-emphasized the American merchant marine’s importance to the navy after 1890, culminating in his 1911 declaration that merchant shipping alone did not justify the navy’s existence.


Works on sea power since 1890 have been greatly shaped by Mahan’s classic work. His contemporaries concentrated on its naval aspects while downplaying the importance of the commercial branch. Fred T. Jane, the founder of *Jane’s Fighting Ships*, thought Mahan had overlooked certain naval aspects that could be included in the greater meaning of sea power in 1906. British historian and strategist Julian S. Corbett studied the various aspects of command of the sea in 1911, concluding it meant the control of maritime communications. A fellow American naval officer, Rear-Admiral Bradley A. Fiske, went as far as to argue that sea power was naval power, as the commercial power embodied by the merchant marine is a weakness during war.\(^4\)

Subsequent historical studies on sea power placed more emphasis on its naval aspects with token mention of its commercial branch. Harold and Margaret Sprout’s books on American sea power in 1939 and 1940 chronicled the effect of Mahan’s theories on American naval policy. In 1960, E. B. Potter described sea power in much the same manner as Mahan did in 1890, but with a different purpose. Potter opined that sea power “comprised those elements that enable a nation to project its military strength seaward and to project and maintain it beyond the seas,” which included commercial shipping, bases, and “advantageous international agreements.” British historian Paul M. Kennedy in 1976 defined sea power as allowing not only commerce but shipboard troops

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to travel to distant destinations. Kennedy credited Mahan for taking sea power from the transport of troops across the sea to a distant theater, to using the ocean for trade and creating standing fleets. There also existed, Kennedy stated, a “Blue-Water” school that believed in the power of the battle-fleet to bring an enemy to its knees by blockade. In 1996, N.A.M. Rodgers noted that Mahan’s concept of sea power had been disproved by the two world wars. For many years, Rodgers observed, sea power was debated more often within American naval circles than among historians until Kennedy’s now classic work was published. George W. Baer asserted that offensive sea control based on the fleet came from Mahan, and the U.S. Navy had been using it as its guiding principle ever since. Mahan’s legacy on naval power is better known than his influence on the growth of a national merchant fleet.

A few works noted the eventual shift in Mahan’s thinking on the merchant fleet, while others criticized him for his initial stance without mentioning the shift in his thinking. William D. Puleston’s biography of Mahan noted the “extreme position” Mahan took when he wrote that a navy disappears with its merchant marine. Puleston

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thought that Mahan relied too much on Great Britain’s history for his initial conclusions. William E. Livezey speculated why Mahan de-emphasized the merchant marine’s importance over time. He thought it resulted from three possible factors: because of changing technology’s effect on naval personnel; Mahan’s beliefs about the oceanic barriers of the country; or “he followed the lines of attack which he thought would most likely accomplish his primary objectives.” Cornell University historian Walter LaFeber argued Mahan could have recognized that American products did not need to be shipped in American bottoms to reach those overseas markets. He agreed with Livezey’s position that technology’s effect on personnel had affected Mahan’s views. Barry M. Gough counted Mahan’s theory of the merchant marine being the backbone of naval power among his fallacies, but Gough failed to mention if Mahan realized his own error on that early viewpoint. John J. Clark argued that a nation with a sizable merchant fleet did not always have a strong navy and vice-versa. Kennedy chastised Mahan on this point as well. Baer noted Mahan’s shift of emphasis toward naval power in his 1911 publication of Naval Strategy in which Mahan stated that military and international functions also influence the creation of a navy besides commerce. Surprisingly, Robert Seager’s biography of Mahan did not mention it at all. While some historians acknowledged

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Mahan’s gradual shift toward the navy, a few others still accepted Mahan’s 1890 views as monolithic.

Scholarship has also delved into the period before Influence of Sea Power was published. Seager argued that many of the points that Mahan touched on in his greatest work were argued in piecemeal in the 1880s by American naval officers and politicians. A revitalized merchant marine was considered as important as a rehabilitated navy during this time period by these individuals, he argued. Kenneth Hagan also assessed the naval theory of the pre-Influence navy. Central to the thinking of these early sea power advocates was the importance of a strong merchant marine as an index of national greatness, and during times when the Navy was using obsolete wooden warships, a necessity as a reserve for defense.  

It was also the period Admiral Benson grew up in when he began his naval career.

William Shepherd Benson was born near Macon, Georgia, in 1855. He entered the U.S. Naval Academy in 1872, and became a midshipman on June 18, 1879. Among his first tours of duty were the screw sloop USS Hartford, and the old frigate USS Constitution. Following his tour on the Constitution in July 1881, he was stationed at the

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Brooklyn Navy Yard as an ensign. His immediate superior was then-Commander Mahan. Benson was at sea for a couple of scientific surveys, and traveled the world aboard the dispatch boat USS *Dolphin*. He taught at the Naval Academy as an instructor of naval architecture, naval tactics, and seamanship. During the Spanish-American War, Benson revised the textbook *Seamanship*, a work by the founder of the U.S. Naval War College, Rear-Admiral Stephan B. Luce. He then served aboard American battleships, first on USS *Iowa* as its executive officer in 1903, and later the commander of the USS *Utah* in 1911. Ranked as a captain, he left the battleship in 1913 to become the commandant of the Philadelphia Navy Yard. He had served from the oldest warship afloat in the *Constitution* to command the newest of America’s battleships.8

The current historiography of Admiral Benson is chiefly centered on his actions as chief of naval operations during World War I and the Paris Peace Conference and his efforts as a member of the Shipping Board during the 1920s. His hardline behavior toward the British following the war is never explained beyond an adherence to Mahan’s theories regarding naval strategy, and anti-British sentiments. Published works on Benson’s career on the Shipping Board focus on his economic perspective in policymaking. Most historians have viewed Benson during this period as being motivated by an anti-foreign attitude and a desire to see an American merchant marine becoming permanent. He was throughout his careers in naval and civilian life an American nationalist. David F. Trask asserted the CNO was “no idealistic dreamer” of

the Allies’ motivations. Benson was “concerned primarily with the interests of the United States.” Mary Klachko argued Benson was “a convinced nationalist” who rejected the opinions held by others, like Admiral William S. Sims, who thought American and British interests were identical or complementary. Klachko opined that Benson carried these opinions with him when he was on the USSB.  

What is missing in the historiography is a deeper understanding of the naval intellectual thought Benson carried with him during his varied careers. His belief in a strong merchant marine being important to national standing and as a viable auxiliary to the navy came from the naval officers of his era. Such thought was not limited to the influence of Mahan, but extended from other sources in his generation. The ideas among naval officers in the 1880s stayed with Benson during the Great War and into the 1920s. While the context of those ideas changed with the circumstances of the eras in which he lived, the ideas were modified to be used in the given situations by Benson and his contemporaries during and after World War I.

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American sea power ideas from the late 1870s to the mid-1920s, when taken collectively, constitute a “tradition of thought.” The naval officers advocating sea power were, therefore, members of a multi-generational intellectual tradition. In addition, the principal questions debated in the professional discourse on sea power changed dramatically from one historical era to the next, as the social and political context changed and the international balance of power likewise changed significantly. In this sense, Benson learned the intellectual naval traditions from the officers in the navy as he came up in the service, from midshipman to admiral. The traditions were not limited to the merchant fleet and its crews, but also the responsibilities of the armed service to the nation.

To understand more fully the evolution of the sea power tradition, it is necessary to divide the period under examination into three distinct, but overlapping eras. The first era spanned the years from the late 1870s to the late 1890s. The naval officers of this time theorized about maritime affairs during a period of rapid industrialization, commercial expansion, and “new empire” colonialism. Their ideas can be categorized as predominantly a mercantile-commercial interpretation of sea power. Naval theorists wanted the United States to expand overseas to sell surplus goods by using its merchant marine. The principal question under debate, not surprisingly, was the relationship of the navy to the merchant marine. That relationship underpinned the navy’s responsibilities.

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10 This paper will use Andrew Lockyer’s “traditions of thought,” an intellectual argument carried over two or more generations that changes in relation to the changing historical context. See “‘Traditions’ as Context in the History of Political Thought,” Political Studies 27, no. 2 (1979): 201-17.
The navy was charged with the protection of American commerce and the defense of American coastlines. Its mission was complicated by the decrepit material condition of the navy’s warships, and the technological advances in naval engineering. The country’s best defense was its ocean barriers and a disinterested Europe that was more concerned with Africa and Asia than the Western Hemisphere. Very quickly after 1890, that naval-mercantile relationship was increasingly nudged aside by a new emphasis on naval preparedness, and a power-political interpretation of sea power was ascendant.

The late 1890s to 1919 were a period of change for the United States’ naval policy. It was an era of great power rivalry rooted specifically in the power-political perspective and that interpretation began to dominate the discourse on sea power. The increasing interference of imperial European powers into the Western Hemisphere put the United States on alert for its territories on the West Coast, the Philippines, and the prospective canal at the Isthmus. In 1897, Mahan felt certain that Imperial Germany was going to challenge the Monroe Doctrine, as Kaiser Wilhelm II was attempting to establish or enlarge its spheres of influence in Africa and China. As part of his Weltpolitik, Wilhelm was also undergoing an ambitious naval building program designed to deter Great Britain from interfering in his plans for expansion.\(^{11}\) The principal question now became the nature and proper extent of naval preparedness. In this historical era, Mahan’s contribution to the discourse on sea power is not the culminating statement (as *Influence of Sea Power* was in 1890), but the originating contribution—the first comprehensive

statement on modern naval preparedness. The navy was now given a mission to engage
the enemy in battle between great fleets, and stifle the enemy’s commerce by driving off
its merchant fleet.

Thus, for CNO Benson during World War I, while he was thinking about the
postwar world, he was conditioned by this era of great power rivalry, and saw it
continuing in a newly restructured world order, with a dramatically different balance of
naval power. At first, he thought Germany would overcome the Allied powers, and then
set its expansionist aims toward American interests in the Western Hemisphere. When
America intervened on the side of the Allies, and fought for an armistice, the threat
changed from Germany and its allies to Great Britain and its alliance with Japan. Great
Britain became free from restraint by Germany’s defeat; it certainly looked to Benson
like the traditional greatest sea power might set its sights on the United States as an up-
and-coming rival.

The third historical era is one of “peace, prosperity, and armaments limitation”
following the war. The Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armaments was
the key event leading into the 1920s. The principal question for Benson during this era
was the preservation of the merchant marine, doubly important after the Washington
treaties, particularly the Treaty for the Limitation of Armaments. That treaty limited the
U.S. Navy’s capital ship tonnage and prevented new capital ship construction for ten
years; it also jeopardized the infrastructure that would be needed for naval construction
when the treaty expired. The treaty did not limit merchant ship tonnage, and so merchant ships became necessary not only for trade, but also for national defense.

Chapter one of this thesis will argue that the first generation of sea power theorists, while recognizing the importance of both commercial expansion and naval build-up to the goal of national greatness, emphasized the mercantile-commercial dimension in their thought. The balanced development of and close relationship between navy and merchant marine was a central element of their thinking. The ultimate statement of this mercantile-commercial perspective on sea power was Mahan’s *Influence of Sea Power*, the classic study in the field. After 1897, however, as great power rivalry overtook commercial-colonial expansion in the minds of these naval officers, Mahan, himself, boldly departed from his own recent statement. Although many of his disciples remained wedded to a close naval-merchant marine relationship, Mahan began to shift the discourse on sea power away from the mercantile-commercial perspective to the power-political viewpoint. He led the way in refocusing their thinking on naval preparedness. This chapter seeks to place Mahan within the traditions established by fellow officers in the past, and that he passed these traditions on to a succeeding generation.

The second chapter of this thesis explores the thinking of the U.S. Navy’s two premier advocates of “naval preparedness” in the era of great power rivalry—Mahan and Fiske—and the influence of their ideas on CNO Benson and the various naval planning staffs responsible for postwar planning as the Great War drew to a close and the peace
conference convened. It argues, first, that Benson was primarily concerned during the last year of the war with the threat of Britain’s Royal Navy in what he expected to be a new era of postwar competition, and second, that the CNO and his staffs, focusing on the creation of a viable naval deterrent, adapted the views of the two principal preparedness advocates in the formulation of the navy’s plans for America’s postwar role in international relations. They sought to prepare the United States for a postwar role in an era characterized by a dramatically altered balance of naval power. Thus, Benson, a strong advocate of a close naval-merchant marine relationship, concentrated his efforts on naval build-up and the goal of achieving naval parity with the British in the postwar era. The traditions of the previous chapter were modified by the state of affairs in this era, and served as the origination of the ideas Benson and his staffs used in formulating their forecasts of the international scene after the Great War.

Chapter three will assess Benson’s efforts to restore balance to the maritime services. It will argue that, as a member and chairman of the U.S. Shipping Board, Benson sought to preserve the massive merchant fleet constructed during the Great War and support the building program toward naval parity with Britain’s Royal Navy. When confronted with armaments limitation during the Harding administration, the former CNO did his best to oppose it. Benson’s fears of an unchecked Royal Navy dominating the world’s sea lanes and an Anglo-Japanese alliance in the Far East went unnoticed by America’s negotiators at the 1922 Washington Conference. As this chapter will demonstrate, armaments limitation reinforced Benson’s desire to preserve the merchant
marine. Now, more than ever, the mercantile service was vital to the preparedness of the
U. S. Navy. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that the traditions of the previous 40 years
still served as a guide to a member who lived through their development, but he modified
them to suit the circumstances he perceived to have existed after the war and the
armaments limitation treaty.
Chapter I
Authors of the American Sea Power Tradition

Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan argued in his 1890 classic *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, that the “necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs, therefore, from the existence of peaceful shipping, and disappears with it.” He asked: “Can this navy be had without restoring the merchant shipping? It is doubtful.” Twenty-one years later, Mahan wrote that he erred when he said “that navies depend upon maritime commerce as the cause and justification of their existence” because Russia’s virtually non-existent merchant marine was not the rationale for the existence of its navy.¹ Mahan’s two positions framed the debate over this relationship and linked two eras in the history of sea power.

The principal question under debate by advocates of sea power throughout most of the late-nineteenth century was the relationship between the navy and the merchant marine. Some naval officers of the period supported the merchant marine as it was a necessity for reserves during wartime. The Civil War was their historical example of both the failure of an inadequate navy, and the contributions a merchant marine could

make to the war effort. Others thought technological changes had made the merchant marine obsolete, and the navy should look elsewhere for its reserves.

The merchant fleet was also a symbol of national greatness. All the great maritime powers had a great navy and a thriving merchant marine, they argued. The United States should be one of those powers. This mercantilist perspective believed the merchant marine made a navy necessary. Capitalists concerned about their investments overseas could be assured that the navy would defend their interests.

The most prominent advocate of sea power was Mahan, whose book *Influence of Sea Power* brought back the relevancy of the merchant marine. While most American navalists of the era looked to the Civil War for reasons to increase the navy’s size and for the rehabilitation of the merchant marine, he focused on Europe’s wars to justify his conclusions. Over time, however, Mahan changed his views, advocating a position that disregarded the merchant marine by the early 1900s as he focused more on the navy.

Even though Mahan modified his views on the merchant marine, his original 1890 thesis was still influential with others within the navy and outside it.

This chapter will begin with an assessment of the arguments for a close relationship formulated by sea power advocates before the publication of *Influence of Sea Power*. From 1878 until 1890, sea power advocates emphasized the interdependence of the two maritime services, drew lessons from the inadequacy of the Civil War-era Union Navy and the resulting destruction of Northern commercial shipping, and disagreed over the value of the merchant marine as a reserve. Following this assessment will be an
examination of Mahan’s changing views on the relationship, and the views of his associates, Rear-Admiral Stephen B. Luce and Theodore Roosevelt, assistant secretary of the navy from 1897-1898, both of whom emphasized different reasons for the value of the merchant marine.

**The Pre-Influence Navy**

Before 1890, few Americans thought the country depended on oceanic commerce for its livelihood, and a navy for its protection. The country’s geographical position, with oceans on both sides and weak neighboring states on its borders, created the impression of security. Coupled to geographical position was the apparent lack of interest by the European powers to venture into the Western Hemisphere. Great Britain kept the sea lanes open for American commerce by its policy of free trade. The U.S. Navy in the 1880s was not designed for prestige or security, but instead protected American commerce and show the flag in foreign ports. The country focused on internal industrial developments following the Civil War, as it had no colonial possessions or a significant merchant marine presence overseas, and the country was determined to avoid involvement in European affairs.²

If the country found itself at war, naval defense was planned around coastal defenses. Mines and monitors, in addition to the U.S. Army’s coastal artillery, kept away

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possible invaders from American shores. Should a blockade develop, shallow-drafted coastal warships were built to break one that was close to shore. These warships were not expected to meet the enemy to break an oceanic blockade, given that most American shipping was close to land. The navy’s blue-water fleet was to raid the enemy’s commercial shipping. Thus, the “battle-fleet” was not needed by the United States for its defense.³

Naval officers of the era virtually agreed on the roles of the navy. The navy’s roles were to protect American shipping and stimulate commercial expansion. Commander T.F. Jewell wanted American politicians to anticipate when American production exceeded needs and had to reach out to overseas markets. In 1874, Commodore Foxhall A. Parker thought the functions of the navy were the protection of American commerce and American citizens overseas. He added that the navy had the addition purpose of maintaining the country’s national dignity.⁴

The navy’s duties to show the flag in distant ports and attack enemy merchant shipping required its sea-going vessels to operate independently. Since coal would be sparse in such operations, the vessels were fitted with sails to use full-time. The navy’s overall strategy permitted an economizing in appropriations that soon became the norm in the service. Naval appropriations were spent on repairing old vessels instead of replacing

³ Baer, One Hundred Years, 9-10.

them, resulting in naval yards flourishing and the continued use of obsolete equipment. The 1884 U.S. Navy was still using muzzle-loading relics from the Civil War.\(^5\)

The economizing effect on the U.S. Navy took its toll on the navy’s material condition. When the Civil War ended, the Navy had 700 ships with total displacement of 500,000 tons carrying 5,000 guns. December 1870 saw a fleet of 200 ships of 200,000 tons displacement and carrying 1,300 guns. Only 52 of this number with 500 guns were in full commission.\(^6\)

The efforts to rehabilitate the navy began in 1881. James G. Blaine, President James Garfield’s secretary of state, and William Hunt, the secretary of the navy, called Congress’s attention to the U.S. Navy’s plight. Blaine emphasized the importance of the larger world outside American borders, in particular the Isthmus to the south and the Hawaiian Islands to the west. Hunt discussed naval policy with congressional leaders, formulating legislation that effectively ended repairs on wooden warships, and, in 1883, authorized the construction of four steel warships. Their completion in 1887 marked the beginning of the “new navy.”\(^7\)

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\(^5\) James A. Arnold, “Naval Developments in the Late 19\(^{th}\) Century,” in E.B. Potter and others, eds., *Sea Power: A Naval History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 339-40. The static technology of this era made it possible for the navy to recruit professional mariners, requiring little if no training by the navy. Unfortunately, the hard life on board a naval vessel often led to desertions, and the old navy suffered from such manpower issues throughout its history. For more on the enlisted personnel of this era, see Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Naval Enlisted Force, 1899-1940*, Contributions in American History, no. 68 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), chapter one.


The 1880s brought about new technologies, and with them, international complications. The development of the steamship brought with it the need for coaling stations. Great Britain and Germany, in particular, competed with each other for such ports across the world, including the Caribbean. A European power establishing bases there could control the trade coming through the prospective isthmian canal, and possibly endanger America’s lightly defended West Coast. After Great Britain and Germany argued over the Samoan Islands in the Pacific Ocean, the site of an American coaling station, the U.S. Navy recognized that America’s national security increasingly meant the extension of the nation’s interests overseas. It realized it had to change its naval policy. Imperial powers were seeking territory across the world, making it more difficult for the United States to stay in isolation from European politics. The protection of commerce changed to national security.\(^8\)

In this era of commercial expansion, the merchant marine was inextricably linked to the navy. Commercial expansion, according to the neomercantilist thinkers of the time, could not be possible without a merchant marine. The internal production of the United States had exceeded its ability for consumption, so new markets had to be found overseas. The 1880s brought about renewed interest in building up both the navy and the merchant marine. The merchant service in the 1880s only carried 23 percent of American foreign commerce. To revitalize the one would strengthen the other. In April 1880, Congressman Washington C. Whitthorne (D-TN), for example, described a

\(^8\) Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power*, 11.
nation’s progress being tied to its commerce and merchant marine, its health determined by production first, and defense of same, second.\footnote{Walter LaFeber, “A Note on the ‘Mercantilist Imperialism’ of Alfred Thayer Mahan,” \textit{The Mississippi Valley Historical Review} 48 (March 1962): 680, http://links.jstor.org/sici?scid=0161-391X%28196203%2948%3A4%3C674%3AANOT%22I%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N.; Robert Seager II, \textit{Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and His Letters} (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1977), 199-202; idem., “Ten Years Before Mahan: The Unofficial Case for the New Navy, 1880-1890,” \textit{The Mississippi Valley Historical Review} 40, no. 3 (Dec., 1953): 493-94, http://links.jstor.org/sici?scid=0161-391X%28195312%2940%3A3%3C493%3ATYBMTU%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L.} Initially, in these early debates on sea power, the difference in opinion rested on what service should be addressed first. Representative William H. Calkins (R-IN) wanted to construct the navy first in 1884 while Congressman John R. Thomas (R-IL) wanted to build up the merchant marine before the navy. It was agreed that a merchant marine was necessary, even as a naval auxiliary, in naval circles. The method to bring the merchant marine back to prominence was also discussed. The most popular option was a subsidy provided by the government, a view supported by Admiral David Porter and Secretary of the Navy William E. Chandler.\footnote{Seager, “Ten Years Before Mahan,” 501-02.}

Many naval officers wanted the merchant marine reestablished in the post-Civil War era, but there were disagreements regarding how that was to be done. While some were in favor of offering subsidies to carry mail to shipping companies, others wanted the tariff reduced so foreign-built ships could be bought. Some wanted subsidies by the
federal government offered to domestic shipbuilding firms. Such disagreements and Congress’s indifference led to inaction.11

The belief of junior officers in the interdependence of commercial and naval power was at the core of their “geopolitical philosophy.” Lieutenant Charles Belknap believed a great commercial power was also a great naval power. Belknap saw in Great Britain a menace since it held Canada, and thus could be construed as a neighbor. He believed British opportunism during the Civil War contributed to the fitting out of Confederate commerce raiders, as these ships attacked rival American shipping. Lieutenant John C. Soley held the same sentiments. The view of these officers was to build the United States Navy to equal the British so as to defend itself from a war over the carrying trade.12

Naval Officers on the Merchant Marine and the Navy before Influence

The earliest writing on the topic dates back to 1878. Commodore Robert W. Shufeldt of the U.S. Navy served as chief of the Bureau of Equipment and Recruiting from 1875 to 1878, the officer responsible for ship maintenance and personnel. Shufeldt saw a fleet in stagnation, a former trendsetter in naval science during the Civil War becoming “bogged down with congressionally inspired restrictive economizing.” The nation itself was in turmoil from social unrest caused by a sharp industrial recession in


western and eastern parts of the country. Shufeldt feared a social revolution would take place. He accepted as a solution to the nation’s problems a proposal by President Rutherford B. Hayes and William Evert, his secretary of state in 1877, that American trade needed more outlets for surplus products. It was under these circumstances that Shufeldt published a letter to Leopold Morse, chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee, in 1878 in response to an inquiry from the committee.\textsuperscript{13}

Shufeldt described the interdependence of the navy and the merchant marine. Regarding the merchant marine, he conceived of it as the essential service in the export of surplus goods. He wrote “At least one-third of our mechanical and agricultural products are now in excess of our wants, and we must \textit{export} these products or \textit{deport} the people who are creating them.”\textsuperscript{14} Government assistance was necessary in order to get capitalists involved as they were sensitive to financial loss. Shufeldt expressed this view of government support: “\textit{In no other way} can our commerce be re-established or our prestige restored upon the ocean,” and he thought that a subsidy could be calculated based on the cost of marine insurance with a ten-year limit.\textsuperscript{15}

He saw value in the steamships, so constructed not just as commercial shipping but also as auxiliary warships, during times of war, either transporting supplies or acting

\textsuperscript{13} Frederick C. Drake, \textit{The Empire of the Seas: A biography of Rear-Admiral Robert Wilson Shufeldt, USN}, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 156, 154, 164.

\textsuperscript{14} Robert W. Shufeldt, \textit{The Relation of the Navy to the Commerce of the United States, to Leopold Morse}. (Washington; John L. Ginck, 1878), 3. Italics are his own; see also Hagan, “Alfred Thayer Mahan: Turning America Back to the Sea,” 287.

\textsuperscript{15} Shufeldt, 4. Italics are his own.
as commerce raiders. The merchant service also provided reserves as the Civil War provided 4,500 officers and 60,000 “rank and file” for the Navy. He asked in turn: “Should another war come upon us—and, if any, it is to be hoped a foreign war—where are these ships, these officers and men to come from, unless the mercantile marine of the country is restored to its former prestige?” The navy, in turn, protects the merchant marine, if not opens up new routes and markets, Shufeldt argued. He reminded Morse that the navy beat the Barbary States while European powers were paying them tribute for their piracy and the navy swept the West Indies of pirates. The navy fought for “free trade and sailors’ rights” in the War of 1812 and opened trade in the Pacific for whaling ships and opened up Japan to western commerce, Shufeldt argued. The navy had contributed much in exploration, from the South Seas and South America to the Arctic, and in providing aids to navigation in lighthouses and charts in the Coast Survey. Shufeldt concluded: “All this, while acting as the police of every sea, the Navy has done in the aid and for the aggrandizement of American commerce.”

In 1879, Lieutenant Frederick Collins claimed that commercial supremacy and naval power worked hand in hand, with commercial power leading the way. He commented that gains to the merchant marine should mean an increase in naval strength. A nation with its commerce on the decline should act to maintain the navy so as to resuscitate the former. Prosperous times mean an abundance of sailors and vessels for

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16 Ibid., 4-5, 7; Kenneth Hagan wrote that Shufeldt wanted to establish a network of steamship lines that would reach worldwide markets. See Hagan, “Alfred Thayer Mahan,” 289.
the navy to use when needed, Collins argued, but prove scarce when commerce declined. In such a time the navy should be strong in sailors, ships, officers and naval establishment to meet emergencies. It was necessary to have a level of preparation, especially in war.¹⁷

Collins used the example of the Civil War to assert what would have happened if the navy was stronger. It could have seized rebel ports before they assumed defensive positions, caught any blockade runners and any cruiser preying on the foreign carrying-trade. The war destroyed the merchant marine, but before that “a blind belief in the ‘manifest destiny of the Republic,’ as the phrase was, no adequate navy had been created for its protection.” He described a scenario of a resurgent American merchant marine that threatened to control world shipping. If a competitor decided to use force with sizable naval strength, it could annihilate American commerce. The United States had never warred against a naval power that could give it undivided attention. If that day comes, he warned, “our countrymen will look with astonishment upon the methods of annoyance that modern means of warfare will place within the reach of an alert and aggressive foe.” The navy’s success during the Civil War, despite being built in a hurry, had a lasting impression on the public. According to Collins, the public took the wrong lesson from the war: that a navy could be built quickly before war broke out, and keep during peacetime only a few officers that “should keep alive the germs of naval

¹⁷ Frederick Collins, “Naval Affairs” The Record of the United States Naval Institute 5, no. 3 (1879): 161. This journal preceded Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute.
knowledge, much as the monks did that of letters during the middle ages [sic].” Such assumptions were faulty, Collins believed, as nations needed time to construct ships and assemble trained men to officer and run the vessels. Wars were becoming short and decisive as nations used force to overwhelm their foes quickly.18

The value of the merchant marine was the topic of an essay prize in 1882 sponsored by The Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute. Ensign William G. David’s analysis, one of the essays published in the March 1882 issue, emphasized how the navy and merchant marine were interrelated. He wrote that no nation could have a great merchant fleet without a “proportionally strong navy” to protect it. He argued a merchant marine contributed to the creation of a navy because the former would be vulnerable to attack by a stronger naval power. David wrote that while a strong navy did not produce a merchant fleet, it could still promote it by way of encouraging citizens to look for new trade routes abroad, confident that the navy’s presence could deter any attacks on them. David calculated that the United States had 1,586,000 tons of registered shipping in 1850, 2,546,000 in 1860, but only 1,314,000 tons in 1880.19


One of the causes for the American merchant fleet’s decline was the navy during the Civil War, according to David. The merchant marine was already beginning its decline by then, helped in part by American shipbuilders building wooden sailing vessels instead of iron steamers as Great Britain was doing. The Civil War made the situation worse, David claimed, as shipping fell to 1,602,000 tons in 1865 from 2,546,000 tons in 1860. During that time, 715 ships of 480,882 tons transferred to British registry. David noted that, in time of war, the navy needed the merchant fleet’s crews and officers to man its vessels, as the former did not have enough personnel. Owners of vessels “unable or too patriotic to change their colors were compelled to lie idle in port, not only earning nothing, but subjecting their owners to heavy loss from taxation.” The navy’s inadequacies in 1861, David argued, hurt the merchant service by taking too much of its personnel and allowing enemy cruisers to prey on it. David’s analysis of the navy’s contribution to the merchant fleet’s decline indicated that there was a limit to how far the navy could rely on the merchant service. A strong navy, less dependent on the mercantile service, was needed.

The prize winner, Lieutenant J.D. Jerrold Kelley, later wrote a book using his original essay and new material to elaborate on his view of the navy-merchant marine relationship. Kelley wrote that “commercial supremacy and naval power have gone hand in hand in all countries, and though it is conceded the former should precede, yet we once

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20 David, “Our Merchant Marine,” 165-66. David argued that if the navy was strong enough in 1861 the Civil War would have been over in two years because of an effective blockade to keep foreign supplies out.
made the mistake of permitting commerce to develop without commensurate additions to our naval strength, and to our great disadvantage.” He agreed with David and Collins that opportunities were lost during the Civil War because of the navy’s inadequate force level. The navy’s first responsibility was to defend the nation’s coasts and second “the guardianship of a nation’s commerce afloat.” The merchant marine provided a training ground for when the merchant service is needed in war. “If there were no merchant marine there would be no need for a navy either to foster commerce or to police and survey the seas,” leaving the naval establishment to consist of stokers and artillerymen in coast defense vessels. In economic terms, the merchant service enriched the nations who own it, Kelley maintained, and provided “a sense of self-respect which comes from healthy rivalry with other competing maritime countries.”

It quickens a nation’s powers and infuses life and vigor into its international relations; for the flag flying at the mast-head of a vessel typifies the individuality of a country and asserts its place among the governments of the world.²¹

Master Carlos G. Calkins, another contributor to the essay contest, noted the economic effect of a merchant marine in general. He wrote that the amount earned by transporting international freight by way of the sea was $500,000,000. The United States’ own commerce was $130,000,000 with less than a fifth going to American ships. “Two-thirds of this sum, being freight on goods exported, was paid by the foreign

consumers of our products. Had it been earned by our own ships, it might be added to the balance in our favor in our foreign trade.” He warned that a nation that was unable to carry its own freights may have its commerce interrupted when “the power owning the shipping employed becomes involved in war, or adopts a policy hostile affecting commercial and maritime prosperity.”  

The merchant marine provided many resources to the benefit of the navy, argued Calkins. It trained men for the sea without any expense to the nation or disruption of their employment. The ships and their support in shipyards and machine shops also contributed to the reserve of the navy. Competition in a merchant service could introduce new materials, he contended, and resolve problems in speed and marine economy that the navy could not solve on its own. Calkins argued it also could contribute to peaceful settlements of international disputes by the merchant marine’s existence. His reasoning was based on a dispute France had with Andrew Jackson’s administration on trade balances and claims dating from the American Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic Wars. An agreement on all commercial issues was reached in July 1831, which obligated the French government to pay $4.6 million in claims. By late 1835, French-American relations became strained to the point of war because the French government had not paid the claims. Calkins argued the matter was resolved because the French knew the large American merchant fleet had many ships, manned by sailors with high public spirit. A

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healthy merchant marine could have contributed the cruisers that would have defended them from commerce raiders in the Civil War. Calkins quoted the merchant shipping lost to hostile action by Confederate cruisers during the war as 104,605 tons and 774,652 tons sold to foreign buyers. To resolve some of these issues, Calkins wanted a special type of merchant vessel built that was multi-purpose in its design. Merchants can use these types of vessels during peacetime, and the government would have expanded the reserve force needed for the navy.\footnote{Calkins, “Our Merchant Marine,” 36-37, 43, 70-71. For more on the French claims dispute, see Donald B. Cole, The Presidency of Andrew Jackson, American Presidency Series (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 125-27.}

Lieutenant Richard Wainwright emphasized in his essay the Civil War’s negative effect on the merchant marine. He blamed the insignificant navy of the day that only had enough resources for blockade duty and to assist in the capture of Southern ports. The foreign carrying trade was thus left unprotected from hostile action. Many were captured, sunk, or sold to foreign interests. When the war ended, the merchant marine engaged in foreign trade was “nearly destroyed; not only that which we formerly carried for other nations, but even our own goods were carried in foreign bottoms,” Wainwright declared. Vessels that returned to American shipping service were found to be behind the times as shipbuilding was transitioning to iron construction.\footnote{Richard Wainwright, “Our Merchant Marine: The Causes of Its Decline, and the Means to be Taken for its Revival,” Proceedings (see note 19): 125.}

The real reason, Wainwright wrote, why the nation needed a merchant marine was to prepare for the occurrence of war. “A war always seems improbable until we are in


the midst of one. Look at our late war; it was declared imminent many years before it came, and when it did come the great rebellion was looked upon as a trifling insurrection.” He applied this viewpoint to Great Britain, a war being improbable and yet possible. The navy needed merchant ships for transports, sailors, and supply vessels. “What would we have done in the late war without our merchant marine?” he asked. Lacking a carrying trade would be a disaster, according to Wainwright, if British shipping were not carrying American grain, controlling seven-eighths of that trade:

Every day we hear of blockades at the great ports, elevators full, and long lines of heavily laden cars lying idle waiting for storage room. The farmers could not sell their grain, railroads would lose freights, they would have less power to purchase, money would cease to circulate freely, and all business would be paralyzed at a time when the country needed money.  

Wainwright recognized the navy’s crucial role as a defender of commerce. If capitalists were to invest in the merchant marine, it needed reassurance on the risks to be taken. Wainwright claimed that the value of property was enhanced by its security; the navy was to protect the merchant marine from enemy cruisers as those seen in the Civil War. Wainwright recalled Collins’s lament that the war also produced a false impression of security by the building of the naval force during the conflict. A warship was becoming more like a scientific instrument in that it needed to be constructed with time and money and not on the pressure of necessity. The navy and the merchant marine go together in terms of economics, he said: “Whatever capital is invested in shipping

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becomes interested in the navy, and without such an interest being created, adequate appropriations for a naval force cannot be obtained.”

Lieutenant-Commander French E. Chadwick disagreed with the idea that the merchant service could be used as a reserve in his essay. Its value was fading with the transition of sail to steam, he argued. Instead, the U.S. Navy should strive to train the officers of the merchant marine, matching the British practice. British sailors retire from the naval service at age 38, Chadwick observed, and generally join the merchant fleet as valuable petty officers. He also recommended that the navy upgrade its life-saving service and organize it like Britain’s Coast Guard service to possess a naval reserve.

A subsequent issue of *Proceedings* held a discussion of the prize essay topic of 1882. Captain A.P. Cooke wrote that the reason for the navy’s reliance on the merchant marine was a long-standing tradition. The American navy was always small, Cooke noted, so the merchant marine was necessary to train efficient seamen, and have ships available. Defense of the coasts can only be done by a navy, and the navy cannot be maintained without a merchant fleet. Naval Institute Chairman N. H. Farquhar repeated these sentiments, but cautioned those who believed “a large navy” was not necessary to maintain a large merchant service as threats such as pirates would reappear on the seas if


the navy should be withdrawn. Farquhar did not elaborate on how large the navy had to be to carry out its responsibilities to the American merchant fleet.

Chadwick was not the only naval officer to hold doubts about the merchant marine’s value to the navy during war. Officers like Lieutenant Soley and Commander Caspar F. Goodrich doubted the value of the merchant marine in war. Navalists after the mid-1880s devised a system of naval militias to act as a reserve for men, which won approval not only with junior officers but, eventually, Congress as well. By the end of the 1880s the merchant marine was seen more by naval officers as something that the navy had to defend and aid in war and peace.

In the decade before Mahan wrote of the influence of sea power, navy officers were already debating the relationship of the navy to the merchant marine. Most were neomercantilists who advocated a protected home market with commercial shipping to carry surpluses to markets overseas; they limited the navy’s national security role to defense of coastlines, shipping, and trade routes. Most saw the navy and merchant marine as closely interrelated, but they differed over whether the merchant marine could still function as a reserve for the navy. Some saw lessons in the events and impact of the Civil War: an inadequate navy could not protect commercial shipping that was destroyed by the end of the war in 1865. By the end of the 1880s, the merchant marine was seen less as an asset and more as a dependent of the navy. The navy enjoyed some limited


growth by efforts from naval agitation. By July 1890, these efforts had produced congressional authorization for twenty-five ships totaling 135,000 tons displacement.\textsuperscript{31}

Mahan’s 1890 \textit{Influence of Sea Power} renewed the discussion of the relationship of the merchant marine to the navy, but he developed his conclusions from the history of Europe’s great power rivalry during the eighteenth-century. He described how one of Europe’s great powers achieved its status by using and controlling the sea in a different manner than was accepted by naval officers of his era.

\textbf{Mahan’s Original Thoughts of the Relations of Commerce and the Navy}

Mahan wrote on naval subjects as early as 1883. His credible work on the navy during the Civil War, \textit{The Gulf and Inland Waters}, did not possess the sea power theory he developed later. He was selected by then-Commodore Stephen B. Luce to be a member of the Naval War College’s faculty in 1885.\textsuperscript{32}

Mahan originally wrote \textit{The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783} from his lecture notes at the Naval War College. He based his conclusions on the give-and-take of great power rivalry in early modern European history. By September 1887, Mahan wanted to publish his lectures. Luce encouraged the publication so that Mahan could get a large amount of material off his mind and focus on studying naval tactics under steam. The publication would also help the struggling college. Mahan’s 1890 sea

\textsuperscript{31} Seager, “Ten Years,” 511.

power thesis was developed independently from the navalists who debated the issue of commerce and the navy around him.33

The roles of a merchant marine in Mahan’s early thought were similar to the ideas of the older generation before him. In this work, he demonstrated what a merchant marine and a navy did for one of the great powers of Europe. Mahan wrote: “The necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs, therefore, from the existence of peaceful shipping, and disappears with it” and he asked “Can this navy be had without restoring the merchant shipping? It is doubtful.” The United States was not an aggressive nation, and since the merchant fleet had virtually disappeared, the “the dwindling of the armed fleet and general lack of interest in it” are logical consequences. A navy without a merchant fleet, according to history, was a “growth which having no root soon withers away.” England’s sea power was not based on the navy and commerce alone, Mahan argued, but a union of the two that made it great. Before the War of Spanish Succession, England was one of several sea powers, and after it, England stood alone. Did sea power alone guarantee success? Mahan answered no, but “[t]he due use and control of the sea is but one link the chain of exchange by which wealth accumulates; but it is the central link, which lays under contribution other nations for the benefit of the one holding, and which, history seems to assert, most surely of all gathers to itself riches.”34


Mahan also introduced a new theory by which the navy operated. The old blue-water fleet that engaged in commerce-destroying during a war was ineffective. Ports located close to enemy trade routes are required for these operations. The United States had no ports located close to the trading centers of the world, unless it could base its operations in the port of an ally. The Confederacy used commerce-destroyers in the face of the Union blockade, but the strategy did not stop the war effort. Commerce-destroying by cruisers, according to Mahan, was a secondary operation that is effective when backed up by the might of the fleet. It was misleading to see commerce raiding as a primary measure, “a most dangerous delusion,” when considering Great Britain’s vast commerce and strong navy. The most effective method of commerce control came from a great navy. The naval historian then concluded:

It is not the taking of individual ships or convoys, be they few or many, that strikes down the money power of a nation; it is the possession of that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy’s flag from it, or allows it to appear only as a fugitive; and which, by controlling the great common, closes the highways by which commerce moves to and from the enemy’s shores. This overbearing power can only be exercised by great navies, and by them (on the broad sea) less efficiently now than in the days when the neutral flag had not its present immunity.  

He argued only by “military command of the sea by prolonged control of the strategic centers of commerce,” and defeating its powerful navy, can a great sea power be defeated.  


Captain Mahan then turned to the subject of the merchant marine’s viability to the navy as a reserve. Besides crews, he noted, the merchant marine also had as reserves “a large number of people engaged in the various handicrafts which facilitate the making and repairing of naval material” and other occupations that relate to the sea. Mahan noted the argument that reserve strength had lost its importance as weapons and ships took so much time to construct. He added that modern states now planned to develop “the whole power of their armed force” so as to disable an opposing force before the enemy could respond effectively. A single battle that completely destroyed the regular forces of a state was the result of exceptional circumstances, like Trafalgar and Jena, but such battles were actually the results of a campaign over time. Reserves do benefit the country, Mahan wrote, if the war lasted beyond one battle or campaign. The United States had no defensive shield in its population, however, as national shipping and its related industries scarcely existed.\(^\text{37}\)

Mahan contended that the government can influence sea power in war and in peace. In times of war, the government can construct a navy relative to the size of merchant shipping and “the importance of the interests connected with it.” He added the need for institutions that developed personnel and ships for use in wartime. In peace, the government can contribute in two ways to sea power: promote industries related to the

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 22, 71, 37, 38-40, 190.
sea even if such industries did not exist, or the government can be counterproductive, as it can hinder the progress of people that could develop such industries on their own.\footnote{Ibid., 67.}

Mahan took the themes of the past decade and made them relevant to the 1890s. The merchant marine had a place with the navy in similar terms. Like the early American naval writers, he recognized that the navy and merchant marine together made the country prosperous and powerful. Mahan also presented old ideas that were not exclusively American. Historian William Livezey wrote such ideas began in antiquity with Xerxes, Thucydides and Themistocles, and were spoken of by Raleigh and Bacon. Livezey declared of Mahan’s contribution: “He clarified, formulated, substantiated, and expounded a doctrine history-old. In his hands sea power received a broad basis; the military and the naval, the political and the commercial, were as sword and sheath in his interpretation.” Overseas trade made a nation great, and its protection was essential. The command of the sea by the navy made trade possible for the exchange of finished products for raw materials. Livezey concluded, “a close relation between foreign trade and the navy was thus affirmed.” Harold and Margaret Sprout wrote Mahan’s conception of command of the sea was not original. Rather “[h]is contribution lay rather in organizing into a coherent system, or philosophy, the strategic principles which the British Admiralty had been following more or less blindly for over two hundred years.”\footnote{Livezey, \textit{Mahan on Sea Power}, 52; Harold and Margaret Sprout, \textit{The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939; Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 205.}
Mahan in 1890 introduced a new mission for the navy, and re-established the linking of both the merchant marine and the navy as contributions to national greatness. The old navy’s primary mission of commerce-raiding was ineffective to defeat a powerful navy. That fleet must be driven away not just from our ports but far from our coasts by our navy, Mahan argued. Protection of commerce and the defense of the coasts were still missions of the navy, but the navy now had to engage any opposing force and defeat it. The navy’s new mission was command of the seas, particularly that of home waters. The merchant marine was considered a necessity for trade expansion and in providing a reserve, but it also justified the navy’s existence. Over time, Captain Mahan found other compelling functions for the navy, and fewer reasons why the merchant marine was special to the country.\textsuperscript{40}

The Evolution of Mahan’s Thought

Over time Mahan favored a large regular naval force and deemphasized the importance of a merchant fleet. In 1897, Mahan felt certain that Imperial Germany was going to challenge the Monroe Doctrine, as Kaiser Wilhelm II was attempting to establish or enlarge its spheres of influence in Africa and China. As part of his Weltpolitik, Wilhelm was also undergoing an ambitious naval building program designed to deter Great Britain in his plans for expansion.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} Mahan, \textit{Influence of Sea Power}, 71.

Under these circumstances, Mahan wrote of the need for a standing force relatively larger than the reserve force. A reserve created on short notice with quick training procedures so as to hurry its creation was inadequate for modern naval warfare. It took time to train a recruit so he understood not only his function, but what the roles of others within the military organization were, and how he related to them. Mahan stressed time was needed to obtain proficiency, and more to retain it. For “preparedness” to be effective there must be enough men to operate the warships immediately when mobilization orders are given. A reserve is only necessary “to compensate for defects in conception or execution” and this principle also applied to material assets such as ships. A reserve, therefore, should be kept small.\(^{42}\)

Mahan did not explicitly connect the merchant marine to this position on reserves. In 1900, however, he argued that there were not enough well-trained men to operate the most modern technology. The best solution was to create and maintain a large standing force. The merchant seamen of the past who could easily pick up on naval equipment because the merchant vessels they served on were very similar to naval vessels (including carrying cannon) no longer existed, he wrote. Mahan declared that “not more than one-third of a ship’s company in war can safely be composed” from the merchant service.\(^{43}\)

\(^{42}\) Alfred Thayer Mahan, “Preparedness for Naval War,” in *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1897; BiblioBazaar, 2007), 100-102, 103. Citations are to BiblioBazaar edition.

\(^{43}\) Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1900), 199-200; for another interpretation of role of technology with the merchant marine, see LaFeber, “‘Mercantilist Imperialism,’” 680.
Mahan testified before the Merchant Marine Commission in 1904 to give his insights on the American merchant fleet. He stated a merchant marine promoted a reserve group of seafaring people for the navy. He cited the Navigation Act that England passed 250 years earlier to build up its merchant marine after finding itself in a situation similar to the United States. However, Mahan noted, the planners in England at that time realized that in order to aid the shipping trade, commerce would have to suffer. On the issue of personnel, Captain Mahan repeated his position from 1897 that favored quality over quantity regarding reserve forces. He cautioned his audience regarding the capabilities of reserves. Mahan told the commission “we must be on our guard not to expect too much” from a large number of people in the reserves as numbers alone could not possibly equal the actual value of those reserves. He added “I would not like to see anything adopted which would seem to militate against the necessity of maintaining a large regular naval force, as the nucleus to which the reserves can go.”

When Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R- MA) asked if the actions taken in accordance with England’s Navigation Acts were to improve commerce as well as merchant shipping, Mahan replied in the affirmative. He also agreed with Lodge’s comment that commerce did return in the long run. In summary, Mahan compromised the usefulness of a merchant fleet as a reserve for the navy by his testimony.

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In 1905 Mahan tried to clarify what he had said at the 1904 hearings. First, Mahan split “maritime intercourse” into two terms, commerce and navigation. Commerce was the exchange of goods; navigation was the transportation of these goods from ports. Mahan opined that a nation with a large commerce being handled by foreign shipping with little shipping of its own, such as the United States in 1905, possessed few native seamen “attached to the country and its interests, by ties of birth or habit.” A nation in such a condition would find itself in a dangerous position in wartime. Mahan stated it was on this reasoning that British politicians accepted its Navigation Act. The Act was designed to build up reserves for its navy; not necessarily for the benefit of commerce. Mahan argued that the men of the merchant marine provided its strength, not the ships. By allowing ship-owners to buy ships where they could be built cheaply, the more important asset, the men, could be paid higher wages. Contradicting himself, however, Mahan noted shipyards were as necessary in the development of British naval power as the encouragement of seamen.46

By 1911, Captain Mahan broke away entirely from the essential nature of the merchant marine, twenty-one years after he wrote of its necessity. He concluded that a navy did not need a merchant fleet in order for the navy to exist. Mahan cited as his example Russia, which possessed little of a merchant marine, but it employed a navy for

the defense of its territory. Mahan explained the relationship of maritime commerce with the navy in this fashion:

It seems reasonable to say that, where merchant shipping exists, it tends logically to develop the form of protection which is called naval; but it has become perfectly evident, by concrete examples, that a navy may be necessary where there is no shipping...More and more it becomes clear, that the functions of navies is distinctly military and international, whatever their historical origin in particular cases...External interests cannot be confined to those of commerce. They may be political as well as commercial; may be political because commercial, like the claim to ‘the open door’ in China; may be political because military, essential to national defense, like the Panama Canal and Hawaii; may be political because prepossessions and sympathies, race sympathies, such as exist in Europe, or traditions like the Monroe Doctrine.

There were other external influences and non-commercial functions that justify a navy’s existence other than a merchant marine. While shipping interests could help the navy’s efficiency with reserves, they could also help the navy get what it needed from representative governments. He wrote that naval officers needed to realize that “merchant shipping is only one form of the many which external questions of a country can assume.” Here, Mahan went beyond the earlier authors of sea power, extending the proper sphere in which an enlarged navy should operate. In his extended view of national interest, there were numerous external pressures that necessitated an enlarged regular naval force. “The United States, with no aggressive purpose, but merely to sustain avowed policies, for which her people are ready to fight, although unwilling to prepare, needs a navy both numerous and efficient, even if no merchant vessel ever again flies the United States flag.”

47 Mahan, Naval Strategy, 446–47; Livezey, Mahan on Sea Power, 266.
Mahan’s Associates on Sea Power

Mahan had two supporters who were influential on his career as a naval theorist. Theodore Roosevelt had his own opinions regarding the use of the navy before he met Mahan. Rear-Admiral Stephen B. Luce, the founder of the Naval War College, gave Mahan the opportunity to develop the lectures that constituted his first sea power book. Both Roosevelt and Luce had views regarding where the merchant marine contributed to the wartime plans of the navy and to the greatness of the country.

Theodore Roosevelt wrote naval history himself with *The Naval War of 1812*. It was the acclaim given this work that earned him an invitation from Stephen B. Luce to speak at the Naval War College. On that occasion he met Mahan, then the president of the college, and became an admirer of the captain. When Mahan published *The Influence of Sea Power*, Roosevelt gave it a glowing review in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He was satisfied that Mahan discredited the habit of America’s lack of preparedness. Roosevelt believed that in a modern age of steam, steel, coal, and ships, a navy could not be built quickly, but instead had to be done years in advance. Roosevelt used Mahan’s reputation on sea power to “vindicate” his own reasoning on the issue. Roosevelt and Mahan corresponded on naval matters when the former was assistant secretary of the navy.48

In his 1882 classic study, Roosevelt described the 1812 U.S. Navy. It was composed “partly of antiquated hulks, and partly of new vessels rather more worthless than the old.” He criticized the lack of military preparedness in the policies of Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, describing the situation as “a criminal folly” of these presidents not to prepare the military for an event he argued was unavoidable.49

Roosevelt strengthened American naval power during his presidency. Roosevelt wanted a navy strong enough to deter German aspirations in the Caribbean, and later Japanese aggression in 1907 and 1908 on the West Coast. He was also concerned about defending the Philippines should the expansion-minded Japanese invade the archipelago. Thus, the navy grew during the Roosevelt administration. In 1901 it had 17 first-class battleships, completed or building. When Roosevelt left office in 1909, there were 27 first-class battleships either afloat or under construction. Roosevelt advocated for the all-big-gun battleship, with several classes of them being authorized during his presidency. Roosevelt used the navy’s battleships to project American influence in his foreign policy,


as was done in the crisis over Venezuela, and in ordering the cruise of the Great White Fleet.  

While Roosevelt’s support for the navy was well-known, his opinions on the merchant marine were not. In 1882, Roosevelt observed that the merchant marine had created the type of seamen needed to man the young nation’s navy in the War of 1812. Without a navy to protect them, sailors on American merchant ships had to depend on themselves. These sailors lived at the mercy of the sea and had to regard the people they met as adversaries. The conditions in which these sailors lived, he argued, “was to raise up as fine a set of seamen as ever manned a navy.”

In 1899, Roosevelt assessed military preparedness following the Spanish-American War. He attributed the success of the war to the navy’s preparedness. A warship is “a complicated machine” that required “such highly specialized training” that a civilian could not master it on short notice. “No civilian could be five minutes on a battle-ship without realizing his unfitness to command it,” he wrote. He equated with civilians even the best masters of merchant ships, whom he felt “could be used to a certain extent as under-officers to meet a sudden and great emergency” but doubted that

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could be done perfectly. The old navy had cannon that were simple enough to operate that a merchant seaman could do it, Roosevelt opined, but modern technology required men to be trained for a period of time before they can be of assistance in handling, for example, engines. “From time immemorial it has proved impossible to improvise so much as a makeshift navy for use against a formidable naval opponent. Any such effort must meet with disaster.”52 His position regarding a navy’s preparedness being based on planning and not on improvised methods was similar to the viewpoints of naval officers like Collins and Wainwright. Roosevelt admired the character possessed by the men of the merchant marine in 1812, but in 1899, the development of character alone did not mean the same as technical competency. Roosevelt’s 1899 position resembled Mahan’s depreciation of the merchant sailor the following year.

Roosevelt modified his views during his years in the presidency. He wanted a merchant marine for its effect on national greatness. Roosevelt advocated the enlargement of the American merchant fleet in his annual messages to Congress. The merchant marine is mentioned in one form or another in every annual address Roosevelt gave except 1902. In 1901, Roosevelt called Congress’ attention to the merchant marine, noting “It is discreditable to us as a nation that our merchant marine should be utterly insignificant in comparison to that of other nations which we overtop in other forms of

business.” Roosevelt wanted the merchant marine reestablished to bolster trade for American products and make available an auxiliary component for the navy. He noted that foreign governments subsidized their shipping while American vessels had to contend with higher costs in manning and constructing ships. For the navy in 1901, Roosevelt wanted to create a “National Naval Reserve” to be trained by the Navy Department. It should be an auxiliary for the Navy to draw from. The reserve should consist of graduates from the Naval Militia and Naval Academy, “officers and crews of coast-line steamers, longshore schooners, fishing-vessels, and steam yachts” along with populations around lighthouses and life-saving stations. While the merchant captain could not command a battleship, at least he could provide auxiliary services to the Navy during an emergency.

In his 1903 annual message, Roosevelt wanted Congress to commission an investigation into the merchant marine to resolve the disagreements about the course of its revival. This commission was to examine the best way to build up the American merchant marine and create a “national ocean-mail service of adequate auxiliary naval cruisers and naval reserves.” He noted that the current contract on mails dated from 1891 and would expire in 1905; vessels since that time had gotten faster. He put more importance on cargo vessels because they would be employed for service in commercial


54 Ibid., 15: 99.

55 Ibid., 15: 117,122.
shipping to Asia and South America. In his fifth annual message, Roosevelt called attention to the Merchant Marine Commission’s report adding: “We should have ships of our own and seamen of our own to convey our goods to neutral markets, and in case of need to reinforce our battle-line.”

The report by the Merchant Marine Commission established a downward trend in American shipping. Since David’s 1880 figure for registered tonnage at 1,314,000 (1,314,402 according to the commission’s report), the registered tonnage for vessels engaged in foreign trade continued to decline. By 1890, the year Mahan’s original treatise on sea power was published, the tonnage fell to 928,062. 1904’s figure was 888,628 in registered tonnage. In comparison to Great Britain, the report indicated that Britain’s tonnage in steamers over 100 tons increased from 8,043,872 in 1890 to 14,889,175 in 1904.

By his 1906 annual message, Roosevelt was still trying to realize the recommendations of the Merchant Marine Commission’s report. He could not understand what was “objectionable” about assisting the American merchant fleet, but

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56 Roosevelt, “Third Annual Message” (December 7, 1903), in Works, 15: 175.
57 Roosevelt, “Fifth Annual Message” (December 5, 1905), in Works, 15: 316. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA) wrote to Roosevelt Sept. 30, 1905 requesting Roosevelt to mention the encouragement of an American merchant fleet. Lodge supported the Commission’s report. “I do not believe there is any piece of legislation which would do more to add to our prosperity and strengthen us financially than the restoration in some degree at least of our merchant shipping.” Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, 1884-1918, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925), 2: 204-5.
58 U.S. Senate, Report, LXIV-LXV. Unlike the American figures, which distinguished between vessels engaged in the coastwise trade and foreign trade, the information regarding Great Britain’s tonnage is not broken down into those categories.
argued that while legislation derived from the report would benefit the states on the 
coasts, in the end it would benefit the entire country. He did concede that if the merchant 
marine in general could not be addressed, at least the mail line should be opened to South 
America. Roosevelt’s secretary of the navy, Charles J. Bonaparte added his support for an 
expanded merchant marine: “The navy should be sustained by the establishment of an 
adequate merchant marine. The encouragement of the merchant marine is a cheap way of 
adding to our naval force.”

Roosevelt elaborated his view that supporting the merchant marine benefited the 
country as a whole in March 1907. In a letter to Congressman Ernest Mark Pollard (R-
NE), who voted in favor of the ship subsidy bill, Roosevelt conveyed his thanks to the 
western congressmen who had “rendered a great and patriotic service.” Roosevelt 
admitted the previous bills were objectionable, but felt the present measure was a good 
one. He equated the western states vote for the subsidy bill to the “seacoast regions” who 
voted for the national irrigation system that benefited the West. When critics said that the 
irrigation system only benefited the West, Roosevelt wrote: “My answer to them was that 
anything benefited a part of this country ultimately benefited all of it” and that also 
applied to the shipping bill. Roosevelt stated “it is deeply discreditable to us as a nation 
that our shipping should be driven from the high seas” because of foreign lines subsidized 
by their governments, and from the high wages and standards of living for seamen in the

American merchant fleet. Roosevelt wanted to develop trade lines and develop closer relations with countries in South America and in Asia. Unfortunately for Roosevelt, this bill died in the Senate because of sectional splits within the Republican Party.\(^{60}\)

In 1907 Roosevelt wanted to extend the ocean-mail act of 1891 since it upheld the “theories of the obligations of a great maritime nation.” Roosevelt explained that these obligations included a nation’s mail being carried by its own vessels; the vessels themselves and their crews were to be available as auxiliaries by the navy, and to keep the shipyards at full efficiency especially for building battleships.\(^{61}\) In his last annual message in 1908, Roosevelt still recommended an extension of the act of 1891 for mail lines in the Pacific.\(^{62}\)

By the end of Roosevelt’s second term, he got his battleships, but not a bill to benefit the merchant marine. The lack of adequate American merchant shipping and naval auxiliaries was one of the lessons taken from the Great White Fleet’s world cruise. The Navy Department had attempted to get congressional support for the construction of colliers to carry the fleet’s coal, but appropriations were assigned for further battleship

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\(^{60}\) Roosevelt to Ernest Mark Pollard, March 19, 1907, in *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Elting E. Morison (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 5: 625-26; Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt*, American Presidency Series (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 245. Republicans on the coasts supported the bill while midwestern Republicans opposed it, believing it to be unnecessary and threatening to the railroads in their regions. The sectionalism within the Republican Party over the mail bill anticipated the later divisions over the tariff and other issues over 1908-09.


construction. It was estimated that the Great White Fleet needed 125,000 tons of coal, with another 100,000 being shipped in transit. Roosevelt worked around the problem of supplying this fleet with coal to San Francisco by arranging for eight naval colliers and 30 foreign ships.\(^6^3\)

From the naval profession, Mahan had a friend and mentor in Rear-Admiral Luce. Luce invited him to lecture on strategy and tactics, and instruct on naval history at the fledging Naval War College in 1884. Mahan developed the lectures that composed his sea power thesis, and Luce encouraged him to publish them, which Mahan did in 1890. He compared Mahan to the great strategist Antoine-Henri de Jomini in 1907.\(^6^4\)

Luce believed in the older tradition of sea power which composed of the naval and commercial branches, and noticed in the late 1890s that Mahan left out the mercantile marine in his writings about sea power. In 1898 the rear-admiral reviewed Mahan’s first collection of articles, *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future*. He agreed with Mahan that a strong navy was needed as there was “a general revival of schemes of colonization and mercantile enterprise.” The United States was getting involved, too, in this “spirit of unrest.” He asserted that the nation was favorably located between Europe and the “ancient civilizations” in the East. While Mahan proved to Luce the need of a navy, Luce felt Mahan left out something important. He thought the views of the naval strategist had subjugated the views of the political economist.


\(^{64}\) Livezey, *Mahan*, 11-12, 44.
“Ocean commerce” was being overlooked here, including the merchant marine, Luce charged. While American products were being sold overseas, they were being carried by foreign ships. Sea power, Luce argued, in its military sense follows commerce, and not before. “Ships and seamen multiply with the extension of traffic with distant lands. The development of the military marine follows, inevitably, the growth of the commercial marine, just as effect follows cause.” With no merchant marine to speak of, Luce believed there would only be a nucleus of a navy. Without the navy to hold strategic points like an isthmian canal, they could be taken away from us during a war. He noticed Mahan implied ocean commerce, but his recent writings did not put enough stress on it. Luce proclaimed that if a country wants to be a naval power, it must have a merchant marine.\(^{65}\) Luce agreed with Mahan’s original thesis in 1890, but in 1898 he wondered if Mahan was losing his focus on what made a country a great sea power.

In a 1903 address at the Naval War College, Rear-Admiral Luce reaffirmed the interdependency of the merchant marine and the navy. He saw value still in the merchant marine as an auxiliary force. Luce argued “It was once observed that we had ‘clipped the wings’ of commerce and driven our carrying trade to foreign bottoms…Thus we are not only contributing indirectly to the support of foreign navies, which may some day be opposed to our own; but we are depriving ourselves of what would prove, in time of war, an auxiliary of incalculable value.” He urged Congress to work out a solution. Luce

added that the navy, “with no other interest in the question save that dictated by the highest sense of patriotism, discharges an imperative duty,” urged for the revival of the merchant marine as a “military necessity.”

Luce got his chance to assist Congress a year later when called to testify before the Merchant Marine Commission. Reading from a letter he sent to Senator Jacob H. Gallinger (R-NH), chairman of the Commission, and taking questions as he read, Luce demonstrated his view of the navy-merchant marine relationship in terms to those expressed the previous year. The navy protected the merchant marine from “molestation” and got its reserves from the merchant marine. Luce added, “A navy may be said to be the offspring of foreign trade.” He looked to history for examples during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 where some of the most well-known officers came from the merchant marine. The Civil War also provided an example of the navy turning to the merchant marine in time of need. Luce said that money paid foreign carriers enriched the country the carrier served, indirectly helping that nation’s navy and reserve. He admitted that the merchant marine of 1898 was not sufficient to assist in the war against Spain. What then should we depend on?

Luce believed the nation needed sailors, the type trained by service in sailing ships:

66 Stephen B. Luce, Chapter II, “An Address Delivered at the United States Naval War College, Narragansett Bay, R.I., June 2, 1903” in The Writings of Stephen B. Luce, 41.

67 U.S. Senate, Report, 1738.

68 Ibid., 1738, 1739.
Steamers produce seamen, it is true – men who acquire the sea habit – but not sailors in the strict sense of the word – men who do not only have the sea habit, but the well-known characteristics of the sailor – his skill in meeting all the vicissitudes of life at sea, his contempt for danger, his self-reliance under difficulties, his adaptability to all sorts and conditions of circumstances. Men seasoned in that school soon adapt themselves to man-of-war life.  

Luce next called attention to the need for school ships utilized in training. He cited as his example three ships created under the marine-school act of June 1874 to provide instruction in seamanship, navigation and other areas in regard to the operation of a vessel. Luce encouraged this as a possibility for future uses.

The reserve component of an American merchant fleet, said Luce, was another necessity in the navy’s interest. A large auxiliary fleet of supply vessels, transports and scout vessels was needed and can be found in the merchant marine. The navy purchased 418 vessels during the Civil War, while the army bought 783 vessels. During the Spanish-American War, the army had 93 purchased and chartered vessels with 97 from the navy. As to how the merchant marine should be revitalized, Luce thought

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69 Ibid., 1739. Luce believed sailing ships still had a place on the seas and thought they should be supported. Luce was asked about why sailors of the sailing type were needed in a steam-powered navy. Luce responded the navy needed men, for instance, to man boats for expeditions. A cook may have the sea-habit, but they are not in the sense sailors. He was assisted in his point by Wisconsin representative Edward S. Minor on the commission recalling the absence of sailing ships in Great Lakes shipping and the type of sailor there disappearing, replaced by crews who could hardly launch a boat.

70 Ibid., 1742. The vessels in question were the Enterprise at Boston, Saratoga in Philadelphia and St. Mary’s in New York. Luce argued for the necessity of a law that required merchant marine officers to be certified in their competency. If such a law were enforced, school ships would be necessary for training. Luce wanted an equivalent of a local broad of trade to certify such officers.

71 Ibid., 1743.
government assistance was necessary, but felt that people suspicious of party politics would probably not support it.\(^72\)

Roosevelt and Luce still saw the merchant fleet as useful to a turn of the century navy as a reserve, but each saw it from a different perspective. Roosevelt saw the merchant marine in the economic perspective. Possessing one enhanced the United States’ national prosperity and its image overseas. The naval reserve element was secondary to this role. Luce saw the merchant marine in a more traditional way, like Shufeldt and others did years before, a viewpoint that was endorsed by Mahan in 1890. When the country found itself at war, suitable naval reserves could be found among the men of the merchant marine. The merchant marine enhanced the United States’ sea power and made it great.

Mahan’s 1890 argument for a close navy-merchant marine relationship was employed by advocates for commercial expansion well into the twentieth century. The Merchant Marine Commission used relevant quotes from *Influence of Sea Power* for its final report to Congress. The prize-winning essay for the 1910 U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* by Naval Constructor T.G. Roberts was reprinted into congressional documents. He quoted the early Mahan heavily in his essay. Mahan, according to Roberts, indicated that, “Trade means wealth, which means power; and it is that sea power which controls the world and makes history.” The navy was insurance towards the merchant fleet, and the navy was to push the influence of the flag across the world so that

\(^72\) Ibid., 1744.
trade proceeded uninterrupted. The U.S. Navy was built more as an expression of patriotic fervor than from “commercial considerations,” but it had to safeguard the Monroe Doctrine and protect the Philippines and the Panama Canal.

The navy was “incomplete” without a merchant marine, Roberts insisted. Modern steam warships required colliers, supply ships, hospital ships and scouts. These units could be easily acquired from the merchant fleet. He concluded: “A nation, therefore, which has no merchant shipping, as this country, has only an incomplete navy in the matter of material. So, likewise, the personnel.” Roberts provided his own interpretation of what the merchant service could contribute to the country. The merchant marine had three elements of sea power, Roberts argued. First, there was merchant shipping that could carry trade during times of peace and war. Another element consisted of merchant vessels that could be converted into naval auxiliaries once war began. The last element would be reserve personnel. Government involvement was necessary to set up the merchant marine for business, he asserted, and allow it to continue its operations. The merchant fleet also provided a means to control the country’s wealth through trade. Roberts argued that the union of the navy, the merchant marine, and the auxiliary component within it, “form the unit of sea power now necessary to place this country upon respectable footing as a great and independent nation.”

Conclusion

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The American naval tradition began in the late 1870s and early 1880s as a rationale to deal with domestic economic problems, and to supplement and ready the U.S. Navy. The naval officers of the 1880s saw the relationship between the navy and the merchant marine from a mercantilist perspective of commercial expansion. They were also cognizant of the navy’s dilapidated condition despite its mission to protect commerce and show the American flag in foreign ports. By restoring a merchant marine that was decimated by the Civil War, these officers hoped the navy would be restored in kind to protect it. Some thought the navy should be rebuilt first to reassure nervous American capitalists with investment opportunities overseas.

The merchant marine’s value in wartime for the navy was debated over the late 1870s and early 1880s. Naval officers discussed among themselves the worth of merchant ships and their personnel to the navy. Commodore Shufeldt in 1878 described the merchant marine personnel that were used for naval service during the Civil War. He wondered where such reserves could be found in the next war. Ensign David cautioned that the navy could only take so much from the merchant fleet before such acquisitions harmed it. Master Calkins argued the merchant marine trained reserve personnel and spurred innovation in naval engineering. Calkins claimed if the merchant marine had been in better condition, it could have contributed ships to hunt for Confederate surface raiders. Lieutenant Wainwright declared the real reason why a navy need a merchant fleet was to prepare for war. Lacking such a resource he maintained, left the country in trouble if foreign shipping was no longer able to handle American cargoes. Lieutenant
Kelley mentioned its training mission. Lieutenant-Commander Chadwick, however, dissented from his peers, stating that changing technology made the merchant fleet’s value less than it was perceived. The Civil War proved to some of these officers that a merchant marine was necessary when the country went to war by providing trained personnel and ships to the navy. These officers were concerned about the possibility that this reserve could disappear. But a few other officers agreed with Chadwick’s view that the merchant service’s effectiveness was declining from changing naval technology.

Common agreement on the merchant marine rested with its enhancement of national greatness. In order to be a great nation, the United States needed to be a great commercial power, sending its surplus products across the world to keep American production high and maintain its individual standing in the world. The navy needed to be rehabilitated to protect American commerce at sea and defend the nation’s coasts. A commercial power also needed to be a great naval power.

When Mahan wrote *Influence of Sea Power* in 1890, he described a navy and a merchant marine as being the mainstays of national power. Mahan proved how Great Britain took advantage of its combined sea power to be the greatest power in Europe. His argument repeated the claims of riches to the nation that possessed a merchant marine, and how its necessity made the navy a natural growth from its wealth. A merchant marine provided personnel in its shipyards to the navy in wartime and reserves to assist the navy in its mission of national defense.
Although others continued to advocate the arguments in *Influence of Sea Power*, Mahan himself moved steadily away from the mercantile-commercial perspective after 1897. Concerning himself with the expansion of the regular naval service, Mahan recognized the new realities of great-power rivalry increasingly obvious after that pivotal year. A navy existed for other reasons besides commercial ones. A navy executed national policy, upheld a nation’s prestige, and defended its territories. As technological advances added new layers of complexity to naval warships and warfare at sea, Mahan understood that only powerful regular navies could defend America and her commercial ships, and deter aggressors. Thus, “naval preparedness” and a power-political perspective gradually nudged aside commercialism in the early twentieth century.

The lack of an American merchant marine, as predicted by Wainwright and Calkins in 1882, came to hurt American commerce with the start of World War I. Collins and Wainwright wanted preparedness for the navy in their time, and it was no different when the world war looked uncertain to Americans. The lingering question of what the war would mean to America’s future brought up the idea of preparedness not just to the U.S. Navy, but to the American merchant marine as well.
Chapter II

W.S. Benson and Navalism: Envisioning American Naval Deterrence for the Postwar Era

Anglo-American relations during World War I were, at best, cooperative. Once the United States entered the war, it accepted the strategies of the Allies regarding the war. The appointment of Rear-Admiral W.S. Sims as commander of U.S. naval forces in European waters led to a close working relationship in London, greatly facilitating naval cooperation. There were disagreements between American and British authorities early on relating to the allocation of certain ships. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral William S. Benson retained several destroyers for the American defense of the East Coast from submarines. His decision was based on submarine activities on the East Coast earlier in the war. Sims and the British did not understand why these units were kept in the Western Atlantic when they felt the Eastern Atlantic was the priority. The situation was remedied in part by Benson’s visit to the war zone in 1917, which allowed him to see the situation overseas more clearly. There was also a controversy over what should receive American naval escorts; troopships going to France or the supply convoys heading to the British Isles. It was resolved by April 1918, when Britain recognized the importance of
American troops in Europe and allowed the use of its passenger liners to transport the U.S. Army.¹

Towards the last months of the war, mutual suspicion had tainted the cooperation between these two powers. Both American and British officials suspected each other of going ahead with aggressive naval and commercial policies after the war. British actions during the war, such as the de Bunsen trade mission to South America in mid-1918, made American officials suspicious about British intentions after the war. Unhappy American officials wondered why Britain, during a time when the Allies were in danger and the United States was working with a hampered Britain, would send a trade mission to South America without consulting the United States. By the war’s end, American attention also turned to the British navy’s increased size, its newfound strategic freedom, and its alliance with Japan, the American rival in the Pacific. In kind, British officials were pondering why the United States wanted to build a large navy that they felt was unnecessary for American defense purposes. Because Britain’s overseas commerce with the Eastern and Western Hemispheres supplied essential raw materials and food, British policymakers believed preponderant naval power was necessary to ensure that the trade routes remained open. The British could not understand why the largely self-sustaining

United States, with no similar lifelines overseas, needed its naval program. The British also wanted to preserve its naval supremacy and the prestige that came with it.²

American naval policy was first focused on Germany before the war. The preparedness movement influenced Congress to pass the Naval Act of 1916. It authorized ten battleships and six battle cruisers as part of a 156-ship building plan. By the end of the war, the U.S. Navy was ranked second to that of Great Britain. While Britain had a clear superiority over the United States in capital ships ready for service, 42 to 16, the American naval force was expanding. The United States was constructing 13 more battleships and 6 battle cruisers in comparison to Britain’s 4 building battle cruisers, but only one of them was completed. If the work was finished on time, within five or six years the U.S. Navy would achieve “substantial parity with, and probably actual superiority over” the British navy. The Navy Department had drawn up plans for 12 more battleships and 16 more battle cruisers to be constructed over a six-year period, but they were reduced to 16 capital ships by the Wilson administration.³

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³ Sprout, New Order of Sea Power, 38-39, 51, 53-55. In general, battle cruisers and battleships carried the same large main-armament, but battle cruisers differed from battleships in possessing a higher top speed, but at the cost of thinner armor protection. For the debate and passage of the Naval Act, see idem, American Naval Power, 334-46. For a brief overview of the preparedness movement, see Sprout,
Among the supporters of the shipbuilding programs was Benson, who became suspicious of British intentions. He was outraged by the de Bunsen mission. Benson had obtained a contract that was to be used by the de Bunsen mission from American naval intelligence. His examination of the contract convinced him that it was designed to keep American businessmen out of South American markets.4

The current historiography of Admiral Benson as chief of naval operations centered on his efforts in World War I and during the Paris Peace Conference. His behavior toward the British following the Great War is never explained beyond an adherence to Mahan’s theories regarding naval strategy, and anti-British sentiment.5 Benson favored naval expansion as a measure of preparedness in case of war in general. Following the war he wanted a navy equal to Great Britain to be ready for a highly competitive world that only recognized armed force. As the senior naval advisor in Paris during the peace conference, Benson defended the right of the American navy to continue its expansion regardless of British opinion. Thus, when Germany’s High Seas Fleet was

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4 Benson to George Henry Payne, September 13, 1930, William Shepherd Benson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Benson Papers).

interned in Scapa Flow as a condition of the Armistice, Benson urged its destruction because he feared a distribution of this fleet would complicate the American building plans. The source of these positions was Benson’s concept of force in international relations, a set of ideas that differed dramatically from those of his civilian superiors. He saw the expanded navy as being necessary for American security, while President Woodrow Wilson preferred to use it as a bargaining chip in the postwar negotiations with the Europeans. When Benson retired from the navy in September 1919, he was still concerned about the future, but his focus changed with his career from naval life to civilian life.

Chapter two will argue that the Anglo-American relationship provided the context within which two generations of navalists thought about naval power and the use of force in international relations. Therefore, Benson’s ideas and actions during both the war years and the Paris Peace Conference must be seen in this context of bipolarity; in particular, Benson’s thinking derived initially from Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan’s and then later, Rear-Admiral Bradley A. Fiske’s thought. During the war years, the revitalization of the American merchant marine service and the specter of future maritime trade rivalry and commercial war were the key factors shaping Benson’s perceptions of the Anglo-American rivalry.

The chapter will address two questions. First, what brought a revival of the American merchant marine, and what could it do for the U.S. Navy in the postwar world? Second, what was the justification for continuing the construction of new powerful
capital ships when the enemy was destroyed and potential rivals were too financially exhausted to challenge the American Navy? To answer these questions, this chapter will first provide an assessment of shipbuilding in the war, then an analysis of Mahan’s and Fiske’s views on naval power and force in international relations. These ideas of Mahan and Fiske on international relations are found in the naval staff memoranda that Benson read and those he drafted for the U.S. civilian leadership. The uncertainties of the future must be prepared for, Benson asserted, and he wanted America to be ready for what may come. In particular, Mahan’s circumstantial approach, rooted in a flexible, relativist view of great power rivalry, and Fiske’s more realist appraisal, advocating preparedness for any contingency, made their way into the discourse on preparedness and postwar relations.

The Return of the Merchant Marine

The American merchant marine was revived out of necessity by Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo following the outbreak of the European war. The first circumstance of change, McAdoo wrote in his memoir, was that of the 45 million in steam tonnage worldwide, half was under the British flag. The American tonnage engaged in foreign trade amounted to about one million tons or not more than 2 percent of the world tonnage. Once the war began, the six million tons of German and Austrian shipping were interned, either in home ports or foreign ones, and Great Britain recalled most of its shipping for military uses. Neutrals were insufficient to handle American needs as they provided meager war risk insurance. Thus, the war brought about a
resurgence in American shipbuilding. Before those ships were constructed, rates soared from lack of tonnage, rising so high as to make shipping prohibitive. Shippers picked up what they wanted and left the rest behind in warehouses and at the docks. The tie-up of American commodities for export extended itself inland as thousands of loaded railroad cars on the Eastern seaboard sat idle in sidings and yards.

McAdoo said letting private industry handle the lack of ships was unrealistic. Shipowners benefited from the rising shipping rates and more ships would reduce the rates. The war made investors reluctant to invest in shipping as “people generally were completely engrossed in problems of their own, and money held so tightly that it was out of the question for anybody to organize a shipping concern with private capital that would be sufficiently large and sufficiently daring to create promptly an adequate merchant marine.” McAdoo opposed government ownership of private business unless it was under extraordinary circumstances to service the public welfare. He thought that the wartime shipping situation was a case in point.

The shipping bill McAdoo drew up in 1914 was an emergency measure. It provided for a private shipping corporation, with a Shipping Board that included the Postmaster General, the Secretary of Commerce and Secretary of Treasury, with active

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8 McAdoo, *Crowded Years*, 295.
management being entrusted to a board of directors. Vessels included the Panama Railroad’s ships, vessels of suitable type from the Navy and War departments, and those purchased or constructed from proceeds from the sale of Panama Canal bonds. The goal was to possess a fleet that could be mobilized quickly to trade routes in need of American vessels. The bill faced stiff opposition from Republicans concerned about the government ownership of merchant ships. McAdoo’s bill failed in February 1915 because of defections by Democrats and the short session.9

McAdoo decided to use a different approach later that year. He changed the economic argument of the original plan into one involving national defense. By March 1915, the U.S. Navy could secure nine vessels for use as colliers in the Pacific, when it might need 75 ships. With the navy unable to buy merchant ships because of the tight market, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels welcomed the idea of a bill that provided for naval auxiliaries. Therefore, Daniels and his staff worked closely with McAdoo. McAdoo saw these auxiliary vessels as also serving as merchant ships earning “a small surplus” hauling freight. A business community that was hostile to the last version of the bill was now in favor of it.10

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9 Broesamle, *McAdoo*, 226-28. The private shipping corporation created by the bill was to have capital stock with $10 million, of which the government would subscribe 51 percent, and the remainder to the public; if there were no buyers then the government would take it. The cabinet officers supervised the corporation and possessed voting power over government stock. Ibid., 226.

10 Ibid., 228-31. Broesamle wrote that a Chamber of Commerce referendum in the summer of 1915 revealed a majority approved of government ownership through stock purchase of a private “Marine Development Company” as businessmen needed ships, *McAdoo*, 229. Business interests were also influenced by the Allies’ restrictions on American trade during the war, and postwar Allied intentions for trade discriminations against American trade at the Paris Economic Conference in June 1916. Also see
To promote this measure to the public, McAdoo emphasized the naval auxiliary features in his speeches and writings on the matter. Before the Chamber of Commerce in Indianapolis in October 1915, he argued that technological developments had negated America’s use of the oceans as defensive barriers. While America’s geographical location had made it unnecessary to have a military establishment like the European countries at war, America still needed a powerful navy for defense. To assist the navy in its offensive and defensive operations, a naval auxiliary from the merchant marine was needed. This auxiliary would provide the navy’s fighting fleet with provisions, fuel, and supplies. To keep these ships active during times of peace, it would be practical, McAdoo proposed, to have them used to expand foreign trade. “The operation of these ships will keep them in fit condition to respond to the immediate call of the navy in case of need, and we shall, at the same time create a large corps of trained American officers and seamen, and the direct earnings may show a handsome return on the investment. Even if a loss is incurred it will be a small price to pay for preparedness and the national safety.”


The speeches achieved their purpose as even Congress became receptive.

Congress received a formal bill for the shipping program on January 10. It went through the House with a revision that terminated the Shipping Board in five years on May 20. The bill passed the Senate in August, and President Wilson signed it into law on September 7. The Shipping Board received $50,000,000 to construct and purchase merchant ships that could be sold or leased to private interests. The Board was empowered to start lines to Latin America and other places across the world. The Board was, however, more of a regulatory agency as Congress only wanted the government to operate ships as a last resort.\footnote{Broesamle, \textit{McAdoo}, 233-34. The bill prevented the government from purchasing any ship with a belligerent’s flag, or any vessel working the American trade unless it was on the verge of being withdrawn from service. The government was also forbidden from operating any vessel unless all efforts to sell or lease them to private interests failed.}

When America entered the war, the United States Shipping Board (USSB) used its authority granted by the 1916 Shipping Act to create the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC). President Wilson appointed Edward N. Hurley chairman of the USSB and president of the EFC to oversee the transporting of the American Expeditionary Force to Europe. The Shipping Board first obtained passenger ships from the coastal and intercoastal trades, but these ships were too small to accomplish the task. British-registered ships assumed the job with naval escorts. With existing shipyards booked with orders, the Board created new shipyards from scratch by late 1917. Shipbuilding efforts focused on freighters as more and more troops crossed to France. The USSB also took
control of German and Austrian ships interned since the war began, requisitioned 431 hulls from private shipyards, and took over whatever American-flagged ship remained in service over 2,500 deadweight tons. When the war ended, the EFC had laid 1,429 keels, with a third of them being completed. The American merchant marine was reborn by military necessity.

McAdoo’s efforts to support the merchant marine by highlighting its usefulness to the navy’s preparedness were going on at the same time as the navy’s expansion was being debated. The merchant marine’s purpose to support the navy in its mission also provided navalists with another reason for the navy’s expansion: to protect American overseas trade.

Navalists’ Views of International Relations

The naval historian Kenneth Hagan wrote that post-Civil War American navalists assumed that the United States would be a great trading nation. Advocates of naval build-up believed a merchant marine and the vitality of its trade overseas measured a nation’s greatness. If the United States was to be a great commercial nation, its navy must be present in all of the great harbors of the world in order to keep American merchant vessels free from unwanted restrictions or harassment from local peoples. In 1879 Lieutenant Frederick Collins used the scenario of a revitalized American merchant

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marine that became so successful that it threatened “the control of the carrying trade of the world” which necessitated a strong navy to defend it.\textsuperscript{15} In 1882 Lieutenant Richard Wainwright, wrote that the navy was needed to protect not just the small merchant marine of his time, but to protect the image of the nation. Ensign W. G. David supported the use of the navy to prevent the destruction of a merchant marine by a stronger power, and ensure its citizens can trade abroad “confident that the presence of their war-vessels will prevent outrages and insults.”\textsuperscript{16} These navalists were concerned about the defense of the country and its interests, but what constituted the national interest expanded under a succeeding generation of navalists.

Captain Mahan explored the issue of naval preparedness in 1897. He elaborated on Collins’s description of war in naval terms. Preparation for war, Mahan argued, should be adequate enough to meet whatever demands are made on it and, if possible, be imposing so as to prevent war from starting “upon the firm presentation of demands which the nation believes to be just” which he defined as defense of the nation’s rights or duties. The naval or military power of a nation was not based on the size of its army or navy, “but what there is in the political status of the world, including not only the material interests but the temper of nations, which involves a reasonable, even though

\textsuperscript{15} Lieuant Frederick Collins, “Naval Affairs,” The Record of the United States Naval Institute 5, no. 3 (February 1879): 163. This journal was the precursor of Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute.

remote, prospect of difficulties which may prove insoluble except by war.” The matter was political in character, and once that was determined, then the military branch can act on it. The probability of a conflict occurring should give way to the formidability of the opponent, but within reason of the political realities the opponent operated under. Since 1884, Great Britain, France, and Germany, Mahan noted, were more preoccupied with territories in Africa. They did so despite whatever interests they had in the Western Hemisphere because of the competition amongst themselves for influence in Africa.17

Preparation for war, according to Mahan, fell into two categories: preparation and preparedness. Preparation dealt with materials, while preparedness referred to the completeness of the preparation. “In matters of preparation for war, one clear idea should be absorbed first by every one who, recognizing that war is still a possibility, desires to see his country ready.” The key to good defense was also good offense, with the offensive power being provided by the navy’s battleships. The naval strength these ships possess must be sufficient to go to sea and fight successfully the largest force that it is likely to oppose it.18

Mahan repeated his point about officers being knowledgeable on international conditions in 1911. He conjectured that should Germany want to make a transatlantic venture, it did so knowing it could afford it based on the conditions in Europe. If the U.S.


18 Ibid., 96, 98-99.
Navy had nine vessels to oppose ten of Germany’s ships, the latter could not make the venture because American resistance could leave Germany with no fleet in Europe.\textsuperscript{19} The navy’s size could be a deterrent in itself, Mahan suggested. The navy “should be so great, and its facilities for mobilization and for maintenance of supplies should be such, that a foreign country contemplating war should feel instant anxiety because of the immediate danger that would arise from that navy, either to itself, or its dependencies, or to its commerce. Such effect would be deterrent of war.” A nation in control of its nautical approaches should not abandon them, Mahan warned, even if it can depend on its own internal resources and neutral trade, whether by sea or land frontiers. Such a state “will suffer both humiliation and material loss, which a great nation should not risk.” Later, he described the size as not based on what the country should accomplish, but on what it is willing to concede. A case in point was the fortification of the Panama Canal and the Monroe Doctrine. Was the nation willing to concede these points by not maintaining “an organized force?”\textsuperscript{20}

Mahan saw peace as “certain” between Great Britain and the United States. “The general military and economical conditions of the British Empire, its commercial intercourse with America, its international relations, and the consequent general trend of its naval policy” made peace between Britain and America possible into the foreseeable

\textsuperscript{19} Alfred Thayer Mahan, \textit{Naval Strategy} (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911; facsimile, n.p.: Reprint Services Corporation, 1999), 19.

future. Awareness of international events and their circumstances were to set the size of the navy, but its principal uses were as a deterrent and an upholder of national prestige.

Rear-Admiral Bradley A. Fiske took Mahan’s ideas of preparedness and deterrence into places Mahan did not see. Fiske was the most outspoken member of his generation of naval officers. As Aide for Operations, Fiske was responsible for war planning and “the efficient operation of the entire fleet.” He wanted a fleet that was comparable to that of potential enemies and strong enough to defend the nation’s interests. Fiske’s insistence that the navy was unprepared irritated his immediate superior, Navy Secretary Daniels. In particular, Fiske feared a German victory in Europe and a possible war with the United States. He was also concerned about possible trouble with Great Britain, particularly if a Royal Navy blockade included foodstuffs as contraband and if America built a large merchant fleet. In contrast, President Woodrow Wilson believed the victor of the European conflict would be too exhausted to challenge America.

Fiske’s ideas on war derived from the views of the previous generation. He recalled how his understanding of war took shape after hearing an informal address given

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21 Mahan, *Naval Strategy*, 332; For an interpretation of Mahan’s support of Great Britain, see Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 82-92. Sumida noted in late 1912 that Mahan wanted a “preponderant navy” as he became uneasy over the possibility of Great Britain losing its status as a great naval power, over the rise of Japan, and “the course of domestic politics.” But this preponderant navy was to serve primarily in the Caribbean and the West Coast. Sumida, 91-92.

22 Paolo E. Coletta, *Admiral Bradley A. Fiske and the American Navy* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), 103, 132, 134, 136. Coletta noted Fiske did not specify what the threat from Germany was nor did he suggest immediate intervention by the United States against Germany.
by Rear-Admiral Stephen B. Luce in 1903. At first Fiske had seen war as fighting in general, but Luce’s address made Fiske realize “that a war is a contest, and that fighting is merely a means of deciding the contest.” War was not only a conflict of purpose but also of ideas. The conflict of ideas was not limited to the causes of the war, but also ideas of how the war was to be fought. “I saw that in every war each side tries to effect some purpose, and that it merely uses fighting to effect the purpose. I saw that the side which understands its purpose the most clearly, which selects the best way of accomplishing its purpose, and which has the best machine ready when war breaks out, must win.” Fiske saw war as a contest between methods of how to prosecute the war. The state that employed the best methods won. For Fiske, preparing for a war was the best method to win it.

Fiske related his theories regarding preparedness in an essay for The United States Naval Institute Proceedings in 1911, and later republished it as a chapter in a book five years later. The first part of the method was analyzing what the circumstances were in international relations, like Mahan wanted naval officers to do in planning for war. Fiske, though, took a broader, theoretical view of what those relations were. The rear-admiral understood conflict between nations to be based on the inequality of wealth and power:

It seems clear, however, that, as between two countries of equal wealth, the probability of war varies with the disparity between their navies, and unless other

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nations are involved, is practically zero, when their navies are equal in power; and
that, other factors being equal, the greatest probability of war is between two
countries, of which one is the more wealthy and the other the more powerful.”;
“…the most pregnant cause of war is the combination of conflicting interests with
disparity in power.”

It was not enough, according to Fiske, to consider the situation in the present, but
in the years ahead. He used Great Britain as an example of a power that could move
quickly to go to war if it so chose to head off a rising power. While the probability of
war with the British was not present, Fiske argued, the possibility of war was always
present. The United States and Great Britain could be at peace now, he wrote, but if there
was “some change in policies or in interests” that made war probable within ten years, for
instance, then it was too late. “Just now, Great Britain does not wish to crush us; but it is
certain that she can” and the United States could not ready a navy in ten years to meet
this. This preparedness included not just the building of ships but also the training of the
personnel. Great Britain would go to war with America regardless of what damage was
done to its own trade, he argued, comparing such a confrontation to a rate war among
railroad companies.

Fiske raised the possibility of an alliance on both sides of the world being used
against the United States. Even if the probability of war with Great Britain was small, he
reasoned, there could be another country in which the probability was greater. The

24 Bradley A. Fiske, “Naval Power,” United States Institute Proceedings 37, no. 3 (June 1911) repr. in
idem, The Navy as a Fighting Machine (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916; n.p: BiblioBazaar,
2007), 57-58. Citations are based on BiblioBazaar edition. His emphasis.

25 Ibid., 58-59.
strongest reason why a nation may not go to war is the doubt of its success. If there was a strong power that could assist, then that rationale disappeared. He saw a possible combination of powers being in the east and the west. “War with either one would call for all the energies of the country, and the issue would be doubtful. But if either country should consider itself compelled to declare war, the other, if free at the time, might see her opportunity to declare war simultaneously.” In this scenario, Fiske did not consider Great Britain as one of those two powers, but he did not know whether it would get involved on America’s behalf.\textsuperscript{26} Fiske was more interested in possibilities than probabilities, especially if there was a disparity between American power and that of a rival. He interpreted it further to include a comparatively weak enemy that sought assistance from a powerful state.

Arbitration came next in Fiske’s thinking. It seemed likely, Fiske claimed, that arbitration treaties were becoming accepted by individuals and nations in international relations. Not only were they tending to the common good, but countries, like any business, were looking to pare down costs. They were more open now to having a reduction of armaments, he claimed, but because “the practical difficulties in the way of making the absolute agreement required are enormous,” it was felt by arbitration’s most earnest advocates that any agreements were still some years away. In such a conference, every participant would cut down the armaments of other nations while holding onto its own as much as possible, the rear-admiral surmised. The advantage in these negotiations

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
rested with the most powerful nation, so everyone should come to the table with as large of a navy as possible.\textsuperscript{27} Even for the benefit of all, states will still compete with each other to get an advantage. Mahan had viewed arbitration, in general, in a similar way. States in a dispute with each other would be more willing to let diplomacy fail if they thought they could get an advantage through arbitration. If diplomacy had military force behind it, however, then both parties would be more willing to compromise. Force can be effective when it was known to exist, and yet, not be wielded. An example of this, Mahan wrote, was when the United States compelled Napoleon III during the Civil War to leave Mexico.\textsuperscript{28}

At the start of World War I, Mahan’s friend Theodore Roosevelt was concerned about the existence of arbitration treaties being used as an excuse to cut down the armed forces. He argued a treaty was only as good as the military power that backed it. Roosevelt asserted that promises should not be made if they could not be kept, and “the utter futility of expecting that in any save exceptional cases a strong power will keep a promise which it finds to its disadvantage, unless there is some way of putting force back of the demand that the treaty be observed.” Peace should not be entrusted entirely to arbitration treaties, but should be based on the preparedness of the armed forces, Roosevelt reasoned. Great Britain’s navy was its means of protection, and not the arbitration and peace treaties that it signed. Future international agreements must be

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 64-65.

\textsuperscript{28} Mahan, \textit{Armaments and Arbitration}, 83-84, 105.
made differently, the former president argued, away from the spirit of “peace-at-any-price” as some pacifists wanted. The Hague Court was limited in its ability to hear certain cases, and that should be resolved. Mahan and Fiske believed self-serving states will use whatever means possible to get an advantage, whether it be force or arbitration.

In the case of diplomacy, force can be used when it is not brandished, as the knowledge of its existence was enough to invoke compromise. Roosevelt insisted that arbitration was not perfect, and military force was still required to defend the country.

Rear-Admiral Fiske analyzed the increase of foreign trade, seeing how its value contributed to the value of the navy. He surmised that American foreign trade would increase, as would that of other countries as they understood the value of overseas commerce. The reason for this increase came from the creation of large, modern steamships. Fiske argued many countries were reaping the rewards of sea commerce with more undeveloped areas left to be utilized. Science made it possible, he stated, to make life better in the tropics. Some even thought that it might be possible some day to find a “healthier and pleasanter” environment in tropical areas than in temperate places because of these developments. Fiske declared: “When this day comes, and it may be soon, the development of the riches of lands within the tropics will begin in earnest, and

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wealth undreamed of [will] now be realized.” The competition thus begins as to who gets to these areas and develops them first. A navy, then, would remain necessary.\(^{30}\)

From this analysis, how powerful should the American navy be? Fiske asserted it should not be built to take advantage of lesser powers, but to defend its nation from “being shorn of her wealth and glory by simple force.” He dismissed the notion that Great Britain possessed a big navy so its people would not starve, given that it depended so heavily on overseas trade. The Royal Navy was used to “assist her trade,” and had been used to make Great Britain wealthy. He concluded that because Great Britain and the United States were the wealthiest countries, and given his earlier theory that the probability of war was minimized if the naval power of two countries is equal, it made the best sense for the United States to build its navy up to match Britain’s navy. Writing in 1919, Fiske asserted that this was the first publication of such an idea “\textit{that now has many advocates.}”\(^{31}\)

Fiske believed most wars were fought over the defense of national policy. Great Britain was a case in point as it maintained a policy of keeping its navy as strong as any two other powers. Great Britain’s foreign trade had grown as its bases and colonies had expanded, he reasoned, so it needed the navy in defense of its imperial holdings and prestige. A navy’s power is determined more by the policies of the country, Fiske

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 59-64. Fiske believed in fifty years time, “practically all of the countries of the world” will be open to trade, its volume “at least” ten times greater in than in 1916, better communication by water and the air, and “scores of appliances, methods, and processes” in which have yet to be developed.

Theorized, and the navies of those countries that oppose them. “The navy that a country needs is a navy that can defend its policies, both offensively and defensively... if we decide that we must maintain a certain policy which a certain country may oppose, then we must have a navy at least equal to hers,” Fiske wrote. If war broke out with a European power at the same time as relations are strained with an Asian power, American naval defense should “have on each ocean a fleet as strong as that of any nation on that ocean against whose wishes we may have to enforce a policy – or against whose policy we may have to oppose resistance.” If a nation’s policy faced opposition from different foreign governments, or if the nation itself opposed a certain policy, the nation must have its armed services ready to defend its policy or oppose another.

Fiske then pondered what was entailed in preparations for war. Modern states made preparations for war during times of peace so as to act quickly, either to attack first for a quick victory or to prevent their opponent’s victory. Whether for offense or defense, “the value to a nation of those forces will depend on how soon they are gotten ready,” Fiske argued. The active fleet was always considered to be ready, but new additions will require time to be ready. To minimize the time lost these additions must be obtained as quickly as possible.

These additions included vessels in reserve and ships in the merchant marine. Their crews should be ready when they are added to the fleet, or else time would be

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33 Ibid., 178-79.
wasted getting the ships in order and men drilled in their new tasks. Naval vessels in reserve should already be prepared by being maintained, so only the additional men were needed to get them ready. American reserves should be like those in foreign countries like Great Britain, Germany, Japan, and France, which retained former members of the regular navy for several years to maintain their reserve forces, Fiske observed. The merchant service vessels, while more difficult to ready for service, were more important than old reserve ships. Fiske wrote it depended on what the nature of the war was to determine what ships were more useful.34 In this instance, Fiske had the merchant marine contributing to the naval power as auxiliaries, but only if the nation’s plans for war required it.

Fiske cast preparedness as a function of naval deterrence. He wanted the best estimate done on a given situation; he looked toward the worst-case scenario because nothing was worse than underestimating the problem. Thus, he thought it better to have “superadequate preparation.” This level of preparedness could insure victory by deterring an enemy from attacking, asserted the rear-admiral. If the enemy realized the chances of victory were small against a force composing of a “superior number of units of personnel and material,” then the enemy would not undertake an attack.35

Creation of Chief of Naval Operations

34 Ibid., 179, 181.

35 Ibid., 184, 189-90. Fiske defined “superadequateness” in different ways, which included the training of personnel to the quality of the ship. Its vagueness created a conflict with the earlier stated desire of naval equality with Great Britain if the term was interpreted in favor of material expansion.
Central to preparedness in Fiske’s thinking was a naval general staff. Fiske wanted this staff despite the opposition of Daniels, who did not think a general staff was compatible with American ideals because it vested too much power in the military. Fiske worked with Representative Richmond Hobson (D-AL) to craft legislation for the creation of a staff. To head off the Fiske-Hobson plan, Daniels arranged for an amendment to be added to a naval construction bill in February 1915 that created an office of chief of naval operations with powers to control the operations of the fleet and make war plans, but the chief could not issue orders except through the civilian secretary of the navy. This measure was signed into law March 3, 1915. Daniels selected as the first chief of naval operations the commandant of the Philadelphia Navy Yard, Captain William S. Benson.36

During Benson’s time as chief of naval operations, 1915-1919, he was concerned, first and foremost, with getting the navy ready to meet whatever challenges the future may bring. The primary challenge in Benson’s eyes was fashioning an American naval policy for the postwar era. He voiced as much in Philadelphia in June 1915: “When the war in Europe is ended there will be tremendous indemnities to be paid. Our national wealth will remain undiminished. Already the eyes of avarice have been turned upon

36 Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 27-30; See Coletta, Fiske, 150-54, for Fiske’s efforts with Hobson to pass the bill, and Fiske, Midshipman, 567-70, for his own account of those events four years later.
us...we do know that if we are properly prepared there is no nation on earth that dare
attack us.”

Benson described his understanding of naval warfare years after the war as views
and operations. “We interpret the experiences of the past. We examine carefully the
resources, habits of mind, methods and tendencies of the enemy. We drew our
conclusions, and then adopt judgment, and project plans in accordance with these.” Then
the matter came to issuing orders to obedient subordinates who can make quick decisions
in unforeseen circumstances. He concluded: “The sum total of our convictions, insight
and conclusions constitute our philosophy of warfare. Our opinions in conflict are the
expression of that philosophy in terms of action.” Benson’s understanding of warfare
was based on the views generated through an examination of these factors, then acting on
those views by operations. These factors changed with the prospective enemy, as they
did when the Great War ended.

Benson and Predicting the Postwar Future

The discussion relating to the postwar navy constitutes an internal discourse
carried out within the naval staffs; it included Benson as CNO. However, the obvious
influence of earlier ideas on naval power and force meant the conversation included
Mahan and Fiske. Officers from the 1880s saw the navy as a deterrent in much the same


38 William S. Benson, “The Catholic Philosophy of Social Service,” speech given at Lowell, Mass,
November 25, 1923, Benson Papers.
fashion as Mahan, Fiske, and Benson. Unlike the conditions confronting those earlier officers, the scope of what was to be protected and from what enemy had expanded. Mahan and Fiske argued force would always be present on the international scene, and it made sense to possess force to maintain prestige. Mahan saw force as deterrence to keep the peace between two countries and compel compromise in diplomacy. He kept his focus on likely enemies and on what they could deploy based on their political circumstances. Fiske wanted to be ready for whatever may come in the future, even if it was against Great Britain, which Mahan had described as an ally of the United States. Both described national self-interest as the motivating factor in international relations. Benson and his staffs took the idea of deterrence and the place of force in international relations and expanded it further to include the likely scenarios within a League of Nations.

Benson’s staff prepared “The Probability of War” in February 1917 for the secretary of the navy, two months before America’s entry into the war. The staff planned for American intervention into the war and what the U.S. Navy should do in the conflict. First, the document described “the chief points” of the situation. If the United States went to war, it would not be for protecting commerce exclusively, the naval staff asserted, but “mainly to secure guarantees for the future.” Past events had shown that “there is no guarantee for the future except superiority of fighting power. No diplomacy that is unsupported by ability to use force can hope to achieve its ends when these conflict with important interests of other governments. At present expediency is the chief
motive of warring powers in their international relations.” Immediate interests alone could not guide the American entry into war, these officers argued. “The possible combinations, of powers and circumstances are too numerous and too pregnant with possibilities adverse to our interest to permit us to consider any plan other than one which will permit us to exercise eventually the full naval and military strength of the United States in the defense of our interests.” The nation’s military power must be built up, not only to assist the allies, “but to act with a full realization that we may eventually have to act alone.”39 The staff wanted the United States to be militarily self-sufficient and ready to address any situation with not only the upcoming war, but what may occur after it that threatened American interests.

Part of the plan to ready the naval forces for European war included the merchant marine. “Transportation by way of the sea is going to remain a vital necessity.” Since it might not be possible to stop the sinking of ships, building more merchant ships to replace those sunk was offered as an option. The memo also stated “We desire to emerge from the war ready to carry on the activities of peace.” Noting the difficulties of private industry to build up a merchant marine, the staff considered it better for the government to assume responsibility: “The Government alone is strong enough to assume the risk of building a great merchant ship tonnage. The military and naval situation demands that this risk be assumed without delay.”40


40 “The Possibility of War,” Daniels Papers.
The memo concluded by describing sea power as control of the sea. Submarines were challenging “the free use of the sea,” the staff claimed, but the United States, with its vast continental resource base, was best situated to endure without using the sea. The staff asserted, though, that more was at stake than just the defense of America’s shores. It echoed Mahan, claiming that if the United States wanted to be taken seriously, it had to drive away its enemies from the sea.

If we fail to prepare to drive our enemies from the sea we display no convincing reason why our policies should not be neglected by competing powers…We may expect the future to give us more potential enemies than potential friends so that our safety must lie in our own resources. We can have no guarantee that we shall be superior in sea power to those who join against us but we can build so that our ability to injure our enemies on the sea shall continue no matter how great the disparity of actual fighting power on the sea.\footnote{Ibid.}

The language of disparity is similar to Fiske’s, but here the staff became concerned about national policies being ignored because American fighting power might not be strong enough to create respect for those policies. Even if the fleet is not strong enough to ensure superiority over an opponent, the fleet could still serve as a deterrent by its power to injure.

With the close of the war, a new assessment of postwar plans by the American naval staff became necessary. Recognizing the new post-armistice realities, these plans leaned toward the resumption of the capital ship construction authorized by the Naval Act of 1916. With Great Britain having no power in Europe to check its naval strength, American naval planners focused on Britain as an opponent. These discussions also
included the fate of the German warships interned at Scapa Flow, which planners
demanded be destroyed. In October 1918, the General Board, an advisory council to the
secretary of the navy, proposed a supplemental program of 28 capital ships, which the
administration trimmed to sixteen. The program’s goal was parity, if not superiority,
over Britain’s navy.42

The Planning Committee in Operations wrote a memorandum based on the pre-
intervention assumptions. Dated October 7, 1918, the staff discussed “Building Policy”
following the war. It projected a future war against an alliance of Japan, Germany, and
Austria. They asserted the navy had to be built to meet such an alliance. It appeared
incidental to the staff that the building plan also created a navy equal in size to Great
Britain.43

The staff Benson used when he was in Europe beginning in late 1918 was the
American Planning Section in London which Benson had created in late 1917 under
pressure from Rear-Admiral Sims and his British colleagues to improve communications
with the Admiralty. Benson wanted its staff to be instilled with “our national and naval
policy and ideas.” Its mission was to study problems, prepare plans for operations, and
criticize plans in operation. The council moved to Paris, where it was replaced by the
Naval Advisory staff in December 1918. The advisory staff’s members were Benson,

42 George W. Baer, One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890-1990 (Stanford: Stanford
University Press, 1993), 83.

43 “Building Policy,” October 7, 1918, Benson Papers.
Captain Luke McNamee, and two men retained from the London Planning Section, Captain Frank H. Schofield and Rear-Admiral Harry S. Knapp.44

These naval planners became more explicit regarding Great Britain as a rival and their growing concern over the interned German-Austrian warships at war’s end. Benson had suspected during the armistice terms negotiations that the Allies wanted to distribute the former enemy ships in some way.45 Planning Section Memorandum no. 65, dated November 4, 1918, gave a descriptive case for the destruction of the interned ships. The advisory staff argued that self-interested states plagued the Western alliance. The staff suspected secret understandings between Great Britain, France, and Italy on armistice terms with Germany and Austria without American input. Staffers described a scenario where Great Britain agreed to transfer five dreadnoughts to Japan after the war, thus necessitating a comparison of fleets according to numbers of dreadnoughts, battle cruisers, submarines, and destroyers. In the event of distribution of the enemy fleets, the staff contended, the United States would not participate. There were 21 dreadnought-type battleships and 6 battle cruisers in the combined German-Austrian fleet. If Great Britain received two vessels for every one given to France, Italy, and Japan, the memo assumed, Britain would have from 43 to 51 capital ships, in comparison to America’s 17.

44 Quoted in Trask, Captains & Cabinets, 165-66; William Reynolds Braisted, The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1909-1922, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 415, 417, 427n-428n. There was a disagreement among naval planners as to which nation was the mostly likely antagonist. The staff in the Office of Operations, in communication with the Far East, saw Japan as the most dangerous enemy, while Benson and the Naval Advisory Staff in Europe believed it was Britain. Braisted, 455.

45 Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 123.
The first conclusion of the Planning Section was that distribution of the ships should not take place. An analysis of the past predicted an unsettling future: “Four great Powers have arisen in the world to compete with Great Britain for commercial supremacy [sic] on the seas – Spain, Holland, France, and Germany. Each one of these Powers in succession has been defeated by Great Britain and her fugitive Allies.” The United States was emerging as a possible challenger to Great Britain’s naval power status, the staff declared, and signs were present of jealousy in Britain.

In their assessment of postwar strengths, all of the European powers were considered. Should the German and Austrian fleets be destroyed, naval planners asserted that relative naval strengths between Great Britain, France and Italy would remain unchanged, with neither Italy nor France challenging Britain’s dominance. Germany would not compete for many years. Therefore, Great Britain would have no restraining influence upon it in Europe. It also had an alliance with Japan, a country that did not require more ships unless it had hostile intentions toward the United States. Any calls for distribution by Great Britain of the interned and surrendered ships should be an indication of its future relations with the United States. Regarding the balance of power, the planners claimed: “Unless we leave in Europe some restraining influence on British naval power, Great Britain will be able to exert throughout the world an influence unknown to her in time of peace in the recent past.” The Planning Section argued it was against the best interests of humanity for Great Britain to command a position that was “in accordance to her will” around the world. Benson signed the conclusions to this
document, which included the recommendation that the German navy should be strong enough to conservatively affect British influence. This memo was the first one that made comparisons between American and British ships in which Britain was seen as the next rival. A December 1918 Naval Advisory staff memorandum given to the president included a copy of no. 65 to explain the advisory’s staff’s opposition to the distribution of the interned German ships. The staff opposed any kind of distribution, even for individual countries to conduct experiments on them.46

Planning Section memo no. 67 (November 21, 1918) was based on a memo sent by Benson to the Planning Section on November 6. Planning Section no. 67 was an internal navy document, describing what the navy required in new construction. First, it recalled a previous memo from May 1918 that assumed that if Germany negotiated a peace by agreement or victory in Europe, the probable enemy would be an alliance of Germany, Austria, and Japan. After the armistice, new assumptions were made based on a treaty with the Central Powers that would leave Germany and Austria with inferior naval power and promote the United States Navy to second place in naval strength, but leave Great Britain without any restraining influence in Europe. Planners also assumed that Japan would be deterred by American naval and military power, unless it partnered with a strong European power. Two naval powers remained; the established British navy and the growing American navy. Any additions the American and British fleets make

with their fleets, the planners noted, should only have each other in mind as an opponent.\footnote{“Planning Section Memorandum no. 67: Building Programme,” November 21, 1918, Benson Papers.}

In their memo no. 67, naval planners contended war between the United States and Great Britain was unlikely but still possible. Among the factors that made war unlikely was “present sentiment,” trade relations, the proximity of Canada, lack of Colonial support, the British labor situation, the “sound business sense of the British government” and lack of American aggression. “But in spite of these happy obstacles to war, war may come” so analysis was necessary on reasons a war could happen and what to expect in possible campaigns. Among the possible causes was the revival of the American merchant marine. With the familiar rhetoric of the older American navalists, the staff predicted: “The peaceful pressure it will exert towards getting its share of trade will arouse the anxiety of the British Government. Successful trade rivalry strikes at the very root of British interest and British prosperity, and may threaten even the existence of the British Empire.” Policy complications were also possible sources of friction, such as the differences in opinion regarding freedom of the seas. This most recent assessment also took into account of the American position but introduced a new interpretation in national policy. It was the United States taking a leadership role in international relations: “We have taken the lead in certain world policies. We have been able to do this through the known unselfishness of our motives and chiefly through the sudden rise in importance of our naval and military power. We are interested in seeing the growth
everywhere of American ideals of international justice and fair dealing. There is no surer way of furthering this growth than in providing diplomacy with the sanction of a naval power that by reason of its greatness shall be fearless.” If America was to lead in the world, it needed the great naval power to support it.48

The staff then turned to the possible naval war with Great Britain. A naval campaign would consist of the belligerents using their fleets to destroy each side’s merchant marine while endeavoring to get into fleet action with each other. In particular, planners declared: “The flag of both countries will be flying throughout all the seas so that the cruiser warfare will be worldwide. Such warfare will require secure fuelling and supply bases so distributed as best to support the world wide operations.” Cruiser warfare would continue as long the fleets existed. Operational planning centered on the West Indies, with the purpose of keeping the British Fleet from threatening the Panama Canal. If the British navy came to the West Indies, the American navy must match capital ship to capital ship. Naval preparations included American superiority of ship type, matching British capital ships and cruisers in strength, and equality in shore facilities.49

Postwar parity considerations necessitated a comparison of capital ships. It was based on two criteria: the gun-calibers of the vessels’ main armament, and the number of capital ships carrying that armament. For example, the staff assumed that eleven of the

48 “Planning Section Memorandum no. 67,” Benson Papers.

49 Ibid.
American 14-inch armed battleships would balance the twelve 13.5-inch armed battleships of the British navy. The results of these comparisons, including the ships still under construction, were that the U.S. Navy was still short in matching all of Britain’s capital ships. It was unknown what the British building program would be as official Royal Navy opinion on the matter varied.\(^{50}\)

The staff wanted to convey to Benson the necessity of a big navy in the postwar years. Mahan’s ally before the war was now a possible opponent after it. The checking influence that Germany exercised on Great Britain was gone, and no successor was apparent in continental Europe. Great Britain’s history of challenging possible rivals could not be doubted, so the United States must protect itself, the planners warned. The signs were already present, the staff warned, of British intentions against America. Preparation for a war with Great Britain required expanding the navy to match the former’s capital ships as Fiske recommended a few years earlier. When Benson was at the Paris Peace Conference, his agenda was shaped by these memos from his staff and he did not care if he offended British sensibilities.

**Benson at the Paris Peace Conference**

Benson understood relations between Great Britain and the United States in a manner similar to Fiske. When Benson was in Paris, he defended the right of the U.S. Navy to expand in discussions with the British. When Secretary Daniels arrived in Paris

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
in March 1919, he and Benson met with their counterparts, First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss and First Lord of the Admiralty, Walter Long. Wemyss tried to convey to Benson why Britain needed its navy to defend its colonies; Benson justified the enlargement of his navy with similar language relating to the defense of the Philippines and implementation of the Monroe Doctrine. Wemyss wanted the American navy to acquiesce to British control of the sea, but Benson refused to consider it. Daniels tried to convince Long and a skeptical Prime Minister David Lloyd George of America’s need for a naval building program. When Long told Benson that Great Britain intended to hold its place as the dominant sea power, Benson used strong language to hint at the possibility of war.51

In order to justify the naval building plan, Benson accommodated national interest to President Wilson’s advocacy of collective security. In February 1919, he formulated a new principle legitimizing postwar parity: “In order to stabilize the League of Nations, it is vitally necessary that no one power included in it should dominate in military or naval strength. There should be at least two powers of equal Naval strength.” Benson was “so impressed” by this principle that he wanted to bring it to Wilson’s attention. Wilson did not understand what this policy meant, but Daniels wrote to Wilson on March 4, agreeing with Benson’s idea that no power should dominate. Daniels wrote that with America’s

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51 Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 144-47; Tillman, Anglo-American Relations, 290.
military and naval strength, it should be willing to contribute “in proportion to its wealth and commercial importance” to maintain world peace.\textsuperscript{52}

Daniels expressed his views on an international navy in his annual reports to Congress. In his 1917 report, the navy secretary advocated that the postwar peace conference should create this navy “to enforce international decrees.” This navy, according to Daniels, should be composed of “separate naval establishments” of the nations, its contribution based on the wealth, or population, or other plan “to insure that no nation can safely challenge the decrees of the high international court.” This would serve, Daniels wrote, to keep nations from adapting their naval policy to meet the program of another that elicits fears of possible attack. “It means the tyranny of a program dictated by apprehension rather than the free choice of a standard suggested by national needs and supported by national needs.” An international navy would put the latter as the option of the people. The next year, Daniels reiterated that navies were still necessary to enforce the rulings of an international tribunal. The United States needed to contribute “to the peace of the world commensurate with its wealth, its commerce, its growing and expanding merchant marine, and its leadership in the council of the free peoples.” The program of 1916 was to continue as planned with another program to follow, but no reason was given as to why, except the hope that such armaments will be

\textsuperscript{52} Benson to American Commission to Negotiate Peace, February 21, 1919, Benson Papers; Wilson to Daniels, March 1, 1919, and Daniels to Wilson, March 4, 1919, Daniels Papers.
unnecessary in years to come.\footnote{53} In stark contrast to Daniels, Mahan never considered the possibility of an international court that could enforce its decisions by the very instrument that made diplomacy so useful.

Benson was ambivalent about a “League Navy.” The issue was studied by the planning committee in the Office of Naval Operations in November 1918. Its members proposed the creation of a navy twice the size of any nation’s fleet. The British and American fleets would contribute 25 percent apiece. Benson considered it “impractical.”\footnote{54} Yet the staffs utilized the international navy concept to justify the American navy in subsequent memos. A Naval Advisory Staff memo to Wilson, dated March 13, with a cover letter from Benson, asserted that no international navy of heterogeneous forces could deal with the British navy. In an international force, a single unit of equal strength to the British fleet must exist to enforce the League’s mandates “against any power.” Distribution of enemy warships would increase the naval armaments of the allies by 30 percent, and not be in spirit of Article VIII (armaments reductions) of the covenant of the League of Nations. The United States had the faith of the world, the memo argued, to support the League of Nations.\footnote{55}

\footnote{53} Navy Department, Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy, for the fiscal year 1918 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 143-44, 389. See Appendix L for earlier statements from previous reports. Daniels originally called for arms reductions in earlier reports, 386-89.


\footnote{55} Benson to Wilson, March 14, 1919, and “U.S. Naval Advisory Staff Memorandum No. XXIV: Disposition of German and Austrian Vessels of War,” March 13, 1919, Wilson Papers. See Klachko, “Naval Competition,” 104. Benson read this memo to Daniels following the latter’s statements that he
Naval parity with Great Britain was the theme of notes and subsequent memos by Benson and his staff. In a memorandum, dated March 28, 1919, the navy staff began with the assumption that Great Britain would be the sole great sea power with every other European power being weak. If the League of Nations was to act outside of Europe, it would utilize naval power and consequently it would also depend on whoever controlled the British navy. This also included safeguarding other nations’ maritime rights, and executing justice. The principle of “equality of opportunity of world trade” to which the United States had pledged, was a dream, according to the memo, if one power dominated the seas in war and peace. The staff noted how strength attracted smaller powers to the great powers out of self-interest. This was true regarding powers in Paris siding with decisions made by Great Britain’s naval representatives. With the British navy possessing such influence over others, it was necessary for another power to provide a balancing influence to prevent one strong power from holding sway over weaker states. Such a power “to wield a commercial influence over Europe that in time of war would enable her to compel alliances” would bring distributed warships to Britain’s fleet.56

The issue over the American naval expansion was resolved with different means than Benson preferred. Wilson used the program of 1916 and the pending supplemental

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56 “Special Memorandum for the Use of Admiral Benson: Distribution of German and Austrian Vessels,” March 28, 1919, Daniels Papers. See “U.S. Advisory Staff Memorandum No. 25: United States Naval Policy” (April 7, 1919) in Benson to Wilson, April 9, 1919, on expanded role of U.S. Navy in theoretical League of Nations, Wilson Papers.
three-year program of 1918 as leverage with Great Britain. He knew that the Allies, including Great Britain, could never compete with the United States in a naval race and so used the building programs to compel naval arms reductions on the greatest sea power. Great Britain’s treasury was more intent on reducing naval contracts and switching resources over to the development of industry and commerce. When Daniels asked Wilson about continuing to support the three-year supplementary program that the former proposed, Wilson affirmed it, but instructed Daniels that he would support a proviso that allowed him to withhold naval contracts should an agreement be reached in Paris concerning a reduction in armaments.  

Lloyd George countered Wilson’s threat by withholding support for the League of Nations unless the United States stopped its construction program. When the president threatened to leave Europe amid British difficulties over the naval question and border disputes with other allies, Lloyd George had Lord Robert Cecil talk with Colonel Edward House, Wilson’s aide. With Wilson’s blessing, House negotiated a modus vivendi with Cecil to postpone the pending supplemental program in return for British support of the League of Nations and the inclusion of the Monroe Doctrine into the league’s covenant. There was to be a discussion over the naval armaments issue at a later time, but the collapse of Wilson’s health and the Senate’s rejection of the League prevented any debate.

57 Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 132-33, 138. Theodore Roosevelt, who suspected Wilson’s intentions with the naval program, wrote to John Murray Clark, president of the Royal Canadian Institute. Roosevelt instructed Clark to inform Lloyd George that the majority’s leaders in the incoming Congress had no desire to back Wilson’s program and “that there need be no fear whatever if Britain has the nerve to stand for what men like myself believe it is her right and duty…to have the biggest navy,” Roosevelt to Clark, December 15, 1918, in Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, 8:1416.
Nevertheless, Wilson used the programs’ potential to negotiate with Great Britain, especially since the supplementary program itself was not doing well with the Republican-held Congress.

The last issue for Benson was the fate of the German warships interned at Scapa Flow. In its March 13 memo, the Naval Advisory Staff repeated earlier memos opposing distribution of German warships. Great Britain could get the most, “the lion’s share,” of these vessels because of losses or naval effort. But the staffers advised that these ships would be impractical for anyone to operate given their German-designed armaments and equipment, their short cruising radius, and their obsolescence. Great Britain “might” afford these ships as reinforcements in their Channel Fleet, enabling the commitment of its more modern units elsewhere. Great Britain built its fleet to counter the German navy, and with the latter gone, the staff asserted, Britain could only have the American fleet in mind for its future policy. Japan, the other great sea power and Britain’s ally, would have the same intention, they claimed. Any ships distributed to the other powers could be compelled by Britain, if necessary, to include them by alliance in its own fleet. Besides international obligations, the United States should think of its “national safety” as any reduction in American naval strength “will weaken our influence in the world and will limit our ability to serve the League of Nations.”

The advisory staff concluded that the disposition of the enemy fleet should be incorporated into the terms of the peace treaty.

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59 “U.S. Naval Advisory Staff Memorandum No. XXIV,” Wilson Papers. This memo noted Allies owed the United States money and other financial difficulties. These ships would compound their financial
Benson wanted to avoid involving the United States in any opportunity that could be construed as an agreement on distribution. In a memo dated January 18, 1919, Benson believed the warships held by the Allies from the former Russian Navy should be returned to the eventual states that emerge from the Russian Empire. Later that month, Benson heard of a proposal by Prime Minister Lloyd George to divide the proceeds of the sales of German submarines amongst the Allies, which Wilson gave his support. Benson sent Wilson a note and a memo explaining that the distribution of the submarines could be seen as precedent for the eventual distribution of the German surface warships.\(^{60}\)

The illusion of force these warships represented to Benson persisted. In a meeting with Lloyd George and French Premier Georges Clemenceau on April 25, the victors disagreed over the disposition of the ships. The French wanted them distributed among the Allies, while Benson argued for their destruction, the specific language for it to be inserted in the peace treaty. Wilson suggested postponing the decision on them for another time, but Benson tried to get Wilson to reconsider. Writing on April 28, Benson worried those ships would be used in some way against American interests. On May 5, his last word on the subject, Benson assessed the collective opinion of other naval representatives at the Paris Peace Conference, with most favoring their sinking. Benson

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problems. Daniels, upon arriving in Paris March 1919, said he thought the interned fleet should be divided up among the European powers. A shocked Benson read this memo to him. Following this, Daniels changed his mind. Klachko, “Naval Competition,” 104.

\(^{60}\) Benson to Wilson, undated, and “Memorandum”, January 24, 1919, Wilson Papers. Wilson sent a reply to Benson to admit his error and seek to correct the potential problem, Wilson to Benson, January 25, 1919, Wilson Papers.
then argued that Great Britain had carried through its claims by its naval power, and if “this condition of inequality of naval strength” continued, the League of Nations would serve the interests of the British Empire. Wilson told his worried senior naval advisor the next day he sympathized with the latter, but he did not think the taxpayers of these countries would consent for further naval expansion. The situation resolved itself when the interned German fleet’s crews scuttled their own ships on June 21, 1919. When asked about the scuttling, Benson repeated sentiments from the memos adding those ships were not wanted by the United States for its navy.

In a paper written after seven months in Paris, Admiral Benson presented his thoughts on naval policy. He rhetorically proposed two courses. Combining naval parity and Fiske’s superadequateness concept, the first option was “for the United States to build and maintain a Navy equal in strength to that of any other power and superior in the efficiency and training of its personnel.” The second was to “reduce the Navy to the needs of the ordinary coast patrol and auxiliary to our Mercantile Marine.” He, naturally, favored the former.


Benson claimed that accurate and complete information was gathered during the war and at the peace negotiations. He wrote that general social and industrial conditions, national finances, material resources, and the naval and military efficiencies of the various countries enabled the United States to determine its future policy. Only two powers mattered in American naval policy, according to Benson: Great Britain and Japan. Should the United States “place herself in a condition to maintain her proper position in world affairs” or rely on “benevolent protection” of Britain?

The modern use of the Navy, according to Benson, did not just protect the country from invasion. It gave “a nation possessing it a certain amount of prestige, and to enforce a certain amount of respect” which would allow American commercial representatives to get proper consideration, and allow other foreign countries “to seek our markets, if desirable, without fear of unfriendly pressure being brought to bear upon them by other commercial countries possessing a more powerful naval force.” His time in Paris convinced him that there existed an American viewpoint and interests separate from a distinct European viewpoint and interests. Benson claimed representatives of weaker states would have preferred the American viewpoint, but they were “deterred from doing so by the very apparent overpowering influence” of Britain’s naval power. If the United States wanted to play its part in international affairs, “we must be in a position at least, if not to enforce our ideas and principles, to make it possible for us to carry them out ourselves and give the smaller powers some feeling that they will be protected from imposition by stronger powers if they concur with us in our ideals and efforts.” Once the
nation determined its naval policy and its proper role in international affairs, the decision about what naval strength should be “a purely business proposition.” Benson did not want new construction or other projects until it was determined what kind of force was needed to maintain the policy.63

Conclusions

The merchant marine’s return was based on the spirit of preparedness. McAdoo, unsuccessful in passing his original bill in 1915, decided to use the rationale that the revitalized merchant fleet was to be used as naval auxiliaries in time of war and carry out American trade in time of peace. At the same that this potential commercial force was created, another potential force was being debated regarding the navy’s expansion. The justification of both the existence of the merchant marine and the large navy resulted from a belief of force in international relations.

A tradition of thought from the 1880s generation of American navalists was updated in its succeeding generations. The navy’s use in national defense and the avenging of insults in the 1880s became more extensive in subsequent years. Mahan saw international relations being increasingly driven by considerations of diplomacy and armaments. He argued that as part of preparedness, a naval officer understood international relations, and how those affected the ability of an enemy to act. A navy is not built to a size merely to counter the biggest navy in the world: it is large and strong

63 “Notes,” undated, Benson Papers.
enough to deter or drive off the largest possible fleet that the enemy could spare against it. Fiske, in comparison, wanted to plan for the worst-case scenario. He wanted to prepare for the long term; differences between states in the present may not remain the same many years later. Great Britain and the United States were that example to Fiske. In his mind, preparation was the best method to win a war. For the United States, to prepare materially, the fleet had to be exactly equal to the British fleet.

Mahan and Fiske thought the role of force meant something more in international relations. Force compelled compromise in diplomacy. A great power used it to defend its territories, either by threat or action. It garnered respect for a power’s policies. How could the United States uphold the Monroe Doctrine? It did so by deploying its navy against any power that challenged the venerable policy. Roosevelt concurred on the necessity of force as treaties were not enough to ensure national security.

Mahan’s and Fiske’s thoughts on deterrence, taken together, had a profound effect on the naval staffs. The planners followed Mahan in recognizing what the probable political circumstances were to be. At first it was the possible victory of Germany following the war. When the Allies won, the conditions had changed. Great Britain possessed a very large war fleet, and acted aggressively in commercial circles. The staffs believed the best way to win was to be the best prepared, and in order to do so, the fleet must be enlarged further than what was authorized in the Naval Act of 1916. Naval parity with Great Britain was considered the best option, with or without a League of Nations naval contingent. Daniels thought the idea was appealing, but it worked within
Daniels’s views of an international navy. Benson thought an international navy was impractical. The admiral observed Britain’s naval power attracting smaller powers to its side during the peace conference, often against American proposals. If the United States wanted to be a world leader, it had to build up its navy so states respected its position and its policies.

Wilson used the naval programs differently than the staffs recommended. Wilson chose to use force as an abstract value. He did not use physical vessels or their heavy main armament to compel Britain to accept the League of Nations. He used the potential force of that program as leverage, knowing that Great Britain could not win a naval arms race when its finances were weak. Wilson proved that even when the weapons do not exist, but the capability to create them did, the potential was present to reach a compromise with Great Britain.

When Benson retired in September 1919, he kept himself informed of events. He had the latest comparison of the American, British, and Japanese navies. He also drafted a memo that discussed the role of the merchant marine during wartime. The war demonstrated how valuable a large merchant marine was, the retired CNO argued. The merchant marine “will have all it can do” to man its own vessels. It cannot supply personnel to the navy’s combatants nor can the navy man merchant ships. Any ship from
the merchant marine operating with the navy during wartime must have its personnel trained so it could defend itself from attacks.64

But with the war and peace conference over, what is to be expected from the fleets that constituted the branches of American sea power? Were such national necessities capable of operating in a peacetime world? Benson would take up the challenge for the merchant marine in 1920 when he was appointed the USSB’s chairman, and he would watch from the sidelines as the navy faced its own challenges.

64 “Comparison of the British and United States Navies,” September, 1919 and “Memorandum for the Secretary of the Navy: The Naval Reserve Force,” October 9, 1919, Benson Papers.
Chapter III

W.S. Benson and the Preservation of an American Merchant Marine, 1919-1926

“All force is relative. While the great powers have entered on this ten-year naval holiday, so far as great war vessels would otherwise have had a part in the naval program, the convention of powers does not limit the construction of merchant vessels, either with reference to their number, their size, or their type, kind, and efficiency.”¹ So wrote William S. Benson in 1923, commenting on articles from the Treaty for the Limitation of Armaments that had been agreed at the Washington Conference the year before.²

After departing as the navy’s chief of naval operations in 1919, he became chairman of the United States Shipping Board (USSB), the agency overseeing the merchant fleet amassed during the war. His appeal for the merchant marine lay not just in its contribution to the American economy, but also to the nation’s security.

Published works on Benson’s postwar career focus on his economic perspective in policymaking. He supported the Merchant Marine (Jones) Act of 1920 which gave the government provisions to counter apparent discrimination toward American shipping


² Harold and Margaret Sprout, *Toward a New Order of Sea Power: American Naval Policy and the World Scene, 1918-1922*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940; Reprint of 2nd edition, New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), Appendix B, Washington Treaties, Treaty for the Limitation of Armament. Article XI directed that vessels not constructed specifically as “fighting ships” or taken into government service for use for purposes other than fighting were not limited to the 10,000 tons displacement ceiling. Article XIV prohibited preparations for readying merchant ships with “warlike armaments” with exception to stiffening of decks to handle a gun no larger than 6 inches caliber. Sprout, 304.
overseas. Most historians view Benson as motivated by an anti-foreign attitude and a desire to see an American merchant marine become permanent. But this economic interpretation does not address his naval perspectives on national security. World War I demonstrated to Benson the value of the merchant marine as troopships and supply vessels when pressed into service. An American merchant marine, fully prepared and unquestionably loyal, was absolutely necessary if the nation had to fight alone.

This chapter will show that William S. Benson, who became commissioner on the United States Shipping Board (USSB) from 1920-1928 and its chairman, 1920-1921, wanted to preserve the merchant fleet created out of necessity from World War I. Through an examination of the ideas embedded in the language of his public statements and personal writings, it is clear that Benson’s defense of the merchant marine derived not only from the economic benefits it could provide the nation, but from its utility to the U.S. Navy in time of war. Based on his experiences as chief of naval operations, Benson perceived a postwar world of fierce competition that necessitated a navy kept up to strength and a merchant marine that was viable. Benson tried to convince others in public and private about the merchant marine’s significance to the navy, only to find disagreement, frustration, and disappointment.

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The Postwar Navy

The U.S. Navy increased dramatically during World War I. By 1918, it was second in the world, inferior only to Great Britain, but with enough work in progress or authorized to take first place within six or seven years. Appropriations from Congress in 1918 totaled $1,693,804,405, with $400 million allocated to new construction. After the armistice the revised figures for 1919-1920 were for $1,414,064,090 with new construction taking up $600 million. These funds were to construct twenty new battleships, twelve battle cruisers along with 300 other ships. Personnel by the navy’s estimates for the post-war period were for 250,000 at the minimum, 200,000 more than were serving in 1914. The navy’s appropriations were to about to decline as congressmen tried to adjust the country to life after war.

Opposition came early from those who did not support a naval building program that jeopardized relations with Great Britain. Among them was former president Theodore Roosevelt. Before American intervention into the war, he only wanted the navy expanded to regain its second-ranked naval power standing from Germany. His reasoning for the navy’s size was that the first-ranked naval power, Great Britain, was not a “military power,” and relations with Canada were good. Roosevelt believed that Great Britain would be neutral in any confrontation that the United States may have with an Asian or European power. By the end of the war, Roosevelt still wanted a navy that was

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the second strongest naval power in the world. He believed the British Navy was
“probably the most potent instrumentality for peace in the world,” and the United States
should not rival it. The former president believed that the English-speaking countries had
common interests and ideals, and that the first step to “maintain peace and justice
throughout the world” was to make it impossible for war to erupt between them.
Roosevelt expressed a change in stances that he admitted was not possible five years
before; the United States and Great Britain should agree to a universal arbitration treaty
between them. He believed: “that the time has come when we should say that under no
circumstances shall there ever be a resort to war between the United States and the
British Empire, and that no question can ever arise between them that cannot be settled in
judicial fashion, in some such manner as questions between the States of our own Union
would be settled.” Such an agreement was possible between these countries, Roosevelt
declared. He thought an arbitration agreement was unlikely with other states because
they had either completely different values, or had not reached a level of advancement
that permitted such reciprocity of relations. Roosevelt, his close friend Henry Cabot
Lodge, and his former secretary of state, Elihu Root, wanted the United States to have
closer relations with Great Britain, a concert of interests to ensure the peace of the
world.5

5 Theodore Roosevelt, “Theodore Roosevelt on the Danger of Making Unwise Peace Treaties,” October 4,
Times; http://nytimes.com. For others who desired closer Anglo-American relations, see Priscilla Roberts,
Roosevelt and his circle were not alone in their support for closer Anglo-American relations. The *New York Times* and *Scientific American*, key public opinion organs, did not want anything to harm Anglo-American relations. The Navy League polled its membership, and found few were supportive of continued naval competition with Great Britain. Most of the league’s membership understood Britain needed a larger navy because of its insular position and the far-flung nature of its empire.6

The larger point of opposition was over the purpose of an expanded navy. To many Americans, it appeared to provoke a naval armaments race with Great Britain. There was no valid reason to build up to a first-ranked navy, opponents asserted. Rather it should be reduced to provide relief from the financial burden of war and the preparation for a future war, argued many congressmen.7

In the House of Representatives, similar reasons were given for opposing the program. Great Britain needed sea power to sustain itself, while America with its extensive continental land mass was self-sustaining and had no “scattered empire” or policy of imperialism. A larger naval program could put the United States on a collision course with Great Britain. There were concerns over why America should build a fleet challenging Great Britain. Was the “military caste” of Germany to be replaced by an

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7 Ibid., 108.
American one? Another common theme was the opposition to those taxes and debt needed to push ahead with this naval building program.\(^8\)

Woodrow Wilson had to compromise with the opposition in the House to pass the new building program. He was able in January 1919 to pressure the House Naval Committee to pass it, but his administration promised to revise or scrap the program if there was “reasonable certainty” of a League of Nations and general decrease in armaments. Despite a concession to $975,903,000, the Committee reduced it to $746,457,000, with only $179 million to spend on the construction of ships already authorized or under construction.\(^9\)

The Senate’s attempts to repair the financial cuts by the House were unsuccessful before Congress’s term expired on March 4, 1919. The new Congress, with Republican control in both houses, proved to be more resistant as anti-navalism and anti-militarism became more pronounced. Wilson withdrew his support for the supplement program, in part because of political realities in Congress, and also because of the agreement reached between Colonel Edward House and Lord Robert Cecil at the Paris Peace Conference over the American naval building program.\(^10\)

\(^8\) Ibid., 108-11.

\(^9\) Ibid., 107-8. The authors’ reasoning of the opposition’s actions included party politics prompted by election of Republican majority in November 1918, and congressional resistance to the office of the president as the war was over. Klachko argued that Wilson’s acceptance for the proviso was a part of his plan of using the program to compel the Allies to accept the League of Nations. Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 132-33, 138.

\(^10\) Sprout, 111-12.
The House Naval Committee then proposed a revised appropriations bill. Its measures totaled less than $600 million, a fraction of the sum requested by the Navy Department. There was no provision for new construction, and it gradually reduced enlisted personnel from 241,000 to 170,000. This bill became law. The anti-navalism continued in 1920 with $432,000,000 in appropriations being approved, prompting a reduction to 120,000 enlisted personnel. In November 1920, the Army and Navy Journal lamented the lack of support in newspapers and noted the disappearance of civilian preparedness societies. While the U.S. Navy faced reductions in its appropriations that jeopardized the completion of the ships authorized in 1916, its fortunes grew even worse in 1921.

The Shipping Board

After the declaration of war, the Shipping Board used its authority granted by the 1916 Shipping Act to create the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC). Originally designed to award contracts for shipbuilding, the corporation instead became “the largest industrial enterprise of the war.” President Wilson appointed Edward N. Hurley chairman of the USSB and president of the EFC to oversee the transporting of the American Expeditionary Force to Europe. The Shipping Board stripped the coastal and intercoastal trade of its passenger ships, but they were too small to accomplish the task. British-registered ships assumed the job with naval escorts. Shipbuilding focused on

11 Ibid., 112-13.
freighters as more and more troops crossed to France. With existing shipyards booked with orders, the Board created new shipyards from scratch by late 1917. It also took control of German and Austrian ships interned since the war began, requisitioned 431 hulls from private shipyards, and took over whatever American-flagged ship remained in service over 2,500 deadweight tons. P.A.S. Franklin, president of the International Mercantile Marine, took over the Shipping Control Committee. He placed all merchant ships in a pool and had them sent to wherever a cargo was in need of transport. When the war ended, the EFC had laid 1,429 keels, with a third of them being completed. Despite the accomplishments, the United States was still “critically short” of shipping, and largely depended on Allied vessels for cargo and troop transport work.\(^\text{12}\)

After the Armistice, the USSB had to curtail its shipping acquisitions and dispose of its fleet. Hurley pondered canceling the remaining orders of ships. He decided to continue the building because he thought the British were afraid of American competition. Hurley’s decision resulted in 757 ships being completed in 1919, 406 in 1920, 68 ships in 1921 and the final 3 in 1922.\(^\text{13}\) The Board then tried to sell off much of the tonnage, but finding few buyers in a recession, tried a “managing operator” system. Profits were retained by private individuals while the government took the losses. The


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 59-60. See Darrel Hevenor Smith and Paul V. Betters, *The United States Shipping Board: Its History, Activities and Organization* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution, 1931). The authors argued there were efforts to cut down orders after the war, the Board cancelling 188 contracts for 906 ships, and suspending the construction of 17 requisitioned ships. Despite these efforts, there were 1,207 ships under USSB control in 1919, and 1,502 in 1920, 43-44.
idea behind this method was to create more American shipping companies. This system attracted 200 operators, who provided both regularly-scheduled service (often in overlapping routes), and tramp steamers that looked for cargo. Unfortunately for the Board, it did not allocate these ships wisely, with get-rich-quick operators taking advantage of the high shipping rates at government expense. When Benson became chairman in 1920, he continued the program with the purpose of creating more lines to reach areas of the world he believed the existing operators did not cover adequately.14

Critics of USSB shipping policy targeted its methods to dispose of the surplus shipping under government ownership as the industry was entering a depression. Edmund E. Day for *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* in August 1920 described the merchant ships as products of war that had to transition to peacetime roles. He noted the high cost of operation for American ships, which a subsidy might alleviate, but not solve. Day observed that the Shipping Board policy under Chairman Hurley was to sell the government-owned ships to private interests, but in practice, the government did not do so based on the terms of sale, which stipulated that the government still hold the title of the ships for as long as payments were pending. The Merchant Marine Act of 1920 did not change this policy, Day wrote, as the government could still describe the terms of sale, including the time needed to transfer ownership of the vessels.15 E.S. Gregg, a

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14 De La Predraja, *U.S. MerchantShipping*, 60-62. The Board’s background checks on these operators were incomplete, indicating the Board had no idea who was buying their ships. De La Predraja, 61.

specialist on transportation and shipping issues, in June 1921 wrote that the shipping business would be unprofitable for the foreseeable future. Cargo shipping yielded returns of 5 percent and passenger ships were a little better. Cargo shipping would not be profitable because of the large surplus of ships and falling rates, he declared. Only the business community could sort out the problem, with some government assistance, he contended, but not patriotic calls or congressional action. In December 1921, Gregg claimed that in 1919 the Shipping Board was overcharging on the price of these ships, and because of this and the resulting postwar maritime depression, changed its pricing five times. The complexities of the Board’s terms of sale to private interests made it difficult to track what was actually sold. The Shipping Board was losing money and would continue to do so for the next few years, Gregg observed.\textsuperscript{16} It was under this difficult business environment that the USSB operated during Benson’s tenure on the Board.

**Benson as Chairman of the USSB**

As chief of naval operations, Benson had spent much time considering the merchant marine and its relation to the navy. In a speech in 1916, he expressed a desire to have canals in places along the East Coast for use for battleships and smaller craft to

travel on should the coastlines be under siege from an enemy fleet. At the same time, he wanted to improve harbors because he did not believe the United States possessed a “first class harbor.”17 As he described the relationship between the commercial and naval fleets, “anything that helps commerce helps the Navy; anything that helps the Navy helps commerce; and whatever helps both helps the country.” 18 His thought at that time had connections to a previous generation of American navalists.

Edith Bolling Wilson, the president’s wife, informed Benson of his decision to appoint the admiral as chairman of the USSB. The decision was made public February 17, 1920, and it was effective on March 13. Benson, asked by reporters why the president selected him, responded that he was not told of Wilson’s reasoning, but thought the president did so because of his effectiveness at the office of naval operations. To his new job, Benson brought support for a strong merchant marine and a firm belief that Anglo-American commercial rivalry would appear after the war. Benson wanted an all-American merchant marine, with American shipping lines using American-built ships with American crews. Benson intended to create a merchant marine that would also serve as an auxiliary to the U.S. Navy and to accumulate national wealth. He believed the merchant marine would not only serve American interests, but also decrease the


18 Ibid., 4.
dependency of other nations on one single power (Great Britain) for trade.\textsuperscript{19} With these goals in mind, the new chairman set down to his work.

**Benson and the Jones Act**

Benson first turned to Congress to use its authority to regulate commerce in order to benefit U.S. shipping. First, the former CNO worked with Senator Wesley Jones (D-WA) of the Commerce Committee to draft the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, signed into law by Wilson on June 5, 1920. Benson wanted to push discriminatory features along the lines of the pre-war German commercial system. The Act featured three controversial provisions. One clause allowed the application of coastwise laws to the Philippines, prohibiting foreign shipping to conduct trade between Philippine ports. Section 28, Benson’s personal addition to the law, granted preferential rail rates for shippers using American vessels “provided there was a plethora of American tonnage to handle a port’s foreign trade.” The last clause, Section 34, instructed the president to abrogate treaties that prohibited the United States from implementing discriminatory duties as to favor American vessels. Benson was not satisfied because the bill did not specify more clearly that ownership and personnel were to be “100 percent American.”\textsuperscript{20}

The Act met opposition within the State Department. The department analyzed the then-pending bill and objected to the provision authorizing and directing the president to notify foreign governments of the expiration of articles that prevented the United

\textsuperscript{19} Klachko, *William Shepherd Benson*, 181, 182.

States from imposing discriminatory duties on foreign shipping. The department’s reasoning was that there were over twenty treaties with such articles, but it required the consent of both parties to make any changes. If the foreign government refused to terminate the offending section and allow the other provisions of the treaty to remain in force, then entire treaties would have to be voided to remove the offending article. This course of action would leave American citizens living overseas without any treaty rights. Even if only the offending section was removed and the rest of the treaty was left in force, American shipping would lose the protection of these treaties to equality in tonnage and import duties.\textsuperscript{21} The State Department feared international backlash toward the unilateral action to abrogate treaties.

Regardless of State Department opposition, Benson tried to use the discriminatory features of the Jones Act to force action on shipping. During a rate conference in August 1920 in Japan between representatives of foreign shipping companies operating out of Japanese ports, French, British, Japanese, and Dutch representatives refused to agree on a standard freight rate for Pacific traffic, as proposed by the Shipping Board, because they lacked the authority from their home offices to make such an agreement. The Shipping Board representative, R.O. Baker, threatened “drastic action” by the Board if Japan and other nations continued to cut rates. The Japanese representatives thought such an agreement was impossible until it was known how far the United States would execute provisions of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920. Benson hoped an agreement would be

made with the representatives. Rate cuts would not be done, Benson said, arbitrarily by
the Shipping Board if competition was fair. He did hint “that should the board find itself
contending with any unfair methods it held the power to protect American shipping
interests.”

Concern over how the government intended to impose the discriminatory
features of the Jones Act did not create a rush by foreign interests to the bargaining table
as Benson thought, but instead elicited cries of anger and worry about a loss of business
from American interests.

Objections to the discriminatory features in the Jones Act became more
vociferous from American government officials and private interests. Postmaster
General Albert S. Burleson, Secretary of Agriculture David F. Huston, and Secretary of
the Interior John Barton Payne, Benson’s predecessor on the USSB, objected on the
grounds of retaliation. The Pacific Northwest faced threats from Japanese shipping
interests looking to move their business to Vancouver or to Atlantic and Gulf ports. Port
authorities and shippers in the Northwest worried that the Japanese action would cripple
commerce on the West Coast. Benson argued that the Shipping Board was merely using
a method employed by other foreign competitors. The Seattle port commissioner, W. T.
Christensen, disagreed, saying the Jones Act was creating problems instead of solving
them. He argued that Germany’s pre-war preferential rail rate system antagonized the
shipping world and declared that it was a factor that led to the war. Both domestic and

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22 “Shipping Board Threatens Action to Stop Rate War in Pacific Trade,” August 9, 1920 and “Japanese To
be Asked for Ship Rate Accord,” August 10, 1920, both New York Times, http://nytimes.com; Safford,
Wilsonian Maritime Diplomacy, 234.
foreign pressure forced Benson to suspend the enforcement of Section 28 four days after the act was passed. It was later suspended until January 1, 1921. American shippers did not want a general rate war with the world; in response, those provisions were allowed to lapse. Philippine commercial leaders opposed the coastwise law application, fearing loss of trade. By September 1920, Wilson refused to enforce Section 34, despite pressure from Benson and Senator Jones. The president chose to repudiate his prior authorization of the section, saying his refusal to enforce Section 34 would not harm the rest of the operations mandated by Congress.23

In summary, Benson wanted to use the methods of foreign competitors against them in an effort to get them to see the folly of their ways. Wilson and Benson worked together on this in June 1920, but by the late summer, Wilson rejected those means in favor of a more liberal (non-discriminatory) internationalist commercial policy.24

Benson and the Army Transport Service

Benson met with Secretary of War Newton D. Baker and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels in May 1920 about a plan to transfer ships under the army’s control to the Shipping Board. Benson wanted those ships to develop lines to Antwerp, Belgium, and Panama, as well as ports in the Pacific. If the Shipping Board did not establish these


lines, the admiral asserted, then foreign competitors would. Benson also wanted control of all government terminals and harbor facilities in the United States. Baker wrote to Wilson, sending copies to Benson and Daniels, outlining the War Department’s objections to transferring the Army Transport Service to Shipping Board control and relying on the merchant marine in peace and the navy in war for transportation.  

The secretary began his argument by clarifying the mission of the navy. Its mission was to fight enemy fleets, according to Baker, which it did not encounter in the last war. Such undivided attention is unlikely to occur in the future, Baker reasoned, and the navy should stay focused on its fleet-action mission during peacetime. The army cannot rely on the navy for transportation during peacetime, he continued, unless it could also provide reliable service during a period of war. Thus, the army needed its own transport service so it did not have to rely on others. The past war demonstrated what happened when the army had no control over resources that were central to its efficiency. The army spent months trying to get troops to France, as “interests of every kind” competed for ships. Baker argued: “If the Navy were to take over the transport, or the Army were to abandon its transport system and commercial lines were relied upon, another war would produce the same conflicts of judgment as to priority of need.”

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25 Safford, *Wilsonian Maritime Diplomacy*, 228; Baker to Wilson, May 12, 1920, attached to Baker to Daniels, May 12, 1920, Josephus Daniels Papers (microform), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Baker attached papers on the transport service from Army sources to buttress his argument.

26 Baker to Wilson, May 12, 1920, Daniels Papers.
Baker then addressed why the army could not rely on the merchant marine. The army needed specialized vessels to handle cargoes like explosives and equipment for troops. If the War Department had to depend on merchant ships, he opined, it would have no readily available ships to start overseas operations. It would waste time taking over merchant ships and fitting them out for specialized uses. If these ships were already in the transport service, they could be ready at a moment’s notice. “It would be a dangerous policy for any country to rely upon commercial shipping to make its initial movement of troops and supplies of an expeditionary force.” Soldiers cannot travel on commercial shipping in steerage, Secretary Baker contended, nor be transported within the ordinary accommodations in “adequate numbers.” Transferring a regiment to the Philippines, he stated, would take months, and disorganize the shipping line. The line’s passengers would have to be excluded, Baker reasoned, or the army forced to use sparse “surplus accommodation” on each of the line’s ships. The army’s existing transport service is reliable. Service to Antwerp would last as long as there were American forces in Europe, Baker asserted, but service to the Panama Canal and the Philippines would be permanent. Service to these areas was best under government control, and the ships in the transport service would not jeopardize any plans by the Shipping Board to establish commercial lines to them.²⁷

Baker summoned the same arguments regarding the shore facilities that Benson wanted under Shipping Board control. The army bases constructed during the war were

²⁷ Baker to Wilson, May 12, 1920, Daniels Papers.
holding supplies where there was no other place to store them, Baker asserted. It would hurt preparedness should these, and any piers and docks the government acquired, be transferred to private ownership, as it would take time to secure depots to hold the supplies for overseas expeditions. Only facilities not used by the army in peacetime could be lent out for commercial uses so that branch could resume using them when needed, Baker stated.  

Benson responded to Baker’s letter with a vigorous defense of his views. He thought the navy’s work during the war was done “in a most efficient and satisfactory manner,” but under the circumstances of the war “it would be impossible for the Army to handle the question of transporting our troops across to the other side.” The U.S. Navy had control of not just the transport of soldiers, but also of munitions and supplies connected with the army. The former CNO remembered that the arrangement was for these army ships to be “officered and manned” with navy personnel. Benson claimed he did not advocate having the U.S. Navy take over army transportation just because the navy would handle it. He opined that a large transport service was not needed by both services in peacetime as such ships were “a very great expense to the Nation.”  

Benson then tried to convince Baker of the value of the merchant marine in emergencies. He wrote: “With the building up of the Merchant Marine, which we are now endeavoring to do, there will always be available a sufficient number of suitable

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28 Ibid. Baker attached papers on the transport service from Army sources to buttress his argument.

vessels to carry both personnel and munitions to any extent that this Government may be called upon to use in foreign service.” Benson admitted that the U.S. Navy should use such auxiliary vessels necessary for the upkeep and operation of the fleet. Such vessels included refrigerator ships, hospital ships, tankers, and supply craft. “Of course, such vessels as certain harbor craft that are needed for exercise in connection with mine-laying or communication with coast-defense works, target practice, etc. of the Army should be maintained by the Army.” Benson recommended that the Navy and War Departments have lists of merchant ships recorded, describing the possible use of each particular vessel and what modifications were needed to get the individual vessel ready for service. Benson concluded: “In this way, I believe, ample ship facilities can easily be provided—certainly by the time a large army could be formed and put into any kind of shape for transport across the seas.” He argued that it was necessary to have American ships out to cover routes before foreign competitors established them first. The Shipping Board chairman believed private shipping lines could accommodate army and navy needs to the Philippines with less cost to the government. “The knowledge that all of this patronage would be given American steamship lines which we are now trying to establish from the West Coast to Yokohama, Shanghai, Hongkong… would insure to these operators a certain definite amount of revenue that would materially assist them in establishing these
Wilson, however, sided with Baker on this issue, informing Baker that, “the judgment expressed in your letter is my own judgment.”

It is clear that Benson wanted to have the army and navy depend on the merchant marine for auxiliaries as a cost-effective measure to the services. At the same time, the shipping traffic from these departments was to sustain routes by the merchant marine. By implication, it also made the U.S. Army dependent on civilian shipping service during an emergency; thus, it increased the importance of establishing a large merchant marine, in accordance with Benson’s nationalist vision. Baker and Wilson, though, did not want to risk the Army’s own preparedness for emergencies to support the merchant marine. The combination of government reproach on the Merchant Marine Act and his effort to secure the transport service under USSB control made Benson’s goal of maintaining an American merchant marine more difficult to accomplish. He also tried throughout his chairmanship to obtain public support for it despite the difficulties posed by resistance to the Jones Act.

**Benson’s Public Campaign**

In a series of public statements during 1920, Benson tried to promote the merchant fleet to the public in nationalist terms. On April 12, Benson addressed the National Marine League, asking for the cooperation of businessmen against “insidious and falsifying propaganda.” The next day, Benson called attention to “propaganda”

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30 Benson to Baker, May 13, 1920, Daniels Papers.

31 Ibid.
aimed at preventing the creation of permanent merchant marine. “Knowing how 
important the merchant marine was in the World War, any American who lends himself 
to propaganda tending to injure American shipping is a mighty poor sort of American,” 
he declared. He repeated many of these sentiments on July 4. On July 19 and August 
15, Benson announced the intention of the Shipping Board to break up the monopoly of a 
few Atlantic seaports. He noted these monopolies were harming the growth of the 
merchant marine. The goal was to break up the congestion of railroad traffic and send 
goods to ports closest to “the point of consumption.” He wanted to spread around the 
shipping trade to create competition among seaports. The Shipping Board chairman 
added that if foreign interests did not end their discrimination of American vessels, then 
the United States would use the discriminatory features of the Merchant Marine Act. He 
insisted that “no foreigner should attempt to dictate to us where or under what conditions 
our ships are to be run.” He explained the discriminatory features of the Merchant 
Marine Act were designed to make foreign competitors “play the game fairly.” Benson 
repeated these sentiments on November 1920, adding “It is the duty of all Americans to 
advocate the upbuilding of the Merchant Marine in the most friendly spirit.” On August 
15, 1920, Benson said the United States must make use of the ships built during the war 
if it is “to take its place among the nations in world commerce” in peacetime. He also 
declared: “Foreign shipping interests must stop their discriminations against American 
vessels if they do not wish us to resort to the use” of the railroad rate provision.32 Benson

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used his public speeches and articles to denounce foreign interests and the Americans who assisted them in discrediting the American merchant marine, and reminding the public that the provisions of the Merchant Marine Act were to be used if these foreign interests did not stop their actions against American shipping.

Benson also used the opportunity to promote the greatness of the merchant marine. On April 14, he declared that in order for the merchant marine to be permanent, the USSB-owned ships must be absorbed by private capital. He said that the best way to get public support behind the merchant service was to make opportunities for advancement great enough to make American boys want to join it. On July 4, he repeated his message, adding that new recruits to the merchant service “[s]hould see the life as it is on board ship to know what fine training for future happiness lies in store for them in the service of our merchant ships.” The difficulty, according to Benson, is getting “ship-minded” men who want to “enter the ranks with the hope an ambition to succeed as a ship operator.” The American men at sea were “a splendid class, big in heart, strong in body and, keen-witted at all times, especially in face of danger.” He gave credit to these sailors, most of whom had never been at sea before, for their work during the World War. Benson called attention to the global market’s need for ships to carry goods. The United States had the ships and the goods. The merchant marine needed

“good, wholesome young men” to man the ships. The merchant marine offered those who heard the “call of the sea” a chance to visit foreign places and meet their peoples, and enjoy better conditions than their counterparts on foreign ships. Benson declared: “As a result of the World War our country again is a power in sea trade, as it was sixty years ago. Adventurous men who want to find their fortune on the sea never had such opportunities as exist today.”

On April 7, 1921, Benson affirmed the importance of the Shipping Board and its mission. He declared: “The question of placing our ships on the seven seas is a world-wide proposition, affecting every phase of industry...It is of international importance, and if the American people can be convinced of that importance, there need be little fear the board will cease to function.” Foreign competitors watched to see if American traders were losing money so they could “jump in and run away” with American commerce, Benson claimed. The loss of money in the American merchant fleet was worth it, he asserted, because “if we don’t, foreign competitors raise their freight rates.” As he was attempting to convince Americans of an American merchant marine, his navy was about to undergo a serious curtailing of its power.

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The Conference on the Limitation of Armaments and Benson

When the Washington Conference was being planned, Congress threatened to impose its own program of arms reduction. American naval development was losing the momentum established during the war years. Congress had rejected three consecutive proposals from the Navy Department. Ships under construction were becoming “frozen assets.” In January 1921, only one of the ten ships authorized under the Naval Act of 1916 was nearing completion with three others at about 50 percent. The other six battleships were less than 6 percent complete, with the battle cruisers even further behind. Congress was unwilling to appropriate funds to finish those close to completion. Appropriations of $133 million in 1919 fell to $90 million in 1921, despite the best efforts of the Harding administration. A canvassing of senators and representatives revealed a discouraging picture of a new session in December 1920. There was talk of scrapping the unfinished ships regardless of any participation in an arms conference.35

The preparations for the Washington Conference included requests to the Navy Department for policy recommendations. The navy wanted no less than a two-power standard if the Anglo-Japanese alliance continued. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes and fellow delegates, however, decided on armament limitations on existing strength. Naval advisors defined “existing strength” around capital ships, i.e. battleships and battle cruisers, as these vessels were considered the “true index of a navy’s power.” These naval advisors also considered capital ships under construction as being a

35 Sprout, New Order of Sea Power, 143.
part of existing strength. They formulated a ratio of 5:5:3 to describe the existing strength of Great Britain, the United States and Japan, respectively. The difficulty then lay with setting tonnage limits. The General Board wanted a 10:10:6 ratio, setting quotas of 1 million tons apiece for Great Britain and the United States, with 600,000 tons to Japan. The American figure could be achieved with the completion of the fifteen capital ships under construction and scrapping units with main-battery gun calibers of less than 14 inches. The administration rejected it. Hughes decided to scrap the entire building program and use the lower 5:5:3 ratio to ask for British and Japanese agreements regarding their programs, and to gain concessions concerning the Far East.  

Benson became concerned about the Harding administration’s plans for the Washington Conference. He was worried that President Warren G. Harding and Hughes would make unwise concessions because of America’s failure to join the League of Nations. The former CNO sent a memo to Harding about his experiences at the Paris Peace Conference two years before. Benson recalled the meetings he and Daniels had with First Sea Lord Rosslyn Wemyss and First Lord of the Admiralty Walter Long. The retired rear-admiral described Wemyss’s impertinent meeting with Daniels without an appointment and Long’s reaffirmation of Great Britain’s dominance in sea power. He concluded that those incidents proved representatives of the David Lloyd George

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government in 1919 (and still in power in 1921) were acting “to block our Naval building program, and also to put every possible obstacle in the way of the development of our merchant marine,” to keep the United States inferior to Great Britain.37

Benson described his suspicions in a questionnaire sent by the General Board. The Board requested the opinions of 26 high-ranking naval officers regarding the ratios between the United States, Great Britain, Italy, France and Japan and what should be done regarding a continuance of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Benson ignored the basic questions; instead the former CNO expressed his concern over limiting the construction of “instruments of warfare” that could be built secretly. Benson wrote he would comment later on subjects he did not cover in his “initial communication.”38

He then composed a memorandum on what points he thought the negotiators at the conference should make. The Paris Peace Conference and the International Conference on Communications from November 1920 to March 1921 had demonstrated to him how Great Britain manipulated the smaller powers’ interests to block the United States. These smaller states had an “attitude of self-assurance and independence,” Benson noted, because of their support for Great Britain. He believed “secret understandings” were made between these powers. If Great Britain accepted armament limitations, “it will be only because she has sufficiently well understood agreement with other nationals as will permit their combined power to dominate the United States.”

37 Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 189; “Admiral Benson’s Memorandum Dated May 16, 1921,” Benson Papers.

38 Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 190.
Benson feared negotiators at the conference would take up questions regarding the fortification of the Panama Canal and “of commercial supremacy as relating to a merchant marine.” The American delegates at the Paris Peace Conference had erred by revealing too much of their support for a League of Nations, enabling other nations to use that support to secure gains for themselves on the subsequent questions that came up, Benson claimed. He wanted American delegates at the disarmament conference to remind the European powers that the United States emerged from war financially secure and able “to continue to build battleships and to maintain large military forces.” The conference was called out of sympathy for their financial condition, he advised, and the United States was willing to “agree to some action that will relieve their international anxiety” by reducing the Europeans’ armaments and get them back to business pursuits. Benson wanted to use financial pressure on those states that owed the United States a lot of money; the United States should not “in any way ease up in our demands, and, if necessary, exactions,” as long as these states spent money on armaments. Only America, Great Britain, and Japan had reasons to maintain battleships, Benson thought. Smaller states with battleships are “a temptation for a larger power to favor the interests of one or more of these smaller nations” so that in “case of trouble” the larger power could secure the latter’s assistance. Armaments for the republics in the Western Hemisphere should be limited by negotiation between the United States and the Pan-American Union. He

39 Ibid.; “Notes Relating to the International Conference on the Limitation of Armaments,” September 26, 1921, Benson Papers. A copy of this paper can be found in Mary Klachko, “Anglo-American Naval Competition, 1918-1922” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1962), Appendix 9, 332-34.
suggested to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., that France retain
enough naval strength to offset Japan’s to deal with any action by a combined Anglo-
Japanese fleet. Benson still feared an Anglo-Japanese combination against the United
States, as he thought their interests were mutual. When the Washington Conference
terminated the Anglo-Japanese alliance Benson remained dissatisfied as the navy’s
strength became limited by the subsequent treaty.  

Benson described his misgivings to Daniels following the conference. The
admiral thought the British encouraged the conference to maintain their dominant
position on the sea. He thought the conference left the United States “from a Naval
standpoint, in a very dangerous position.” Benson argued that Great Britain would have
three “super-Hoods” and the rest of the battle cruisers in the British navy in contrast to
America’s slow battleships and no battle cruisers. He did not realize that these super-
Hoods were canceled by the treaty. He also noted “Great Britain has 112 merchant ships
capable of making twenty or more knots at sea, while we have only three.”


“Super-Hoods” referred to battlecruisers larger and more powerful than HMS Hood, which displaced
41.200 tons, carried eight 15-inch guns and could make a top speed of 31 knots, Oscar Parkes and Francis
E. McMurtie, eds., Jane’s Fighting Ships, 1924 (Sampson Low Marston, 1924; New York: Arco

Benson to Daniels, March 13, 1922, Daniels Papers. See Daniels, The Wilson Era: Years of War and
After, 1917-1923 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946). In his recollection of the Wilson
years, Daniels stated he did not support the conference, as Britain and Japan “scraped blue-prints and old
ships,” and the United States scrapped ships being built. Benson did not know Daniels’s opinion of the
conference at the time and expressed it in this letter to Daniels, which Daniels used in his book. Daniels,
Years of War and After, 586-87.
The Treaty of the Limitation of Armaments, in general, ensured virtual parity with Great Britain over capital ships. By treaty rules, the United States scrapped 26 capital ships, totaling over 1.7 million tons, and Great Britain scrapped 24 capital ships totaling less than 600,000 tons. The treaty permitted the United States to convert two of the uncompleted battle cruisers from the 1916 program to aircraft carriers. The United States retained 18 ships with 526,000 tons, and Britain retained 20 ships of 559,000 tons, including two new capital ships built under treaty restrictions.\textsuperscript{43} Aircraft carriers were dealt with as a separate category, their tonnage limited under the 5:5:3 ratio. Capital ship construction was prohibited for ten years following November 12, 1921. The treaty also maintained the status quo in the Pacific, with no new fortifications or expansion of pre-existing facilities established in named territories and possessions. Benson’s attention later focused on two articles in the treaty. Article XI directed that vessels not constructed specifically as “fighting ships” or taken into government service for use for purposes other than fighting were not limited to the 10,000 tons displacement ceiling. Article XIV prohibited the readying of merchant ships with “warlike armaments” with exception to stiffening the decks to handle a gun no larger than 6 inches caliber.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{44} Sprout, \textit{New Order of Sea Power}, Appendix B, Washington Treaties, Treaty for the Limitation of Armament, 304. Roskill wrote the treaty imposed a temporary check on Anglo-American rivalry, and made
Benson was not the only naval officer who did not support these limitations on American naval power. Rear-Admiral Charles L. Rodgers in March 1922 told the secretary of the navy he was concerned that the treaty limited America’s ability to defend its interests in the western Pacific. Dudley W. Knox, naval editor of the *Army and Navy Journal*, also thought the treaty strengthened Japan’s capabilities in Asia. Navy circles were not satisfied by the political accomplishments of the Washington treaties, as they lamented the loss of capital ships and prohibitions to fortifying Pacific naval bases.45

There were also concerns in the U.S. Navy regarding Congress’s willingness to provide enough appropriations for the navy’s maintenance up to treaty limits. In 1921, the Navy Department requested for fiscal year 1923 $420 million based on the premise of 100,000 enlisted personnel and 6,000 apprentices. The treaty heightened expectations outside the navy for further reductions. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., was appalled to hear Congressmen in January 1921 wanting the navy reduced by half. After the conference, Secretary of the Navy Edwin Denby wanted $350 million for eighteen battleships with 90,000 enlisted personnel with 6,000

the naval powers focus efforts on aircraft carriers, and the numbers of cruisers, destroyers and submarines, *Anglo-American Antagonism*, 332.

45 Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People’s Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 267-68; William Reynolds Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1909-1922* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 670-74. Buckley argued that while parity with Great Britain was not achieved in reality, the United States only gave up 11 of the 15 capital ships offered for scrapping, with two to be completed and two others converted into aircraft carriers. He observed that the weapons of World War II, specifically aircraft carriers, aircraft, and submarines, were not heavily restricted or never restricted at all. *Washington Conference*, 89, 126. The Sprouts argued that the treaties recognized geopolitical realities between Great Britain, the United States, and Japan. *New Order of Sea Power*, 290-91.
apprentices. The chairman of the naval subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, Patrick H. Kelley (R-MI), wanted to cut $100 million before hearing Denby’s proposal. Chairman Martin B. Madden (R-IL) of the House Appropriations Committee wanted to tie up the navy’s ships at their docks since the country was at peace. He wanted the navy’s size set at pre-war levels, with 65,000 enlisted men. Roosevelt was able to get the ceiling lifted to 86,000 enlisted men with 6,000 apprentices. The assistant secretary of the navy wanted the navy maintained at the 5:5:3 ratio allowed by the treaty, with enough personnel to man the vessels. Roosevelt stated that the treaty allowed the United States to have great position with Britain and Japan. The navy maintained at treaty strength would be useful in future disarmament conferences. If the navy had been reduced before the past conference, Roosevelt claimed: “we would have been able to get to no successful conclusion. We would not have been able to speak with authority. Our influence would not have counted the way it has for peace and justice in the world.”

The treaty’s restrictions on the navy, plus its troubles with Congress, limited America’s preparedness on the oceans. Benson was concerned over national security being harmed by these obstacles. The former CNO then recalled from his experiences the service the merchant fleet performed in the Great War and how it could contribute to

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naval preparedness, and he decided the merchant marine had a vital new role to fill for national defense in the post-Washington era.

**The Merchant Marine and National Defense**

In October 1922, Gregg analyzed certain fallacies he heard regarding merchant shipping. Did the United States, rich in raw materials, need a large merchant marine, he asked? The shipping expert concluded in the negative, because, among economic factors, the ships that carried these export products were flying the flag of the nations that bought them. Only a country needing raw materials, like Japan, should possess a large merchant fleet in order to find raw materials for its industries. Another “fallacy” was the desire to achieve parity with Great Britain’s merchant fleet. Building up the merchant fleet to match the British fleet was not practical; planning for future shipping should be based on the character of its trade, not on what some other country had in its fleet.  

Gregg’s preoccupation of the economic aspects of the American merchant marine overlooked its contributions during the Great War. Benson was not concerned about the economics of the situation. He was more concerned over America’s national security and the merchant marine could contribute to it.

The former CNO believed the merchant fleet was pivotal during the Great War, and actions should be taken to strengthen it for future conflicts. He had earlier expressed his views to the secretary of the navy in October 1919 that a large merchant marine was

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necessary for national defense. “In war, the Merchant Marine will have all it can do to
man its own ships and cannot supply officers or men for the combatant ships of the
Navy.” But the personnel of the merchant marine will have to be trained by navy
personnel to work their vessel as “a fighting ship” in order to defend the ship from attack.
In order for this training to be done, he claimed, the civilian personnel must be enrolled in
the naval reserve.48

Benson believed the merchant marine won the war for the Allies, and it was an
asset that needed naval assistance. The former CNO declared: “Any discussion as to the
value of the Merchant Marine, in the recent War is superfluous…but for the Merchant
Marine, the War would have been lost to the Allies and the United States and that the
United States would not have been able to carry on its campaign in France, without the
aid of foreign shipping.” The conditions of the last war made it possible to build up our
forces, Benson opined, “but in the future we should be in a position to stand on our own
resources. As a matter of National defense in any future war, a Merchant Marine is just
as essential a part of our fighting forces as is the Regular Navy.” A future war that
threatens the United States will be an overseas operation, according to the admiral, its
success hinging on the efficiency of the supply lines. Carrying over from the forecast of
Planning Section No. 67, the merchant shipping was believed to be the subject of “a more
determined attack than ever before by air, water and under the water.” The U.S. Navy
can never be large enough to protect “the enormous supply lines of the future,” so every

48 Memorandum for the secretary of the navy, October 1919, Benson Papers.
vessel must be “a fighting ship” to protect itself. Earlier, he had declared: “In view of the vital necessity of a Merchant Marine as a means of national defense, the Navy must foster in every practical way the development of the Merchant Marine of the United States and cooperate to the full extent of its resources in any movement tending to bring about closer relations and better understanding between the Merchant Marine and the Navy.” The U.S. Navy can permit merchant vessels to use its yards for repairs, allow shipping operators to use the navy’s facilities and purchase food and supplies on naval contracts when overseas, and train the personnel with a retainer for naval reserve service.  

Benson still advocated for the naval parity he sought as chief of naval operations in 1919, but now he tied it to commerce in his remarks. In February 1920, the newly appointed Shipping Board chairman told an audience that the strengthening of the navy was not for aggression “but to further the cause of commerce and to maintain America’s status among the nations of the world.” The navy must be “equal in size” to any navy and be more efficient. He added, “I favor a closer alliance between this country’s commercial interests and the navy, for in times of peace it is the function of the navy to facilitate foreign commerce.”

In July 1920, Benson elaborated on the interrelationship of the navy and the merchant marine. “The navy…should exist for the nation’s commerce, so as to protect it and make safe the avenues of trade. Of course, a sea-going marine provides shipbuilding

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and engineering plants, skilled artisans and seamen, all of which contribute to the creating and maintaining of the navy.” The merchant marine did not exist for this alone though, he noted. It kept men employed in constructing over 2,000 ships for the wartime shipbuilding program. The ships the program produced, he contended, had given the United States an opportunity to take its place amongst nations. “In the race for trade, let us not forget that a merchant marine is as necessary for the national defense as it is to take care of the proper growth of our foreign and domestic commerce. Therefore it is our solemn duty to do everything possible to build up this merchant marine.” There must a sufficient number of ships available to carry on trade and for emergencies. He asked for “[e]very man, woman, and child” to study the Merchant Marine Act as it made “possible a permanent American Merchant Marine worthy of our pride. It should kindle anew a belief in our power to come back upon the seas.”

In March 1921, Benson addressed the New York Press Club about the merchant marine’s necessity in wartime. He used language that was reminiscent of his days as chief of naval operations; in case of war in the future, the United States would most likely fight on its own, so the merchant marine was needed as a naval auxiliary. Benson also addressed public apathy toward the merchant service. The chairman thought that people had the impression that the American merchant marine was “temporary” as expressed by foreign competitors. He wanted the press to remind the American public that the nation’s

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flag was “nailed to the mast” on the merchant marine, and when foreign competitors understood the merchant marine’s permanence, they will “play the game or get off the field.”\(^{52}\)

The Washington Conference put a new sense of urgency behind the value of the merchant fleet. With treaty obligations and a Congress hostile to further naval construction, what was the best way to ensure the nation’s naval preparedness? Benson saw the merchant marine as the best possible naval reserve. He sought to preserve the merchant shipping created from the war effort. Benson also recognized that the aging fleet that fought the Great War would have to be replaced eventually over time. Thus, the retired rear-admiral used his position as a commissioner on the USSB, and his experience as CNO to highlight the merchant marine’s contributions to national defense.

In September 1922, as Congress debated a bill providing subsidies to American shipping lines, Benson described the usefulness of the merchant marine to the navy in times of war. First, he commented on America’s spirit of nonaggression, signified by the nation’s leadership at the Washington Conference. “None but the most suspicious can accuse us of ulterior motives of conquest. We want nothing that does not belong to us,” he maintained. It was still a duty, he reminded his fellow citizens, to protect the country. By “voluntarily depriving herself to a great extent of the power to promptly make an aggressive war,” the country should still “equip herself as to discourage any possible aggressive nation from attacking her.” Benson explained that the navy’s role was to go

out and meet the opposing force before it should reach American shores. Working with the units of the fleet are the auxiliary vessels like colliers, oil tankers, aircraft carriers, scouts, and other units that are so specialized that they have no purpose for anything outside of the Navy. Then there are the unspecialized types that could be used for commercial pursuits; colliers and oil tankers, cargo ships, and passenger ships that can be procured from the merchant marine. From a financial perspective, the merchant marine made sense. With one “a nation need not spend so much money on its actual naval auxiliary, since, when war comes, its merchant marine is immediately called to support the navy.” A point of argument that Benson used two years earlier with then-secretary of war Baker was now being used to sway public opinion.

Benson used history to make his point about how the merchant marine could have assisted the U.S. Navy. During the war with Spain, Admiral George Dewey employed British ships as auxiliaries to carry supplies to Manila Bay. Benson rhetorically asked, “Suppose Great Britain had then been at war?” Then, Dewey’s situation in the Far East would have been much more precarious. He gave an example in the war of four good vessels the navy employed, made possible by the 1891 Ocean Mail Act. Benson also


55 Benson said the American line wanted two British-built vessels under U.S. registry for the 1891 Ocean Mail Act, Congress acquiesced on condition line built two ships in American yards, to navy specifications, and equal to or better in quality than British-built ships. Therefore, two of the “American” ships were actually built overseas. “The Merchant Marine and National Defense,” Benson Papers.
recalled President Theodore Roosevelt’s sending of the Great White Fleet around the world, noting no American colliers or auxiliaries went with them. The U.S. government had to hire such vessels from foreign shipping lines. Benson mentioned his own experience as chief of naval operations in directing at least 450 vessels to carry troops and supplies, but these ships were largely drawn from allies. The U.S. Navy should not depend on these favorable circumstances existing in the future. If the navy is to go out to meet the enemy, occupy ports, and so on, it needed vessels to carry troops and supplies to hold those points. This was possible with a merchant marine that was flying the American flag. “Recent history has emphasized the fact that any form of delay in readiness to attack or meet the enemy in the beginning of the war is not only expensive in men and money, but often fatal in final result.”

The merchant marine became a very versatile and inexpensive asset to Benson’s mind. Instead of having taxpayers provide the navy with auxiliaries that were mothballed during peacetime, Benson argued, it made sense to build up a merchant marine. These ships in peacetime can carry commerce and keep experienced mechanics employed at shipyards. These shipyards must remain in operation as they can perform repairs and construct new ships when needed. Benson warned that if the shipyards were not kept busy developing new designs, and maintaining a steady production of new draftsmen, mechanics, and others to fill vacancies over time, American shipbuilding could be in
trouble when the holiday ended. Benson’s argument for the bill came to nothing as the Senate never brought it to a vote.⁵⁶

Benson tried again in 1923 to focus public attention on the merchant marine. He published _The Merchant Marine_, hoping a close examination of the book would be interesting and informative. He repeated the problem plaguing America when it possessed no merchant marine at the onset of war. The Allies assisted the United States by providing ships, but Benson stressed again what would happen if the nation had to send troops across the Pacific or the Atlantic and there was no American merchant marine or allies to furnish the ships. “At present there is no lack of vessels, but their existence now is no assurance for our possible need at an indefinite and we trust distant future time when our rights may again have to be preserved by resort to arms.” Constant protection comes from a navy and a “permanent” merchant fleet flying the American flag. He declared: “A merchant fleet of adequate size for our peace time commerce, manned by American citizens whose loyalty will keep them at their posts when danger comes, and whose experience will equip them for higher office in our non-combatant fleet when it serves as an auxiliary to our navy, is not a mere instrument of commerce – it is a necessity.”⁵⁷


⁵⁷ Benson to Daniels, May 16, 1923, Daniels Papers; Benson, _Merchant Marine_, vii, viii.
He then argued the economic perspective for the merchant marine. Money paid to foreign shipping companies could go to American companies instead, and foreign shippers are more likely in lean tonnage years to favor the commerce from its own ports. The practical aspect was when a foreign country was caught in a war; it would call on all vessels flying its flag “without regard for their inconvenience or loss our merchants will suffer in their foreign commercial relations.” He cited Great Britain’s use of its merchant marine during the Boer War and the World War. Benson noted the indifference of many citizens of the situation, particularly those who lived far inland, away from contact with the ocean. Americans seemed “to give very little, if any, thought to the deeper principles and policies involved” in naval and maritime policy.58

The Washington Conferences, Benson wrote, had emphasized the need for an American merchant marine. “All force is relative,” he argued, since the treaty did not restrict merchant ship construction in any way, and it permitted the ships to be armed under certain limits. “As a result, if an ordinary merchant man in time of war should be chased by a ‘cruiser,’ having armament sufficiently superior for a successful attack, it is quite unimportant whether the ‘cruiser’ has been a war vessel from its inception, or a merchantman converted for the purpose.” These ships cannot only serve as transports or auxiliaries, but they “now have acquired potential military value of great significance.”

The conference did, according to Benson, indicate a trend towards “peaceful intercourse between nations.” Thus, in any future commercial competition, the United States should be equipped to handle the carrying of its commerce using its own ships. Shipyards and their personnel needed the work of constructing merchant ships as the conference had ended the patronage of the government to build naval vessels during the ten-year holiday. These shipyards are national assets, he asserted. If these yards and their workmen were lost, Benson warned, the country could find itself lacking facilities when restarting naval construction after the ten-year holiday ended. Benson had a reason to be concerned about the shipyards in this period. The existence of the large numbers of merchant ships and the maritime depression following the war created a lack of work for the yards. Most of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation’s yards got by on repair work and the diversification of operations, while others, like William Cramp & Sons at Philadelphia, closed, just one among dozens of shipyards.59

With such importance attached to the merchant marine, what was its state when needed for emergencies? Benson asked the chief of naval operations, Admiral Edward W. Eberle, to assess the passenger ships in the merchant marine for auxiliary uses. In December 1924, Eberle replied that 144 ships, considered the best in the merchant marine, were, for the most part, inadequate. Of these ships: “82 are deficient in speed, 24 are deficient in tonnage, 30 are deficient in radius, 9 are of improper types.” Another 58

59 Benson, Merchant Marine, 175-76, 171; Kemble And Kendal, “Years Between the Wars,” 124. Inactivity of shipyards was also a concern of Admiral David Beatty of the Royal Navy during the holiday, Buckley, Washington Conference, 87, and Roskill, Anglo-American Antagonism, 312.
passenger ships were deficient in “size, speed or build” and were considered worthless as naval auxiliaries. Roles in mind for these ships included aircraft carriers, cruisers, administrative flagships, gunboats, and especially transports for the Orange plan. These ships were also to be employed as airplane and submarine tenders, and hospital ships.  

In response, Benson used his position as commissioner in charge of the Shipping Board’s Bureau of Construction to propose an ambitious construction program. He proposed building 230,000 tons annually with two 30,000-ton passenger ships. He noted the United States had only built 18 of the 1,300 ships built after the war. If naval and merchant tonnage combined was the true measure of maritime power, he argued, America lagged behind the ratios of the Washington Conference, and well below parity.

Benson’s report on American shipping distinguished two points of view on its future. One was to encourage the growth of the merchant marine and have the United States take its place in international trade. The other was leave the seas “as rapidly and economically as possible and let who will carry goods to us or from us as cheaply as may be done, or as expensively as will be done in the absence of adequate competition.” Benson rejected the latter, arguing that there was a relationship between national

60 Chief of Naval Operations to Benson, December 22, 1924, Benson Papers; The Orange Plan was a joint Army-Navy plan to retake the Philippines from Japan. For the early formulation of the Orange Plan, see Louis Morton, “War Plan Orange: Evolution of a Strategy,” World Politics 11, 2 (January, 1959): 221-50.

61 Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 193-94. Benson was not alone in thinking the merchant marine contributed to naval parity. Rear-Admiral Bradley A. Fiske thought the American public did not understand naval parity in 1929. Naval parity was composed of three factors; the fleet, naval bases, and a large merchant marine especially with large ships. See letter to the editor of New York Times, July 31, 1929.
prosperity and progress, and industrial activity on and across the sea. In essence, he claimed, shipping could contribute to American economic development like the railroads of the past.\(^{62}\)

Benson continued his argument that the merchant marine also played a role in national defense. Benson cited as an example the potential of “aeroplane transport ships” that could be converted from a merchant ship readily. The two passenger ships he proposed to be built were to have this feature in their design. Other passenger ships under government ownership should be replaced as well. Benson also wanted to replace the existing cargo ship fleet, about 2 million tons, with new efficient vessels over a 10 year period.\(^{63}\) Unfortunately for Benson, the economics of the situation took precedence in USSB policy.

Benson became frustrated with the new Republican administrations of the 1920s over shipping policy. Harding was as unwilling as Wilson to enforce the discriminatory features of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920. The new chairman, Albert D. Lasker, recalled ships from active service to reduce losses. Benson recognized the need for economy, but worried that the withdrawal of ships from established routes would leave them open to foreign competitors. Benson’s advocacy of government intervention in


\(^{63}\) Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 194; Benson, “Report on the American Merchant Marine,” Department of Transportation Library. Benson wanted to create a three-ship transatlantic service with the existing Leviathan of the government-operated United States Lines to make the line attractive to buyers.
merchant shipping put him at odds with Calvin Coolidge when the latter became president in August 1923. Benson wanted to build new merchant shipping to replace old ships. He thought new ships, being more attractive to private interests, would further the USSB’s policy of liquidating government-owned ships. Because of a recession and newer foreign ships, the Board was forced to either operate these ships or lay them up.64

The USSB under Benson and beyond still relied on often unreliable managing operators. Most were in the business as long as the profits continued; few planned for the long term. When the shipping market collapsed in 1920, operators who bought their ships in 1919 with borrowed money went bankrupt. Operators with half-loaded ships transferred their losses to the USSB. Chartering government vessels stopped, and the Board found itself with many idle ships. The Board tried to reduce the number of operators. By June 1921, there were 97 operators with 744 government ships over 120 operators a year before; by June 1922, there were 39 operators with 394 ships. Tramp services were discontinued, but there were still many overlapping routes. In November 1923 USSB passed a resolution to consolidate 39 operators into 25 steamship companies. Throughout the 1920s, the USSB was subject to official turnover and bureaucratic quarrels. This made the Shipping Board “a captive of shifting coalitions of private steamship companies, so unscrupulous executives had ample opportunity to reap considerable personal gains by favorable allocations of ships routes, and funds from the government. For too many private executives, the battle in Washington, D.C., became

64 Klachko, William Shepherd Benson, 192, 194.
more important than the competition against foreign rivals.” By 1926, American shipping carried less than 25 percent of American foreign commerce, and the dream of a merchant fleet “strong enough to challenge the British went aglimmering.”

Conclusion

When he assumed the chairmanship of the USSB in 1920, Benson had already drawn key lessons from the recent war, and believed he had the right assessment of what lay ahead. To Benson’s way of thinking, the merchant marine had secured victory for the Allies in the Great War; thus, the huge merchant fleet created by the Shipping Board had to be preserved and kept in operation. Throughout his tenure at the Board, he emphasized the two contributions made by a sizeable merchant marine: one, economic or commercial; the other, to the national defense. The existing historiography has recognized his emphasis on the commercial, but the navalist (national security) component to his thought has received no attention. Benson’s navalist views of the merchant marine were an important facet to his support of the civilian branch of sea power, and explain why he was so determined to preserve it by any means at his disposal.

Benson’s political arguments ran the gamut from economics to national defense. He used the economic argument before the public, warning of propaganda by foreign interests and unworthy Americans to discredit the merchant marine. Benson tried to convince the War Department of the merchant marine’s viability to serve as a reserve for

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both services, as it was cost-effective, and conducive to the operators of the merchant
fleet to stay in business. But the War Department administrated by Baker was not
convinced and neither was President Wilson. Benson tried to use the threat of law, based
on the discriminatory features of the Jones Act, to force foreign competitors to accept
American proposals of a standard freight rate. This effort also failed as Wilson refused to
enforce these measures.

The Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armaments put new importance
behind the merchant marine. Previous Congresses had already begun reducing the U.S.
Navy’s appropriations to levels that hindered both new construction projects and the
construction already authorized under the 1916 law. Congress’s budgetary axe continued
chopping the navy’s appropriations after the Conference’s naval holiday halted
construction of capital ships for ten years. Like other advocates of the sea power
tradition before him, Benson then saw the U.S. Navy’s preparedness being threatened.
The merchant marine was now needed to keep shipyards and their technical staffs
operating, or else when the treaty expired, the country would be short on these resources.
The merchant marine could also provide ships that could serve in some way as auxiliary
warships.

Armaments limitation and budgetary restraint led to Benson’s scheme for
constructing more commercial tonnage. He wanted to replace the old, obsolete merchant
ships with new construction over a long-term period. But this recommendation was
contrary to the Shipping Board and to Coolidge administration policy: under the new
Republican administration, government must get out of the shipping business. It did not make sense for the government to construct more ships when it should be selling off what it already owned. Benson tried to stop the selling for scrap of 200 ships in 1925 by suggesting such a sale was contrary to the Jones Act and in 1926 tried to convince Frank Schofield in the office of naval operations, an associate from the days in Paris with the Naval Advisory Staff in 1919, to take 188 ships listed as surplus by the president of the EFC. Schofield did not want these ships as the most likely vessels to be used by the Navy were the ones already in service, not surplus.66 Benson attempted to preserve the large merchant marine created by the war. His efforts, however, came to nothing as the question of its economic viability was considered more important than its military necessity.

Conclusions

The thesis has shown that a tradition of thought in sea power existed in the United States Navy in the late nineteenth-century, and that it influenced Admiral William S. Benson in his decisions as chief of naval operations and a member of the United States Shipping Board.

Chapter one proved that the writings of American sea power advocates in the late 1870s to 1890s constituted a tradition of thought. The old navy of that era had three principal functions: provide continental defense, protect Americans living abroad, and defend American commerce. The dwindling American merchant fleet, crippled from the damage sustained by Civil War-era Confederate raiders and competition from foreign shipping lines, handled an ever-decreasing proportion of American commerce going overseas. American navalists were dissatisfied with the obsolete state of the naval service and the mercantile service, and spoke out for their revitalization. In this early phase of the American sea power tradition, most navalists saw the navy and merchant marine as having a special relationship. The merchant marine provided for national greatness by shipping surplus American products to markets overseas and providing the navy a valuable reserve in men, ships, and technical personnel in shipyards. The navy opened up markets in hostile areas to commerce, and defended American merchant ships from harassment by unfriendly locals and from enemy ships during a war. While these American naval officers disagreed over the utility of the merchant marine as a reserve in
wartime, they concurred on the merchant marine’s contribution to America’s standing in the world. A great commercial power was also a great naval power, so both services were considered necessary elements in the rise of the United States to great-power status. Mahan’s 1890 thesis became the central argument in this discourse, even though he based his conclusions on the Europeans wars from 1660-1783 rather than America’s Civil War experience. By demonstrating how Great Britain took advantage of its geographical position, he proved the points of the navalists in the value of sea power.

Mahan gradually modified his views from the original 1890 thesis as a result of the changing international scene. America, at first, was not affected by the actions of the great powers of Europe. But late-nineteenth century technological change made it easier for imperial powers, specifically Great Britain and Germany, to cross the Atlantic moat and threaten American interests in the Western Hemisphere. Mahan saw American relations with Great Britain as being stable and became more concerned about two rising powers, Germany and Japan. The former had designs on the Caribbean and the prospective Panama canal; the latter threatened American interests in the Philippines and security of the West Coast. Technological change also meant a reliance on well-trained, skilled regular naval personnel that required much time to become efficient at their tasks. With American interests extended beyond commerce alone, Mahan declared in 1911 that the special relationship that the merchant marine had with the navy was no longer valid, as other missions and rationale were enough to keep a sizeable fleet in operation.
What was considered a “prepared fleet?” The second chapter of this thesis explored the navy’s thinking about the concept of preparedness. The “fleet” was applied to the two separate branches of sea power before American intervention in World War I. The war’s European beginnings left American exporters with few and expensive options as the major antagonists withdrew their shipping for their own purposes. The U.S. government decided that private industry’s efforts were insufficient to restore the necessary shipping to keep the nation’s economy moving. When the initial argument for government operation on an economic basis failed to get the Shipping Bill passed in early 1915, the Wilson administration used national security arguments to sell the bill. National security also justified the Naval Act of 1916, authorizing a building program to address concerns of what could happen after the war ended, particularly if the Allied powers lost to Germany. The newly created United States Shipping Board (USSB) during American involvement in the war was able to obtain and construct enough vessels to create a large merchant fleet.

Mahan’s approach to naval preparedness turned on an assessment of existing political circumstances; Bradley Fiske expanded the time frame of that concept to cover potential circumstances. Mahan did not want a navy big enough to challenge the largest navy just because it was the largest, but only to safeguard American interests, and meet an opponent based on what the enemy could realistically deploy against the American fleet. Mahan warned of the complacency that could occur if a self-sustaining nation did not drive off an enemy fleet from its shores; the failure to act could damage its national
standing. Fiske, on the other hand, wanted to leave nothing to chance and insisted on an American navy sufficient to meet the force of any possible opponent. To win a war required the best method, and preparation for war was Fiske’s preferred choice. He wanted to secure a state of superadequateness so that a power, upon seeing such a strong and efficient naval force, would be deterred from making any hostile actions toward the United States.

When William S. Benson became chief of naval operations, the preparedness discourse of Mahan and Fiske permeated his naval staff’s thinking about potential postwar opponents. Benson and his staffs concluded that it was best to prepare for the worst possible scenario, even if the scenario was not based on existing political circumstances. He wanted naval parity with Great Britain for the purpose of securing allies within the new League of Nations; the navy’s importance had now increased from securing national interests to establishing international leadership. Benson wanted naval parity regardless of British opinion. To that end, he tried to convince President Woodrow Wilson of the necessity of the destruction of the interned German-Austrian fleet and the value of maintaining the U.S. Navy’s growth. Wilson, cognizant of Britain’s financial realities and of his own waning support within a Republican-held Congress, instead used the supplemental naval building program as a diplomatic bargaining-chip to secure British concessions to the League of Nations and the Monroe Doctrine.

The postwar environment became one of survival for the fleets created by the war. The 1916 naval building program became expendable in the eyes of Congress and the
American public. Dwindling appropriations for the authorized construction and maintenance of the navy’s existing strength were the result. Many American leaders supported Great Britain’s naval power, including former president and Mahan associate Theodore Roosevelt, and did not see any need to challenge the Royal Navy’s supremacy on the global oceans. In the civilian branch of sea power, the USSB was charged with the reduction of its huge fleet of merchant ships, but faced daunting tasks of privatizing existing ships and maintaining the growth of American merchant shipping.

Chapter three explored the continuing contributions to the discourse on sea power by Benson, who, after retirement from the navy in September 1919, assumed the chairmanship of the USSB. Benson tried to secure the merchant fleet by influencing legislation to protect American shipping lines from discrimination overseas, and pitching the fleet as a cost-effective measure to the War Department. Benson’s support for the discriminatory features of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 met with criticisms from the State Department, seaports on the West Coast, and even President Wilson, who had earlier supported it. Benson, who sought to privatize the army’s transport service, defended the economic feasibility of the American merchant marine to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, but Baker and Wilson were not convinced. Baker thought dependence on the merchant marine would affect the army’s preparedness to act quickly to developments overseas. He also did not believe the navy’s unique circumstances during the war (no enemy fleet to engage) could be repeated in any future conflict. Critics wondered if the costs of upkeep and operation justified the merchant marine’s existence
in government ownership, but Benson argued these costs were justified to stimulate competition between American seaports and ports across the globe.

The Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armaments changed the rationale of the merchant marine from primarily an economic argument to one of national security. With treaty obligations prohibiting the construction of further capital ships for ten years, and Congress’ hostility to funding more naval construction, Benson worried that the infrastructure of shipyards and their technical staffs would suffer, leaving the yards in bad condition when the naval holiday ended. The naval treaty did not affect merchant ships as much as warships and Benson wanted to take advantage of that by continuing the mercantile fleet’s build-up. The merchant marine could provide the stimulus to keep the yards running and the vessels themselves could be constructed to double as auxiliary warships during times of war. Upon hearing of the current merchant marine’s deficiencies in 1924, Benson proposed to replace old tonnage in 1925 with new, efficient types, but met resistance to further government action on construction. The Coolidge administration was keen on getting the government out of the shipping business, not creating more ships to be sold in the future.

Benson’s naval perspective is largely absent from works that discussed his time on the USSB. This context explains why he was in favor of a merchant marine at any cost. He believed the next war could find the United States fighting alone. The nation could find itself in a future war with no auxiliary ships available to ship troops and supplies overseas, or carry its own commerce if the United States remained neutral. It
became imperative to preserve the merchant marine. Benson’s mindset was shaped by the generations of naval officers he grew up with in the navy, from officers in the 1880s, to Mahan at the turn of the century, and finally the Fiske’s preparedness views, recommendations made to ensure American security and prosperity. The merchant marine was important for national prosperity and greatness, and the navy was needed to protect the merchant marine and to provide a measure of force to international relations.

When Benson finally left public life in 1928, he remained interested in naval affairs and international relations. In July 1930, Benson wrote to a friend of his interest in the London Arms Limitation Conference, held from January to April of that year; not surprisingly, he did not see anything of use in it. “Personally I am not at all in favor of conferences on the subject of national defense. The conditions and interest of the various nations are too varied and diverse to try to equalize such matters.” There was always the danger, Benson wrote, that each participant was suspicious of the others’ intentions. Benson was speaking of his experiences a decade before when he exhibited such suspicions of the Allies. He was little interested in the discussions of the treaty as it was debated in the Senate. No one had asked him for his views, and he claimed he stayed out of its deliberations.¹

¹ Benson to Montague E. Browning, July 14, 1930, William S. Benson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. He said he was more interested in the development of the American merchant marine. Benson did send a memorandum to someone connected to the U.S. Senate on battleships that elicited a reply, dated April 4, 1930, Benson Papers. That writer was not swayed by the contents of that memo. For a perspective on the London Naval Conference (1930) and the Senate debate over the treaty, see Gerald Wheeler, Admiral William Veazie Pratt, U.S. Navy: A Sailor’s Life (Washington, D.C.: Naval History Division, 1974), 294-305, 307-8.
In October 1931, Admiral Benson gave a speech commemorating the U.S.S. Constitution, having served aboard the vessel as a midshipman from October 1879 to July 1881. He closed his remarks with a vigorous defense of the navy. He asserted that: “the result of the splendid efforts of the Navy we were able to organize, even in those early days, that foreign nations were compelled to respect our rights as a new and powerful nation.” The U.S. Navy, then, and since, had served “to convince the world that as a nation we stood for the rights of mankind and were able to defend them.” He wished he had more time to explain to his audience that national defense required “an adequate and efficient Navy” but added “all wars have been won by the side having the strongest and most efficient Navy.”

Benson died in May of the following year.

The discourse of what the merchant marine meant to American sea power continued long after the postwar era of World War I. Even in the years after World War II, the issue resurfaced with its own wartime-created merchant fleet becoming older and obsolete, especially in the 1960s. American naval officers again recalled Mahan’s 1890 thesis to bring attention to the merchant marine. Some thought the merchant marine was lost in naval thinking that was more concerned about nuclear weapons. The idea that the navy and the merchant marine still had a special relationship in defense, prosperity, and

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standing in the Cold War era among American naval officers lived on well past the era of the old navy.³

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