

1969

The French Navy and the Washington Conference

Donald G. White

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

White, Donald G. (1969) "The French Navy and the Washington Conference," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 22 : No. 9 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol22/iss9/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

In many quarters today it is hoped that strategic arms limitation talks will bring about a lessening of international tensions and a diversion of resources from defense spending to domestic projects. In at least one instance, however, a similar conference led to exactly the opposite result. The efforts of the British Government to abolish the submarine at the Washington Conference led to renewed support and appropriations for the French Navy and increased suspicions of British intentions.

THE FRENCH NAVY AND THE WASHINGTON CONFERENCE

An article prepared by
Ensign Donald G. White, U.S. Naval Reserve

At the conclusion of the First World War the French Navy and the infrastructure which supported it were far weaker than in 1914. The warships of the navy were obsolete, the morale of naval personnel was low, and the Marine Ministry was under-financed. This was due largely to France's necessary pre-occupation with the Western Front during the war years, which had diverted the available military resources to the French Army. It was nevertheless a source of regret for those Frenchmen who cherished France's naval tradition.

One area of weakness for the French Navy was public relations. The navy had a very low casualty rate compared to that of the Western Front, and many Frenchmen viewed it as a haven for those who were hesitant to take their place in the trenches. During the war, several newspapers published slurs about "la marine en sommeil" and made caustic comparisons of army and navy death rates.¹ In addition to this problem, the French Navy had been the scene of Communist agitation in 1919. In April

of that year, 28 sailors were arrested for singing "L'Internationale" and hoisting the red flag of revolution aboard the French warships *Jean Bart* and *France*, and the French Chamber of Deputies, by a vote of 365 to 195, refused them amnesty.² The leader of these sailors, André Marty, was elected to the Paris Municipal Council while still in jail. When his election was invalidated by the Government, he was then chosen as the representative of a Paris working class district to the Chamber of Deputies. This incident was not appreciated by the many small investors in France who had subscribed to prewar Russian loans, only to have these loans repudiated by the Soviet Government.

Another area of weakness for the French Navy was personnel. The manpower of the navy totaled 51,000, but it was plagued by a rapid turnover of junior officers, which was the result of a poor pay scale.³ The structure of enlisted personnel, many of whom were recruited from the fishing communities of Brittany, was more stable. However,

34 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

at the top of the personnel pyramid there existed a surplus of senior officers who had no functional billets in the organization. Only five of 36 admirals held sea commands, while 20 of 100 capitaines de vaisseaux and 57 of 200 capitaines de fregates were assigned to sea duty.⁴ Even more serious was a generally low morale, largely caused by the public's attitude, the navy's mediocre wartime performance, and the lack of modern equipment.

The warships available to the navy were antiquated and inadequate. While other powers were constructing post-Jutland battleships and battle cruisers, the French possessed 10 obsolete old battleships which were constructed before 1910. They also had 11 armored cruisers of 1908 vintage, a multitude of small and obsolete torpedo boats, and an amazing museum of submarines. This historical collection of 51 boats included two powered by steam—the *Sane* and the *Dupuy du Lome*—and several with a displacement of 68 tons and a powerplant which consisted of a 20 horsepower electric motor. Only 18 of these submarines were considered combat worthy.⁵

The most modern ships in the French Navy were those taken from the Germans at the conclusion of the war. These included five light cruisers, 10 torpedo boats, the 2,060-ton U-cruiser *Halbronn*, two 1,300-ton minelaying submarines, and seven smaller submarines of less than a thousand tons.⁶ The French obtained great technological assistance from these enemy vessels, especially in the areas of diesel engines and space conservation. They were handicapped in the utilization of these ships, however, by the difficulty of obtaining ammunition and torpedoes of the proper caliber.

French naval aviation, which eventually became a respectable force, was at this time burdened with obsolete equipment. It possessed 250 planes, of which a hundred were serviceable, plus

20 balloons, 12 dirigibles, and two "rigid dirigibles."⁷ This modest organization was to be the object of a decade of intraservice rivalry between the army and the navy, the former of which held that all aviation should be under its control.

The most serious deficiency in the French Navy was its naval yards. These yards were numerous and employed 14,000 workers at wage scales high enough to cause restlessness in other sectors of the French economy.⁸ These overstuffed yards were grossly inefficient. By 1922 they had succeeded in repairing only half of the vessels taken from Germany at the conclusion of the war.⁹ During the war they had languished due to the halt in naval construction and the drafting of skilled personnel. This loss of experienced personnel was especially serious in view of the nature of French naval engineering. Yard personnel were accustomed to improvising the details of construction from generally drawn plans, a procedure which produced widely varying products and depended upon skilled yard workers for any degree of success. The capacity of these naval yards was 24,000 tons, which meant that much of any major construction program had to be contracted to private firms. These firms charged the Government 25 percent more than their own yards, even though private wages were much less.¹⁰ Between 1914 and 1922 only 40 small antisubmarine vessels were constructed for the French Navy, one of which was an experimental destroyer.¹¹ Frequent demands were heard in the French Parliament for the curtailment of navy yards and arsenals, but political considerations prevented any major cutbacks.

French naval doctrine in 1919 was still dominated by the classical view of Mahan, although that view had been weakened by wartime experience. In the years immediately preceding the war, Admirals Daveluy and Darricus had

spearheaded the predominance of Mahan's thought, including the emphasis upon capital ships.¹² These concepts carried over into the postwar era in the minds of most French admirals. Admiral de Bon, the head Chief of Staff of the French Navy, was to ask for 350,000 tons of capital ships at the Washington Conference, a tonnage greater than that allotted to Japan. Admiral de Faramond wrote for the *Revue Bleue* in 1921 an article comparing France's lack of modern battleships to her lack of heavy artillery in 1914.¹³ To these men the dreadnought was central in naval warfare, while the submarine, the relatively new aircraft carrier, and the land-based airplane were peripheral.

French wartime experience, however, had spawned some disagreement with this perspective. France had entered that conflict with her fleet concentrated in the Mediterranean in accordance with the Anglo-French naval agreement. The primary responsibility of the French Fleet had been the containment of the naval forces of the Dual Monarchy. The French possessed few oceangoing escort vessels, and they often sent major warships to patrol the narrow strait between Italy and Albania alone and unescorted, operating at the most economical speed. The result was a series of submarine disasters.

In 1915 a French and British battleship force had attempted to penetrate the Dardanelles without the aid of an amphibious force, and they had been repulsed with heavy losses by the Turkish coastal defenses. In the amphibious campaign which followed, German submarines—which had arrived via Gibraltar—were a constant threat to both major warships and supply lines. French efforts to penetrate both Pola, the major base of the Austrian Fleet, and the Sea of Marmara between Gallipoli and Dardanelles, had proved costly failures. These defeats had repercussions both in the French Parliament and within the French officer corps.

One of the French flag officers, Admiral Guepratte, had developed an entirely different concept of naval warfare. He opposed any and all further expenditures on capital ships, claiming that they had been made obsolete by technical advances. He advocated, instead, the construction of fast aircraft carriers, large submarines, light escort vessels, and seaplanes. He was especially impressed with the aircraft carrier, and in 1921 in a statement to the French Chamber of Deputies he claimed that in the future the aircraft carrier would be the avant-garde of naval combat. Whoever lost the battle of the carriers would be helpless, regardless of how many battleships he possessed.¹⁴ Admiral Guepratte disassociated himself from the construction of France's first aircraft carrier, the *Bearn*, on the grounds that her slow speed (18 knots) would deprive her of the opportunity of breaking off an engagement.

Admiral Guepratte found minimal support within the ranks of the officer corps, but there was major support for his point of view in the French Parliament. The chairman of the Senate Naval Committee was Gustav de Kerguezec, a senator from Brittany. Kerguezec had served for 6 years on the Naval Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, where he had publicly demanded in 1916 the scrapping of all French capital ships. In March of 1920 he stated that when France possessed from 250 to 300 submarines, her naval future could be regarded "with perfect serenity."¹⁵ In the elections of 1920 Kerguezec had moved up to the Senate, where his recognized knowledge of naval affairs plus its obvious relationship to his constituency quickly won him the chairmanship of the Senate Naval Committee.

Kerguezec expressed his views on naval policy many times in the Senate. Along with Guepratte he called for the cessation of battleship construction, and he also opposed the conversion of the

36 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

Bearn for the same reasons as *Guepratte*. He seems, however, to have been less impressed with the carrier than with the submarine. In several parliamentary statements he called for an autonomous defense of each French colony based on coastal defenses, submarines, and aircraft. This group of autonomous colonies was to be connected with convoys which were to be escorted by large submarines of great range.

The obvious difficulty of using submarines to protect a convoy against major warships or other submarines raises the question of *Kerguezec's* true motivation in recommending this system. Did he sincerely believe that the submarine was a good convoy escort, or did he think in terms of using these large submarines as corsairs? From *Kerguezec's* parliamentary statements it appears that he simply failed to appreciate the limitations of the submarine at this stage of technological development. On one occasion he was challenged by a fellow senator who questioned the submarine's ability to escort convoys. To this question *Kerguezec* replied in the affirmative, adding that forthcoming technological improvements would soon increase the submarine's speed and make it even better suited to this task. He protested convincingly during the Washington Conference against unrestricted submarine attacks on unarmed merchant shipping, and he asserted that international action should be taken against any nation which attacked unarmed freighters without warning. He felt, along with the French admirals, however, that submarine attacks against armed merchant vessels were perfectly legitimate as long as they were carried out in accordance with the rules which applied to cruisers.

Opposed to *Kerguezec's* view of naval policy was another group of senators led by *James Hennessey* and *Jean Grandmaison*. These men felt that the submarine had not yet proved itself, and hence no new submarines should be

constructed until extensive research had established their future role in naval warfare. In the interim they called for the construction of cruisers and dreadnoughts, which in their eyes were the backbone of the fleet. The rivalry between these two factions was quite intense. *Kerguezec* and his supporters labeled those who supported new capital ship construction "Imperialists."¹⁶

In the months prior to the Washington Conference, the French took the first halting steps toward the rejuvenation of their navy. The appropriation of funds for naval construction was made all the more difficult because of France's general financial condition. In 1918, 7.6 billion francs had been collected by taxation, and 41.9 billion had been disbursed. In 1919 tax receipts had risen to 9 billion francs, but debt service on the 300 billion francs of internal bonds that had been sold during the war amounted alone to 10 billion francs. The result of this aggravated deficit spending was a chronic inflation which raised the cost-of-living index from 100 in 1914 to 209 in early 1923.¹⁷ The years following the war produced continued heavy expenditures in the form of reconstruction costs, which the French had expected German reparations payments to defray. Under the circumstances, there was strong opposition to large credits for naval construction.

At that time the most recent naval bill which had been passed by Parliament was the 1912 naval law, which called for the construction of 28 dreadnoughts, 10 battle cruisers, 52 torpedo boats, and 94 submarines.¹⁸ After a 2-year delay the first ships to be constructed under this law were begun in 1914. These were the battleships *Normandie*, *Languedoc*, *Gascogne*, *Flandre*, and *Bearn*. Their keels had been laid only a few months when the commencement of the war brought a halt to all naval construction and the conversion of many naval arsenals to the support of

army munitions requirements. By 1922 four of these battleships were half completed, and one, the *Bearn*, was 80 percent completed and ready to be launched.

Georges Leygues, the Premier of France from late 1920 to January of 1921, introduced the first postwar naval bill during the tenure of his government. A politician since 1884, Leygues had served as Marine Minister in the wartime Clemenceau government and received much credit for the defeat of the Austrian submarine effort in the Mediterranean. His bill called for the construction of three cruisers, 12 torpedo boats, and the conversion of the *Bearn* into France's first aircraft carrier. In addition, all work on the remaining four battleships begun in 1914 was to be halted.

The parliamentary faction headed by Hennessey and Grandmaison called for the construction of cruisers of 10,000 tons or more in order to counter the vessels which the Germans were permitted under the Versailles Treaty. Leygues, however, favored lighter cruisers, and he finally decided to limit them to 8,000 tons.¹⁹

Guepratte and Kerguezec, aided by the status of French finances, had been able to persuade Leygues that the battleship construction should be halted, but their desire to have submarine construction included in the bill was not implemented immediately. Kerguezec let it be known that he would like to see 36 submarines included in the bill, but he at first made no effort to introduce an amendment to this effect in his committee.

In January of 1921 the Leygues government fell, and Aristide Briand became the Premier of a government which was still in office at the time of the Washington Conference. His Marine Minister was Gabriel Guisthau, a deputy who had served on the parliamentary committees evaluating Tushima and Jutland and who was known as a

partisan of the capital ship. Guisthau retained the Leygues bill and added to it appropriations for six destroyers.

When constructed, these ships were the first true destroyers the French Navy had possessed. While other powers were developing the destroyer type from the torpedo boat destroyers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the French continued to rely on their torpedo boats both for attack and defense. As many of these were not oceangoing, France was faced with a serious shortage of escort vessels during the war, a shortage which contributed to several naval disasters.²⁰ Impressed with the destroyer as a ship type, Guisthau included them in the proposed construction.

In the years following the war the United States, Britain, and Japan had continued their construction of post-Jutland battleships and battle cruisers. The American political scene was characterized at this time, however, by a return to "normalcy," which denoted a departure from the lofty idealism of the Wilsonian era. One aspect of this was increased congressional resistance to the large appropriations required for dreadnought construction. This political reality, plus a sincere desire to reduce the burdens of the naval armament race, provoked Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes to issue invitations to Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan to attend a disarmament conference to be held in Washington beginning on 11 November 1921.

Until this time the British had resolutely refused to accept equality of naval strength with any other power. This refusal had prompted Lloyd George during the Paris Peace Conference to demand the cessation of U.S. capital ship construction as a *quid pro quo* for British acceptance of an amendment to the League Covenant which acknowledged the presence of regional agreements outside of the League's jurisdiction. This amendment was demanded

38 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

by the Senate as a recognition of the Monroe Doctrine. It had also prompted Lloyd George to angrily state in the prearmistice talks that Great Britain "would spend her last guinea to keep a navy superior to that of the United States or any other power."²¹

Observing this, the French imagined that Britain and the United States would again disagree at the Washington Conference. This would offer the French delegation an opportunity to play the role of arbiter and gain concessions for France. Little did the French dream that they would instead find themselves vilified for intransigence.

The French delegation to the Conference included Aristide Briand, the Premier, Phillippe Berthelot, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jules Jusserand, the French Ambassador in Washington, Albert Sarraut, the Colonial Minister and owner of the influential newspaper *Depeche de Toulouse*, and Rene Viviani, a Republican Socialist deputy and former Premier. Phillippe Berthelot was an extremely influential person in French foreign relations, for he was a friend of Briand and the head of the civil service organization in the Quai d'Orsay (Foreign Ministry).²² This organization had much to do with the continuity of French policy under a republican constitution which encouraged the rapid turnover of ministries. The naval adviser to this delegation was Admiral de Bon, the head of the French naval staff.

When the conference convened on 12 November, Briand was mistakenly given a seat among the representatives of the British dominions, an error which symbolized the fears of many Frenchmen.²³ After an opening statement by President Harding which was "received with the enthusiasm which may not be withheld from idealistic utterances,"²⁴ Hughes revealed his heretofore secret proposal. According to this proposal the three major naval powers were to scrap all of their pre-Jutland battleships as

well as those then under construction. In an effort to fix capital-ship strength on the ratios then existing in fact, Hughes proposed that Britain and the United States be allowed 500,000 tons of capital ships (15 vessels) and Japan be allowed 300,000 tons (10 vessels). The two former powers were to be allowed 90,000 tons of submarines, while the Japanese were to have 54,000 tons. As Hughes hoped first to get an agreement among the three powers which were then engaged in sizable construction, he dismissed France and Italy with the remark that "... the United States does not consider necessary the discussion at this stage of the proceedings the tonnage allowance of these nations..." After the big three had agreed, he hoped France and Italy could then be pressured into accepting whatever ratio the larger powers thought suitable.

At the Second Plenary Session 3 days later, the British astonished the French by accepting equality of tonnage with the United States. The British decided it would be better to accept equality rather than risk being left behind in an unequal race. The French suspected collusion between the two and a political trap for themselves. In a speech by Arthur James Balfour, the British also called for a further reduction of submarine tonnage and the abolition of "those vast submarines of great size which are not intended for defense..."²⁵

In Paris, Kerguezec reacted to this speech by calling for the addition of appropriations for 36 submarines to the naval bill then before his committee, and the reaction of the public and the press to the British proposal was enough to enable him to secure the votes for its passage. The French Marine Minister, Guisthau, who was still in Paris, offered a compromise. He agreed to the addition of 12 submarines to the bill and promised that 24 more would be included in naval bills in the years immediately following. This assured

Kerguezec that Hennessey would not hamstring submarine construction for an indefinite period of time. Thus, 12 submarines were added to the bill as a direct result of the Conference.

Briand left Washington on 23 November to return to Paris. On that day he was asked a leading question by a reporter about the purpose of the submarine in warfare. He replied as follows:

When the British retain 500,000 tons of capital ships, I do not say that it is against France, although England is a friend of America, an ally of Japan, and Germany and Russia have no fleets.

Perhaps the English want their capital ships to fish for sardines. Well, we want submarines to study the flora at the bottom of the sea for the benefit of our botanical societies.

No, England is taking a precaution against X. France wishes to take a precaution against X. Capital ships cost; they are for the rich. Submarines don't cost much; they are for the poor.

England wishes to abolish submarines. We do not agree to that. If England wishes to abolish capital ships, we will accept in a moment.²⁶

On 23 November the Committee of Imperial Defense met in London for the specific purpose of recommending a British naval policy in the light of the French refusal to abolish submarines. The Admiralty stated flatly that they could parry a French submarine attack provided they were not limited in the construction of destroyers. They also asserted that small submarines operating from French ports were just as dangerous as large ones *vis-a-vis* Britain, due to the small distances involved. The British Foreign Minister, Lord Curzon, then instructed the British delegation to

attempt to gain the abolition of all submarines.²⁷

Meanwhile, the United States, Britain, and Japan had reached agreement upon capital ship tonnage. The Japanese desired a tonnage of capital ships which was 70 percent that of Britain and the United States, as compared to the 60 percent of the original proposal. They finally agreed to accept the 60 percent in return for an agreement by the United States and Britain not to fortify their island possessions between Singapore and Hawaii. There was still a problem, however, over the Japanese battleship *Mutsu*, which was near completion. The Japanese Government had taken up pennies from schoolchildren for the dreadnought as a means of promoting public support for the navy, and it was politically impossible for them to scrap it. Another compromise was therefore arranged whereby they would retain the *Mutsu* and scrap an older ship. The United States and Britain would, in return, complete two modern battleships and scrap two older ones. This was supposed to equalize the modernity of the three fleets. The final battleship tonnage for Great Britain, the United States, and Japan would thus be 525,000, 525,000, and 315,000 tons, respectively.

Having settled their own ratios, the three powers then proceeded to discuss what tonnage should be allotted to France and Italy. Hughes, Balfour, and Baron Kato finally agreed to ask the French and Italians to accept the figure of 175,000 tons of capital ships. As Hughes stated, it was hoped that they "would yield to pressure" on this matter.²⁸

When this proposal was privately presented to the French delegation, they did not yield. Admiral de Bon demanded for France 350,000 tons of capital ships, a larger figure than that of Japan. Albert Sarraut remarked that to accept such a limitation would be to

40 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

"cut France into shreds."²⁹ The rest of the delegation followed his lead.

Seeing he was getting nowhere with the delegation, Hughes cabled Briand, now back in Paris, and asked him to accept the tonnage limitation. After gaining the support of the Kerguezec faction, who were incensed at the proposal of Admiral de Bon to allow France 350,000 tons of battleships, Briand replied in the affirmative. He made final acceptance of the limitation conditional upon an equitable settlement of the tonnages for light vessels and submarines, and he stated that France could not accept a similar limitation in that area. Briand's conditional acceptance of the limitation was made more palatable to him by the knowledge that Hughes, as a *quid pro quo*, intended to include France in the Four Power Pact relating to the Far East. The Italian delegation, which throughout the negotiations expressed only a desire for equality with France, accepted readily their allotted tonnage.

The Conference next discussed the abolition of submarines. On 22 December, Lord Lee of Fareham proposed, on behalf of the British Government, that all submarines be abolished.

Albert Sarraut, the French Colonial Minister, and Admiral de Bon replied to Lord Lee on behalf of the French delegation. Sarraut stated that the French felt they needed 90,000 tons of submarines and 300,000 tons of cruisers and destroyers to adequately defend their colonial possessions, and they could agree neither to the submarine's abolition or any restriction upon the tonnage of individual submarines. He further stated that the French Government felt that the employment of submarines in commerce raiding was entirely consistent with international law, and large submarines were better for this purpose because they could more readily furnish prize crews and provide for the safety of the passengers of merchant ships. Admiral de Bon added

that a blockade was more humane than a "direct application of force," and the possibility of technical changes made it unwise to limit the tonnage of individual submarines.³⁰

The other delegations at the Conference also declined to abolish the submarine, but they were not as vocal as the French. Hughes read a prepared statement which said that the United States felt that the submarine was useful for scouting and coast defense and could therefore not agree to its abolition. Mansanao Hanihara of Japan expressed disgust at the German use of submarines but stated that Japan needed submarines for the defense of its long coastline. Senator Shanzer of Italy expressed the opinion that the submarine was still a potent defensive weapon, and Italy could not agree to its abolition.

The British were not concerned with the retention of submarines by Japan or the United States, for these nations had no bases near the British Isles. They could interpret the French attitude, however, in only one way.

We may be a stupid people, but we are under no delusion as to what is meant by the refusal of France to limit either the number or size of submarines and her claim to become the greatest submarine power in the world.³¹

In an effort to find a compromise, Hughes introduced a proposal which provided that both Britain and the United States would reduce their submarine fleet to 60,000 tons, while all other nations would retain the tonnage of submarines they then had. (At that time the British had 80,000 tons, the Americans 90,000, the Italians 17,000, the Japanese 32,000, and the French a useful tonnage of 15,000.) When the French delegation refused this offer, Hughes once more appealed to Briand. The British, of course, were quite

willing to accept this limitation, and, in fact, Hughes had cleared it with them beforehand.³²

French public opinion, which had not been favorably disposed toward the navy since the war, now rallied behind the Government and the navy. Kerguezec spoke in the Senate on two successive days opposing any concession on submarine tonnage, and even Hennessey and Grandmaison lent their support to the French delegation. Briand called a meeting of the French Supreme Council of National Defense, and that body reiterated the necessity of 90,000 tons of submarines and 300,000 tons of destroyers and cruisers.³³ Briand therefore cabled Hughes that his Government could not consent to any tonnage limitation less than that proposed by the French delegation. Lest the French receive the blame for the complete failure of the Conference, however, Briand agreed to make final the 175,000-ton limitation on capital ships.

When the French reply became known, the British refused any further limitation on destroyers and cruisers, and the chance of any further naval limitation evaporated. The major work of the Conference appeared to be at an end.

One of the American delegates, Elihu Root, had prepared three resolutions for the consideration of the Conference. The second of these stated that "The Signatory Powers recognize the practical impossibility of using submarines as commerce destroyers without violating the requirements universally accepted by civilized nations. . . ."³⁴ These resolutions were now presented to the Conference, and it appeared certain that the French, who had just recently expressed their approval of commerce raiding by submarines, would reject them.

To prevent this the British had instructed their naval attaché in Paris to find some material which would convince the delegates to the Conference and the general public that the French

planned to use their submarines without restriction in any future conflict. It was hoped that this would force them to adhere to the Root Resolutions.

Capitaine de fregate Raoul Castex attended the French Ecole Supérieure de Guerre during the year 1920-1921. At the conclusion of his study there, he had written a paper entitled "Tactique Navale: Nouveaux Aspects de la Liaison des Armes a propos de la Guerre sous-Marine Allemagne." This paper was accepted for publication in the French naval periodical *Revue Maritime* as an article under the title "Piracy." In it Castex stated that the German submarine campaign, "like so many novelties of our planet, was the application of an idea that was essentially French in origin."³⁵ More important, he asserted that the Germans were justified in resorting to unrestricted submarine attacks on commerce. A copy of this article was sent to London and hence to the British delegation in Washington.

In the session of 30 December 1921, the British read sections of this article into the record. Admiral de Bon, surprised but undaunted, claimed that the article was the opinion of one man, and he repudiated it in the name of the French Government and Navy. (Two months after this incident the *Revue Maritime* initiated the practice of placing a disclaimer statement in each issue.) The French delegation did, however, accept and sign the Root Resolutions, but they were specifically omitted from the ratification at the instigation of the Government.

Having failed to gain the abolition of the submarine at the Washington Conference, the British Government now attempted to gain the same result by means of a private agreement. Shortly after returning to Paris, Briand traveled to London for conversations with Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, and Lord Curzon, the British Foreign Minister. In the course of these conversations he asked for a defensive alliance with

42 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

Britain to guard against a German resurgence. Lloyd George promised an answer in the near future.

Approximately 3 weeks later, on 4 January 1922, Lloyd George traveled to Cannes, France, for further discussions on the topic. He agreed there to give the French Government a guarantee of their homeland against Germany if they would, in return, cancel the submarine construction in the pending naval bill and participate with the Soviet Union in a forthcoming economic conference at Genoa.³⁶ Briand cabled these proposals to President Millerand in Paris, but his message was intercepted by Louis Barthou, a man Briand trusted, and revealed to the press. The French public and deputies in the Chamber resented not only the British attempt to dictate their military policy but also feared that either their reparations claims or their claims to Russian investments would be sacrificed at such a conference. The situation was made more difficult for Briand by the publication of a casual photograph taken at Cannes which revealed Lloyd George giving him golfing lessons.

Disturbed by these developments, the French Chamber of Deputies passed, by a vote of 312 to 199,³⁷ a motion recalling Briand to Paris. Angered by this interference and betrayal and perhaps realizing that he could not win a vote of confidence, Briand explained to the Chamber his activities at Cannes and then resigned. Some observers felt he could still have commanded a majority in the French Parliament had he chosen to do so, but he apparently was incensed at the Chamber's interference. Upon meeting Louis Barthou in the corridor, following his resignation speech, Briand asked him the contemporary price of 30 pieces of silver.

President Millerand asked Raymond Poincaré of western Lorraine to form a government following Briand's resignation. Poincaré had been President of France during the war and had formerly

served as Premier. He was considered an extreme nationalist by the British, especially in relation to reparations and the Versailles Treaty. After Poincaré had appointed his ministers (one of which was Louis Barthou) and gained an initial vote of confidence, Lloyd George traveled to Paris to continue the discussions begun at Cannes. Poincaré, however, was intransigent. In a fit of anger he refused any naval concessions and demanded a military convention from Britain as a condition of an alliance with her. Such a convention, he insisted, must specify the number of troops Britain would furnish in a war with Germany and must obligate Britain to go to war upon any violation of the demilitarization of the Rhineland.³⁸ Lloyd George refused these conditions, and the negotiations ended.

The Poincaré government presented the Washington Treaty to the Chamber for ratification after a year's delay. In the discussion of this treaty, the Government stressed the fact that the treaty was only obligatory for 10 years, and during that time France's financial condition would make it impossible for her to construct more than her quota of capital ships anyway. The Root Resolutions were removed from the treaty by the Government before ratification was discussed, thus eliminating any restriction upon the ways in which France might use her submarines. The final ratification was thus a Pyrrhic victory for the British.

The Poincaré government also gave its full support to the 1922 naval law, which now provided for the construction of three cruisers (216 million francs), six destroyers (156 million), 12 torpedo boats (192 million), 12 submarines (141 million), and the conversion of the *Bearn* to an aircraft carrier (50 million). This law was passed in March of 1922.

Although the Washington Conference is generally considered to be one of the more successful disarmament confer-

ences, it had in France precisely the opposite effect. The publicity over the abolition of the submarine caused 12 submarines to be added to the French naval law and made it a certainty that French submarine construction would not be halted by the proponents of the capital ships. Even more important, the Conference created in France a climate of opinion which supported the continued construction of naval vessels despite France's financial straits. In the case of France, therefore, the Conference was counterproductive.

The publicity harvested by the French Navy at Washington brought increased appropriations at a time when they were badly needed. Before the war the navy had been allotted 13 percent of the military budget, but by 1921 this had fallen to 5 percent.³⁹ With the passage of the 1922 naval law, this percentage slowly increased, until by 1930 the navy was obtaining 20 percent of all military expenditures.⁴⁰ This money purchased new warships which increased both the morale and the fighting ability of the navy. By 1930, 17 admirals had been added to the retired list, several unnecessary arsenals had been curtailed, and modern torpedoes and ship types had been developed.

This rejuvenation continued until 1940. In that year the French, spurred by the German construction of pocket battleships, had added the modern battle

cruisers *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg* to their fleet, and they were on the point of completing the 35,000 ton battleships *Richelieu* and *Jean Bart*, as well as the modern aircraft carrier *Clemenceau*. These vessels, plus the light ones constructed in the twenties and thirties, gave France a balanced fleet of respectable dimensions.

But the French miscalculated. Their main strategic threat lay not in their colonial possessions or anywhere at sea, but on their eastern frontier. While spending large sums of money on a fleet to protect their colonies, they left their eastern border inadequately defended. As a result their fleet, so painstakingly reconstructed from the time of the Washington Conference, became one of the spoils of war.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Ens. Donald G. White, U.S. Naval Reserve, holds a B.A. degree from Kentucky Southern College and a master's degree in military and naval history from Duke University. At Duke he prepared his thesis under the guidance of Dr. Theodore Ropp, who held the Ernest J. King Chair of Maritime History at the Naval War College during the 1962-1963 academic year. Ensign White is presently assigned as research editor of the *Naval War College Review*.

FOOTNOTES

1. Louis Guichard, "Considerations on the Evolution of the French Navy, 1919-1929," *Brassey's Naval Annual, 1930* (London: Clowes, 1930), p. 83.
2. Edouard Bonnefous, *Histoire Politique de la Troisième République* (Paris: 1959), v. III, p. 9-10.
3. R.A. Hall, "Professional Notes: France," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, January 1922, p. 99.
4. *Annales de la Chambre, 1926*, v. III, p. 37.
5. *Annales de la Chambre, 1922*, v. II, p. 1486.
6. *Annales du Sénat, 1921*, v. I, p. 1961 ff.
7. *Annales du Sénat, 1926*, v. II, p. 872.
8. Bonnefous, p. 29-30.
9. R.A. Hall, "Professional Notes: France," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, April 1922, p. 645.

44 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

10. *Annales de la Chambre*, 1928, v. III, p. 747.
11. Guichard, p. 83.
12. Hall, January 1922, p. 97.
13. Admiral de Faramond, "La Politique d'Outre Mer et la France," *Revue Bleue*, 20 August 1921, p. 500-501.
14. *Annales de la Chambre*, 1921, v. III, p. 305.
15. *Annales de la Chambre*, 1920, v. I, p. 514.
16. Gustav de Kerguezec, "French Naval Aims," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1926, p. 379.
17. Bonnefous, p. 23.
18. *Annales du Senat*, 1922, v. I, p. 376.
19. *Annales du Senat*, 1926, v. I, p. 881.
20. Total losses suffered by the French Navy in World War I were four battleships, five cruisers, 13 torpedo boats, three gunboats, and 14 submarines. See Louis Nicolas, *Histoire de la Marine Francaise* (Paris: 1961), p. 111-113.
21. David Lloyd George, quoted in Seth P. Tillman, *Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 49.
22. Comte de Saint-Aulaire, *Confessions d'un Vieux Diplomate* (Paris: 1953), p. 533. See also Richard D. Challener, "The French Foreign Office: the Era of Phillippe Berthelot," Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, eds., *The Diplomats: 1919-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).
23. Georges Suarez, *Briand* (Paris: 1941), v. V, p. 256.
24. Great Britain, Foreign Office, *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939* (London: H.M Stationery Off., 1966), First Series, v. XIV, p. 491.
25. *Conference on the Limitation of Armament, November 12, 1921-February 6, 1922* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1922), p. 102.
26. Aristide Briand, quoted in Edwin L. James, "Concern over French Navy Plan," *The New York Times*, 24 November 1921, p. 1:5.
27. Great Britain, Foreign Office, p. 515.
28. U.S. Dept. of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1922* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1938), v. I, p. 122-127.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 137-141.
30. *Conference on the Limitation of Armament*, p. 488, 508.
31. "British Suspect French Designs," *The New York Times*, 28 December 1921, p. 2:2.
32. U.S. Dept. of State, p. 143.
33. *Conference on the Limitation of Armament*, p. 568-570.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 596.
35. Raoul Castex, "Tactique Navale: Nouveaux Aspects de la Liaison des Armes a propos de la Guerre sous-Marine Allemagne," *Living Age*, 18 March 1922, p. 654-657. Translation.
36. Bonnefous, p. 277.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Harold G. Nicolson, *Curzon: the Last Phase, 1919-1925* (London: Constable, 1934), p. 241. See also Baron Charles H. Hardinge of Penshurst, *Old Diplomacy Reminiscences* (London: Murray, 1947) for an eyewitness account of the interview.
39. Hall, January 1922, p. 99.
40. Espagnac du Ravay, *Vingt Ans de Politique Navale* (Grenoble: 1941), p. 173.

