

THE SUBMARINE AND THE WASHINGTON CONFERENCE OF 1921

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Following the First World War, the tide of public opinion was overwhelmingly against the submarine as a weapon of war. The excesses of the German U-boat had stunned the sensibilities of the world but had, nonetheless, presented new ideas and possibilities of this weapon to the various naval powers of the time. The momentum of these new ideas proved so strong that by the opening of the first major international disarmament conference of the 20th century, practical uses of the submarine had all but smothered the moral indignation of 1918.

Several months prior to the opening of the conference, the General Board of the American Navy was given the task of developing guidelines and recommendations to be used by the State Department in determining the American proposals to be presented. The orien-

tation of this group, simply stated, was that second best in naval strength meant last. A policy of naval superiority was necessary, they felt, for "history consistently shows that war between no two peoples or nations can be unthinkable."¹ A second group, the Naval Advisory Committee (Admirals Pratt and Coontz and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, Jr.) also submitted recommendations concerning the limitation of naval armaments. From the outset their deliberations were guided by a concern that had become more and more apparent—the threat posed to the security and interests of this country by Japan. This concern was evidenced in an attempt to gain basic understandings with Britain.

The submarine received its share of attention in the deliberations of these two groups. One approach to the

weapon, considered in a draft proposal submitted by Capt. F.H. Schofield, called for the total and permanent abolition of submarines and the destruction of all submarines, built and building.² In support of his proposal, Schofield noted that the relative strengths of the world's navies would not be materially affected by such a move, and increasing the numbers of submarines would involve large expenditures for antisubmarine warfare (ASW) vessels. However, save this one proposal, the elimination of any armament by type received scant attention in these early recommendations as it was thought to hold little promise of success.³

A second approach to the problem was to scrap submarines then in existence and place restrictions upon new construction, thereby establishing maximum tonnage allowances in vessel types permitted each power. The Advisory Committee drew up three plans involving this basic principle and submitted them to the General Board and the Secretary of the Navy on 20 October 1921. Under plan I the submarine tonnage recommended for this country and England was a maximum of 90,000 tons, while Japan, France, and Italy were each allotted 54,000 tons.⁴ Those submarines building at the time of the Conference could be completed up to the assigned tonnage, but no new construction would be permitted except to replace those units reaching 12 years of service. Plans II and III were quite similar to plan I but for the maximum allowed tonnage (85,000 tons for England and the United States and 51,000 tons for the other powers). The Navy Department was of the opinion that plan I "is the best plan and is the one which . . . it advises be adopted."⁵

A memorandum prepared for the General Board by Capt. H.H. Bemis of the Submarine Section of the Office of Naval Operations expressed the opinion of those professionals who favored retention of the submarine. After citing

the improved capabilities and the primary uses of the submarine, Bemis opposed its abolition "... chiefly on account of the impossibility of doing so."⁶ "History," continued Bemis, "shows only too well the value of a 'scrap of paper' when the life of a nation is at stake." Alluding to England, he also noted that, "Two weapons are now in hand that challenge her supremacy, one of which is the submarine, and, naturally, she would be glad to see that 'outlawed.'" In concluding this section of his memorandum, Captain Bemis observed that relative to the Pacific, "the United States will make a criminal mistake if she becomes a party to an agreement to abolish submarines."⁷

Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt expressed his agreement with Bemis in a paper entitled "Limitation of Armaments." "In an assumed war against the world," he wrote, "the submarine would be of most value . . . against the two island empires—Great Britain and Japan." It was imperative that we "not permit our hands to be tied as regards submarines."⁸

In this same paper Roosevelt observed that Japan was our most probable enemy at present, and if the Conference did not provide us with a dominating naval strength in the Pacific, we should conclude a "treaty such that Japan cannot break it as regards us without breaking it with others." In other words, an "entangling alliance." With an eye on the development of new weapons, Roosevelt wrote that the United States should be the "... last nation to advocate any limitation upon the extension of recent weapons or the development of new ones."⁹ The President, Secretary of the Navy Hughes, and Roosevelt agreed that disarmament was an impossible objective and that the reduction or limitation of armaments was all that could be hoped for.

The independently formulated General Board plans were, however, un-

acceptable to Hughes and Roosevelt for they were, as Roosevelt noted years later, "what one would have expected from the Naval Board—an estimate of limitations (based) on 'naval needs,' which represented not a limitation of armaments for the United States but an increase."¹⁰ Such a plan was folly, and Roosevelt decided to consult Admiral Pratt whom he thought to be "the ablest naval statesman," and together they hit upon and developed the idea of using existing naval strength as the basis for the American proposals.

The plan laid before the Conference by Hughes at the first plenary session detailed a reduction and limitation of naval armaments for Great Britain, the United States, and Japan in a ratio of 5:5:3, respectively, but left the ratio for Italy and France for the Conference to determine.¹¹ Tonnage limitations consistent with the 5:5:3 ratio were assigned for each type of vessel with the submarine tonnage allotment being the same as that allowed in plan I of the Advisory Committee (i.e., 90,000 tons for Great Britain and the United States and 54,000 tons for Japan).¹²

At the second plenary session (15 November) the representatives of the various countries presented their replies to the American proposals. Arthur J. Balfour, representing the British Empire, noted the willingness of his country to accept the naval ratio suggested by Hughes but made such acceptance conditional upon the continued supremacy of England in European waters. The British also wished to retain complete freedom in the building of cruisers and other auxiliary types and limit only their battle fleet or capital ships.¹³ This disagreement regarding cruisers was to plague Anglo-American relations for years following the Washington Conference and emphasized the differences between the roles and needs of these two naval powers. Great Britain, with a large global empire, needed both a battle fleet and a large

number of commerce escort vessels, while the primary concern of the American Navy was defense of the continental United States.

Proceeding to the limitations proposed for submarines, Balfour reported that his country's experts thought the amount of submarine tonnage permitted was too large. He thought that the tonnage should be reduced further and suggested that the Conference might possibly "forbid altogether the construction of those . . . submarines of great size . . . whose sole purpose is attack . . . by methods which civilized nations regard with horror."¹⁴ Only fleeting reference was made to the abolition of the submarine and then only to note that such a decision "would be impossible, or, if possible, it might well be thought undesirable to abolish it altogether."¹⁵

Delegations from the other countries at this second public meeting of the Conference voiced general satisfaction with the American proposals, but their remarks, and particularly those of France and Japan, indicated that each nation expected special consideration because of its particular situation (e.g., geography, current naval strength, national interests, et cetera).

Two memorandums prepared for the American representatives contained what eventually became the basic position of the United States regarding the question of submarine limitation used for the remainder of the Conference. A General Board memorandum (No. 43B, ser. 1088-dd) transmitted to the Secretary of the Navy on 15 November assumed that while unrestricted submarine warfare was indeed to be abolished, the submarine itself was an "effective and legitimate weapon of warfare." The depredations visited upon the world by the submarine in the last war were to be prevented from recurring not by outlawing the weapon but by clearly defining the rules under which the submarine was to operate in time of war.

The second memorandum, prepared by Capt. Sinclair Cannon of Colonel Roosevelt's staff, responded to several questions regarding the submarine that had been raised during the first meeting of the Subcommittee of Technical Experts (16 November) and was explicit as to why this country should retain a strong submarine force. The British had proposed that the tonnage be reduced from 90,000 tons to 45,000 tons for both themselves and the United States and that Japan be allotted 27,000 tons as opposed to the 54,000 tons originally proposed by the United States. In his memorandum to the Director of War Plans, Captain Cannon advised that such a substitution should not be allowed. One reason he discussed was the defense of the American island possessions in the Pacific where he considered the submarine an absolute necessity.¹⁶ In the event of hostilities in the Pacific, observed Cannon, "the presence of submarines with our fleet would be of vital importance . . ."¹⁷ The submarine as a determining factor in future operations of the British Navy also received Cannon's attention. With submarines reduced to a minimum, observed the captain, the British Fleet would be more at liberty to carry on offensive operations in the event of war, whereas, "if submarines are allowed, that fact in itself might prevent Great Britain from going to war . . ."¹⁸

Although agreed upon in theory, the specific provisions of the proposed limitation ratio among the three major powers proved to be a source of continuing difficulty. With certain reservations, Great Britain accepted the ratio of 5:5:3 (10:10:6) as originally set forth by Hughes, but Japan proved to be considerably more recalcitrant in arriving at an understanding. Demanding security in her own waters and dissatisfied with the assurances that a four-power consultative pact might provide (as a substitute for the now defunct Anglo-Japanese alliance), Japan insisted

that a 10:10:7 ratio be instituted. The General Board saw such a ratio as placing Japan in a position to "carry forward her aggressive policies in the Far East, thereby endangering the peace of the world."¹⁹

The ratio deadlock was broken by permitting Japan to keep a new construction battleship (*Mutsu*) originally slated for destruction and an agreement by England and the United States to nonfortification of their Pacific possessions.

Extending the ratio to France and Italy in the balanced proportion (1.67) also proved difficult. France demanded that she be allowed a ratio of 3.5, and Italy insisted on parity with France. After considerable debate and a personal appeal to Premier Briand by Secretary Hughes, France accepted the 1.67 ratio but made formal reservation to the extension of the limitation ratio to surface auxiliaries and to submarines which France considered to be of a purely defensive nature and necessary to insure her communications and security.²⁰ It became evident that French strategy had called for concessions in the capital ship ratio argument to support their later demands for increased auxiliary tonnage and to "introduce the submarine controversy."²¹

In spite of the acknowledged importance of the submarine limitation question, both the United States and Great Britain chose to defer discussion until the capital ship ratios had been at least tentatively agreed upon. In response to a request by the Netherlands that she be granted a large allotment of submarine tonnage, Roosevelt recorded this interpretation of the submarine ratio situation. "My view of the matter," wrote Roosevelt,

is that we should get our established ratio for the three major naval powers and stick to it religiously. If we depart from it we will immediately get into a vexed situation [with] France . . . Fun-

damentally England's real fear of France is based on submarine tonnage. If this were eliminated a mutual agreement would quickly be reached. [But if the Netherlands is allowed to build 45,000 tons] I could foresee trouble at once. We are accordingly preparing a reply for the State Department in which we urge that the matter be held in abeyance, and that America stand as she has stood, upon the ratio established by the three great powers.²²

In addition, the General Board had indicated that the submarine tonnage proposed by the Secretary of State expressed the "maximum reduction in submarine armament to which the United States [could] subscribe."²³

It was common knowledge among the conferees that Great Britain wished to pursue her often stated goal of submarine abolition. On 19 December Secretary Hughes and Roosevelt discussed the British position. Both agreed that it was a "foolish thing" but, from their meetings with Lee and Balfour, it was clear that the British were "set on the matter." Lee had told Roosevelt that the English did not feel that bringing the abolition question before the Conference would embarrass their position because "at no time did they expect [that] a decision in this matter, contrary to what they consider correct, would force them to leave the conference." The British were convinced that they would eventually have the submarine abolished by repeatedly hammering at it.²⁴

That the French, however, were not prepared to outlaw the submarine was made clear 2 days later (21 December) when Roosevelt met with Admiral de Bon of the French delegation. The admiral informed Roosevelt that the French did not wish to "cut down on submarines" and asked for the "up-set figure" of American submarine needs, expressing his assumption that we

would want only about 60,000 tons.²⁵ Roosevelt was of the opinion that France would want at least as much and that to allow such an amount would be "as good as not cutting down at all." Nor would Britain "hear to 60,000 tons for the French."²⁶ His conversation with de Bon only served to reinforce what he had felt for several days. "We will have to make our agreement on capital ships . . . and let the auxiliary tonnage insofar as submarines [are concerned] . . . go, pass by the board, with certain restrictions."²⁷

The first extended discussion of submarine limitation took place during the fifth meeting of the Committee on Limitation of Armament (22 December) where Albert Sarraut of the French delegation pointed out that further discussion of naval limitation "could not be pursued without taking into account the question of submarines."²⁸ Lord Lee of Fareham, First Lord of the British Admiralty, noted that the question of submarines was of "transcendent importance" to the British Empire, and he regretted that this appeared to be the only question on which his delegation was out of sympathy with the American proposals and the views of France and the other powers.²⁹ Lee then presented figures to illustrate his contention that the American submarine proposals actually provided for an increase in the submarine fleets of the major powers.³⁰

In a lengthy statement designed to counter the prosubmarine arguments of the other powers, Lee recounted the wartime experience of the submarine and noted that its real value was, and would continue to be, its utility as a commerce destroyer. The submarine, Lee maintained, was essentially an offensive weapon involving murder and piracy upon the seas. It was the only class of vessel for which the Conference was asked to give permission to thrive and multiply, and it would be a great disappointment to the British Empire if they could not persuade the Conference

to abolish this weapon.³¹ Lee then offered to scrap the entire British submarine fleet of 80,000 tons, which was the "largest and probably the most efficient submarine navy in the world," provided the other powers would do likewise.³² The sympathies of the other nations were visibly prosubmarine, however, and Lee hardly expected to convince all the powers to come round to the British point of view. With this in mind the British delegate noted that they had no intention of jeopardizing the capital ship agreement if they failed to carry the point regarding the submarine and would, therefore, welcome any suggestions for the reduction and restriction of the submarine.³³

Following the presentation of the English case for abolition, the French representative Albert Sarraut presented his country's views on the submarine. His words reinforced the prosubmarine attitude the French had supported for many years. The submarine was an excellent defensive weapon, contended Sarraut, particularly for those nations without a large fleet of battleships. It was, therefore, an "excellent means of preserving her independence . . . especially in view of the sacrifices to which she has been asked to consent in the matter of capital ships."³⁴ As for the employment of the submarine in the war, noted Sarraut, there is "reason for condemning [the] belligerent, but not for condemning the submarine." The French spokesman concluded his remarks with the statement that

. . . The French Government cannot consent to accept either the abolition of submarines, or a reduction of the total tonnage of submarines which it considers to be the irreducible minimum necessary to insure the safety of the territories for which it is responsible, or a limitation of the individual tonnage of submarines.³⁵

In somewhat briefer statements, the Italian and Japanese representatives

presented their official views of the submarine question. Senator Schanzer, speaking for Italy, supported the French contention that the submarine was a defensive weapon necessary to protect the lines of communication upon which Italy depended. The Italian delegation, observed the Senator, thought that a Conference involving only five of the world's navies could not settle a question which concerned so many others. In spite of its appreciation of the humanitarian arguments of the British delegation, concluded Schanzer, Italy could not associate itself with the proposal for submarine abolition.³⁶

The Japanese delegate, Masanao Hanihara, presented similar arguments regarding the positive defensive capabilities of the submarine. As far as the legitimacy of the weapon was concerned, Hanihara pointed out that "any weapon might become illegitimate if used without restriction."³⁷ Furthermore, for an insular nation like Japan, submarines were relatively inexpensive, yet effective. Japan would favor, therefore, "more vigorous international rules governing their proper use."³⁸

Hughes reinforced this position by reading the report on submarines adopted by the Advisory Committee of the American delegation on 1 December.³⁹ As a man-of-war, the submarine has a "very vital part to play,"⁴⁰ and as a scout, continued the report, "the submarine has great possibilities . . . it has value, a legitimate use, and no nation can decry its employment in this fashion."⁴¹ Again alluding to the Japanese threat in the Pacific, the report declared that although the United States would never undertake unlimited submarine warfare, delay tactics until major fleet operations began could,

. . . at some future time result in the United States holding its outlying possessions. If these colonies once fall, the expenditure of men necessary to recapture them will be tremendous and may result in a

drawnout war which would really be a United States defeat. The United States needs a large submarine force to protect its interests.⁴²

The United States had completely reversed its position on submarine abolition from that taken 3 years earlier at the Paris Peace Conference. England was now without support in her campaign to abolish the submarine.

At the next meeting of the committee (23 December) Admiral de Bon, speaking for his country, indicated that the Conference could not "reasonably limit submarine tonnage," but if such a limit were to be fixed, the American proposal of 90,000 tons was "the absolute minimum for all navies who may want to have a submarine force."⁴³

Great Britain responded by accusing France of favoring the submarine because of its ability to wage a successful war against merchant fleets.⁴⁴ Balfour then attempted to win Italy to the abolitionist point of view by pointing out that country's vulnerability to submarine operations in its dependence on seaborne commerce. Italy, however, suggested that the best course to follow would be to place restrictions on the offensive operations of submarines rather than abandon what they considered a defensive weapon.⁴⁵

The confrontation between Great Britain and France over the question of submarine abolition dominated the seventh session (24 December) of the committee also. Sarraut restated France's position that "An agreement had been reached on the reduction of offensive naval armaments, but the question of means of defense [i.e., submarines] must be left to the consideration of the countries interested."⁴⁶ Balfour countered by asking, "Against whom is this submarine fleet being built? What purpose is it to serve? What danger to France is it intended to guard against?" These were questions, noted Balfour, to which no satisfactory

answers had been given, and the implications were a definite threat to British seapower.⁴⁷

Secretary Hughes terminated the debate on the abolition of the submarine by saying that further discussion of the matter was futile and that it was impossible to "expect a result favorable to the adoption of . . . a resolution to abolish the submarine."⁴⁸

With the abolition controversy ended, the Committee on Limitation of Armament turned its attention to the problem of quantitative and qualitative restrictions to be placed on submarines. As England had rejected the original American tonnage figure of 90,000 tons as being too large, Secretary Hughes now proposed that both Great Britain and the United States accept 60,000 tons as their maximum submarine tonnage while France, Italy, and Japan maintain their present tonnage as the maximum.⁴⁹

This offer was readily accepted by the British delegation at the next meeting of the committee (also 24 December) but met with considerable argument from the other powers. Admiral de Bon stated that a minimum of 90 submarines (90,000 tons) were required to safeguard French security. To reduce their force below this limit, "was equivalent to abolishing the whole French program . . ."⁵⁰ The admiral informed the committee that the figures were so far below what they had originally contemplated that the French delegation must refer them to Paris for study. Italy announced that she would accept the new tonnage figures only on the condition that they represent parity with France.⁵¹ The Japanese delegate pointed out that their acceptance of the original tonnage allowance of 54,000 tons called for a considerable sacrifice and compromise on their part and was the minimum tonnage acceptable to them.⁵² Japan was so remotely situated, concluded her spokesman, "that it must be evident to all that her subma-

rines could not constitute a menace to any nation."⁵³ Secretary Hughes terminated the discussion on submarine limitation at this juncture to await the French reply to the new American proposal.

On the following Tuesday (27 December) Admiral Pratt submitted to Roosevelt a memorandum reviewing the discussions in the Committee of Fifteen since its formation by the Committee on Limitation of Armament. Pratt noted that "a certain amount of tension had resulted owing to the uncompromising attitude of Great Britain and France on the submarine question,"⁵⁴ and suggested that they put the submarine question "under the ice to cool" and stop discussing it.⁵⁵ Also, in recommending that the question of other auxiliary tonnage (cruisers, destroyers et cetera) not be raised until the submarine question was settled, Pratt warned that the United States should guard against the setting of a precedent by allowing Japan an out of ratio tonnage in an attempt to yield to France, for that country (France) might make a similar claim at a later date.⁵⁶

Admiral Pratt was of the opinion that the submarine problem adversely affected aircraft carrier tonnage limitation which, in his mind, was second only to capital ship tonnage. It was important to settle this question first, and whether or not a decision was later reached in submarines, the purpose of the Conference would have been fairly accomplished. "The ratio is the Big Thing of this conference," wrote Pratt. "It is the power back of us which assures the Anglo-Saxon peoples that the rule of Constitutional government and its ideals during years of peace or of war shall be the law of land and of sea." To emphasize his point regarding the importance of the ratio, Pratt offered his resignation if it was departed from.⁵⁷

During the evening of the same day (27 December), Hughes received a letter

from the British delegation (Balfour) summarizing that country's position regarding the submarine. Balfour reiterated the British desire for total abolition. If this was not possible, however, they would favor any diminution in their number. But, noted Balfour, "no mere diminution in their numbers during peace would relieve us from the necessity of devising and preparing all practicable methods of dealing with them in war, so that no limitation of anti-submarine vessels would seem consistent with our national safety."⁵⁸ Antisubmarine vessels could, of course, include just about every type of vessel except capital ships, aircraft carriers, and fleet support ships.

That this was the only policy England had chosen to pursue was confirmed by the contents of a secret dispatch from Churchill to Balfour sent at the time of Balfour's initial pleas for submarine abolition. This dispatch was not made public until it was mentioned by Churchill during a speech in the House of Commons in 1930.⁵⁹

In this letter, Churchill lauded the British delegation's decision to press for total abolition of the submarine. "We apprehend, however," continued Churchill,

that there is very little chance of the abolition of submarines being agreed upon, and in this event we must insist at all costs upon absolute freedom in regard to the character and number of all vessels under, say, 10,000 tons. We cannot, in the face of French freedom to construct a great submarine fleet, to say nothing of the submarine and cruiser concentration of other powers, enter into any agreement fettering our liberty to build whatever numbers and classes of cruisers and anti-submarine warfare craft we may consider necessary . . .

Even at the cost of a complete rupture, we feel certain that you

will not agree to any restriction in this sphere without previous consultation with the cabinet.⁶⁰

It is evident that the submarine was the key to any meaningful limitation beyond the agreement already reached for capital ships.

Formal discussion of submarine limitation resumed 28 December with the ninth gathering of the Committee on Limitation of Armament. France aggravated an already strained situation by refusing to accept the status quo offer (31,500 tons) for submarine tonnage made by Hughes at an earlier meeting (24 December). Sarraut informed the committee that his government had concluded that

... it is impossible to accept a limitation below 350,000 tons for auxiliary craft and 90,000 tons for submarines, without imperiling the vital interests of the country and its colonies and the safety of their naval life. The French Delegation has been instructed to consent to no concession in regard to the above figures.⁶¹

Even though the French indicated their acceptance of the capital ship allowance assigned to them (175,000 tons) in the same announcement and thereby kept the ratio intact, there was little warmth in the remarks accorded the French decision on the submarine. Hughes was "disappointed" with the French statement. If France had 90,000 tons of submarines, both the English and Americans would have to greatly increase their submarine fleets. This, noted Hughes, could hardly be called limitation or reduction⁶² and raised the serious question whether anything might be accomplished in regard to submarines and auxiliaries.

Balfour was "profoundly disappointed" and pointed out that the threefold increase in submarine tonnage proposed by France would make her equal to the major naval powers. This he

viewed as a "somewhat singular contribution to a Conference called for the diminution of armament."⁶³ Why, continued Balfour, did a fleet of capital ships of 175,000 tons require 90,000 tons of submarines to scout for it and protect it? It was perfectly obvious, stated the English representative, "that the proposed 90,000 tons of submarines were intended to destroy commerce." It should be perfectly clear, concluded Balfour, that if the French were permitted to build 90,000 tons of submarines, "no limitation of any kind on auxiliary vessels capable of dealing with submarines could be admitted by the government which he represented."⁶⁴ The division in attitude toward the submarine engendered by the French refusal to accept limitation of their submarine force and the British plan to maintain freedom in constructing auxiliary craft rendered any agreement to limit the tonnage of submarines at the Conference impossible. Realizing this, at a meeting of the Committee of Fifteen on the same day, the various national representatives "agreed to disagree" on the submarine issue.

The Committee of Limitation of Armament reconvened for its afternoon session at 3:30, and following the discussion of a proposed limitation of cruiser tonnage and maximum gun caliber for use aboard cruisers, Hughes suggested that the committee consider the action to be expressed by the powers as regards the illegal use of submarines. Elihu Root then presented three restrictions designed to place certain restrictions upon the operations of submarines through universal adherence to international laws⁶⁵ regarding the search, seizure, and destruction of merchant vessels in time of war; the prohibition of the use of submarines as commerce destroyers; and the outlawing of unrestricted submarine warfare.⁶⁶ The reading of the resolutions garnered enthusiastic and warm replies from the assembled representatives, but all the

nations—except Great Britain—wished to study them in detail and deferred discussion until a later date.⁶⁷

At the next meeting of the committee (20 December) Admiral de Bon, supported by the Italian and Japanese representatives, recommended that the resolutions be submitted to a group of jurists for further study. Root, however, declared that neither he nor the resolutions were “going to be buried under a committee of lawyers.” “Either the delegates assembled here,” stated Root, “. . . must speak clearly and intelligently the voice of humanity which had sent them here, and to which they must report, or that voice would speak for itself, and speaking without them, would be their condemnation.”⁶⁸ Roosevelt described the debate over the resolutions as “voluble and acrid” but personally did not think the submarine resolution (No. 2) amounted to much. It was, however, the “kind of a subject which gives to diplomats an opportunity for cantankerous disagreement.”⁶⁹

On 30 December the committee opened discussion on the second Root resolution relating to the elimination of the submarine as a commerce destroyer. This meeting was the setting for one of the most heated exchanges between Great Britain and France due, in part, to a series of articles in *Revue Maritime*, one of which was written by a Capitaine de Frigate Castex and published in January 1920.⁷⁰ The series, entitled “Synthese de la Guerre Sous-Marine” (Synthesis of the Submarine War), was cited by Lord Lee to support the British interpretation of French intentions, i.e., the submarines were not for defensive purposes, as the French claimed, but for offense and that the French favored a submarine war on commerce as a legitimate weapon in time of war. The Germans, wrote Castex, were absolutely justified in resorting to unrestricted submarine warfare and to neglect to do so would have been to commit a great blunder. The French writer concluded,

stated Lee, with the observation that the instrument is finally at hand that would “overthrow for good and all the naval power of England.”⁷¹

Lee stated that he hoped these were not the views of the French Government and that he expected immediate repudiation. He also observed that there was only one way that the French could effectively disavow these statements and that was by adopting the resolutions proposed by the American delegation. It was only through such action that they could remove the British feelings of apprehension and bitterness.

Admiral de Bon was the first to reply for France. He stated that he was glad to know the basis for the misunderstanding that had lasted so long between the two countries. The Castex article, asserted de Bon, “in no way represented . . . the views of the French Navy. This article, written by a man of ‘letters,’ was, in the eyes of the French Delegation,” a “monstrosity,” and he formally repudiated it in the name of the French Navy.⁷² Chairman Hughes then put aside any further discussion of the Root resolutions until the delegations had received advice from their respective governments.⁷³

When the discussion of the Root resolutions resumed on 5 January, so did the battle of semantics. The only issue of real consequence arose when Japan questioned the resolutions on the use of submarines for blockading purposes.⁷⁴ Italy and Japan were both opposed to Balfour’s position that prohibition was the intent of the resolution. As the “conflict raged without success,” Roosevelt overheard a remark passed from Sarraut to de Bon to the effect that he would be glad to remain silent and let Italy and Japan fight France’s battles.⁷⁵

Despite the protracted debate on the Root resolutions, they were finally approved and adopted during the 15th and 16th meetings (5 and 6 January) of the committee⁷⁶ and incorporated into

a separate Treaty Regarding the Use of Submarines and Noxious Gases in Warfare.⁷⁷ Following the meeting of 5 January, Roosevelt had strongly urged Hughes to exclude them from the naval treaty because "... they deal with international law and suggest amendments to international law. [and] ... are not a generic part of our treaty which is composed of stipulations concerning matters over which we have no control."⁷⁸

The submarine resolutions were laid before the entire Conference during the fifth plenary session (1 February) by Elihu Root and subsequently approved. Just prior to the reading of the treaty incorporating the resolutions to the assembled representatives, Root explained to Captain Rodgers, Chairman of the General Board, that the resolutions were designed to "meet public opinion with regard to [the] horrors and lawlessness of the Germans."

In his presentation before the Conference, Root pointed out that the treaty "undertakes further to stigmatize violations of these rules ... as violation of the laws of war which, as between these five great Powers and all other civilized nations who shall give their adherence thereto shall henceforth be punished as an act of piracy."⁷⁹ The acceptance of the treaty closed the subject of submarine limitation but was ratified by only four of the powers (France refused) and consequently never became binding. With the defeat of this treaty through lack of ratification, the only accomplishment of the Washington Conference regarding the limitation or restriction of submarines was eliminated. The Conference adjourned on 6 February 1922 after the adoption of 13 resolutions and seven treaties.

A major accomplishment of the Washington Conference was the replacing of the Anglo-Japanese alliance with a pledge between the United States, Britain, Japan, and France to

respect each other's rights in their island possessions in the Pacific (Four Power Treaty, 13 December 1921). The nations represented at the Conference also agreed to respect China's independence and to uphold the principle of equal industrial and commercial opportunity in that country, thus formally accepting America's Open Door policy in China (Nine Power Treaty, 6 February 1922). A third achievement was, of course, naval limitations as outlined in the Five Power Treaty also approved on 6 February 1922. This agreement fixed the status quo in fortifications in the Western Pacific, established a capital ship construction holiday, made provisions for the scrapping of certain battleships and battle cruisers of the three major naval powers, set tonnage limitations for certain ship types (capital ships, aircraft carriers), limited the maximum gun caliber for cruisers, and established the naval strength ratio of 5:5:3:1.67:1.67 on aircraft carriers and capital ships.⁸⁰

The major failure of the Washington Conference was its inability to reach a limitation agreement on the submarine, the key to the limitation of the remaining classes of surface warships. For the agreements at the Conference on battleships and aircraft carriers to be effective in reducing the chances of war, it was necessary that these two types of vessels be universally accepted as the key factor of seapower. Furthermore, limitation of these types only enhanced the combatant value of the other unlimited vessels. Capt. Dudley W. Knox observed that "It is very, very doubtful," whether this failure [to limit submarines] did not actually nullify the effects of limitation on battle ships and aircraft [sic] carriers ... "⁸¹

Any contribution the so-called submarine treaty might have made to the limitation of armaments would have been at best psychological, backed as it was only by "world opinion," for it made the submarine "an ordinary ship of war and took from it the stigma of

being a murderous and foul weapon."⁸² As Admiral Sims wrote to Raymond L. Buell, author of *The Washington Conference*, any nation menaced by defeat and domination, "would use the submarine to save itself; . . . the 'tremendous power of public opinion' would not prevent it being used . . ." ⁸³

Another pessimistic evaluation of the treaty came from a paper written several days after the Conference ended by Adm. William V. Pratt of the U.S. Navy. The treaty, wrote Pratt, "is not practical [and] will not work." Pratt likened the submarine treaty to the Prohibition law, for it was forcing something on the majority of nations which they did not or would not want in war. The treaty, concluded the admiral, "is made to be broken, and this in itself leads to a disregard for the law . . ." ⁸⁴

Admiral Sims concurred in this negative evaluation of the submarine treaty. It would probably prove a failure, wrote Sims, "because it is really impossible to understand what it means . . . It is useless to talk about the rules of warfare if the terms used are not accurately defined . . ." ⁸⁵

The rather unrealistic attempt to restrict the submarine by international law enforced only by world public opinion was hardly an adequate substitute for strict limitation by tonnage or size of the individual submarine or of a nation's submersible fleet. Lacking any regulations upon construction of this type of vessel, it was clear that those nations which chose to do so were free to engage in unlimited building programs not only in this category but in the other unrestricted classes as well. With competition underway anew, it soon became apparent that further international attempts to limit naval armaments were necessary if the naval arms race was to be halted.

The lessons from the attempts to limit the submarine at Washington should be abundantly clear. If a weapon lends itself to the protection or advancement of a nation's interests, meaningful limitation is doubtful. Similarly, if political differences between nations cannot be settled, there can be little genuine hope that important disarmament agreements can be reached.

NOTES

1. U.S. Dept. of the Navy. *Records of the General Board of the United States Navy. International Conferences and Discussions, Records and Publications, 1921-22.* Series I, Item 1, Policy and Discussion Book, 1921, Recommendation of the General Board, 15 July 1921, pars. 11, 13. Hereafter cited as U.S.N., Policy and Discussion Book.

2. *Ibid.*, Schofield draft, 23 August 1921.

3. *Ibid.*, H.P.H. Memorandum, 20 August 1921, p. 7.

4. U.S. Dept. of the Navy. *Records of the General Board of the United States Navy. International Conferences and Discussions, Records and Publications, 1921-22,* Series I, Item 2, Advisory Book, July 1921-February 1922, par. 16. Hereafter cited as U.S.N., Advisory Book, 1921-1922.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

6. Memorandum, Capt. H.H. Bemis to General Board, 4 November 1921. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. The Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. Papers, "Limitations of Armaments," box 21, General Correspondence, 1922, Letters, v. I, p. 2, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

10. Letter, T. Roosevelt, Jr., to Philip C. Jessup, 10 August 1937. *Ibid.*, box 37, General Correspondence, 1936-37. This letter served as a point of clarification to Jessup, the author of *Elihu Root* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1938).

11. *Conference on the Limitation of Armament, November 12, 1921-February 6, 1922* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1922), pp. 26-66, 78-92. Hereafter cited as *Conference*.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 86. It is interesting to note that although Plan I had also allotted 54,000 tons to both Italy and France, no mention of it was made at this time.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 60. All vessels except battleships, aircraft carriers, and fleet support ships were considered auxiliaries at this time.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Letter, Capt. Sinclair Cannon to Director of War Plans, 17 November 1921. U.S.N., Advisory Book, July 1921-February 1922, p. 3.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. Letter, General Board to Secretary of the Navy, 22 November 1921, No. 438. U.S.N., Final Action of General Board, July 1921-January 1922.
20. United States, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1922* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1922), v. I, pp. 135-36. Telegram, Premier Briand to Secretary Hughes, 18 December 1921. Both the Hughes' telegram of 16 December and Briand's reply were inserted into the records of the Conference during the course of the fourth meeting of the Committee on Limitation of Armament (22 December). Hereafter cited as *U.S., For. Rels. 1922*.
21. Raymond L. Buell, *The Washington Conference* (New York: Appleton, 1922), p. 83. See also memorandum of conversation between Secretary Hughes and French Representatives Saraut, Jusserand, and de Bon, 19 December 1921, *U.S., For. Rels., 1922*, v. I, p. 137.
22. Roosevelt Papers, box I, Diaries, 1921-24, v. I, pp. 40, 73.
23. Memorandum, General Board to Secretary of the Navy, 12 December 1921, No. 438, Ser. No. 1088-mm. U.S.N., Final Action of the General Board, July 1921-January 1922, p. 293.
24. Roosevelt Papers, box I, Diaries, 1921-24, v. I, p. 97.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
28. *Conference*, p. 466.
29. *Conference*, p. 474; U.S. Congress, Senate, *Conference on the Limitation of Armament at Washington, November 12, 1921-February 6, 1922*, Senate Document 126, 67th Cong., 2d sess., 1922.
30. According to Lee's calculations, the major naval powers could, under the Hughes plan, increase their submarine tonnage by the following amounts: Japan, 21,800 tons; Great Britain, 9,500 tons; United States, 6,500 tons. Italy and France could also increase their fleets in proportion. *Conference*, p. 476. A discrepancy between the tonnage figures used by England and the United States was discovered and later corrected. The British had been using the surface displacement tonnage of submarines while the Americans had used the larger, submerged displacement figures.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, p. 486.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 490-92. The Advisory Committee report supposedly reflected American public opinion, but its findings appear to be quite similar to General Board memoranda found in U.S.N., Series I, Item 3, Final Action of the General Board, July 1921-January 1922, which could hardly claim to be a reflection of public opinion regarding the submarine. See Buell, note, p. 217.
40. *Conference*, pp. 492-98.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 498.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 500.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 518.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 520.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 538.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 532-38.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 542.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 552.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 556. The tonnage possessed by those nations was: France, 31,391; Italy, 21,000; and Japan, 31,452. This proposal had been suggested to Hughes by Roosevelt earlier in the day at a subcommittee meeting. See Roosevelt Papers, box 1, Diaries, 1921-24, v. I, p. 106.
50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, p. 562.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. Memorandum, Admiral Pratt to Colonel Roosevelt, 27 December 1921. U.S.N., Advisory Book, July 1921-February 1922, p. 1.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.
58. Letter, Lord Balfour to Secretary Hughes, 27 December 1921. *U.S., For. Rels., 1922, v. I*, p. 143.
59. See Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates* (House of Commons), Fifth Series, CCXXXVIII, 2099, 15 May 1930 and Dudley W. Knox, "The London Treaty and American Naval Policy," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, August 1931, pp. 1079-1088.
60. Knox, p. 1081.
61. *Conference*, p. 570.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 572.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 574.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 576.
65. This attempt to limit the submarine through international law was in keeping with Roosevelt's idea to have restrictions of some kind if limitation failed and also in accordance with the recommendation of the General Board noted in Memorandum No. 438, Ser. No. 1088-dd of 15 November 1921.
66. *Conference*, p. 596.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 598.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 618.
69. Roosevelt Papers, box 1, Diaries, 1921-1924, v. I, III.
70. At the time the article was written, Castex was chief of a bureau on the French Naval Staff and at the time of the Conference was Chief of Staff of the Admiral of the Second Division in the Mediterranean.
71. *Conference*, p. 654.
72. *Ibid.*, pp. 658-660.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 668. On 31 January 1922, at the 20th meeting of the Committee on Limitation of Armament, there occurred a further exchange between France (Jusserand) and England (Lee) over the Castex article. Jusserand claimed that the British translation and interpretation of the article was imperfect and misleading and had done France an undeserved injustice. The debate was ended by Hughes when he moved the question of final approval of the naval treaty. See *Conference*, pp. 820-834.
74. Roosevelt Papers, box 1, Diaries, 1921-1924, v. I, p. 126.
75. *Ibid.*
76. *Ibid.*, pp. 684-740. It is probable that the French felt constrained to approve the Root resolutions in an attempt to dispel the negative public image engendered by the submarine debate and the Castex affair. See Buell, p. 223.
77. See *Conference*, pp. 1605-1611, for the complete treaty.
78. Roosevelt Papers, box 1, Diaries, 1921-1924, v. I, p. 127.
79. *Conference*, p. 268.
80. For the text of the various resolutions and treaties see *Conference*, pp. 1570-1658 or U.S., Senate Document 126, pp. 869-910.
81. Dudley W. Knox, *The Eclipse of American Sea Power* (New York: American Army and Navy Journal, December 1922), p. 96.
82. Rolland A. Chaput, *Disarmament in British Foreign Policy* (London: Constable, 1927), pp. 121-122.
83. Letter, Adm. William S. Sims to R.L. Buell, 9 May 1923. *The Papers of Rear Admiral William S. Sims*, Series I, folder SS. Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as *Sims Papers*.
84. *The Papers of Admiral Hillary Pollard Jones*, box 1, paper by Adm. William V. Pratt, "An Attempt to Interpret the Treaty," 13 February 1922, pp. 10, 14, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
85. Letter, Adm. William S. Sims to Sir Graham Bower, 26 July 1923, *Sims Papers*, Series J, folder SS.