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GREAT WAR AT SEA: REMEMBERING THE BATTLE OF JUTLAND

by John H. Maurer

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John H. Maurer is a Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He also serves as the Alfred Thayer Mahan Professor of Sea Power and Grand Strategy at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone, and do not represent the settled policy of the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Foreign Policy Research Institute
1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610 • Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684
Tel. 215-732-3774 • Fax 215-732-4401



Executive Summary

This essay draws on Maurer's talk at our history institute for teachers on America's Entry into World War I, hosted and cosponsored by the First Division Museum at Cantigny in Wheaton, IL, April 9-10, 2016.

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the largest sea fight of the First World War, a clash between the main fleets of Germany and Great Britain that took place on the afternoon and evening of 31 May 1916 off the coast of Denmark's Jutland peninsula. The Battle of Jutland was a trial of strength between a rising challenger, with aspirations to world power, and the reigning superpower, accustomed to thinking itself the indispensable leader of the international system. To whom did the future belong—the rising power or the keeper of the system? A single day of combat between the steel giants making up the British Grand Fleet and German High Sea Fleet might decide (or so it was thought) the vital question of world power or decline for these competing empires.


The Battle of Jutland formed an episode in a longer naval arms race between Britain and Germany that stretched back almost twenty years. At the end of the nineteenth century, Germany's rulers made a conscious strategic choice to challenge Britain as a sea power. They looked upon the building of a battle fleet as part of a strategy to establish a post-British international order, marked by the passing of Britain's commanding position on the maritime commons and the emergence of a German super-state on the world stage. Both countries went to great expense in building up their battle fleets before the war. In this naval arms race, Britain kept ahead of Germany in the construction of large surface warships. The Battle of Jutland's outcome was largely predetermined by Britain winning this prewar naval arms race.

The day of battle itself, when these great fleets clashed, would disappoint the high expectations held by the leaders and peoples on both sides of the North Sea. While the battle did not lack in high drama, the day's ending did not result in one side or the other winning a clear-cut victory. What Jutland did demonstrate was the lethality of modern naval warfare: in a single day of combat, the two fleets together lost 25 warships sunk and over 8,500 men killed. Those losses would have been even greater had it not been for, at critical moments in the battle, both the British and German fleet commanders taking actions to avoid risking the destruction of their battleships, turning away from the enemy rather than pressing the attack. The admirals took decisive actions during the battle's course that precluded a decisive action. Instead of a single-day showdown to determine naval mastery, the fleets limped back home to lick their wounds after having inflicted appalling damage on the enemy. This ambiguous result would not stop both governments from claiming the trophy of victory. The day of battle had come and gone, but the cruel war at sea to command the maritime commons would continue on without respite until the conflict's end more than two years later.

While Jutland did not end the naval stalemate in the North Sea, it did produce important strategic consequences. One consequence of Jutland was to convince Germany's naval and military leaders that the German battle fleet stood little chance of success in wresting command of the maritime commons from Britain. Instead, Germany's rulers sought to win by executing an all-out submarine offensive against the world's merchant shipping that sustained the British and Allied war effort. This decision for unrestricted submarine warfare would prove fateful and self-defeating because it provoked the United States' entry into the war against Germany. Jutland, then, by swaying Germany's leaders toward a submarine offensive, paved the way for their own country's eventual defeat in the Great War and the rise of the United States as a naval and military great power.

What can we learn from this battle fought a hundred years ago? One conclusion is that the outcome of the prewar arms race provided a good indicator of which country—the rising peer competitor or the reigning superpower—would prevail in the struggle for naval mastery. The baneful consequences of arms races and security dilemmas should not be allowed to conceal the strategic value of military superiority. The leading power will no longer lead if it falls behind in an arms race to a rising challenger. Any future Battle of Jutland, fought in the aerospace, cyber, and maritime commons, will play out against a high-stakes strategic backdrop of rising and declining great powers. The United States, to prevail in that contest, must prepare not only for the day of battle but for the day after.





This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Jutland, the largest sea fight of the First World War. On May 31, 1916, the main fleets of Germany and Great Britain clashed in a hard fought battle in the North Sea, offshore Denmark’s Jutland peninsula. The battle was an immense trial of strength at sea between the fleets of a rising challenger, with aspirations to world power, and the reigning superpower, accustomed to thinking itself the indispensable leader of the international system. On the outcome of this battle in the cold waters of the North Sea (or so it was widely thought), nothing less than the fate of empires was at stake. To whom did the future belong—the rising power or the keeper of the system? A single day of combat between the steel giants making up the British and German fleets could decide the vital question of world power or decline for these competing empires.

Alas, the battle would disappoint the high expectations of the leaders and peoples on both sides of the North Sea. The battle, to be sure, did not lack in high drama, as the fleets chased each other. And, yet, the day’s outcome did not produce a rousing triumph but an ambiguous result. Instead of a decisive single-day showdown to determine the war’s outcome, both fleets limped back home to lick their wounds after having inflicted appalling damage on the enemy. While the fleets had been unable to score a decisive victory at sea, that did not stop the spin doctors in Britain and Germany from taking over from the hapless admirals in an effort to win the battle, firing barrage and counter-barrage of propaganda in a war of words. Winning and losing would be determined not by the admirals, their ships and crews fighting at sea, but by the propagandists sitting behind their desks on the home front.

The Battle of Jutland was a scene in a larger tragedy. The fighting at sea and on land would drag on, with grinding attrition and strategic missteps killing millions, wearing down the great power contestants, breaking up empires, and destroying the economic, social, psychological, and moral fabric that knitted together European civilization. In the Great War’s aftermath, the winners did not feel at all like winners. Instead, all combatants appeared losers. Jutland can be seen to stand for much of the war itself—the folly of leaders, an inability to win quickly and decisively, coupled with hideous loss of life for little gain, followed by public controversy about who was most to blame for the whole awful mess.

Buildup for the Day of Battle

The clash of the British and German battle fleets off Jutland forms an episode in a longer naval arms race that stretched back almost twenty years. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Queen Victoria celebrated her diamond jubilee, an observer of world affairs and naval developments would have been hard pressed to imagine the navies of Britain and Germany slugging it out in the North Sea. Further, it would have seemed inconceivable to an informed naval analyst that the British fleet would suffer higher losses than that of the German in battle. Andrew Gordon writes: “the visible aura surrounding Britannia in 1897 remained one of serene, unassailable supremacy. . . . With 360 major fighting ships the R[oyal]N[avy] was equal to the next five navies combined.”¹

That “serene, unassailable supremacy” would soon face challenges and was not destined to last. Britain faced what we today would call the rise of the rest—that is, emerging great power peer competitors, challenging the leader of the existing international order.² Over the course of a generation between 1890 and 1914, Germany’s sources of strength made enormous strides, spearheaded by the German economy and technology. Germany’s steel, chemical, electrical, and pharmaceutical industries were pioneering and powerful engines of economic growth. An expansion of trade underscored Germany’s industrial strength, as did the German economy’s appetite for raw materials and foodstuffs. By 1914, the value of Germany’s exports and imports were transforming its economy, making it into a major trading state. Germany possessed the second largest merchant fleet in the world after Britain. Germany’s great oceanic liners,



too, competed against those constructed in British yards, displaying the prowess of German technology, engineering, and shipbuilding. The German economy grew to where it roughly equaled that of Britain. This economic dynamic was turning Germany into a great sea power as a rival to Britain.


The passing of the era when Britain was the world's leading industrial power also pointed to a waning of its leadership as a naval power. On this connection between industrial and naval power, the historian Avner Offer writes: "In a world of many workshops, it became difficult [for Britain] to keep ahead in armored warships."³ While the barriers to entry in this competition were high, Germany could overcome them because of its industry and technology. The German naval challenge to Britain proved so daunting because it was backed by Germany's rising economic might.

The growth in the German economy entailed a decline in British security because Germany's rulers made a conscious choice to harness the economic power at their disposal to contest Britain's dominance in the maritime domain.⁴ A new generation of German leaders wanted their country to take a larger role in world affairs. Germany's rulers sought to break the dominant position held by Britain in big-ship, conventional combat capability in the maritime domain. Since Germany's industry and trade were growing, its technology was world-class, why, then, should its naval armaments be anything less than that of any other great power? Why should it take second place to Britain? German leaders aimed at establishing a post-British international order, marked by the passing of Britain's dominant position on the maritime commons and the emergence of Germany as a world power.

Kaiser Wilhelm II championed this effort to transform the existing world order. He was dedicated to making Germany into a sea power, and he worked tirelessly in calling for a powerful German navy. Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack have noted: "Without Kaiser Wilhelm II, there would have been no naval program."⁵ Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, Germany's chancellor at the war's outbreak, told a confidante: "[The Kaiser's] first and basic idea is to break Britain's world position in favor of Germany; for this, a fleet is required, and to obtain it, a lot of money, which only a rich country can afford; so Germany should become rich; hence the priority given to industry [The Kaiser's grandfather] founded the German empire with the army, he will establish Germany as a commercial and colonial power with the fleet."⁶ The eminent historian Friedrich Meinecke paid tribute to Wilhelm as the *Flottenkaiser*. The Kaiser, Meinecke intoned, "ceaselessly converted the nation and enticed it out onto the water [and] he has the satisfaction of knowing that his conviction has become the conviction of the nation."⁷ Where the Kaiser led, the German government and people followed.

To build the fleet, the Kaiser turned to Admiral Alfred Tirpitz, naming him navy secretary in 1897. Tirpitz wrote in his memoirs: "There was no way to the position of world-power than by building a fleet."⁸ From the outset, the fleet of battleships was explicitly built against Britain. The passage of the 1898 and 1900 German navy laws by the Reichstag, spelling out a long-term plan for warship construction, marked a turning point in that Germany's strategic orientation included the possession of a powerful fleet as well as army. The 1900 navy law called for the construction of no fewer than thirty-eight battleships.⁹ By building a battle fleet that threatened Britain, Germany's ruling oligarchy expected to make incremental foreign policy gains that would eventually establish their country as a world power, an equal of the British Empire in the global arena. A competitive German battle fleet might even deter British decision-makers from pushing any confrontation with Germany to the point of actual fighting. Germany's rulers might then achieve their foreign policy ambitions without having to fight.

The anti-British character of the German naval buildup was unmistakable and could not be cloaked. By 1909, the battleship building taking place across the North Sea provoked alarm among the British government, naval leaders,



and public: a rival great power in imperial Germany showed itself ready and able to acquire the latest generation of naval weaponry and challenge a longstanding British supremacy on the maritime commons. Britons, accustomed to think that their country ruled the waves, were dismayed that Germany appeared poised to overturn Britain's lead in modern battleships. The First Lord of the Admiralty reported to the Prime Minister H.H. Asquith:

I am anxious to avoid alarmist language, but I cannot resist the following conclusions which it is my duty to submit to you German capacity to build dreadnoughts [the latest generation of battleship] is at this moment equal to ours.


The last conclusion is the most alarming, and if justified would give the public a rude awakening should it become known.¹⁰

Germany's industrial strength and technological prowess permitted it to equal Britain at sea. Asquith feared: "We are at present in a parlous condition."¹¹ The naval rivalry between Britain and Germany shaped the international strategic environment before the First World War, and there could be no disguising that Europe's two leading great powers were vying against each other in an intense head-to-head struggle for command of the maritime domain. The war in the dockyards had commenced. The naval race provoked the journalist Norman Angell to write "at a time of panic" his famous tract *The Great Illusion*, which begins with the ominous sentence: "It is pretty generally admitted that the present rivalry in armaments with Germany cannot go on in its present form indefinitely."¹²

In the ensuing naval arms race, Britain kept ahead of Germany in the building of capital ships. Britain followed what we might call an offset strategy of keeping one generation ahead of rivals in the building of large surface warships. Between 1906 and 1921 Britain built or designed five generations of capital ships—Dreadnoughts, super-Dreadnoughts, fast battleships, the Hood-class, and super-Hoods—to best rivals with a superior class of fighting vessel. At the war's outset, Britain also maintained a numerical advantage of roughly a three-to-two edge in large surface warships. Britain's prewar building programs also ensured that as the war continued, its lead would get even greater. This superiority in capital ships was a victory won by Britain before the fighting started, helping to ensure that Germany suffered from a position of inferiority in its attempt to break the British command of the world's ocean highways. The outcome of the Battle of Jutland was largely predetermined by Britain winning the prewar naval arms race in large surface warships.

Both countries went to great expense in building up their battle fleets before the war. The warships at Jutland represented the latest technology and knowhow. To British decision-makers, Germany's naval buildup appeared as nothing less than a short-warning, first-strike weapon. Britain's leaders and the public feared that Germany might launch a surprise attack on the British fleet at the outset of a war. On the eve of the war, a young Winston Churchill, serving as Britain's first lord of the Admiralty, the civilian head of the Royal Navy, highlighted the danger: "We should have ample margin [of superiority in warships because] . . . the consequences of defeat at sea are so much greater to us than they would be to Germany." Churchill aimed to make sure that Germany could not "engage us at any single moment, even our least favourable moment, with any reasonable prospect of success." Further, Britain's dependence on overseas sea lines of communication for critical supplies, including the most basic commodity of all, food, meant it could not afford to see naval mastery in home waters pass to a rival great power. Britain, too, did not possess an army that came anywhere near in numbers to what Germany could put in the field after mobilization. In the matter of naval defense, Churchill maintained there could be "no parity of risk" between Britain and Germany.¹³


To the surprise of many, especially given the immense resources expended on building up the navies of Britain and



Germany, the two countries' main fleets adopted a defensive stance at the war's beginning. The fear of risking the big surface ships in action induced naval leaders on both sides of the North Sea to exercise extreme caution in their fleets' movements and actions. The huge investment in capital ships seemed too valuable to risk in fighting at sea. Whereas the armies of the great powers were immediately hurled against each other at the war's beginning, fighting furious and hideously costly battles, the main surface fleets of Britain and Germany avoided contact with each other. Whereas the generals proved profligate in their willingness to risk the lives of millions of soldiers in search of a decisive battlefield victory, the admirals feared losing a single capital ship, since warships could not be as readily replaced as could the poor infantrymen. Whereas the generals now stand accused of belonging to a cult of the offensive, defense dominance ruled in the minds of the admirals. With the main fleets of Britain and Germany keeping on the defensive, the North Sea became a watery no-man's land, in which the big ships dared not venture.

Germany's political and naval leaders feared their battle fleet courted destruction if it ventured forth from the protected defensive bastion inside the first island chain of Borkum, Heligoland, and Sylt. Why venture forth when German naval leaders counted on Britain's Royal Navy following its traditional naval strategy of taking the offensive into the enemy's home waters, instituting a close blockade of its bases? In the war against Napoleon, during the famous campaign of Trafalgar, Britain's main fleet in the English Channel commanded by Admiral Sir William Cornwallis (the younger brother of the losing British general at Yorktown), kept a close watch on the French naval forces at their base at Brest. Alfred Thayer Mahan lauded this strategy of offensive sea control in his famous books on *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*.¹⁴ Napoleon's grand scheme to invade Britain fell apart because Cornwallis' fleet, in an act of extraordinary seamanship and logistics, remained forward deployed, preventing French naval forces from escaping their bases. If Britain's admirals emulated this model that brought success during the Trafalgar campaign, the Germans believed they could defeat the British fleet by following what we today would call an anti-access area-denial strategy. New weapons of naval warfare—mines, torpedo-armed submarines and small surface craft, and land-based artillery—would inflict heavy losses on British large surface ships before the main battle began.¹⁵

The commander of Britain's Grand Fleet, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, had no intention of playing the role written for him by the German naval staff.¹⁶ Jellicoe determined that the risks of an offensive in the North Sea far outweighed the rewards. Attacking into German home waters to seize a forward base at Borkum, Heligoland, and Sylt, in the face of the growing lethality of naval warfare, made an offensive strategy a most dangerous one. Recent combat experience gave clear warning of the lethality of mines, torpedoes, submarines, and coastal artillery. In the Russo-Japanese War, fought just ten years before, the Japanese lost a third of their battle fleet in a single day when it steamed into a minefield. If the British suffered comparable capital ship losses to mines in the North Sea, then the battle fleets of Britain and Germany would have been roughly equal in strength, enabling the Germans to go head-to-head in the contest with a much better prospect for success. Earlier in the war, the battleship *Audacious*, representing the latest generation and most powerful of British warships, had been lost to a mine off the coast of Ireland. In the naval assault on the Dardanelles, the attacking British and French fleet suffered heavy losses to mines. Six British and French battleships were sunk or heavily damaged by mines when the Allied fleet tried to force their way past the Ottoman gun batteries defending the Dardanelles. Mines were not the only threat to surface ships. Stealthy German submarines could wreak havoc with surface ships. This danger was brought home by the loss of three British armored cruisers—the *Aboukir*, *Cressy*, and *Hogue*—torpedoed on the same day by a German submarine off the coast of the Netherlands. Britain's First Sea Lord, the uniformed head of the Royal Navy, Admiral Lord Fisher of Kilverstone lamented that “with the holocaust of the three cruisers” the Royal Navy lost “more officers and men than in all Lord Nelson's battles put together.”¹⁷ There was nothing heroic in pitting battleships against mines, coastal defense artillery, and submarines.




Furthermore, there was no imperative for Britain to attack into the German first island chain. Britain could strangle most of Germany's seaborne trade with the outside world by setting up a distant blockade. British warships—operating outside the second island chain, stretching from the English Channel, Britain, the Orkney, Shetland, and Faroe Islands, to the coast of Norway—could intercept German trade into the Atlantic. As early as 1906, Admiral Fisher could boast:

It's so very peculiar that Providence has arranged England as a sort of huge breakwater against German commerce, which must all come either one side of the breakwater through the Straits of Dover, or the other side of the breakwater the north of Scotland. It's a unique position of advantage that we possess, and such is our naval superiority that on the day of war we 'mop up' 800 German merchant steamers. Fancy the 'knock-down' blow to German trade and finance! Worth Paris!

Britain's geographic position conferred strategic advantage that meant the British battle fleet did not need to attack into the heavily defended German home waters, or even fight a major battle in the North Sea to inflict enormous damage on Germany's economy and war effort. At the war's outbreak, Fisher cautioned Jellicoe: "The temptation for you to do something will always be exceeding great. I know but 'your strength is to sit still' till 'the day' arrives!"¹⁸

Despite the strategic advantages of remaining on the defensive, pressure was put on Jellicoe to destroy Germany's main fleet. Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, as well as his successor the prominent Tory leader Arthur J. Balfour, wanted the British Grand Fleet to undertake a major offensive. Churchill pushed hard for an offensive. "[E]verything convinces me," Churchill wrote, "that we must take Borkum as soon as full & careful preparations can be made. . . . Troops for Borkum will be available: & altho' the capture is a difficult operation I am sure we ought to make the attempt, & am also confident that success will be attained."¹⁹ Jellicoe would have none of it: he was obstinate in his refusal to carry out an offensive that he feared would jeopardize Britain's overall naval superiority. He warned: "The danger is very real and the disaster may occur in a few minutes without warning. It only requires the fleet to be inadvertently taken over one minefield for a reversal to take place in the relative strength of the British and German fleets. The existence of the Empire is at once in the most immediate and grave danger." Jellicoe viewed the destruction of the German battle fleet as a precondition for a British naval offensive into German home waters. He was willing to fight a major battle if the German main fleet came out of its defended bastions to fight in the open sea. Otherwise, the British fleet should stay on the defensive and avoid running the risk of losing by attacking. Jellicoe concluded: "No other naval offensive appears to me practicable unless and until our objective, the High Sea Fleet, gives us the opportunity. The Grand Fleet can never have any other objective than the High Sea Fleet, and until the High Sea Fleet emerges from its defences I regret to say that I do not see that any offensive against it is possible. It may be weakened by mine and submarine attack when out for exercises, but beyond that no naval action against it seems practicable."²⁰ Jellicoe was backed by uniformed British naval leadership at the Admiralty, who presented a united front against the politicians and their demands for more offensive zeal.

Britain's defensive naval strategy in the North Sea upset Tirpitz's plan to defeat the Royal Navy.²¹ He built a fleet to deter Britain or to fight. It had succeeded at neither. On the eve of war, Tirpitz worried that the British might not attack. He asked the commander of Germany's main fleet: "What will you do if they [the British] do not come?"²² When the British did not take the offensive, Tirpitz wanted the German fleet to attack, despite its inferiority in numbers. He feared that the German people would not devote funding to navy after the war if it was seen as not playing an active fighting role during the struggle. While the fleet was viewed as inactive—all quiet on the North Sea



Front!—the German army’s leaders Field Marshal Hindenburg and his staff chief General Erich Ludendorff were hailed by the German people as saving the country from a Russian invasion in the East. Meanwhile, on the Western Front, the German army, outnumbered, was battling and taking heavy casualties at Verdun. What was the navy doing to provide for the security of the Fatherland? Tirpitz complained: “If we come to the end of a war so terrible [as this one] without the fleet having bled and achieved something, then we will get nothing more for the navy. All the very scarce funds that may be available will go to the army.” A postwar rivalry for resources with the army spurred Tirpitz in his call for action. Popular pressure was also exerted on the German battle fleet to act. A ditty making the rounds in Germany made fun of the battle fleet’s inactivity: “Dear Fatherland, you may rest assured; the fleet lies in the harbors—safely moored.”²³


This inactivity changed when, as part of a shakeup of the German naval leadership, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, became the new commander of the fleet. He hoped to break the stalemate in the North Sea by offensive operations designed to wear down Britain’s naval superiority.²⁴ His plan was to draw out portions of the British fleet, trap and destroy detachments, and by a series of engagements, start turning the odds to Germany’s favor. Rather than one big decisive battle, he envisioned several engagements in a campaign to wear down Britain’s naval superiority. The German fleet sortie that resulted in the Battle of Jutland formed part of Scheer’s plan. He hoped to sting the British naval leadership into making foolish decisions and fight on German terms. Of course, any plan that depends on the enemy committing a blunder is an admission that the chances for success are small.

By the time, then, that the Battle of Jutland occurred, the Great War had already been hard fought for almost two years, resulting in heavy loss of life. At long last, the Day, May 31, 1916, the big clash at sea long anticipated by the British and German peoples occurred. For Britons, brought up to believe that they ruled the waves, yearning for a reaffirmation of their greatness as a naval and world power by achieving another crowning victory like that of the Battle of Trafalgar, the time of reckoning with the German upstart was at hand. Meanwhile, the German people looked forward to humbling an arrogant Britain, which laid claim to commanding the world’s oceans. The stakes of the war at sea were high. The winner at sea would win the war.

The Day

The Battle of Jutland—like many of History’s greatest battles—saw the combatants plagued by inadequate, incorrect, and often contradictory information, struggling to find and grapple with the enemy.²⁵ Jellicoe had an edge in that he possessed information from Room 40, the Admiralty’s signals intelligence unit, which could decrypt German naval codes. Room 40 provided advanced warning of the German battle fleet’s sortie outside of the first island chain defensive bastion. Yet, even armed with this information, Jellicoe did not know the exact whereabouts of German naval forces. The battle began when the advanced scouting forces of the British and German battle cruiser forces stumbled upon each other. The British battle cruiser force was commanded by Admiral Sir David Beatty, perhaps the most colorful naval leader of the era. His impetuosity in rushing to engage the enemy put at risk the forces under his command and would cost the British dearly during the initial fighting.²⁶ Opposite Beatty in command of the German battle cruiser force was Admiral Franz von Hipper. Somewhat of an outsider in protestant Prussia-Germany, Hipper was a Bavarian by birth, raised a Roman Catholic, and came from middle class background. Hipper represented the technocratic elite that led Germany’s newly forged navy.²⁷

On first contact, Beatty moved quickly to engage, starting the first phase of the battle. Beatty’s instructions under the Grand Fleet Battle Orders were clear: “The primary function of battle-cruisers is the destruction of the battle-




cruisers of the enemy.”²⁸ As Beatty steamed to attack, the German battle cruiser force turned and ran. Hipper’s plan in retreating was to draw Beatty’s force into a trap of fighting the main German battle fleet commanded by Scheer. Thus began the back-and-forth of attack and retreat for which the battle is known. In pursuing the Germans, Beatty moved too quickly to engage, charging into action with his force of six battle cruisers without first making sure they had properly targeted the enemy ships opposite them. In addition, he charged into the fight before the Fifth Battleship Squadron—four of the most powerful battleships in the world—could support him. Poor signaling from Beatty’s flagship resulted in the Fifth Battleship Squadron lagging behind. If Beatty had assembled his whole force, he would have gone into action with ten powerful capital ships against a German force consisting of five battle cruisers. These inexcusable errors squandered the British superiority in numbers, evening the odds in the initial fighting between the battle cruiser forces.²⁹

This initial fighting between the battle cruiser forces also highlighted the danger that faced the British fleet. At the opening salvos of the big guns, Beatty’s force outnumbered the Germans opposite him by six-to-five battle cruisers. In less than an hour of fighting, however, Beatty suffered the loss of two battle cruisers, and his own flagship the *Lion* came perilously close to destruction, while the Germans squadron had not lost a single major ship. In the heat of battle, Beatty famously exclaimed: “There seems to be something bloody wrong with our ships today.” One third of Beatty’s force of battle cruisers had been destroyed. Beatty might have suffered even heavier losses had it not been for the arrival of the fast battleship force as reinforcements. The gun duel between the battle cruiser forces showed that the Germans could not only hold their own but inflict heavier losses on the British in a relatively even fight.

It is now thought that the British battle cruiser losses were caused by error in judgment about how to fight a ship. Nicholas Lambert has made a strong case for unsafe handling of ammunition as the likely cause for the destruction of the three British battle cruisers. In the tradeoff between rapid fire and ammunition safety, the battle cruisers opted for rapid fire. This choice (with rapid fire encouraged even if not ordered by Beatty and Jellicoe) raised the risk of catastrophic destruction if a turret was hit by enemy fire. The battle would show that the balance between the two needed to be readjusted toward greater safety.³⁰ If the battle cruisers had exercised more caution in the handling of ammunition, British losses in the battle might well have been reduced, and the disparity in damage suffered by the two fleets would not look so pronounced. Rather than the British battle cruisers suffering from fatal design flaws, their destruction was more likely due to there being something wrong with Britain’s naval leadership for running too much risk in how they fought their ships.

The next phase of the battle occurred when Beatty’s force of battle cruisers, belatedly joined by the Fifth Battle Squadron, sighted the main German battle fleet. It was now Beatty’s turn to cut and run, seeking to lure Scheer’s main force of battleships into action against Jellicoe’s fleet. Again, poor British signaling put the Beatty’s forces at undue risk: the Fifth Battle Squadron continued to steam for too long toward the main German fleet before receiving the flagship’s signal and turning to run away. Beatty’s handling of the ships under his command deserves censure, as he played right into the Germans’ hands, giving them the very opportunity that they longed for to catch a portion of Britain’s Grand Fleet and mass a superior force against it. The British were fortunate that the battle cruisers and Fifth Battle Squadron escaped without heavier losses. Beatty’s reckless charge into action before concentrating his whole force, incompetent targeting of enemy vessels, and poor signal communications endangered his whole force. Beatty should never have given the Germans that opportunity to score an upset success.

In drawing the German fleet toward Jellicoe’s rapidly approaching force, Beatty once again showed poor leadership in not passing accurate information to his chief. Jellicoe remained unsure of the exact whereabouts of Beatty and the




Germans. Jellicoe needed to know the enemy's location so that he could deploy his force, bringing to bear against the Germans the superior firepower of the British fleet. Given the dearth of accurate information at his disposal, Jellicoe did a commendable job. The Grand Fleet deployed right along the line of German advance, putting Scheer's fleet in extreme danger. When Scheer realized that he had fallen into a trap, he took prompt action, ordering his fleet to turn away and saving it from near certain destruction. He wanted to preserve his force and not see it perish in a glorious defeat.

In Scheer's haste to get away, however, he lost contact with the British fleet. Desperate to escape and to get back to German home waters, Scheer inadvertently turned his fleet right back onto a collision course with Jellicoe. This blunder meant that, for a second time, Jellicoe's battle line was positioned to bring superior firepower to bear against Scheer's fleet. Facing annihilation, Scheer ordered a reckless charge by his destroyers to launch a torpedo attack on Jellicoe's battleships. Faced by an incoming barrage of torpedoes, Jellicoe turned his battleships away to avoid the danger of getting hit, allowing Scheer once again to escape from a trap. Thus, Jutland witnessed the spectacle of both admirals turning away from the enemy at the critical juncture of the battle in an attempt to preserve their battleships, neither caring to exhibit the Nelson touch of closing to fight with the enemy. To Jellicoe and Scheer, avoiding losses trumped inflicting losses.

While Scheer had avoided destruction by turning away, he was still not safe: Jellicoe's forces remained between the German fleet and its home ports. As night fell, Jellicoe remained confident that he had positioned his forces to renew the fighting on the next day and would have another chance to stop Scheer from getting to safety. Consequently, in the darkness, Jellicoe did not want to risk bringing on a major engagement since the night would tend to nullify the Grand Fleet's superiority in numbers. Meanwhile, Scheer remained desperate. Already, he had blundered into the superior firepower of Jellicoe's fleet in the attempt to get home. In the darkness, he might well once again run right into the main British force. At night, however, Scheer would have better luck. His battleships passed astern of Jellicoe's main battleship forces. Some British warships at the end of Jellicoe's line saw the German fleet in the darkness. One British battleship even made out and trained its guns to fire on a German battleship. The ship's captain refused to give the order to open fire. If he had a battleship duel might have triggered a night action, which Jellicoe did not want. Sporadic and confused night fighting nonetheless took place as the German fleet battled through British scouting forces. This fighting should have alerted the British to Scheer's escape route. Instead, information about this fighting was not passed along to Jellicoe, who continued to think Scheer remained in his trap. Very soon the next day it became clear to Jellicoe that during the night Scheer had escaped.

Jutland demonstrated the lethality of modern naval warfare. The British forces suffered heavier losses in the fighting. Fourteen British ships—three battle cruisers (*Indefatigable*, *Queen Mary*, and *Invincible*), three cruisers, and eight destroyers—totaling 111,000 tons displacement, were sunk. 6097 British officers and men lost their lives. The German fleet lost eleven vessels—one battle cruiser (*Lützow*, Hipper's flagship), one obsolescent battleship (*Pommern*), four cruisers, and five destroyers—that totaled 62,000 tons displacement. The Germans suffered the loss of 2,551 officers and men.³¹ Some of the ships lost in the fighting should never have been in the battle. The British armored cruisers *Black Prince*, *Warrior*, and *Defence* were obsolescent, slow, inadequately protected. The same could be said for the six older German battleships, of which the *Pommern* was one. Bringing these ships and their crews to a fight where they were likely to meet more powerful opponents amounts to malpractice on the part of naval leaders in both countries. The loss of life and ships would have been even greater if Jellicoe and Scheer had not been so risk adverse in the handling of their fleets.



The battle also showed the importance of naval leadership in determining outcomes. Jellicoe has been severely criticized for not acting in a more aggressive way during the battle. He had several opportunities to engage more closely the German fleet. If he had seized these opportunities, the battle would have taken a much different course. Scheer would have found it very difficult to escape. The German force might well have been annihilated because of the superiority of the British Grand Fleet. It should be emphasized that Scheer, while stumbling into a trap, nonetheless proved able to escape, and his claim to success is that he brought his force home largely intact. A less skillful commander in the game of hide-and-seek might have kept stumbling into traps and suffered annihilation. Neither Jellicoe nor Scheer wanted to fight under adverse conditions that favored the enemy. Both were right to pursue a risk-averse strategy.


One of Jellicoe's principal failures at Jutland was that he did not keep the component parts of the Grand Fleet better positioned to support each other. He violated the cardinal principle of war known as concentration of force. Jellicoe admitted his error: "When next I go [out to sea] I must keep Beatty nearer It was my doing of course, but I have learned a lesson."³² With his forces divided, unable to move quickly to offer mutual support, Jellicoe gave the Germans an incredible opportunity to defeat piecemeal the British fleet. Beatty's forces and the Fifth Battle Squadron should never have been exposed for so long a period of time to the whole German battle fleet. Beatty, too, violated this principle: he should have not attacked the German battle cruiser force without the powerful fire of the Fifth Battleship Squadron.

The inability of the British to share information also contributed to Jellicoe's failure to bring to bear his superior force to inflict heavier losses on the Germans. Beatty's information was inaccurate, making it difficult for Jellicoe to know the position of his own forces as well as the German fleet. During the evening, Jellicoe was not provided critical information about the fighting taking place at the rear of the British battle line. The British ships engaged in and near the night fighting could make out German capital ships. Not only did the British battleships fail to engage the Germans, they neglected to pass this priceless information along to Jellicoe. In addition, the Admiralty did not provide Jellicoe with signals intelligence that indicated the main German force was cutting behind the British fleet. This information breakdown robbed Jellicoe of several chances to engage the German fleet with superior British force.

The Battle of Jutland underscores the important role that uncertainty plays in the conduct of operations and decision-making. Better information sharing among the British forces would have enabled Jellicoe to revise his assessment of risk. With better information, he would have been able to position British naval forces to engage and destroy the German fleet. Uncertainty increased Jellicoe's caution. Scheer, too, was plagued by poor information. His turn back toward the British fleet during the second phase of the battle cannot be explained by anything other than poor situational awareness about the enemy's location. Once it became clear that he faced the full firepower of the Grand Fleet, Scheer made the correct decision of getting out of harm's way as rapidly as he could.

Jellicoe was right to avoid a night engagement. Still, the Grand Fleet might have inflicted heavier losses on the Germans by accepting somewhat greater risk. The British battleships were so intent on concealing their position at night that they lost the opportunity to score some blows against the Germans. The straggling, badly wounded German battle cruisers *Moltke* and *Seydlitz* were in grave danger. On their own, they would have stood little chance of surviving if engaged. That they escaped owed as much to luck, as well as to the discipline and skill of their crews who kept the ships afloat and brought them home. If these German battle cruisers had been sunk, the narrative about the Battle of Jutland would have been markedly different, with the British claiming a clear victory.

Who had more to lose in fighting a major engagement between the two main battle fleets—Britain or Germany? In a



famous passage about the Battle of Jutland, Churchill would write: “The standpoint of the Commander-in-Chief of the British Grand Fleet was unique. His responsibilities were on a different scale from all others. It might fall to him as to no other man—Sovereign, Statesman, Admiral or General—to issue orders which in the space of *two or three hours* might nakedly decide who won the war. The destruction of the British Battle Fleet was final. Jellicoe was the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon.”³³ Quite simply, Britain could not afford to lose at sea. Jellicoe gave a higher priority to preserving his force than to destroying the German battle fleet. At least that was the opinion of Chatfield, who faulted Jellicoe for dispositions that “were not calculated to keep touch with the enemy, but to me & others seemed to be made with the one idea of *avoiding* contact.”³⁴ Jellicoe’s caution explains much about the battle’s indecisive outcome.

The Day After

No sooner had the wounded High Seas Fleet limped home, than Germany’s rulers moved quickly to portray the battle as a victory: the vaunted British fleet had been bested in a fight on the open seas; the German fleet inflicted greater damage than what it had received. Celebrations were proclaimed throughout Germany. A jubilant Kaiser visited the fleet just days after the battle, showering medals and awards on officers and crews. He proudly proclaimed to his fleet:


At last came the day. The enormous fleet of Albion that dominated the oceans, that for the hundred years since Trafalgar had imposed a tyrannical rule on the sea over the whole world, wearing the nimbus of overwhelming power and invincibility—came out. . . . And what happened? The English fleet was beaten!

The first hammer blow has been struck, the nimbus of English global domination has been ripped down, the tradition of Trafalgar torn to shreds.³⁵

There can be no doubt that the results of Jutland did diminish Britain’s prestige as a naval power. In the United States, the naval officer and publicist Dudley Knox would echo the Kaiser’s verdict: “Never again would American or Japanese sailors be overawed by the powerful, even overwhelming, force of British naval tradition.”³⁶

In Britain, the results of the battle were a keen disappointment. The prospect of a knockdown sea fight with the Germans in the North Sea filled British decision makers with high hopes for another Trafalgar. Balfour, normally so staid and stolid, was “in a state of very great excitement” as the fleets approached battle. He read “a succession of wireless messages, ending with one from Jellicoe to the Admiralty saying that ‘a fleet action is imminent.’” The Prime Minister H.H. Asquith was informed about the approaching battle while attending a debate in the House of Commons. He “showed no sign or trace of anxiety or nervousness, but only delight at having brought them [the German fleet] to action.”³⁷ With great expectations of a glorious victory in the offing, British politicians and admirals could look forward to congratulating themselves and taking credit for the coming triumph.

But, when news arrived about the losses suffered by the British fleet and the enemy’s escape, the British leadership was stunned. Jellicoe was bitterly disappointed at the result: “I missed one of the greatest opportunities a man ever had.”³⁸ Fisher vented, providing background information to C.P. Scott, editor of *The Manchester Guardian*, who recorded: “Fisher held that the result of the battle was virtually a defeat because even assuming the German losses to be equal to our own that was a wholly unsatisfactory result of an encounter between forces so unequal.”³⁹ Lord Riddell, another well connected press magnate, recorded in his diary: “News of great battle of Jutland, from which it appears that we have suffered a severe reverse.”⁴⁰ At the center of British decision making, Maurice Hankey, the Secretary of the War Committee, lamented to his diary that this “trial of strength between the two fleets” was “the most bitter




disappointment of this disappointing war.”⁴¹ The naval news made David Lloyd George, Britain’s dynamic war leader and future prime minister, “very hot about the conduct of the Admiralty.”⁴² Indeed, the battle’s result so upset Lloyd George that he cancelled his golf game to rush up to London.⁴³

Taken aback by the battle’s unexpected outcome, British leaders were initially at a loss about how to respond. The first Admiralty bulletin botched the job, making the battle look like a serious loss. Not only British pride but self-confidence was shaken by the news. Margot Asquith, the prime minister’s opinionated wife, was furious: “The Germans with their usual care of detail & organizing foresight got their news of triumphant victory over the British fleet into America as well as their own country long before we did. We are incorrigible in this way, and will always remain an unpopular nation as we never express ourselves.”⁴⁴ Jellicoe complained to the Admiralty that the British press releases “magnifies ours and minimises enemy casualties and gives somewhat false impression of action generally.”⁴⁵ He asked whether something might “be done to censor press articles?” He complained that the press reporting “disgusts us all completely.”⁴⁶ And, to compound the failure at Jutland, several days after the battle, Britain received another shock when Lord Kitchener, Britain’s war secretary and national icon, was lost when the cruiser *Hampshire*, taking him on a mission to Russia, hit a mine and sank. Not only was there no Trafalgar to trumpet, the British government faced a public relations nightmare.

To regain control the narrative and prevent a loss of confidence in the fleet, the government turned to Winston Churchill, who took prompt action in providing a press release with a more positive spin on the battle’s outcome. Churchill offered the reassuring appraisal: “Our margin of superiority is in no way impaired. . . . The hazy weather, the fall of night, and the retreat of the enemy, alone frustrated the persevering efforts of our brilliant commanders, Sir John Jellicoe and Sir David Beatty, to force a final decision.”⁴⁷ In response to Jellicoe’s bitter complaints about the initial public reaction to his failure to destroy the German fleet, Balfour wrote: “If the Grand Fleet had some reason to feel disappointed over the public attitude on Friday night and Saturday morning, they certainly have no reason to be dissatisfied now. Opinion has undergone a revolution, both rapid and complete.”⁴⁸ Not for the last time would Churchill step in to rally the British public at a critical moment in wartime.

One discreditable consequence that occurred in the battle’s aftermath was the start of a controversy among Britain’s admirals, heirs to a glorious naval tradition, as they attempted to control the narrative of what happened in the North Sea, to shift blame onto someone else’s shoulders. Jellicoe found fault with the information provided by Beatty about the whereabouts of the British and German forces. If supplied with better information from Beatty, Jellicoe believed he would have gained the expected victory. Soon rumors went about that Jellicoe lacked confidence in Beatty, refusing to endorse him as next commander of the Grand Fleet. Jellicoe considered “Beatty had not experience enough and had made many mistakes.”⁴⁹ Beatty, for his part, did not take kindly to any criticism, viewing Jellicoe’s reports as giving an unfair account of the movements and actions of the battle cruiser force. Beatty’s wife opined that, with the battle over, “there seems to be very little to say except to *curse* Jellicoe for not going at them as the B[attle].C[ruiser].s did & never stopped until we had annihilated them. . . . He failed hopelessly & not only that but he does not tell the truth in his *dispatch*.”⁵⁰ Fisher, too, took aim at Beatty, Jellicoe, and (for good measure) the Admiralty as well. He could not understand why the British naval forces were not concentrated when they went into action. Fisher’s verdict: “Beatty blundered.” To a major newspaper editor, Fisher even stooped so far as name-calling in abusing Beatty, dubbing him “Balaclava Beatty”—a mean comparison of the battle cruisers’ destruction at Jutland with the ill-fated charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimean War.⁵¹ The effects of the unseemly blame game among the admirals would prove long lasting, dividing the service into partisan camps for a generation, showing all involved in the feud to be less than professional in their conduct, with officers putting personal reputations and settling scores ahead of the good of the




navy and country.

Despite the sniping, the admirals could agree that there must be no more impetuous charges into action by the British battle cruisers. Even before Jutland, Jellicoe was risk adverse. The frightful losses incurred at Jutland chastened Beatty as well. As commander of the Grand Fleet in place of Jellicoe, Beatty feared a repeat of Jutland, arguing that the British superiority in battle cruisers strength was illusory. He wrote the Admiralty: “In Battle Cruisers we have nine to the German six A considerable superiority on paper, but of the British vessels only three, viz: ‘LION’, ‘PRINCESS ROYAL’, and ‘TIGER’, are fit to be in the line against the German five.” In other words, the Germans actually outnumbered the British by two-to-one in battle cruiser strength. Further, Beatty maintained: “In formulating a strategic policy there is one more all-important factor to be considered—the inefficiency of the projectiles with which the fleet is equipped.” Since the Grand Fleet would not be provided with improved shell until the summer of 1918, Beatty maintained that until “then the Grand Fleet could only meet the enemy under a most serious handicap. I wish to lay emphatic stress on this point. It is one which is known only to myself and a few other officers, and I feel strongly that the War Cabinet should be cognisant of the actual situation.”⁵²

The “serious situation” caused by the adverse balance of strength in the North Sea even led the Admiralty to conclude “that the only way of meeting this danger is by using Japanese Battle Cruisers.” The Admiralty wanted the Foreign Office to explore if the Japanese government “would sell two Battle Cruisers” to Britain.⁵³ That such a drastic step was considered necessary indicates the Admiralty’s fears of the British battle cruisers having another meeting in the North Sea with the Germans. As late as August 1918, the Admiralty maintained: “In spite of the numerical superiority of the British Force the position cannot either now, or in the immediate future be considered as satisfactory.”⁵⁴

This reluctance on the part of Britain’s admirals to have a repeat of Jutland meant that the stalemate in the North Sea would continue, with the German battle fleet tying down considerable British naval assets and resources. Britain simply could not afford to let up its vigilance in watching the German fleet, even if it did not come out to fight. Britain expended enormous resources on the Grand Fleet. Churchill estimated that Britain and its allies possessed “a preponderance in battleships and heavy cruisers of between 4 and 5 to 1” over enemy fleets.⁵⁵ Keeping the main German fleet in check meant that British resources tied down in the North Sea and were thus not available for other uses. For example, the manpower and destroyers with the Grand Fleet could not be used to fight against the German submarine offensive. The trade-off in using destroyers for protection of the Grand Fleet or for defense of commerce was particularly acute. In addition, Germany’s battle fleet prevented Britain from undertaking a close blockade of the German island chain in an attempt to stop submarines from exiting the North Sea. While the stalemate in the North Sea worked to Britain’s overall strategic advantage, it came at a considerable cost in resources that were then not available for urgent use elsewhere.

Across the Atlantic, news of Jutland had an immediate impact in the United States, galvanizing political opinion for a massive buildup in American naval power. The struggle in Europe underscored the connection between the security of the United States and the war’s conduct. Both Britain and Germany acted to restrict American maritime rights. Already, the previous year, the sinking by a German submarine of the British liner *Lusitania*, with the loss of American life, provided a graphic illustration of the war’s escalating dangers. With war raging in Europe, Americans debated what military and naval preparations the United States should undertake in response. How much the United States should prepare for the eventuality of being drawn into the war became a major political issue confronting the White House and Congress.




American naval leaders argued forcefully that the war called for an immediate buildup in the Navy. The war put the United States in grave danger, the admirals warned. Even if the United States could manage to remain neutral, the international environment would remain dangerous: American naval leaders feared a new war might arise as a consequence of the current one. “The present almost world-wide war appears to be in the last analysis a struggle, primarily between Great Britain and Germany, for industrial and commercial supremacy,” argued one leading American admiral. “Whichever one of these two powers is successful will find itself confronted by the certainty that sooner or later its supremacy will be challenged by the United States.”⁵⁶

The admirals benefited from growing public support for the strengthening of the American armed forces—the so-called preparedness movement. President Woodrow Wilson was at first reluctant to be swept along in the popular passion of the preparedness movement. His reluctance would not last. By early 1916, the president concluded that the United States, to improve both its security position and his bargaining hand in negotiations with Britain and Germany, needed increased military might. Consequently, he called for “incomparably the greatest navy in the world.”⁵⁷ But many in of the president’s own party in Congress were not convinced, forcing Wilson to accept reductions in the administration’s proposed naval shipbuilding plan.

The news of Jutland, however, changed the political atmosphere in the Congress, strengthening advocates calling for a crash program of warship construction. To the chagrin of many Democrats, Wilson jettisoned his earlier compromise proposal and supported those in both parties in the Congress—such as, the Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge—who wanted the largest possible effort of naval construction. In a display of bipartisan support, both houses of Congress passed legislation by overwhelming votes to build a navy second-to-none. The famous Naval Act of 29 August 1916 called for the construction of no less than 157 ships. Of this total, twelve would be capital ships of larger tonnage and greater armament than any vessel in the British or German navies. The Americans were leaping ahead of Britain in building the latest generation of capital ships. Only the British capital ship *Hood*, then just beginning construction, compared to the projected giant battleships of the South Dakota-class and battle cruisers of the Lexington-class. Jutland’s impact in the United States was pivotal in changing American attitudes about their place in the world, alerting them to emerging dangers in the international security environment, rousing them to undertake the revolutionary step of striving for a navy as powerful as that of Britain.⁵⁸ What the historian C. Vann Woodward called the age of free security for the United States, predicated on Britain’s naval mastery, was passing away.⁵⁹ The United States was beginning its ascent to naval leadership.

Jutland produced another dramatic turn of events in putting Germany and the United States on a collision course for war. Despite the Kaiser’s bluster, Germany’s naval leaders saw Jutland as too dangerous a gamble to repeat. They feared that the next time the German fleet tangled with the Grand Fleet, it would not be so fortunate to escape as well as to inflict heavier losses on the British. Soon after the battle, Scheer reported to the Kaiser: “there can be no doubt that even the most successful result from a high sea battle will not compel England to make peace.”⁶⁰ Germany’s battle fleet could not win the war at sea—a startling admission from its commander, who had just won a battle that German propaganda was portraying as a glorious victory.

Instead of going for another battle in the North Sea, the German naval leadership turned to the submarine for an offensive to disrupt Britain’s command of the world’s shipping lanes. Scheer recommended: “A victorious end to the war at not too distant a date can only be looked for by the crushing of English economic life through U-boat action against English commerce.”⁶¹ While Britain had won the arms race with Germany in surface ships, another competition in naval armaments that started on the eve of war pitted a German buildup of submarines against British




capabilities to defend trade. This stealthy undersea threat would pose an immense menace to Britain's command of the seas. Before the war, Germany had lagged behind Britain in building a submarine force: Tirpitz favoring putting his resources into increasing the German surface fleet. It was Britain (and not Germany) that pioneered the development of long-range submarines, capable of carrying out offensive operations outside of home waters. Germany, however, did not lag behind for long in this new weapon for waging war at sea. If Germany's naval leaders were deterred from using their battle fleet, seeing the capital ships as too valuable to risk losing, they were not at all inhibited in their willingness to take the fight to Britain on the high seas with their submarines. The range of the German naval offensive in the war at sea would reach out from the North Sea to the Atlantic, to include the waters around the second island chain and beyond to the third island chain formed by Ireland. Germany was adopting a naval offset strategy of its own to defeat Britain at sea, using submarines to get around the British lead in capital ships and advantage of geographic position.

To be effective in disrupting Britain's maritime trading network, the German submarine force had to receive authority to have permissive rules of engagement. These rules of engagement would permit submarine skippers to fire without warning on merchant ships, neutral as well as Allied, without warning. Only by fighting in this way could submarines reduce their risk of being attacked by armed merchant ships. Once restrictions were lifted, German submarines would go on to inflict a stunning blow on world trade, as Germany's naval leaders predicted. In January 1917, before the unrestricted submarine campaign began, German submarines sank 145 British, Allied, and neutral ships, totaling 291,459 tons of merchant shipping. In April, German submarines sank 354 ships, totaling 834,549 tons of shipping.⁶² These losses would bring about a German victory before too long. Churchill would call this phase of the naval war a "life-and-death struggle of the Royal Navy with the German U-boats."⁶³

The German success in destroying merchant shipping owed much, however, to the British Admiralty's mismanagement of trade defense. In defending against Germany's submarine offensive, the British Admiralty could not have been a more cooperative adversary, acting according to the script written for it by German naval planners. In charge at the Admiralty was Jellicoe, whose lackluster performance as commander of the Grand Fleet had not prevented him from being promoted to First Sea Lord, the uniformed head of the Royal Navy. This choice would prove unfortunate. Jellicoe's pessimism stunned Britain's main army field commander Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. At a high-level conference of political and military leaders to discuss future operations, Haig recorded to his diary Jellicoe stating that, owing to shipping losses to submarines, "it would be impossible for Great Britain to continue the war in 1918. This was a bombshell for the Cabinet. . . Jellicoe's words were, 'There is no good discussing plans for next spring. We cannot go on.'"⁶⁴ Jellicoe feared that losses in merchant ships may have "such a serious effect upon the import of food and other necessities into allied countries as to force us into accepting peace terms."⁶⁵ Britain was losing the war at sea before its armies and those of its allies could win on land.

Jellicoe's failure to move quickly to adopt convoys magnified shipping losses. Ample evidence existed to show the value of convoys for the protection of trade. In this era, Britain was an energy exporter. British coal was exported to France, for example, and played a vital role in supporting the French wartime economy. This coal trade across the Channel was convoyed, and these convoys suffered minimal losses despite the presence of German submarines. Jellicoe's opposition delayed the widespread use of convoys.⁶⁶ As first sea lord, Jellicoe was losing the war at sea to the German submarines—not in an afternoon—but in a protracted attrition battle involving merchant shipping losses. While unwilling to risk battleships, keeping them heavily defended by destroyers against attack by submarines, Jellicoe proved content to send merchant shipping into dangerous waters without adequate protection. Yet Britain's war effort depended on the protection of merchant shipping. Britain could no more afford to lose the Battle of the Atlantic




than it could suffer defeat in the North Sea. Jellicoe's ineffectiveness and pessimism led Lloyd George to fire him on Christmas Eve 1917. The prime minister complained: "Jellicoe has lost his nerve." If attacked by political opponents for firing Jellicoe, Lloyd George was ready to make "disclosures that will astonish the House of Commons." He would demonstrate gross "negligence and incompetence" at the Admiralty.⁶⁷

Germany's search for a quick and decisive victory at sea meant a showdown with the United States, the most powerful neutral. Unrestricted submarine warfare meant sinking American ships. Germany's leaders harbored no illusions that a decision for an all-out submarine offensive would trigger war with the United States. If Germany did not win quickly, then the war would be lost once the United States mobilized and brought to bear its resources. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg understood the stakes at risk in provoking the United States. In arguing against a submarine offensive, he reasoned that, "if *certainty* for the defeat of England exists, we have to dare it. Nobody can give such *assurance* and it remains a throw of the dice with Germany's existence at stake." He judged "submarine warfare the *ultima ratio*; such a challenge would mean *finis Germaniae* in case of failure."⁶⁸

The German admirals, however, disagreed. The submarine had been hyped by German leaders to be a wonder and vengeance weapon that would bring Britain to its knees. Standing against the bullying from the admirals and domestic political opponents, Bethmann Hollweg prevented Germany from undertaking a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare. But by the end of 1916, time had run out for the chancellor. Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff, chief of the German naval staff, provided the strategic rationale for the immediate undertaking of the submarine offensive in a memorandum dated 22 December 1916. He argued that the war would end in mutual exhaustion for the belligerents and a disaster for Germany if victory was not won by the autumn of 1917. The only prospect for gaining victory before then rested on the submarine force. The Allied war effort critically depended on merchant shipping. Unrestricted submarine warfare would double the rate of merchant shipping losses and force Britain to make peace. He maintained: "an energetic blow delivered with all force against English merchant tonnage promises certain success." American objections should not lead Germany "to recoil from making use at the decisive moment of a weapon that promises victory for us." Furthermore, Holtzendorff argued that American assistance would not arrive in time to prevent Britain's defeat. The Navy Minister Admiral Eduard von Capelle agreed, even telling Reichstag deputies that the Americans would not be able to reach Europe "because our U-boats will sink them."⁶⁹ The generals agreed with the admirals, to form a united front of the military and naval chiefs against the chancellor. General Erich Ludendorff foolishly maintained that "America does not count." The popular war leader Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg followed (as usual) Ludendorff's lead, telling the chancellor that there must be no more delay.

On 9 January 1917, at the fateful war council at Pless, Wilhelm came down on the side of the generals and admirals. The Kaiser believed: "Now the time has passed for negotiating with America! If Wilson wants war he must bring it about and then shall have it!" Bethmann Hollweg was forced to capitulate. The Empress found the chancellor "a completely broken man." Bethmann Hollweg resigned himself to the view: "When the military authorities consider submarine warfare essential, I am not in a position to object." He predicted that the submarines would not end the struggle with a smashing German victory, the war of exhaustion would continue, with Germany's enemies "pushing us back in France and Belgium to the Maas, with the capture of many guns and the taking of a host of prisoners."⁷⁰ His prediction would prove all too accurate.

Although the German leaders went to great lengths to portray the Battle of Jutland as a victory, it had the opposite effect of convincing them that the battle fleet was not the decisive weapon in the war at sea and led them to use the submarine as an alternative to defeat Britain. Only after months of deliberation did Germany's rulers decide to



execute the submarine offensive: they did not sleepwalk into war with the United States. This self-defeating strategic behavior came from an underestimation of American strength and an overestimation of the submarine's destructive potential. Imagine if the United States had not entered the war: Germany stood to win a war of exhaustion over its continental enemies—France, Italy, and Russia—which were in danger of collapse. Britain, too, was staggered by its heavy losses. Even the grimly determined Churchill believed “the Allies would have been beaten if America had not come in.”⁷¹ Instead, the United States entry into the war transformed the balance of forces. That, by war's end, an American army of over 2,000,000 men would eventually deploy to France testifies to German strategic folly and the utter failure of the submarine offensive.

So What?

The noted British historian Corelli Barnett argued in his account of high leadership during the First World War that Admiral Jellicoe was a sailor with a flawed cutlass.⁷² The Royal Navy that went into war in 1914, to be sure, was not prepared for all the challenges it would face in the years ahead. After all, a country goes to war with the navy it has and not necessarily with the naval capabilities it needs. Over the war's course, the British learned and adapted. The Royal Navy at the war's end in 1918 was a much more lethal fighting force than the navy at the conflict's beginning. The learning curve for Britain, however, came at great cost in lives and ships lost. The cutlass was not so much flawed as were the admirals who wielded it. Churchill was scathing in his criticism of the Royal Navy's uniformed leaders for not giving serious attention to the education of officers for high command and planning staffs. They did not want “brainy” officers, studying their profession, reading books on war at sea and history, writing and hence making a contribution to the examination of naval warfare. Churchill lamented that, as a consequence, “at the outset of the conflict we had more captains of ships than captains of war.”⁷³

In any future major conflict at sea, naval leaders will have to adapt quickly to the unforeseen and to losses, making best use of the capabilities at their disposal. Rigid, obstinate leaders, unable to adapt to the strategic, operational, and tactical environment of real combat, will lose the war. Educating and selecting leaders who are quick to learn, who will innovate while fighting, who are willing to discard prewar practices that do not stand up to the test of war must be a priority. Naval leaders who can understand the international strategic environment and national interest, who can relate that understanding to risk management in operations at sea, come from the deep study of war and strategy. This kind of high-quality leadership requires a genuine commitment to professional military education, to affording time for learning, and not looking upon the schoolhouse as a regrettable check-in-the-box exercise to be circumvented by faddish short training courses.

In a future conflict, will future naval leaders have the time to learn and adapt? That time can only be bought by having superiority at sea before the battle is joined. An obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the Great War is the strategic importance of possessing an ample margin of superiority in naval forces. In a war at sea between first-class naval opponents, losses in ships and sailors are bound to occur. At Jutland, Britain suffered heavier losses than Germany. Despite these losses, Britain kept the German fleet in check much as it had done before the battle. Britain's Royal Navy could take punishing losses and still retain command of the sea. The overall strategic position of the two navies remained unchanged. When the German fleet sortied again into the North Sea in August 1916, the British Grand Fleet stood to sea as well, ready and able for a rematch. Britain's leaders understood before the war that they needed to remain ahead of Germany in the naval arms race. Many British Liberals resented having to spend so much on the Royal Navy. Arms races, to liberals, are a dangerous security spiral that can escalate into war. Despite pangs of social conscience, Britain's Liberal government nonetheless made the investment in naval forces that provided the



margin of superiority needed to defeat Germany. While Britain's Liberal government failed to deter Germany's rulers from launching the war, it did provide the naval foundation for achieving victory in the struggle for command of the maritime commons and mastery in Europe.

In a future Sino-American clash, the United States Navy must expect to suffer losses on a scale that it has not suffered since the Second World War. Both sides are pursuing strategies in weaponry and doctrine to offset the advantages of the other. The Department of Defense's most recent report on China's military developments underscores the increasing danger posed to American naval forces: "China's coastal defense cruise missiles (CDCM), air- / surface- / sub-surface launched anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), submarine-launched torpedoes, and naval mines provide the PLAN with an ability to counter an adversary fleet's intervention with multi-axis, high-intensity attacks that increase in lethality as adversary naval combatants approach China's coast. Additionally, China has fielded CSS-5 anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) specifically designed to hold adversary aircraft carriers at risk 1,500 km off China's coast."⁷⁴ The lethality and wide range of weaponry that China and the United States can employ in fighting at sea will result in heavy losses. At Jutland, Britain lost 14 surface combatants—including three battle cruisers—out of a force of 150 warships. These losses might have gone much higher if Jellicoe and Scheer acted in a more aggressive way. Remember, too, the gunfire at Jutland was inaccurate, unlike today's precision-guided weaponry. Major battles of the Second World War in the Pacific—Pearl Harbor, Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal, and Okinawa—would confirm the lethality of high-intensity, modern naval warfare.

What if the United States Navy were to lose between eight to ten percent of its surface warships in a single day of fighting with China, as Britain's Royal Navy did at Jutland? A key to success for Britain in the Great War was that it could renew its naval power despite losses. Against a peer competitor, navies must expect protracted fighting, marked by attrition. Even after Trafalgar, the war at sea against Napoleon went on for another decade. The last war fought by the United States with China dragged on from the winter of 1950-1 until the summer of 1953 costing over 35,000 American lives. China, backed by its Russian ally, fought the United States to a standstill, with Washington settling for the status quo ante. In that conflict, the fighting remained concentrated on the Korean peninsula, and the Navy did not suffer heavy losses in ships. In a future conflict fought at sea with China, the Navy will be in the crosshairs of Chinese weaponry. How much punishment can a navy take before it loses the ability to carry out essential wartime missions? Is the United States in a position to retain command of the global maritime commons after suffering heavy losses in combat, such as the major navies did during the two world wars when they clashed? The United States needs to spend more in peace to ensure that it possesses the margin of naval strength needed to frustrate an armed attempt by China to achieve hegemony in Asia in wartime. War plans must be realistic and have the forces to back them up in the face of losses in combat.

In an age of fiscal austerity, will the American government, foreign policy and strategy establishment, and people prepare in peacetime not only for the day of battle but to continue the fight in the days after? Of course, force planning under conditions of fiscal austerity is not new. Alfred Thayer Mahan posed the same question 126 years ago: "Whether a democratic government will have the foresight, the keen sensitiveness to national position and credit, the willingness to insure its prosperity by adequate outpouring of money in times of peace, all which are necessary for military preparation, is yet an open question. Popular governments are not generally favorable to military expenditure, however necessary."⁷⁵ The European great powers had already been fighting for two years during the First World War before the United States took seriously naval preparedness. It is a sobering thought that, when looking into the future, naval preparedness will lag behind the danger, and war will come before the United States is fully ready to fight. Meanwhile, American military weakness led Germany's military rulers, in their bid to win quickly, to discount



the power United States. That is the American experience in both world wars.


Another conclusion is that the outcome of the prewar arms race is a good indicator of which country will prevail if a cold war becomes hot. Britain held command of the maritime commons during the war because it built up a lead over Germany before the fighting started. All too often concerns voiced by policymakers, scholars, and analysts about the baneful consequences of arms races and security dilemmas conceal the strategic value of military superiority. The leading power will no longer lead if it falls behind in an arms race to a rising challenger.

There is another dynamic in the prewar naval arms race that is often overlooked. While Britain beat Germany in the battleship competition, a new menace in the submarine was just emerging. The British needed to stay ahead of Germany in meeting the submarine menace as much as it did the German surface fleet in the North Sea. Britain could not afford to lose against either threat. While the German battle fleet remained on the defensive for most of the war, Germany's submarines went on the attack and inflicted an immense amount of damage on shipping. Just compare the damage inflicted by Germany's navy during the war: the High Sea Fleet at Jutland destroyed 111,000 tons displacement of British warships in a single day; whereas German submarines sank nearly 13-million tons of shipping.⁷⁶ Defeating a naval challenger, then, will require beating back asymmetrical dangers as well as more conventional threats.

By championing the buildup of the navy, by stoking German nationalism and anti-British public opinion, channeling popular passions toward the acquisition of naval weaponry to fight Britain at sea, Kaiser Wilhelm unintentionally contributed to his own downfall and Germany's defeat in the Great War. By building a fleet against Britain, Germany raised British fears of a German super-state seeking European hegemony. The historian Avner Offer argues: "Germany's naval armament under Wilhelm II was a fundamental cause of the Anglo-German war."⁷⁷ Germany then escalated the fighting at sea by using submarines to damage Britain's ability to wage war. In these circumstances, the German navy felt compelled to take offensive operations. National pride, the large investment in naval force structure and capabilities to fight at sea demanded aggressive action, serving as a propellant for escalation and self-defeating strategic behavior.⁷⁸

In case of a conflict with the United States, China's rulers fear that a maritime blockade will damage their country's economy and put pressure on them to move quickly to end the fighting. They have tried to counter this danger to their access to outside resources by developing overland infrastructure into the heartland of Eurasia. Still, China will have great difficulty breaking this maritime blockade if, in case of blatant Chinese aggression, other countries in the region join in supporting the United States. The island chains of the Western Pacific will pose a strategic challenge for China to overcome. If the German experience in the First World War is any guide, the Chinese armed forces will argue for vigorous offensive operations to disrupt American command of the aerospace, cyber, and maritime domains in reply to a blockade. Before finding a negotiated solution, the Chinese military will likely want to test the strength and resolve of the United States and its coalition partners. Germany's rulers took offensive action, even though the odds for success looked low, because they preferred a high risk gamble to what they convinced themselves was certain defeat. China's panoply of ballistic and cruise missiles will enable it to carry out deep strikes, hitting targets beyond the first and second island chains, just as German submarines could range out to attack shipping at a distance in the waters around the British Isles.

A final observation is that a future contest in the aerospace, cyber, maritime, and nuclear domains will take place in the larger context of competing high-stakes policy aims. While China's leaders have called for "a new type of great-power relationship," the steady buildup of their armed forces looks more like a return to past contests for mastery.



Kaiser Wilhelm and Tirpitz would recognize China's strategy to build up their armed might as a precondition for furthering their geopolitical ambitions on the world stage. The slogan "China Dream"—like the German demand to attain the status of world power, a place in the sun—might appear vague but it nonetheless stands for real aspirations to achieve greater international standing and security.⁷⁹ The Great War was not fought for trifling stakes.⁸⁰ Germany's rulers judged their regime's very survival at stake in striving to emerge a new leader in a post-British world. They stoked German popular passion, using nationalism as a rallying cry to bolster the regime's legitimacy. The mantra of world power or decline trapped Germany's rulers into pursuing a dream of hegemonic ambitions. To settle for anything less was to admit the bankruptcy of their claim to lead the German people. Germany's ruling political and military oligarchy, in their fight to stay atop the political and social pyramid at home, wrecked their country, killing and maiming many patriotic Germans along the way. The dream of world power had turned into a nightmare.

The slogan world power or decline was equally applicable to Britain. The future security and wellbeing of the British Empire required the defeat of Germany's aggression in Europe. To permit Berlin to overturn the balance of power in Europe would undermine Britain's leading role in the international system. The British leaders and people showed themselves willing to fight rather than accommodate themselves to a Europe dominated by Germany. The cost of defeating that challenge proved extremely high. Indeed, the very notion that Britain won the Great War seems hardly the case. That 1918 can count as a victory for Britain rests on the counterfactual proposition of having avoided a far worse outcome of defeat at the hands of Germany. After all, the British Empire did not fall apart at the Great War's end, as did the Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian empires. It would take another world war to break the British Empire.

This competitive dynamic of nationalism, regime legitimacy, and ambition for international leadership, if played out again with a resort to violence in the twenty-first century, will prove even more ruinous than it did for the twentieth. In a future war involving nuclear-armed great powers, the rational course of action would seem to be for leaders to seek an early negotiated end to the struggle. The Great War offers a different more frightening scenario, with escalation tempting leaders to go another round in the fighting in a quest for victory. Any future Battle of Jutland will thus play out against this high-stakes backdrop of rising and declining great powers. Success in that contest will require that the United States arm and prepare not only for the day of battle but for the day after.

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¹⁹ Churchill to Jellicoe, 4 January 1915, Jellicoe Papers, Ad. Ms. 48990, ff. 175-177, British Library.

²⁰ Jellicoe to Balfour, 25 January 1916, Jellicoe Papers, Ad. Ms. 48992, Vol. 4, ff. 6-13, British Library.

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