BRITAIN AND THE GERMAN NAVAL THREAT, 1908-1910

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Germany's commitment to build a battle fleet, initiated by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz's Navy Laws of 1898 and 1900, threatened Britain's traditional superiority in sea power and led to a naval arms race between the two countries. By 1908 they were engaged in a costly competition in the area of battleship construction, their rivalry fueled by Tirpitz's Supplementary Navy Law of 1906 and by the launching of Britain's *Dreadnought* later the same year. Germany's decision to produce Dreadnought-type battleships added a qualitative dimension to the race. The fact that the new battleship rendered all previous designs obsolete eliminated the existing British advantage and gave Germany the opportunity to amass a more formidable challenge to the supremacy of the Royal Navy.

Strategically, the big battleships were the inter-continental ballistic missiles of their day.[1] A strong battle fleet was a hallmark of greatness, providing a country with the means to project power and influence events far beyond its borders. Because dreadnoughts were less restricted by the geographical realities that limited the effectiveness of even the mightiest armies, they became an indicator of a country's strength and were counted in much the same way that nuclear warheads are in the present arms race. Likewise, battleship construction and naval competition became a heated domestic issue, fomenting political

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1. Fritz Erler, prominent West German Social Democrat, observed this similarity as early as May 1957, when he noted that "atomic weapons are the mark of a world power, as battleships were for Tirpitz and the Kaiser." Quoted in Gordon D. Drummond, *The German Social Democrats in Opposition, 1949-1960: The Case Against Rearmament* (Norman, Okla.: Oklahoma University Press, 1982), p. 199.

rhetoric in a vein similar to the "missile gap" and "window of vulnerability" of more recent times.

The Anglo-German naval race has been subjected to a variety of interpretations, both in specialized works and in broader studies on the origins of the First World War.[2] Fritz Fischer's school, embracing the belief that a country's foreign policy is an extension of its domestic policy, has dealt with Tirpitz's naval buildup in the context of the internal situation in Imperial Germany.[3] The same treatment has yet to be applied to Britain's response to the German threat. In a recent work, Zara Steiner argues that the Fischer thesis does not apply to Britain, which, she concludes, went to war in 1914 for reasons rooted solely in diplomatic policy.[4] Consequently, she handles the naval race in a diplomatic context, dismissing the significance of domestic politics in the British reaction to the Tirpitz plan.

The following narrative is constructed to demonstrate the close connection between Britain's domestic situation and her response to the German naval threat during the period from early 1908 to mid-1910, a time which, despite its importance, is covered inadequately by the existing literature.[5]

2. On naval construction and competition, see E.L. Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935); Walther Hubatsch, *Die Ära Tirpitz* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt Verlag, 1955); Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, vol. I: *The Road to War, 1904-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent: Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan. Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter Wilhelm II* (Dusseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1971); Peter Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry, 1900-1914* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1974). General works with information on the rivalry include Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975); Volker R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (London: Macmillan, 1973); F.H. Hinsley, ed., *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Zara S. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980), and *The Realities Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy, 1865-1980* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).

3. *E.g.* Fischer, *War of Illusions;* Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan* and *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914.*

4. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War.*

5. Of the specialized works cited in note 2 above,Woodward views the entire naval race in the context of the major prewar international crises (over Morocco, Bosnia-Herzegovina, etc.), and Hubatsch does not consider the role of domestic policy in the British response to the German buildup. Marder essentially is a naval historian, and uses the feud within the Royal Navy between Sir John Fisher and his rival, Admiral Charles Beresford, as a backdrop for his treatment of the years 1908-10. Steinberg's work concentrates on the formulation of

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The original German Navy Law of 1898 provided for nineteen new battleships, their construction to begin over the following six years, and for the automatic replacement of all battleships after twenty-five years of service. It also established a building tempo by which three new battleships would be laid down every year. Tirpitz's second navy law (1900) doubled the number of battleships to thirty-eight and extended to 1920 the deadline for their completion, spreading out the financing of the program to the 1917-18 budget year. His supplementary law of 1906 increased from fourteen to twenty the number of "large cruisers" in the projected battle fleet and raised the tonnage limit on new German battleships.[6]

Thus, by 1908, Tirpitz succeeded in increasing Germany's commitment to become a major naval power by presenting his program in stages rather than as a single package. To request so much at one time would have offended the Reichstag and provoked a major diplomatic crisis with Britain. Tirpitz remained tactfully vague about the ultimate goals of his program, but advertised the fleet as the potential lever with which Germany would obtain its rightful place in the world. The battle fleet would be the peaceful means to force Britain to recognize Germany as a world power. The negative side to Tirpitz's strategy was his contention that Germany must refuse to negotiate with Britain until after the program was completed. To answer critics who argued that such planned intransigence would lead to war, and to the destruction of the German fleet before it was strong enough to fight back, Tirpitz cited the belief, common among naval strategists of the time, that a fleet two-thirds the size of its opponent stood an even chance of winning in battle. Under this formula, the "risk" period for Germany would last until her fleet reached the 2:3 ratio vis-á-vis Britain. Fortunately for Tirpitz, it was not until 1906, when the German navy became the world's second-largest, that the British began to view the program as a threat to their security.

Even then, the British made no immediate effort to respond. This complacency enabled Tirpitz to propose an additional navy law for 1908, which called for a reduction in the replacement time for battleships from twenty-five years to twenty and an increase in funding for construction. The latter provision would allow Germany to build ships of the more expensive dreadnought design and keep up with Britain in the qualitative competition. The new law also proposed that the twenty "large cruisers" of the 1906 law be built as battle-

the Tirpitz plan during the 1890s, and Berghahn's account stops in 1908. Padfield, like Marder, focuses on the Fisher-Beresford feud in his coverage of this period. Historians have tended to emphasize the periods 1904-7 and 1911-14 as the most critical of the prewar years, leaving 1908-10 relatively unexploited.

6. Berghahn, *Approach*, pp. 34, 37, 59; Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 106, 127.

cruisers, imitating a design produced by Britain's First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher, for a capital ship[7] that would supplement his dreadnoughts. This raised from thirty-eight to fifty-eight the number of capital ships to be produced under the Tirpitz program.[8]

The most significant feature of the new law was an increase in the rate of German building. Germany had been laying three keels per year (the *dreiertempo*) for ten years, giving her thirty battleships built-and-building as of the end of 1907.[9] Only five were of the dreadnought type, though, and none of these would be completed for at least another two years. Under the terms of the 1908 law, construction would accelerate to four capital ships (three dreadnoughts and one battlecruiser) per year for the next four years, then drop to two keels laid per year for six years, accounting for all of the twenty-eight remaining ships. This provision would carry the program through the 1917-18 budget year, after which the original ships begun in 1898 would automatically be replaced, raising the tempo to three per year once again. Thus, the new navy law would give Tirpitz his Iron Budget, a self-perpetuating navy which no Reichstag could legally reduce through a withholding of funds.

Another of Tirpitz's long-standing goals, a battle fleet of sixty capital ships, was left unfulfilled by the new law. But the naval secretary was confident that yet another navy law could be used to meet and even surpass this number, by amending the 1908 law when the time came to drop the rate of construction to two keels per year for the last six years (1912-17) of the program.[10] He was confident that the tremendous expense of maintaining a safe measure of naval superiority would force Britain to negotiate some sort of settlement with Germany, fulfilling his prophecy that the battle fleet would bring the Reich recognition as a world power. In the meantime, the increased tempo would prevent Germany from falling behind in the qualitative race and keep the pressure on Britain to come to terms.

In November 1907, the new law was sanctioned by the Bundesrat and published in Berlin. The German naval budget for 1908-09 would be £17 million, up sharply from £13.9 million the previous year. The Conservative press in Britain noted this dramatic departure from the increases of roughly £1 million that had occurred annually since the 1898 law, and remarked that the new measures were likely to be approved by the Reichstag, where "practically every vote, except those of the Social Democrats," would be in favor of continued

7. "Capital" ships were a navy's largest warships the core of a fleet and the twentieth-century equivalent of the "ships of the line" of earlier times.

8. Berghahn, *Tirpitz-Plan,* p. 556f.; Marder, *Road to War,* p. 136.

9. Actually, the twenty-ninth ship, the last of the 1907 program, was not laid down until March 1908.

10. Berghahn, *Approach,* p. 65. Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs,* vol. I (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1919), p. 267, confirms that he never intended to let the tempo drop to two ships per year, as it was scheduled to do after 1911.

naval expansion.[11]

Meanwhile, the British were reducing their capital ship construction. Ever since the 1890s, when the program provided for by the Naval Defence Act of 1889 ran its course, Britain had had no fixed navy law and appropriated money for battleships on a year-to-year basis. Four capital ships (the *Dreadnought* and three battlecruisers) were funded by the 1905-6 budget, the last formulated by Arthur Balfour's Unionist government. When Balfour resigned in December 1905, bringing to power Henry Campbell-Bannerman and the Liberals, his First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Cawdor, left as a legacy the so-called Cawdor Memorandum, a recommendation that Britain continue to lay down four new capital ships per year to ensure her superiority for the future. The new prime minister at first accepted the Cawdor program, but reversed his course after his party won a landslide victory in the General Election of January 1906. Many Liberals campaigned on a platform of reduced arms expenditures and increased funding for social programs, producing a split within the party between the "little navy" radical Liberals and the "big navy" Liberal imperialists.[12] To the chagrin of the latter faction, which included Chancellor of the Exchequer Herbert Asquith, Secretary of State for War Richard Haldane, and Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, the "little navy" Liberals won the intra-party struggle and the naval program for 1906-7 was reduced to three ships, equal to the German program of the same year.

After laying down three again in 1907-8, the British cut their program of capital ships to two in the estimates for 1908-9. When the Admiralty proposed these new reductions in December 1907, only weeks after the publication of the new German navy law, the Opposition began to question whether the government was ignoring its obligation to provide for an adequate national defense. Yet Fisher and the Admiralty did not believe that they could justify starting construction on more than two capital ships in the upcoming year. Britain had a one-year lead over Germany in developing the dreadnought and battlecruiser and, owing to delays the Germans encountered in drawing up similar designs, already had a total of nine of the new ships built-and-building, compared to Germany's four building. Notwithstanding Tirpitz's new navy law, Britain by 1910 would have ten new capital ships completed to Germany's five.[13]

Unfortunately for Fisher, the "little navy" Liberals in Campbell-Bannerman's cabinet thought that even two additional capital ships were too many. The source of their discontent was the proposed increase in the estimates, to £35.2 million from a low of £34.3 million in 1907-8, which would come

11. *Daily Mail* (London) 3619, Monday, 18 November 1907, p. 7.

12. Marder, *Road to War,* pp. 125-126. In the General Election of 1906 the Liberals won 400 seats, the Unionists 157, Irish Nationalists 83, and Labor 30. See Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People: The British General Elections of 1910* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 130.

13. See appendix.

despite the reduction in the capital ship program. His figures were finally approved – after all, they were still much lower than the £38.5 million appropriated in Balfour's last budget – but only after considerable debate. This program of two ships, for a year in which Germany was building four, ultimately would lead to the great navy scare of 1909. As early as February 1908, the month in which the Reichstag ratified Tirpitz's new navy law, the Conservative press in Britain called for the construction of seven capital ships per year to counter the German buildup.[14] Deriding the Liberal government's emphasis on social programs over armaments, the Opposition posed the question: "Is Britain going to surrender her maritime supremacy to provide old-age pensions?"[15]

Naval expansion had become an issue in British domestic politics. Balfour and the conservative Unionists were opposed to the Liberal welfare program and made good use of the fact that national defense was not Campbell-Bannerman's chief priority. But in April 1908, just as it appeared that the size of the navy would become a partisan question, illness forced Campbell-Bannerman to resign. He died within the month, leaving Asquith, his successor as prime minister, in control of the Liberal party. The "big navy" faction, led by Asquith, Haldane, and Grey, now dominated the cabinet. On the subject of naval expenditure, they were closer to Balfour and the Unionists than to the radical wing of their own party.

In the cabinet reshuffle following Campbell-Bannerman's resignation, radical Liberal David Lloyd George became chancellor of the exchequer. With Winston Churchill, newly-appointed president of the Board of Trade, he assumed leadership of the "little navy" faction within the party. The debate over the British program for 1909 began the following month, when Fisher and First Lord of the Admiralty Reginald McKenna called for a minimum of four, preferably six, capital ships to be included in the next year's estimates. Grey quickly backed their position, while Lloyd George and Churchill insisted that four should be the maximum.[16] During the summer of 1908 the Liberal press voiced hopes for a naval understanding with Germany to head off an escalation of the arms race, but Emperor William II's staunch support of the Tirpitz program prevented any settlement. Much to the dismay of the German chancellor, Prince Bernhard von Bülow, who also sought a way out of the costly competition, the Kaiser rejected "with great vigour" the suggestion that Germany slow her rate of naval construction, even if the purpose of such a concession would be to keep Britain from allying herself more closely with France.[17] In August, during the course of meetings held at Kronberg to discuss

14. *Daily Mail* 3695, Thursday, 13 February 1908, p. 5.
15. From an editorial in the *Daily Mail* 3704, Tuesday, 25 February 1908, p. 4.
16. Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 142-143.
17. Bernhard von Bülow, *Memoirs of Prince von Bülow*, vol. II: *From the Morocco Crisis to Resignation, 1903-1909*, trans. Geoffrey Dunlop (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1931), p. 355.

the naval race, William conveyed to Grey's undersecretary, Sir Charles Hardinge, his refusal to limit the German program.[18]

Nevertheless, Bülow's hopes for a settlement were sustained by word from the German ambassador in London, Count Paul von Wolff-Metternich, of congenial interviews with Lloyd George on the subject of naval expansion. His reports kept the chancellor under the delusion that there was hope for a settlement agreeable to Tirpitz and the Kaiser as well as the Liberal cabinet, even though the latter was now led by Asquith and the "big navy" faction.[19] The possibilities for an understanding grew more remote after October 1908, when the London *Daily Telegraph* published its scandalous interview with the Kaiser. Among William's more unfortunate remarks was a statement that most of his subjects were anti-British, a "revelation" that heightened fears over the German buildup and prompted the British Navy League to call for a program of eight capital ships for 1909. As the year drew to a close Asquith, hoping in vain to contain the dispute, unwittingly added to the furor by refusing to allow the customary publication of the proposed naval estimates for the following budget year.[20]

Meanwhile, in Germany, the final weeks of 1908 were a difficult time both for the Kaiser and the chancellor. William's popularity hit an all-time low in the wake of the *Daily Telegraph* interview. Reichstag deputies called for an end to "person rule" and the introduction of true parliamentary government, while the Bundesrat expressed concern over the damage the affair had caused to the "monarchist idea" in Germany. Bülow, having failed to take advantage of two opportunities to block publication of the interview, emerged from the crisis in no position to stand up to Tirpitz or to deal with a strong British reaction to the German naval threat.[21]

Early in December 1908, McKenna submitted to the cabinet the naval estimates for 1909-10, which provided for a program of six new capital ships. After the ministers gave their preliminary approval, Grey on the 18th informed Metternich of the increase in construction, leaving open the possibility of a smaller program provided that Germany reduced her shipbuilding tempo in return.[22] A week later Bülow formulated a plan to slow the rate of German building: instead of laying four keels per year from 1909 through 1911 and two per year from 1912 through 1917, he proposed reducing the tempo to three for a six-year period (1909-1914) and to two for 1915 through 1917. This relaxation of the rate would not cost Germany any ships, but would delay the fourth

18. Berghahn, *Approach*, p. 68; Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 143-144.

19. *E.g.* Metternich to Bülow, 1 August 1908, Alfred von Tirpitz, *Politische Dokumente: Der Aufbau der deutschen Weltmacht* (Berlin: J.G. Gottasche, 1924), pp. 75-82. (Cited hereafter as *Pol. Dok.*).

20. Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 144-145.

21. Berghahn, *Approach*, p. 80; Bülow, *Memoirs*, pp. 393-394, 402.

22. Marder, *Road to War*, p. 151.

ship in the years 1909-1911 to 1912-1914.[23]

Tirpitz, secretly planning to fill the gap of 1912-17 with another navy bill, rejected the chancellor's proposal as a "humiliation" and speculated that the growing navy scare in Britain was being "arranged" by big navy circles in London.[24] He certainly saw no reason to be conciliatory, for by the end of 1908 Germany had nine dreadnoughts and battlecruisers building, while Britain, slow in laying down the two ships of the 1908 program, still had a total of ten built-and-building. The British soon realized that Tirpitz was gaining ground; in early January 1909, Grey confronted Metternich with projections that Germany would have at least thirteen capital ships completed by 1912, with a possibility of seventeen or twenty-one if she employed "full shipbuilding capacity apart from financial restrictions."[25] The latter figures were greatly overestimated, inspired by intelligence reports that at least two ships of the German program for the 1909-10 budget year, which did not begin until 1 April, were already under construction. The British suspected that Tirpitz, in addition to raising the rate of German construction to four ships per year, was planning to lay down each program months ahead of time, at no risk because funding for the ships was already guaranteed by law. Britain, of course, could not use a similar acceleration tactic because she had no navy law and had to determine the size of her program on a year-to-year basis, with no guarantee of how large the naval estimates would be.

Tirpitz did nothing at this stage to dispel the acceleration rumor, preferring to wait and see what final form the 1909-10 estimates would take. Actually, the British information was only partially correct. German shipyards did get an early start in collecting materials for two ships of the 1909 program, but only one dreadnought, the future *Oldenburg* (see appendix) was laid down in advance of 1 April, and in its case construction began only one month early. Recent industrial expansion at Krupp's, and the German government's unusually large purchases of nickel (used in making guns, gun mountings, and armor), supported Grey's contentions, though, and reinforced sentiment for a strong British response. The new "evidence" combined with a healthy respect for Germany's industrial capacity to fuel the scare.[26]

Late in January Tirpitz, under pressure from Bülow, formulated a plan for an Anglo-German naval settlement. Under its terms, Germany would pledge to build only three capital ships per year for the next ten years in return for a

23. Bülow to Metternich, 25 December 1908, *Pol Dok.*, p. 103.

24. Tirpitz to Bülow, 4 January 1909, *ibid.*, p. 105.

25. Metternich to Bülow, 4 January 1909, *ibid.*, pp. 109-111.

26. Padfield, *Great Naval Race*, p. 231, and Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 152-153, believe that Tirpitz was attempting to accelerate the tempo. Figures pieced together from Marder's appendix, pp. 441-442, and from Siegfried Breyer, *Schlachtschiffe und Schlachtkreuzer, 1905-1970* (Munich: J.F. Lehman's Verlag, 1970), 283-7, prove that acceleration never occurred. See appendix.

British promise to build or buy no more than four per year for the same period. The purchase clause attached to the British pledge no doubt came in reaction to speculation that the Liberal government would try to supplement its naval program by buying from Brazil two dreadnoughts nearing completion in British shipyards. There was a precedent for such a transaction in Britain's purchase in 1903 of two pre-dreadnoughts ordered by Chile, the sale in that case coming after the Chilean government could not pay for the ships.[27] At any rate, Tirpitz's proposal would allow Germany to build twenty-seven capital ships over the nine years prior to the scheduled resumption of the *dreiertempo* in 1918, an increase of three over the number already provided for the same period by the Navy Law of 1908. Although he told Bülow that the British Liberals, now haggling over the cost of naval construction, could not refuse such a settlement, the fact that his proposal represented another increase in the German program made its rejection a certainty.[28]

Throughout January and February, the battle raged within the British cabinet over the size of the naval estimates. Lloyd George argued that the projected £38 million naval expenditure for 1909-10 would stir the discontent of the radical Liberals into "open sedition," crippling the party and rendering useless its large majority in the House of Commons.[29] But by this time it was generally accepted that by 1912 Germany would have seventeen capital ships completed. Allowing two and a half to three years for construction, Britain, with twelve built-and-building as of February 1909, would need a program of six in 1909-10 just to have a bare advantage over the Germans in 1912 and eight for even a small measure of superiority. Fisher and the Admiralty, initially requesting a program of six, now asked for eight, while Lloyd George, Churchill, and the "little navy" Liberals stuck by their original limit of four.

The depressed state of British shipbuilding that resulted from the Liberal government's recent reductions in battleship construction worked to the favor of the "big navy" faction, the argument against the radicals being that well over half of the cost of a dreadnought went to the British worker in wages. But the "little navy" ministers were powerful enough to force a compromise, the cabinet on 24 February agreeing to a program of four dreadnoughts for 1909-10 with an additional four to be laid down no later than April 1910 if continued pressure

27. Tirpitz to Bülow, 20 January 1909, *Pol. Dok.*, p. 117; Breyer, *Schlachtschiffe*, p. 343. For a comment in the House of Commons on the possibility of purchasing the Brazilian dreadnoughts see Viscount Helmsley to House of Commons (HC), 29 March 1909, Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates*, Fifth Series-Commons, III, col. 90-91. (Cited hereafter as *P-Debates*). Marder, *Road to War*, p. 106, mentions the purchase of the Chilean ships.

28. Tirpitz to Bülow, 20 January 1909, *Pol. Dok.*, p. 117.

29. Lloyd George to Asquith, 2 February 1909, in Blewett, *Electronics*, p. 52.

30. Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 156-162. McKenna estimated that the construction of one dreadnought provided full employment for two years for roughly 7,000 men. See McKenna to HC, 25 May 1909, *P-Debates*, V.

from Germany made them necessary.[30] With the navy scare reaching its peak, the government took its four-plus-four proposal to Parliament.

The press campaign intensified as the debate over the naval estimates neared. The Liberal press lamented that Campbell-Bannerman, that "great champion of the cause of peace and economy," was no longer around to lead the fight against "extravagant shipbuilding proposals," and noted that the Labor party, though only a small force in the House of Commons, would lodge "a most emphatic protest" against any sacrifice of social programs to provide money for the navy.[31] The Conservative press responded by demanding that Britain build two dreadnoughts for every one launched by Germany, and repeated the "big navy" battle cry: "we want eight, and we won't wait!"[32] While the struggle between expansion and economy raged within the Liberal ranks, the only partisan question was over how large the expanded navy would be.

On 10 March, with the parliamentary debate over the naval estimates less than a week away, Grey suggested to Ambassador Metternich that a policy allowing for open inspection of capital ship construction by the naval attachés in both countries would put an end to the current alarm. The Germans rejected his proposal, not out of sensitivity over revealing the number of ships they were building, but because Tirpitz wanted to keep secret the size and quality of his latest designs.[33] On the 16th, when the debate in the House of Commons began, Opposition leader Balfour argued for a program of eight ships, on the assumption that Germany would have twenty-one dreadnoughts and battle-cruisers by the spring of 1912. Asquith's appeal for the four-plus-four program assumed a total of seventeen German capital ships by the same date. The following day Tirpitz, having been informed by Metternich earlier in the week of the Liberal cabinet's four-plus-four plan, disclosed to the Reichstag Budget Committee that Germany would have only thirteen ships completed by 1912 and, at that, only late in the year. This formal denial of the acceleration rumor did not have the same effect that it would have had two months earlier, though, and the Conservative press pilloried Asquith after he repeated Tirpitz's assurances in Parliament.[34]

The radical Liberals led the parliamentary opposition to the four-plus-four plan, forcing a division against the government on the 17th in which thirty-six Liberals joined Labor MPs in an attempt to block an increase in the naval

31. *Manchester Guardian* 19521, Wednesday, 3 March 1909, p. 8; *ibid.*, 19531, Monday, 15 March 1909, p. 7.

32. *Daily Mail* 4037, Friday, 19 March 1909, p. 9; Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 156, 167. The "we want eight" slogan was coined by Conservative MP George Wyndham. Because of the limited capacity of British armaments factories to provide the necessary big guns, eight was the maximum number of dreadnoughts that could be built in a year.

33. Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 164-165.

34. Metternich reports, 10 and 12 March 1909, *Pol. Dok.*, pp. 129-134; Marder, *Road to War*, p. 166; *The Times* (London) 38910, Thursday, 18 March 1909, p. 11.

estimates. They failed by an overwhelming margin, 322-83, but the debate continued. Lloyd George and Churchill, realizing that the "big navy" majority would eventually authorize construction of all eight dreadnoughts, at this stage attempted a last-minute "compromise," renouncing the four-plus-four scheme in favor of a definite program of six. Their maneuver also met with failure, and Asquith's program was adopted.[35]

Throughout March, the Germans misread the signals coming from London. In reports to Bülow, Metternich characterized the furor over "four or eight" as a mere party question. On the contrary, one of Asquith's most vocal opponents in Parliament, Unionist MP Arthur Lee, called the question of defense against the German fleet a "crisis before which our small party controversies pale into insignificance," a view no doubt shared by many within the Opposition.[36] But in spite of their professions of solidarity and the fact that many of them sided with Asquith in the latest vote, the Unionists still tried to exploit the naval issue to divide the Liberals and bring about a general election. Expansion itself was no longer a party question, but a combination of social programs and increased defense spending meant a strained budget and higher taxes, excellent campaign material for Unionist politicians.

At the end of March, Parliament turned to the question of how to finance the expanded naval program. L.G. Chiozza Money, a Liberal MP and proponent of social reform, opened the debate by challenging the "little navy" faction to "bend their energies, not so much in endeavoring to reduce naval armaments, as to endeavoring to see to it that the right people pay for the manufacture of them."[37] As April progressed and Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George's budget address neared, the speculation over finances all but displaced the controversy over the naval program.

On 29 April, in the course of a four-hour speech on the budget, Lloyd George revealed a plan for revising the tax structure to ensure that the "right people" would pay for the armaments increases. The reform program included a new additional tax on incomes of over £5000, duties on motor vehicles and gasoline, four new land taxes, an increase in the general income tax rates for all unearned incomes and incomes of over £3000, and a doubling of the rates of

35. H.V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals, and Social Politics, 1892-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 185; Marder, *Road to War,* p. 163. Tirpitz waited until late March to give complete details to his naval attaché in London, Captain Widenmann, about the alleged acceleration of German shipbuilding. Widenmann was instructed to tell Fisher that Krupp's began to gather materials for contracts on its own initiative and not on orders from the government, but the information was delivered too late (27 March) to have any influence on the debate. Tirpitz to Widenmann, 25 March 1909, *Pol. Dok.*, p. 139; Widenmann to Tirpitz, 27 March 1909, *ibid.*, pp. 140-144.

36. Metternich to Bülow, 23 March 1909, *Pol. Dok.*, p. 136; Lee to HC, 17 March 1909, *P-Debates,* II, col. 1075.

37. Money to HC, 29 March 1909, *P-Debates,* III, col. 103.

inheritance taxes. Seventy-five percent of the increases would be paid for by the wealthiest ten percent of the population. The only provisions that would affect the working class were proposed higher taxes on liquor, spirits, and tobacco. In the event that the four conditional dreadnoughts of the four-plus-four plan were not needed, the surplus money would be used on social programs and to provide relief "to the local ratepayer."[38]

This so-called "Peoples' Budget" outraged the Unionists, because Lloyd George had funded naval expansion and salvaged Liberal social programs at the expense of their conservative (and wealthy) constituents. During May the House of Commons passed most of the budget resolutions. The greatest hurdle, the increase in inheritance taxes, was cleared on the 20th despite strong Unionist protests. Unlike the naval estimates, which produced votes that did not follow party lines, the issue of the budget united the Liberals and Labor party against Balfour's Opposition. But the approval of the tax reform program did not end the controversy over the budget, since it had to win ratification in the House of Lords. Parliament's upper house, an institution under fire, still had veto power over all legislation and was expected to try to reject the tax increases even though it had not turned down a money bill of any kind in almost fifty years. Asquith and the Liberals, fearful that rejection of the budget would bring about a constitutional crisis before public opinion was ready for a reform of the House of Lords, began an elaborate policy of delay that would keep the upper house from passing judgement on their tax reforms for another six months.[39]

At this stage, Britain's determination to meet the German threat finally began to make an impression on Tirpitz. He all but admitted to the chief of the naval cabinet, Admiral Georg von Müller, that the race was lost, saying that the Imperial Navy should "stick it out" ("*Durchhalten*") and hope for an easing in Anglo-German tensions. He no longer spoke of expanding German construction, but of the improvements in training and battle-readiness that the navy could make before the eight dreadnoughts of the 1909-10 program entered British service. And yet Tirpitz stuck to his hard line regarding any naval settlement with Britain, refusing to negotiate on the basis of the 2:1 or "Two German Standard" that "big navy" circles in Britain were advocating. Instead, he held out for the 4:3 Anglo-German capital ship ratio that he had proposed in January, which Britain obviously could not accept. In the face of the new British buildup, the naval secretary still hoped for a turn of events that would enable him to fill the gap of 1912-17 and win his Iron Budget for a sixty-ship battle fleet.[40] Since it was not yet certain that Britain would build the additional four ships, he did

38. Lloyd George to HC, 29 April 1909, *ibid.*, IV, col. 480; Blewett, *Elections*, pp. 68, 70.

39. *P-Debates*, V, col. 631-651 (20 May 1909); Blewett, *Elections*, pp. 85-99.

40. Tirpitz to Müller, 6 May 1909, *Pol. Dok.*, pp. 150-152; Berghahn, *Approach*, p. 91. See Kennedy, *Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 422, regarding Tirpitz's persistent hopes for a favorable outcome.

not want to commit himself to any proposal that would compromise his original goals.

By summer, Tirpitz came under increasing pressure to propose a naval settlement that would be acceptable to Britain. In early June he admitted that his offer of a 4:3 ratio of supremacy for the Royal Navy was unrealistic, but at the same time he rejected Ambassador Metternich's suggestion that the British should be appeased by raising the German battleship replacement time from twenty years back up to twenty-five. Unwilling to sacrifice his Iron Budget by creating a new "gap" (1918-23), Tirpitz argued that the pace of technological change would leave Germany with a dangerously obsolete navy if the replacement period was lengthened. From the naval cabinet, Müller offered support by linking the continuation of the 1908 law to Germany's national honor.[41]

Germany, like Britain, was having trouble covering the expense of the naval race. In formulating his original program, Tirpitz assumed that the growth of the fleet would be supported by a corresponding growth in the German economy and in the income of the Imperial government. But the arms race wrecked his calculations and transformed the navy from a unifying "national" force into a divisive domestic problem. Bülow, like Lloyd George in Britain, had to devise a tax reform program to help finance the growing armaments budget. In late June he took his proposals to the Reichstag, only to meet with defeat when the Conservatives abandoned his "Bülow Bloc" and voted against the bill.[42] The following month, he resigned as chancellor and was replaced by Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg.

In July 1909, construction began on the first of the four unconditional dreadnoughts of Britain's 1909-10 program. Late in the same month, Asquith's cabinet, having received no proposals from Germany regarding a naval settlement, asked the House of Commons to authorize construction of the four conditional ships. In a relatively calm atmosphere that contrasted sharply with the furor of the previous spring, the request was granted by a 280-98 margin, forty-two Liberals voting against the government.[43] Despite the early approval, construction on the ships, as prescribed in the original four-plus-four proposal, would not begin until April 1910. This delay gave the new German chancellor a period of nine months to attempt to reach a naval settlement with the British, after which the additional ships would preclude any face-saving agreement and force Germany to continue the arms race.

Starting in early July, before Bethmann Hollweg took over in Berlin, British banker Sir Ernest Cassel and German businessman Albert Ballin were

41. See Müller's protocol of conference of 3 June 1909, *Pol. Dok.*, pp. 157-161.

42. Berghahn, *Approach*, pp. 76-77, 84.

43. Emy, *Liberals*, p. 185. The new dreadnought programs of Italy and Austria-Hungary, particularly the latter, produced fears that Britain would be too weak to maintain her position in the Mediterranean and contributed to this decision. See Marder, *Road to War*, p. 171.

used as agents to arrange for negotiations.[44] They had engineered the previous summer's Kronberg meeting between the Kaiser and Hardinge and in early 1912 would provide the groundwork for the Haldane Mission. On this occasion, however, they were not so successful. Tirpitz's unyielding stand on a settlement proved to be the major obstacle in Germany. On 11 August the naval secretary proposed to Bethmann Hollweg a reduction in the German tempo to three capital ships in 1910 and two in 1911, in exchange for a British pledge to build only four in 1910 and three in each of the succeeding three years. With the German program scheduled to drop to two capital ships in 1912, Tirpitz's new scheme granted Britain a thirteen to nine advantage for the years 1910-13, or a ratio of 4.35:3, hardly a major concession from his January position of 4:3. The chancellor did not forward this plan to the British, but on 21 August proclaimed Germany's desire to discuss the naval problem within the context of negotiations for a broader Anglo-German understanding.[45]

Asquith's government welcomed Bethmann Hollweg's willingness to talk, but Tirpitz again kept Germany from the conference table. On 1 September he sent another proposal to the chancellor, this time calling for Britain to cancel its four additional dreadnoughts of the 1909-10 program in return for a reduction of Germany's 1910-11 program from four ships to two. For the years 1910-13, Britain would build three capital ships per year to Germany's two. His acceptance of the 3:2 ratio, which Metternich had already confirmed as acceptable to Lloyd George and the "little navy" faction in London, appeared to be a major personal concession. But it had a catch: Britain's quota of three per year would have to include any ships paid for by her dominions. The British considered these "Dominion ships" to be supplementary to their program, a sort of insurance that was not negotiable. The point was hardly a theoretical one either, since during the recent navy scare both Australia and New Zealand had offered to finance a dreadnought for the Royal Navy. Like his previous efforts, this plan too, would face certain rejection if forwarded to London.[46]

Tirpitz dodged the task of drawing up a more reasonable proposal, absenting himself from Berlin for over a month. On 14 October Bethmann Hollweg finally acted without him, producing his own formula for a relaxation of German construction. His plan, very similar to Bülow's stillborn proposal of December 1908,[47] would reestablish the *dreiertempo* by postponing the fourth capital ship of the 1910 and 1911 programs to 1912 and 1913. The British were

44. Tirpitz, *Pol. Dok.*, pp. 163-164.

45. Tirpitz to Bethmann Hollweg, 11 August 1909, *ibid.*, p. 165; Marder, *Road to War*, p. 173. As early as June 1909, Bethmann Hollweg had advocated naval discussions as one facet of more general talks with Britain. See Müller's protocol of conference of 3 June 1909, *Pol. Dok.*, p. 159.

46. Marder, *Road to War*, pp. 174, 179; Tirpitz to Bethmann Hollweg, *Pol. Dok.*, p. 165. New Zealand (March) and Australia (June) offered to pay for one dreadnought apiece.

47. See p. 49 above.

not enthusiastic about the chancellor's scheme, since it would not result in an actual reduction of the German program. Whitehall also rejected his appeal fo an Anglo-German political understanding, the basis of which was to be guarantee by both parties of the territorial status quo in Europe. For Britair such an agreement would involve guaranteeing Alsace-Lorraine for Germany anc consequently, the end of the Anglo-French entente. By late October, Gre decided to hold out for a naval understanding with no political string attached.[48]

In early November, Tirpitz resubmitted his proposal of 11 August t Bethmann Hollweg, but with a one-year extension of Britain's 3:2 advantage t give them a sixteen to eleven superiority in capital ships for the five year 1910-14. Significantly, he made no mention of Dominion ships and included n other provisions that London would find inherently unacceptable. He noted tha the sacrifice of three ships from Germany's 1908 Navy Law would enabl Britain, with her preponderance in pre-dreadnoughts, to maintain he Two-Power Standard in battleships. Considering the prevailing view in Britai that "only dreadnoughts count," this proposal probably would not have wo acceptance either.[49] It never gained serious consideration, though, becaus Bethmann Hollweg, after assuring the British that the building ratio and th sticky problem of exchanging information on construction were negotiable, on 4 November called for a political understanding that would involve a sort o Anglo-German non-aggression pact. In addition to staying at peace with on another, both parties would pledge to remain neutral in case a third power o group of powers attacked the other. The British recognized that this plan, lik the chancellor's proposed guarantee of the status quo the previous month, wa incompatible with the Anglo-French entente. Moreover, acceptance of the lates German initiative would threaten the recent (1907) Anglo-Russian entente. Still Whitehall was anxious to keep open the possibility of future negotiations Avoiding the appearance of a direct rejection of Bethmann Hollweg's proposal Grey on 17 November informed Metternich that Asquith's plans for a general election early in 1910 would necessitate a postponement of further discussion for at least two months.[50]

The Liberal cabinet's six-month campaign of delay finally ended in late November, when Lloyd George's controversial budget and tax reform program were forwarded to the House of Lords. On the 30th, the upper house rejected the legislation by a resounding vote of 350-75, touching off the expected

48. Marder, *Road to War,* p. 174.

49. Tirpitz to Bethmann Hollweg, 4 November 1909, *Pol. Dok.,* pp. 168-169. Quotation from editorial in the *Daily Mail* 4037, Friday, 19 March 1909, p. 9.

50. Marder, *Road to War,* pp. 175-176. Steiner, *Britain-Origins,* pp. 54-55, does not believe that Grey and the Foreign Office were eager to continue talks with Germany, and contends that they used the elections here and late in 1910 as excuses for interrupting negotiations.

constitutional crisis. The following day Asquith, well-prepared for the challenge, introduced in the House of Commons a resolution characterizing the veto as "a breach of the Constitution and an usurpation of the rights of the Commons." The cabinet's refusal to compromise with the Lords led to a heated but inconclusive debate. Following the dissolution of Parliament on 3 December, the rival parties prepared for national elections.[51]

Reform of the House of Lords was the central campaign issue but, because Balfour viewed an explicitly pro-Lords platform as a liability, the Unionists chose to focus attention on the budget and the naval question. Virtually every Unionist candidate tried to exploit big-navy sentiment during the campaign, depicting Asquith, despite his commitment to a program of eight capital ships for 1909-10, as soft on defense issues. Lord Cawdor, former First Lord of the Admiralty under Balfour and author of the Cawdor program, even attempted to link the navy question to the ever-present issue of Home Rule for Ireland by asking voters how the Liberals would deal with "a German fleet in Belfast."[52] In a strong attempt to revive the scare of the previous spring, the Conservative London *Daily Mail* printed a series of articles by a former socialist, Robert Blatchford, entitled "Germany and England." Following accusations that Germany was "deliberately preparing to destroy the British Empire" with her "wholesale, feverish, and systematic preparations for war," Blatchford noted that "Germany acts; we talk. Words count for nothing in the game of blood and iron. Arm or surrender. . . ."[53]

Such sensationalism failed to produce a new scare, but the Unionists did manage to use the naval issue to their advantage in some dockyard cities. In Portsmouth there was a swing to the Unionists of nearly twenty percent over 1906, but election results from the five other major dreadnought-building centers of Britain were closer to the national average. Overall, the Unionist popular vote was up 4.3% over 1906, and Balfour's followers registered a net gain of 105 seats over the totals at dissolution. The Liberals suffered a net loss of ninety-eight seats, while the Labor and Irish Nationalist parties absorbed smaller setbacks. By the end of January 1910 the new House of Commons took shape, the Liberals holding 275 seats, the Unionists 273, Irish Nationalists 82, and Labor 40.[54]

The new alignment presented Asquith with grave problems. Because his party was saddled with a commitment to naval expansion that was unpopular with many of its members, it was vital that the tax reform program gain passage to deflect the cost of armaments increases away from the working class. But in

51. Blewett, *Elections*, pp. 100-102.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

53. Quotations from the *Daily Mail* 4267, Monday, 13 December 1909, p. 8; *ibid.*, 4269, Wednesday, 15 December 1909, p. 6; and *ibid.*, Thursday, 16 December 1909, p. 4.

54. Blewett, *Elections*, pp. 139 and 507. By-elections and defections had lowered the Liberal majority over the Unionists to 373-168 at dissolution. Cf. figures in note 12 above.

the wake of heavy losses, the Liberal leadership was in no position to ask King Edward VII to pack the House of Lords with new pro-budget peers. Within Commons, the Irish MPs became the key to maintaining a decisive majority, and they made no secret of their displeasure with some aspects of Lloyd George's budget, particularly the increased whiskey duty, and with the Liberals' less than forceful stand in favor of Home Rule during the recent campaign.[55] Asquith's difficulties drew an ambivalent reaction from Berlin, because on the key issue from the German point of view, naval expansion, the only party question was over how much to spend on the fleet, as both major parties were now committed to make sacrifices to secure Britain's superiority. Although the Germans feared that a new Balfour government would bring even larger armaments increases, Lloyd George's projection of naval estimates of over £40 million for 1910-11 proved that it was not necessarily to Germany's advantage to have the Liberals in power either.[56]

During February and March, the Liberal government paved the way for the passage of the 1909 budget and tax reforms. The cabinet agreed on a series of proposals to neutralize the powers of the House of Lords, making most of the peers reluctant to repeat their veto of the previous November and force the constitutional issue. Asquith and his ministers also rejected the idea of making concessions on the budget to assure Irish support of its passage, deciding instead to stand firm with the original program. The Nationalists, convinced that Asquith was making a sincere effort to eliminate the veto power of the upper house (the major roadblock to Home Rule), ultimately backed the Liberals in the budget vote and secured its passage in Commons on 27 April. On the following day the House of Lords finally approved the legislation, one day short of a year since its introduction.[57]

Thus, the Liberals assured that the expanded naval program would not come at the expense of the lower classes. The four conditional dreadnoughts of the 1909-10 program, authorized the previous July, were laid down on schedule in April after Bethmann Hollweg produced no new proposals for a naval settlement. In fact, the Germans sent signals of a far different nature in the spring of 1910, moving the base of the first division of the High Seas Fleet from Kiel, on the Baltic, to Wilhelmshaven, on the North Sea.[58] In March, in a setting far calmer than the heated debate of a year earlier, the 1910-11 naval estimates passed a half-empty House of Commons by a vote of 225-34. The program for 1910 included five capital ships in addition to two battlecruisers funded by

55. In a campaign speech at Albert Hall on 10 December 1909, Asquith had pledged not to take office again without "safeguards" against the Lords' ability to veto Liberal legislation. He also made a more equivocal statement in favor of Home Rule for Ireland. See Blewett, *Elections*, pp. 90-92, 146.

56. Metternich to Bethmann Hollweg, 11 January 1910, *Pol. Dok.*, p. 170.

57. Blewett, *Elections*, pp. 147-148, 152.

58. Marder, *Road to War*, p. 216.

Australia and New Zealand, giving Britain, by the spring of 1911, a total of twenty-seven built-and-building compared to seventeen for Germany, figures acceptable under the Admiralty's new standard of a sixty-percent capital ship superiority over the Kaiser's navy.[59] When Anglo-German naval discussions resumed in July 1910, Britain's advantage was secured and the atmosphere far different from the apprehension of two years earlier. Although the arms race would continue, the outcome was no longer in doubt.

* * *

Britain's decision to counter the German naval challenge with an extensive shipbuilding campaign of her own came during a period of acute domestic political tension. Because of its effect on the budget, the naval race became intertwined with the controversy over social reform and, ultimately, with the constitutional position of the House of Lords and Home Rule for Ireland, the three most important domestic issues of the time. For the Liberal government, naval expansion had to be accompanied by an increase in funding for social welfare. This combination gave birth to a budget and tax reform program that outraged the House of Lords and needed Irish support to secure passage. Had a conservative, Unionist government controlled the country during the same time, naval expansion would have come at the expense of social programs and with no affront to the upper house. The subsequent failure to remedy growing social problems or challenge the power of the Lords would have exacerbated tensions within the working class and, even more so, in Ireland, distracting Britain's leaders and weakening her ability to be a dynamic force in international affairs. In either case, it can hardly be argued that domestic policy had no effect on the British reaction to the Tirpitz plan. While it would take much more than an article of this nature to prove that the Fischer thesis applies to pre-1914 Britain, it cannot be denied that domestic considerations all but dominated the British response to the German naval threat, which, in the final analysis, drew her into war.

Zara Steiner has concluded that domestic conditions and policies had no effect on Britain's decision to go to war. She argues that the Liberal cabinet gave Grey a free hand in foreign affairs and that he reacted to diplomatic crises on a case by case basis, never taking domestic affairs or publuc opinion into consideration in making decisions.[60] The "old elite" of the Foreign Office was

59. The Admiralty dropped the Two-Power Standard in April 1909, in favor of the more effective sixty-percent guideline. Starting with the 1910-11 program, Britain built five capital ships (four dreadnoughts and one battlecruiser) per year until the outbreak of war. See appendix.

60. Steiner, *Britain-Origins*, p. 249.

responsible for leading the country to war in 1914; social and political tension influenced this circle only indirectly, in that it "shaped the views of those in power and affected their vision of the world overseas."[61] Steiner all but agrees with the view, popular in the interwar period, that Grey bore a significant share of the responsibility for the First World War. She contends that the Foreign Office was not touched by "the democratic currents of the day" and remained an arena in which select members of the "traditional ruling class" practiced the "old diplomacy" of the nineteenth century, determining the fate of their country from an isolated position of privilege.[62]

This argument has several weaknesses. Steiner centers her attack on the "elite" of career civil servants in the Foreign Office, but does not distinguish between their bureaucratic diplomacy (a development of the late nineteenth century) and the true "old diplomacy" of earlier years, which was centered around foreign ministers and ambassadors rather than permanent officials of foreign ministries. In Britain, the "professionals" of Whitehall and the Admiralty did not secure any form of control over foreign policy until after Lord Salisbury surrendered the foreign secretaryship for the last time (in 1900); thereafter, the bureaucrats of the Admiralty were perhaps more successful than those of the Foreign Office in influencing major policy decisions.[63] Indeed, the greatest drawback of Steiner's work is her failure to appreciate the political influence of the naval hierarchy, which follows logically from her treatment of the naval race as a secondary factor in the origins of the war. She dismisses the importance of navies and sea power as an outdated concept, arguing that "the doctrines of Captain Mahan did not hold in the world of 1914."[64] These oversights alone justify the present reevaluation, which has attempted to reiterate the significance of the naval race as well as the long-neglected domestic factors behind its British side.

During the period of naval competition under consideration, it was Berlin's

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 241, 249. See also Zara Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898-1914* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 91. Her "power elite" theory is similar in some respects to the one applied to Germany in Gerhard Ritter's *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, 4 vols. (Coral Gobles, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1969-73). Steiner's view of prewar British society being basically placid and conservative, with the Irish as the only significant "malcontents," runs counter to virtually every depiction since George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1935).

62. Steiner, *Britain-Origins*, p. 248.

63. J.A.S. Grenville, *Lord Salisbury and Foreign Policy: the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: The Athlone Press, 1964), pp. 438-439.

64. Steiner, *Britain-Origins*, p. 256. Her reference is to Alfred Thayer Mahan, nineteenth-century American theoretician on the importance of sea power in history. The Kaiser and Tirpitz are known to have read Mahan, whose influence was worldwide. Many historians credit him with inspiring pre-war naval construction in both the United States and Imperial Germany.

miscalculations regarding the British domestic situation, more so than any misreading of Whitehall's diplomatic maneuvering, that caused the failure of the German challenge. Yet Tirpitz's refusal to abandon the program, even after the "diplomatic revolution of 1904-7"[65] created the Triple Entente and spoiled his original calculations, cannot be condemned as senseless megalomania. The British during 1908-10 were plagued by a number of domestic problems, any one of which could have caused enough political chaos to enable Germany to gain ground in the competition. Unfortunately for Tirpitz, Asquith's government was able to overcome intraparty differences over increases in naval expenditure and weather the storm on the tax reform issue, while postponing resolution of the reform of the House of Lords and the volatile Irish question. Who could have foreseen that the same Liberal cabinet that only grudgingly approved the construction of two capital ships in 1908 would authorize eight a year later?

Thus, the major German miscalculation of this period was Tirpitz's firm belief that Britain's Liberal government would be unwilling and unable to advocate a naval program large enough to maintain superiority over his expanding High Seas Fleet. For Britain, the most important miscalculation was the failure of most of her leaders to consider that domestic problems and internal conflicts would keep Germany from building dreadnoughts at will. In the end, the latter proved to be a blessing in disguise, as it led to Britain's overbuilding during 1909-10 and ensured that Germany would never be able to catch up in the naval race. While Tirpitz underestimated Britain's resolve to maintain her position, British leaders overestimated Germany's ability to challenge it. Although this overestimation added more fuel to the fire of the arms race, it was motivated by a healthy respect for the opponent which was noticeably lacking in Germany.

Tirpitz's failure to dispel the rumor that Germany was accelerating her capital ship construction beyond the provisions of the 1908 Navy Law proved to be a crucial blunder, since it only served to heighten the navy scare in Britain. Although some historians still believe that Germany was attempting to increase her shipbuilding by this tactic, evidence shows that no acceleration actually occurred.[66] McKenna, First Lord of the Admiralty at the time, later contended that Tirpitz had planned to accelerate the German tempo but abandoned the idea after the British grew suspicious.[67] In fact, it seems that Tirpitz was torn between whether to try to build capital ships faster than the British or to build them better; improvements in the quality of German designs caused construction delays of over a year on four of his first thirteen dreadnoughts.[68]

65. Kennedy, *British Naval Mastery*, p. 232.

66. See note 26 above. The British were guilty of an "acceleration" of their own earlier in the race, when construction on the *Collingwood* (1907-8 program) was started two months before its funding was approved by Parliament. See appendix.

67. Marder, *The Road to War*, p. 177.

68. The *Nassau*, *Westfalen*, *Von der Tann*, and *Kaiser*. See appendix.

Steiner and other historians have blamed the escalation of the race on the obsession with ratios and numbers;[69] actually, the two sides were so close to agreement that the race most likely would have ended had numbers alone been involved. By the end of 1909 Tirpitz had conceded a 3:2 (15:10) ratio of superiority to the Royal Navy and the British Admiralty had abandoned its traditional Two-Power Standard in favor of a sixty percent (16:10) supremacy over Germany.[70] But mutual distrust and a deep antagonism precluded the possibility of an agreement.[71] On a practical level, Britain wanted to maintain the status quo at sea and Germany wanted to preserve it on land. Just as the Germans were unwilling to concede absolute naval superiority to Britain, the British would not guarantee Germany's possession of Alsace-Lorraine or allow her a free hand on the continent. Grey wanted a naval settlement with no strings attached, while Bethmann Hollweg wanted to negotiate an end to the race in exchange for substantial British concessions in Europe.[72] The controversy over numbers and ratios contributed to the competition, but did not prevent a peaceful settlement.

Britain's commitment to win the naval race, firmly established by the spring of 1910, made war with Imperial Germany inevitable. The determination of Grey and the Liberals to maintain the British position and concede nothing put the Germans in the position of having to back down or risk war. Because Bülow and Tirpitz had made the fleet a cornerstone of their "popular imperialism,"[73] which helped to justify the continued existence of the archaic political and social institutions of the Second Reich, German leaders felt compelled to accept the latter course. As a result, Germany in 1914 had an expensive, high-quality battle fleet that she hesitated to use because of its numerical inferiority to the Royal Navy.

69. Steiner, *Britain-Origins*, p. 50. See also Jonathan Steinberg in Hinsley's *Foreign Policy of Sir Edward Grey*, pp. 212-213.

70. Hubatsch, *Die Ära Tirpitz*, pp. 79-80.

71. See Kennedy's *Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism* for an exhaustive account of the roots of this mistrust. Dangerfield, *Strange Death*, p. 120, reports incorrectly that in February 1913, Churchill (then First Lord of the Admiralty) and Tirpitz reached an agreement on the basis of an 8:5 ratio of superiority for the Royal Navy. Tirpitz in fact promised to limit the German navy to five squadrons in return for a British freeze at eight squadrons, a proposal vague enough to elicit no response from London.

72. Cf. Kennedy, *Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 418.

73. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914," *Central European History* 6 (1973), p. 18.

APPENDIX

Chart of British and German capital ship programs, 1905-1914.

The figures below have been arranged to illustrate how the various programs referred to in the text actually translated into ships. Close attention should be given to length of construction times (usually shorter on the British side) and delays between appropriation of funds (every April) and construction starts. Example: construction on the British battlecruiser *Invincible* did not begin until April 1906, one year after the start of the budget year of its program, and was not completed until March 1908, almost three years after its construction was authorized.

	BRITAIN			GERMANY		
Program Year	Ship	Laid Down	Completed	Ship	Laid Down	Completed
1905-6	*Dreadnought*	10/1905	12/1906			
	Inflexible(BC)	2/1906	10/1908	(three pre-dreadnoughts)		
	Indomitable(BC)	3/1906	6/1908			
	Invincible(BC)	4/1906	3/1908			
1906-7	*Bellerophon*	12/1906	2/1909	*Nassau*	7/1907	10/1909
	Temeraire	1/1907	5/1909	*Westfalen*	8/1907	11/1909
	Superb	2/1907	5/1909	*Blücher(*)*	–––	10/1909
1907-8	*Collingwood†*	2/1907	4/1910	*Rheinland*	6/1907	4/1910
	St. Vincent	12/1907	5/1909	*Posen*	6/1907	5/1910
	Vanguard	4/1908	3/1910	*Von der Tann(BC)*	3/1908	9/1910

1908-9	*Neptune*	1/1909	11/1911	*Ostfriesland*	10/1908	8/1911
	Indefatigable(BC)	2/1909	2/1911	*Helgoland*	11/1908	8/1911
				Thüringen	11/1908	7/1911
				Moltke	12/1908	9/1911
1909-10	*Colossus*	7/1909	8/1911	*Oldenburg†*	3/1909	5/1912
	Hercules	7/1909	7/1911	*Goeben(BC)*	12/1909	7/1912
	Orion	11/1909	1/1912	*Friedrich der Grosse*	1/1910	10/1912
	Lion(BC)	11/1909	6/1912	*Kaiser*	10/1910	8/1912
	Conquerer	4/1910	2/1913			
	Monarch	4/1910	4/1912			
	Thunderer	4/1910	6/1912			
	Princess Royal(BC)	5/1910	11/1912			
	Australia(BC)	6/1910	6/1913			
	New Zealand(BC)	6/1910	11/1912			
1910-11	*King George V*	1/1911	11/1912	*Kaiserin*	7/1910	5/1913
	Centurion	1/1911	5/1913	*König Albert*	7/1910	7/1913
	Ajax	2/1911	10/1913	*Prinzrgnt. Luitpold*	10/1910	8/1912
	Audacious	3/1911	10/1913	*Seydlitz(BC)*	2/1911	5/1913
	Queen Mary(BC)	3/1911	9/1913			
1911-12	*Iron Duke*	1/1912	3/1914	*König*	10/1911	8/1914
	Marlborough	1/1912	6/1914	*Grosser Kurfurst*	10/1911	7/1914
	Benbow	5/1912	10/1914	*Markgraf*	11/1911	10/1914
	Emperor of India	5/1912	10/1914	*Derfflinger(BC)*	1/1912	9/1914
	Tiger(BC)	6/1912	10/1914			

1912-13						
	Queen Elizabeth	10/1912	1/1915	*Kronprinz Wilhelm*	5/1912	11/1914
	Warspite	10/1912	3/1915	*Lützow(BC)*	7/1912	8/1915
	Valiant	1/1913	2/1916			
	Barham	2/1913	10/1915			
	Malaya	10/1913	2/1916			
1913-14	*Ramillies*	11/1913	9/1917	*Baden*	9/1913	10/1916
	Revenge	12/1913	3/1916	*Bayern*	9/1913	3/1916
	Resolution	12/1913	12/1916	*Hindenburg(BC)*	6/1913	5/1917
	Royal Oak	1/1914	5/1916			
	Royal Sovereign	1/1914	5/1916			

† – ships laid down before beginning of corresponding budget year.

BC – battlecruiser. All other ships listed were of dreadnought design.

* – Blücher was a 'hybrid', counted as a pre-dreadnought by Germany but considered a battlecruiser in Britain's calculations. The controversy over its classification has yet to be resolved: Marder considers it a battlecruiser, while Breyer does not include it in his work, which omits all pre-dreadnoughts.

Sources:

Siegfried Breyer, *Schlachtschiffe und Schlachtkreuzer 1905-1970* (Munich: J.F. Lehmann's Verlag, 1970), pp. 133-169, 283-297.

Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow,* vol. I: *The Road to War 1904-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 439-442.