Failing to Prepare for the Great War? The Absence of Grand Strategy in British War Planning before 1914

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Abstract
It is a commonplace that the Royal Navy entered the Great War intending to strangle the German economy through a strategy of blockade. This was not so. Prior to 1912 blockade was mainly seen as a means of attaining operational intelligence; economic warfare was secondary. For legal reasons blockade had to be abandoned in 1912. Thereafter, only contraband control remained as a means of waging economic warfare, and this was seen purely as a way of luring the Germans to battle. In 1914 the Royal Navy had no grand strategy, a fact that explains its hesitant performance in the war.

Keywords
Royal Navy, economic warfare, First World War, grand strategy

In August 1930 Sir Maurice Hankey, Cabinet secretary, clerk to the Privy Council, and secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), flatly turned down a request by his one-time mentor, Major General Sir George Aston, to endorse his new book about the First World War. The reason for this rebuff was a difference of opinion about the quality and extent of Britain’s preparations for great power conflict in the years before 1914. Aston’s account argued that the government had not made adequate provision for the threat of a major war and that, as a result, Britain had entered the Great War without a properly defined grand strategy. Given that Hankey had played a key role in coordinating British preparations for war before 1914, he predictably took umbrage at the implied criticism of his efforts and those of his colleagues. Hankey contended that Britain had

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given considerable thought to strategic issues before 1914 and that, as a result of these deliberations, had entered the war ready to enact any one of several strategies. Not the least of these was the economic blockade, a weapon which had slowly but surely eroded the sinews of Germany’s fighting power and brought victory to the Allies. This, Hankey assured the highly sceptical Aston, had always been the intention.1

Hankey’s assertion that in 1914 Britain possessed a well-considered and properly developed grand plan has won more adherents among historians than Aston’s view that it was lacking such schemes. Two main schools of scholarly thought have emerged on this topic which, if not mutually exclusive, certainly privilege different conceptions of how Britain proposed to fight and win a future great power conflict. On the one hand there are those who argue for the so-called ‘continental commitment’, an interpretation that places its main emphasis on Britain’s use of military power on land.2 Adherents to this analysis differ on numerous issues, but central to their argument is the contention that at some point prior to 1914 – suggestions include 1904, 1906, 1909, and 1911 – the new War Office General Staff advanced the view that, in the event of a Franco-German war in which Britain intervened, the dispatch of a British expeditionary force to fight alongside the French army would be a decisive intervention. If sent across the Channel immediately and in its entirety, it would arrive on the vital battlefield just in time to negate Germany’s numerical advantage and so stem the tide in France’s favour, thereby winning the war for the Allies. The General Staff’s analysis, it is said, proved persuasive. Talks were authorized with the French military command, plans for enacting this were put on paper, and coordinating bodies such as the CID provided their endorsement. Thereafter, Britain was committed to a continental military strategy in the event of war with Germany.

By contrast, a second school assumes that it was not the army but the navy that was the instrument of Britain’s grand strategy, and that it was not battles but economic warfare that was the intended method of applying it. Traditionally this has been understood to mean that in the event of hostilities the Royal Navy would be used to cut Germany off from global trade, a form of gradual ‘blockade’ that, as was suggested in Hankey’s letter to Aston, would slowly grind down the German economy, undermine the nation’s fighting power, and so produce a British victory.3 Recently a new variation on this argument

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1 Hankey to Aston, 19 August 1930, with undated marginalia by Aston, Southsea, Royal Marines Museum, Aston papers, AST 6/8/5.
2 Key texts include: J. E. Tyler, The British Army and the Continent, 1904–1914 (London, 1938); Maurice Hankey, The Supreme Command, 1914–1918 (London, 1961), I, pp. 81–2; Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914 (Cambridge, MA, 1969); Nicholas d’Ombrain, War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain, 1902–1914 (London, 1973); John McDermott, ‘The Revolution in British Military Thinking from the Boer War to the Moroccan Crisis’, Canadian Journal of History IX (1974); John Gooch, The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy, c.1900–1916 (London, 1974); John Gooch, The Prospect of War: Studies in British Defence Policy, 1847–1942 (London, 1981); Keith Jeffrey, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: A Political Soldier (Oxford, 2006).
3 A.C. Bell, A History of the Blockade of Germany (London, 1937); Arthur J. Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, vol. I: The Road to War, 1904–1914 (Oxford, 1961), pp. 367–83; John W. Coogan, The End of Neutrality: United States, Britain and Maritime Rights,
has been proposed, one which depicts economic warfare as a quick-acting route to a rapid British triumph. Under this formulation, Britain’s pre-1914 grand strategy was to use its pre-eminent position in global finance, banking, insurance, cable communications, and shipping to cause a meltdown in the global economy, a process that would promptly deprive Germany of the financial means to continue the war. The disputed merits of this thesis notwithstanding, it mirrors earlier accounts in emphasizing that Britain had a grand strategy that was centred on the use of naval power and aimed at providing victory through economic means.

As can be seen, in the current historiography, controversy exists not over whether there was a British grand strategy, but over what constituted Britain’s grand strategy. Admittedly, this debate has taken a decided direction in recent times as the argument stressing continentalism has taken something of a drubbing from several of today’s most prominent historians. Many have pointed out that the army did not speak as one voice on this matter: Henry Wilson’s views were not necessarily the same as those of Sir John French, who favoured independent operations in Belgium, let alone those of Lord Kitchener, who saw merit in keeping much of the BEF at home. In addition, while the General Staff might well have wanted to dispatch the expeditionary force to the Continent to fight alongside the French, before August 1914 no such strategy was ever endorsed by the only body constitutionally able to authorize such a move, namely the Cabinet. Thus, while permission may well have been given to hold talks with the French General Staff about possible military coordination, and while certain army officers might also have been successful in explaining their wartime preferences to the CID, none of this implied acceptance of their strategy. Indeed, even after Sir Henry Wilson’s tour de force before the CID on 23 August 1911, a performance that persuaded many that the army leadership was more professionally organized than its naval equivalents, there was no change of policy. Even after British entry into the war on 4 August 1914, the Cabinet remained

1899–1915 (Ithaca, 1981); David French, British Economic and Strategic Planning, 1905–1915 (London, 1982); Avner Offer, The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation (Oxford, 1989); Eric W. Osborne, Britain’s Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914–1919 (London and New York, 2004).

4 Nicholas A. Lambert, Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

5 Among those to contest it are: Christopher M. Bell, Churchill and Sea Power (Oxford, 2013), p. 44; Stephen Cobb, Preparing for Blockade, 1885–1014: Naval Contingency for Economic Warfare (Farnham, 2013); John W. Coogan, ‘The Short-War Illusion Resurrected: the Myth of Economic Warfare as the British Schlieffen Plan’, Journal of Strategic Studies XXXVIII (2015), pp. 1045–64; Alan Kramer, ‘Blockade and Economic Warfare’, in Jay Winter et al., eds, The Cambridge History of the First World War (Cambridge, 2014), II, pp. 463 and 709–10; Samuël Kruizinga, Review of Planning Armageddon by Nicholas A. Lambert, First World War Studies V (2014), pp. 144–6.

6 Hew Strachan, ‘The British Army, Its General Staff and the Continental Commitment, 1904–14’, in David French and Brian Holden Reid, eds, The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation, 1890–1939 (London, 2002); Thomas Otte, ‘“The Method in which We Were Schooled by Experience”: British Strategy and a Continental Commitment before 1914’, in Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy, eds, The British Way in Warfare: Power and the International System, 1856–1956: Essays in Honour of David French (Farnham, 2010).
undecided about how many divisions, if any, would be sent across the Channel, proof positive that the existence of a ‘continental commitment’ was unknown and unrecognized by those in power. Not surprisingly, arguments such as these have tended to loosen the ‘khaki grip’ on interpretations of British policy before 1914, strengthening the suggestion that British grand strategy was primarily maritime. As Hew Strachan has argued, it was privately recognized, even by Henry Wilson, that at best the BEF would help stave off a French defeat, allowing the navy to employ economic warfare as the ‘long-term means to ultimate victory’.7

This article takes a different view. While agreeing with the criticisms that have been levelled against the increasingly disputed ‘continental commitment’, it nevertheless argues that the downgrading of this interpretation does not automatically mean that the Royal Navy, with its proposals for economic warfare, was the instrument of British grand strategy. It suggests, much as Sir George Aston did in 1930, that Britain had no grand strategy in 1914. This is not to imply that the Royal Navy possessed no war plans prior to the outbreak of fighting, nor that those plans ignored the option of economic warfare. The Royal Navy had well-developed war plans in 1914 and economic warfare was a central component of them. However, having war plans and having a grand strategy are not the same thing. This article will contend that pre-war plans to wage economic warfare against Germany have been misconstrued as the central part of British strategy they went on to become after 1915. It will show that, so far as the Admiralty was concerned, before 1914 economic warfare had a far more limited objective: inducing the German fleet to put to sea and so to force a naval battle that might enable a more proactive (but ill-defined) use of British sea power to affect the war on land. Thus, although extremely important to the Admiralty’s conception of how a war against Germany would be managed, these plans were primarily operational in focus. The article will demonstrate that, while different opinions existed within the navy and while there was certainly some change over time, a broad consensus did exist. The prevailing view was that, given the constraints to its application deriving from the state of international law, the need to take into account other countries’ sensibilities, the problems of geography, and the challenges posed by new technology, economic warfare was a weapon with finite possibilities. It could be expected to influence an opponent’s behaviour, but could not be counted upon directly to bring about his defeat. Nevertheless, the former attribute, if exploited properly, could be used to advantage, and this was the intent.

In order to understand the Admiralty’s attitude to economic warfare before 1914, it is necessary to establish accurately the relationship between the navy’s pre-war military and economic strategies. That such a distinction existed may surprise those who accept the view that the navy entered the First World War prepared to mount a ‘distant blockade’. However, distinguishing between what were, in fact, two independent strands of Admiralty thought is vital to the accurate comprehension of the navy’s intentions as

7 Hew Strachan, The First World War, vol. 1: To Arms (Oxford, 2001), p. 199.
regards ‘economic warfare’ by 1914. The logical starting point for any such consideration is to establish what, if anything, constrained the navy in its ability to disrupt seaborne commerce in the pre-war period. Arguably the most important factor in this regard was the opinion of other powers, manifested in the ambiguous and contested realm of international law.

In addition to permitting belligerents to strike at will at the shipping of their enemies, which in a conflict with Germany would mean the swift eradication of all German-flagged vessels, international law in 1914 recognized two additional ways in which warring states could apply economic pressure to their opponents, both of which principally affected neutral sources of overseas supply: one was blockade; the other was the seizure of contraband or, as it is now better known, contraband control.

Blockade consisted of denying the right of all shipping, irrespective of nationality or cargo, the right of access to or egress from those harbours, ports, and river estuaries that were both held by the enemy and covered by a blockading force. Ships of any and every nation, including those of neutral non-belligerent states, that attempted to cross the blockade line or, in British law, even intended to cross the blockade line, were liable to seizure as blockade runners and could be taken and condemned as prizes. In theory, therefore, a blockade could be total, denying the entry of goods of any kind into the ports and harbours affected. However, international law – as expressed by the Declaration of Paris (1856) – made one stipulation: for a blockade to be legal it had to be ‘effective’. While the term ‘effective’ was not without ambiguity, it was generally understood to mean that a blockading force had to be sufficiently numerous, strong, and proximate to a stretch of coastline under blockade to be able, in nearly all cases, to physically block entry or exit from the ports and harbours in question. This understanding had various implications, the most important of which was that, in the legal sense, there was not and could not be such a thing as a ‘distant blockade’, as such a strategy would immediately fail to constitute an ‘effective’ blockade on the grounds of proximity.

Contraband control was a very different beast. It conferred upon the warring states the right to seize articles having ‘belligerent destination and purpose’, that is to say, war materials being transported to the enemy. So long as the commodities in question were military in nature and it could be proven that they were intended for the use of one’s opponent, they could be seized from ships of any nationality, including vessels under the registry of neutral states. Additionally, although nations differed on the extent of this right, Anglo-American practice was to allow such seizures anywhere on the high seas – the intent to deliver the goods rather than the act of doing so being the key consideration. Added to this, under the doctrine of ‘continuous voyage’, Britain and America also held that goods could be seized as contraband even if they were consigned to a neutral receiver or were being delivered to a neutral port. The only condition for such seizure was proof that the neutral consignee was an intermediary of a belligerent power, or that the neutral port was merely a place of trans-shipment, the ultimate destination being the enemy. Thus, while the range of goods that could be impounded under contraband control was

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8 For a discussion of this distinction, see David Morgan-Owen, ‘An “Intermediate Blockade”’? British North Sea Strategy, 1912–1914’, War in History XXII (2015), pp. 478–502.
more limited than under blockade, being restricted to so-called ‘warlike stores’, the ease and scope of operations were much greater, there being no obligation under British prize law to maintain a force in proximity to the enemy’s littoral in order to enforce this right.

For the vast majority of the pre-war decade, the British naval plan for a war against Germany was based upon the idea that the primary instrument of British action would be blockade rather than contraband control. It should be stressed, however, that the main and overriding reason for this was a military one at the operational level rather than an economic one at the strategic level.

In the era before aerial reconnaissance, radio direction finding, radar and satellite imaging, and other remote forms of operational intelligence gathering, the only means of knowing if an enemy navy was in harbour or at sea was to go and look. Thus, in the event of war, if the German fleet was to be brought to action rather than suddenly appearing unannounced off the British coast as part of a raiding party or, worse still, an invasion, then the Royal Navy had to keep the main German harbours and naval bases under regular observation. Only by such means could it be absolutely guaranteed that the British Isles were secure from a surprise German assault.9 The need to keep Germany’s ports under continuous observation accordingly became a central feature of British planning. Articulated in the earliest official plans for war against Germany, produced in 1901, it remained prevalent thereafter.10 The 1909 war plan, to take but one example, called for the deployment of rotating flotillas of the newest and best British destroyers directly off the German North Sea littoral. Backed at a distance by lines of light cruisers and armoured cruisers to ensure that they could not be driven away by German light forces, these destroyers were there to notify the British naval command of any attempt by the German fleet to sortie into the North Sea. Should such a move take place, there would be two British fleets, one based in Scotland and one based between the Channel and the Wash, ready to intercept the emerging German forces and give battle.11

Yet, if British naval deployments were mainly designed with such operational considerations in mind, it was also clear that they could be equally applicable to the purpose of applying economic pressure. After all, an inshore destroyer flotilla tasked with watching the coast for signs of activity from German warships could simultaneously and just as easily mount an ‘effective’ blockade against civilian traffic in the legal sense of the term, even if it was expressly stated in the instructions to these vessels that this was only ‘one of the subsidiary objects of the force employed’.12 The majority of naval planners operated with this realization in mind – orders issued to the fleet in 1911 noted: ‘There is very little doubt that the Military blockade will be also effective as a

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9 David Morgan-Owen, ‘The Invasion Question: Admiralty Plans to Defend the British Isles, 1888–1918’, PhD, Exeter University, 2013.
10 Shawn T. Grimes, Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887–1918 (Woodbridge, 2012), chs 1–4.
11 David Morgan-Owen, “‘History Is a Record of Exploded Ideas”: Sir John Fisher and Home Defence, 1904–1910’, International History Review XXXVI (2014).
12 Callaghan to Admiralty, 31 August 1911, Kew, The National Archives (TNA), ADM 1/8132.
Commercial blockade.’13 This dual role was facilitated by the fact that, under British prize law, the inshore destroyer flotillas that established the blockade did not have to be the vessels that policed it. So long as a legal blockade was in existence – and the destroyers ensured this was the case – then other naval assets could be tasked with tracking down blockade runners and could do so anywhere ‘within the area of operations of the warships detailed to render the blockade effective’, thus ensuring that mounting an effective commercial blockade did not distract from the destroyers’ key function of maintaining a military blockade. Thus, with a strong naval force deployed off the German North Sea coastline and the entrances to the Baltic, the Royal Navy would be legally able to interdict merchant shipping headed for Germany in the Straits of Dover or the northern entrances to the North Sea. Captain George Hope of the Naval Mobilisation Department expressed it thus: ‘the blockading force is not limited to the [torpedo] b[oat] d[eestroyer]s and cruisers stationed in the Heligoland Bight, but consists of all the naval forces in the North Sea’ . Crucially, however, and contrary to one recent argument, none of this removed the legal requirement to mount an ‘effective’ blockade.15 The area of operations might be ‘the whole of the North Sea’ and cruiser cordons might be strung from Scotland to Norway and across the Straits of Dover, but as Admiral Bethell explained, these were merely the ‘outer lines of the blockading force’; they did not render it ‘effective’.16 That was down to the forces in the Bight, forces put there first and foremost with the object of ‘preventing raiding expeditions [and] the German fleet putting to sea without the British Commander-in-Chief knowing it’.17

If blockade became the main means of applying economic pressure largely on account of its primary role in dispositions designed for gaining operational intelligence and forcing battle, the alternative means of applying economic pressure, contraband control, having no part to play in the Royal Navy’s operational thinking, inevitably took on a secondary role. Aside from its mismatch with existing military plans, there were various other reasons for not pressing this particular belligerent right too strongly. For one thing, all the historical precedents suggested that neutral states tended to object strongly to the interference with legitimate trade that its exercise normally occasioned. Many of the bitter diplomatic complications of the wars of the eighteenth century had arisen from British attempts to suppress the flow of contraband and it was not considered desirable to repeat this experience in any future war. As Reginald McKenna, the first lord of the Admiralty, fully recognized: ‘a powerful neutral would make its protests felt so forcibly that we should have … to relinquish our rights of seizing neutral vessels’. In this context the United States, a nation that had traditionally vigorously defended neutral rights, naturally loomed large. Accordingly, pre-war orders to British warships regarding their treatment of neutral vessels repeatedly stressed that:

13 Admiralty to Bridgeman, 26 October 1911, ibid.
14 Minute by Hope, 8 September 1911, ibid.
15 Christopher Martin, ‘The Declaration of London: A Matter of Operational Capability’, Historical Research LXXXII (2009).
16 Minute by Bethell, 7 October 1911, TNA, ADM 1/8132.
17 Minutes of 15 December 1908, TNA, ADM 116/1079.
In a clear demonstration of the continuity of Admiralty thinking, once the war came, these orders were quickly issued again in even more direct form. A mere two weeks into the conflict, Churchill ordered:

Great care is to be taken in the diversion of neutral ships with neutral cargo. It is of prime importance to keep the United States of America as a friendly neutral. Diversion of doubtful ships should be reported to Admiralty.¹⁹

The point, first articulated in late 1911, was crystal clear.

Secondly, contraband control was not regarded as an easy right to enforce. No merchant intent on transporting contraband goods to a belligerent would be so naive as to carry a bill of lading openly stating this.²⁰ The true destination would inevitably be well hidden, ensuring that providing convincing evidence of enemy destination before an independent judicial body such as a prize court would be anything but a simple task.²¹ Charles Ottley, the director of naval intelligence (DNI), ruefully noted: ‘the onus of proof as to its ultimate destination would rest with us’. For this reason he believed that, in a war with Germany, not only could Britain ‘not hope to prevent that country from obtaining any contraband over her land frontiers’, but in addition it would be extremely difficult to prevent it reaching Germany by sea as it could be carried in neutral bottoms and unloaded in neutral harbours. Regrettably, he wrote, ‘Contraband for Germany … could always be landed in neutral European ports under the very guns of our cruisers.’²² Such difficulties were assumed to make contraband control a much weaker weapon than blockade, and for this reason it was generally viewed as a supplement to, rather than an essential component of, any putative economic warfare campaign against Germany. As the Admiralty Secretariat’s Naval Law Branch succinctly put it, the value of seizing contraband was that it would ‘increase the severity of a blockade’.²³

Finally, contraband control was one of the few maritime belligerent rights that could be employed to damage Britain’s own interests. This was clearly true of a great power conflict in which Britain was neutral. In this eventuality, legal limits on the right of

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18 Admiralty to C.-in-C. Home Fleets, 31 August 1911. These instructions were repeated on 1 January 1913 and 29 July 1914. TNA, ADM 137/2065.
19 Churchill, Telegram, 17 August 1914, Cambridge, Churchill Archives Centre, CHAR 13/36/68.
20 Coogan, End of Neutrality, p. 84.
21 The significance of Britain’s prize courts being independent of government control is discussed in Isabel Hull, A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War (Ithaca and London, 2014), esp. pp. 158–60.
22 Ottley, ‘The Value to Great Britain of the Right of Capture of Neutral Vessels’, 9 May 1906, TNA, FO 372/23.
23 Minute by Naval Law Branch, 15 December 1908, TNA, ADM 116/1079.
belligerents to interfere with British-flagged shipping would certainly be valuable, a fact that undoubtedly influenced the government to seek protections for legal British commerce. Importantly, however, it was also believed that this right would be detrimental to British interests in a war in which Britain was a combatant.24 Nobody really conceived that another power could mount anything approaching an ‘effective’ blockade of the extensive coastline of the British Isles in the face of British naval power. However, the prospect that enemy commerce raiders might both sink British-flagged merchant ships, as they were naturally entitled to do, and also detain cargoes headed for Britain in neutral vessels was viewed with a good deal more concern. Indeed, the dangers of such a guerre de course had been appreciated in Britain since the 1880s.25 Thus, it was in Britain’s interests to ensure that those goods which Britain imported and which were vital to the nation’s well-being were considered ineligible for inclusion on any nation’s contraband list. This meant arguing that definitions of contraband should be kept as narrow as possible. In the Admiralty’s view, the best solution was for absolute contraband to be limited to ‘munitions of war only’; for ‘the list of items never to be intercepted as contraband … [to] be as extensive as possible’; and for the category of goods that had both civilian and military application – and hence were free from seizure if intended for the general population, but could be condemned as ‘conditional contraband’ if destined for the armed forces – to be abolished altogether.26

This British emphasis on extensively exploiting the right of blockade but taking a much more circumspect attitude over the question of contraband control was most strongly in evidence when it came to the British negotiating position at the two international conferences called at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century to codify the international laws of war at sea. At both the Second International Peace Conference at The Hague (1907–8) and the London Naval Conference (1908–9) the British delegates sought to make the very wide British interpretation of blockade the basis for a common code of law, while simultaneously arguing for the introduction of major restrictions when it came to the right to seize contraband. In doing so, they were acting in line with the Admiralty’s explicit recommendations. At the meetings of the interdepartmental committee held under the chairmanship of Attorney General John Walton to establish the British government’s position on the issues likely to arise at The Hague Conference, the Admiralty had strongly pushed for stringent limitations on the right to seize contraband

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24 Significantly, this was also the view of Germany’s Imperial Navy Office. See memorandum by Tirpitz, 20 April 1907, in Matthew S. Seligmann, Michael Epkenhans and Frank Nägler, eds, The Naval Route to the Abyss: The Anglo-German Naval Race, 1895–1914 (Farnham, 2015), pp. 222–6.

25 French and Russian plans were well known. Bryan Ranft, ‘The Protection of British Seaborne Trade and the Development of Systematic Planning for War, 1860–1906’, in idem, ed., Technical Change and British Naval Policy, 1860–1939 (London, 1977). German plans were secret, but were still known to the Admiralty. Matthew S. Seligmann, The Royal Navy and the German Threat, 1901–1914 (Oxford, 2012).

26 Admiralty remarks, 12 May 1906, on a memorandum by the Committee of Imperial Defence, 24 October 1905, TNA, CAB 4/2.
at sea. However, none of this implied any weakening in the attitude to blockade. As the DNI argued:

Of course, I would on no account touch the ‘Right of Blockade’, and by consequence would ruthlessly sink, capture or destroy every vessel, whatever her nationality, neutral or belligerent, which attempted to enter a blockaded port.27

In line with this position, when the conference finally took place, the British delegation proposed the complete abolition of contraband and, when that was resoundingly rejected by the other powers, it argued, largely unsuccessfully, for a strict definition of all categories of contraband. In contrast, as regards blockade, the Admiralty repeatedly stressed that it attached ‘great importance to the maintenance of the British Law as to blockades’;28 that it was strongly of the view that ‘the established law of British Prize Courts [on blockade] … should not be liable to indefinite and unlimited modification’;29 and that it was, therefore, essential that the British delegates ‘obtain a settlement of the question of the law of blockade in a manner satisfactory to British policy’. Moreover, their lordships were quite prepared to see the conference fail if this could not be achieved.30 It was an emphatic position and one from which the Admiralty would not budge, as was evidenced a year later at the London Naval Conference.

As had been the case in 1907, a pre-conference interdepartmental committee met to hammer out the British position – this time chaired by Lord Desart. Once more the British delegation arrived at the conference with instructions to ensure that as much as possible of British blockade law was incorporated into any common code, while at the same time working to place strict limits on the right to seize contraband by securing definite lists of those items that constituted absolute contraband, conditional contraband, and non-contraband goods.31 Significantly, in a departure from the stance taken at the previous conference and one that clearly shows the importance the Admiralty attached to this issue, to attain these much-desired outcomes the British government was now willing to accept some curtailment of the doctrine of ‘continuous voyage’, a concession that gained some traction with several European powers.32 Consequently, after much negotiation, the British programme was essentially achieved. Under the terms of the Declaration of London, strict limits were placed on contraband control, but wide powers were granted under the laws of blockade.

Generations of scholars have correctly identified that Britain did not impose an effective blockade on Germany during the First World War – the so-called ‘blockade’ being, in fact, a form of contraband control – and that, for this reason, the British government was to be heavily hamstrung in the early days of the conflict by the need to limit seizures of

27 Ottley, ‘Recent Admiralty Opinion on the “Right of Search”’, 14 February 1906, TNA, ADM 1/8366/12.
28 Admiralty to Foreign Office, 26 August 1907, TNA, FO 372/72.
29 Admiralty to Foreign Office, 15 August 1907, TNA, FO 372/71.
30 Admiralty to Foreign Office, 12 September 1907, TNA, FO 372/73.
31 Grey to Desart, 1 December 1908, TNA, ADM 1/8100.
32 Coogan, End of Neutrality, pp. 107–8.
contraband to a very limited range of goods. Thus, these writers have been universally astounded by the position that Britain adopted at the London Naval Conference, which seemed to defy all logic. Anthony Morris is far from atypical when he observes that ‘given the Admiralty’s attitude, it is difficult to understand why … its representatives … agreed to the Declaration which … disabled the navy’s most effective offensive weapon against Germany’. On the basis of the apparent lack of logic in the Royal Navy’s stance and the seeming inconsistency between the service’s professed desires at these pre-war conferences and its actual behaviour in wartime, some authors have concluded that the only possible explanation is that the Admiralty never intended to adhere to international law. Instead it is assumed that, in the event of Britain being a belligerent, the Royal Navy planned to jettison those agreements that limited its freedom of action and act as it pleased. Several bellicose statements to this effect by McKenna and First Sea Lord Sir John Fisher have been advanced in support of this proposition. Notwithstanding the robust comments from Britain’s then naval leaders, there are clear problems with this interpretation. For one thing, it assumes that the Admiralty had the determining voice in matters of high policy. It did not; responsibility in this area rested with the Cabinet as advised by numerous interested departments, of which the Admiralty was only one and not necessarily the most influential. Perhaps more saliently, however, there is a more straightforward and less Machiavellian explanation for the Admiralty’s stance at The Hague and London conferences. When one considers that at the time of both of these gatherings Britain’s naval plans were firmly premised on the utilization of blockade, in the strict legal sense of the term, and had been for some considerable time, the position taken at the venues is anything but inexplicable. Starkly put, the Royal Navy sought to gain the maximum latitude for the instrument it actually intended to utilize, while curtailing as far as possible those belligerent rights that could be employed to harm British interests and which, in any case, they did not intend to use, or would use only sparingly.

The British government’s commitment to this position is further evident in the extensive parliamentary battle that was fought to secure legislative ratification of the Declaration

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33 See, for example, Lance E. Davis and Stanley L. Engerman, Naval Blockades in Peace and War: An Economic History since 1750 (Cambridge, 2006), p. 13 n. 27.
34 A.J.A. Morris, The Scaremongers: The Advocacy of War and Rearmament, 1896–1914 (London, 1984), p. 279. For a similar view, see John Terraine, Business in Great Waters: The U-Boat Wars, 1916–1945 (Barnsley, 1989), pp. 6–7.
35 Offer, First World War, pp. 278–80.
36 It is also worth underlining just how often Fisher was overruled in matters of national strategy during his tenure as first sea lord. The majority of politicians regarded his ‘Copenhagening’ claims with a degree of dismay during 1905; Clarke’s informal planning group sided in favour of the General Staff’s idea of deploying the army to Europe in January 1906; the government was sufficiently sceptical of Fisher’s guarantees regarding home defence that it mounted a renewed invasion enquiry in 1907; and he again failed to secure definite backing for a primarily maritime approach to a European war in 1908–9. All of this underlines the point that Fisher cannot but have known that it was far beyond his authority to plan to ignore international law, something the Liberal government was committed to on ideological and political grounds.
of London. From the signing of the convention in 1909 through to its final rejection in the House of Lords in December 1911 and beyond, the Liberal government sought to enshrine the new code into British prize law. It was still planning on achieving this in July 1914. Ironically, that it failed turned out to be fortuitous.

The reason for this apparent paradox was that in May 1912, only a few months after the bill’s final rejection, British naval plans underwent a fundamental transformation. In many respects this is quite surprising. As we have seen, the existing idea of blockading the German coast had been central to them since at least 1904, if not before. Moreover, it had been tested and validated in a series of manoeuvres undertaken as recently as June 1911, which had shown that blockade was possible even against coasts defended by flotilla craft. Furthermore, the concept had been presented to the CID on 23 August 1911 by First Sea Lord Sir Arthur Wilson, when, contrary to many accounts, it had not been rejected. Indeed, only a week after the now notorious meeting when the plans were reconfirmed, the C.-in-C. Home Fleets declared:

The present War Plans provide for a blockade of the Heligoland Bight … with the principal object of … preventing the German Fleet putting to sea without the British Commander-in-Chief knowing it and, when it is known to be at sea, conveying to him such information as to its movements as will enable it to be brought to action by the British Main Fleet.

However, the new naval leadership that was put in place after Sir Arthur Wilson’s enforced retirement in December 1911 decided to abandon it. The new Board of Admiralty was worried that the belated expansion of the German submarine service, combined with the enhanced potential of mine warfare and the upgrading of Germany’s fixed coastal defences, made the use of inshore destroyer flotillas extremely hazardous. Particularly significant in this calculation were the logistical difficulties of keeping sufficiently numerous and powerful watching forces on station. Given that crews required rest, ships needed to be refuelled, and time was needed to travel the not inconsiderable distance from British ports to the German Bight – for example, Cromarty to the mouth of the Ems was over 400 miles – no more than a third of the navy’s destroyers could be on station at any given time. The same logic applied to the cruisers that would have to provide the vital close support required to enable the British destroyers to maintain themselves on station. Thus, despite Britain’s numerical superiority over the German fleet, it was no longer sufficient for an observational blockade. Hence it was decided to pull the watching forces back into the mid North Sea region. This decision would produce enormous tactical difficulties for the Royal Navy. Summer manoeuvres undertaken in 1912 and in 1913 to evaluate the effectiveness of the new dispositions revealed what generally became known as ‘the North Sea Problem’, namely that watching forces in the middle

37 Digest entry for X1963/1911, TNA, ADM 12/1488. See also Keyes to Bayly, 1 July 1911, British Library, Keyes papers, Add. MS 82456.
38 David Morgan-Owen, ‘Cooked Up in the Dinner Hour? A Reconsideration of the Strategic Views of Sir Arthur Wilson’, English Historical Review CXXX (2015), pp. 865–906.
39 Callaghan to Admiralty, 31 August 1911, TNA, ADM 1/8132.
40 ‘Naval Manoeuvres 1913: North Sea Problem’, TNA, ADM 116/1214.
of the North Sea, unlike their inshore equivalents, frequently failed to observe let alone intercept enemy raiding and invasion forces, which in the various tests managed to reach British shores undetected and unscathed. As the citizens of Scarborough would later be able to confirm when the real war came and they were shelled by German raiders that appeared off the British coast without warning, these results were not an isolated aberration. Given this vulnerability, it was hardly surprising that in the last years of peace the Admiralty was desperately searching for some means of reintroducing a viable form of observational blockade to secure Britain from invasion or raid. Proposals included: ‘reviving the strategy of close blockade’ by using submarines to mount ‘a watch of the enemy’s harbours’; capturing a German North Sea island as a base for renewed operations off the German littoral; and major destroyer operations in the Heligoland Bight.41 Unfortunately, none of these options had been perfected by the time the fighting started in August 1914.

The Admiralty’s decision to pull back the watching forces and the failure to find a method of replacing them was not just problematic in terms of the naval defence of the British Isles; it also had wider implications for the navy’s ability to apply pressure to the German economy. If the Admiralty had concluded in 1911 that ‘Military blockade will be also effective as a Commercial blockade’, the natural corollary of this was that the removal of a military blockade rendered the commercial blockade ineffective and, therefore, in the legal sense, void. Yet, in the absence of an ability to impose a commercial blockade, the only remaining means of applying economic pressure was to fall back upon seizing German-flagged vessels and contraband control, the latter being the very belligerent right on which the British government had previously sought to place significant limitations. That the Royal Navy would now be limited to these means was well understood in the Admiralty. Sir Henry Jackson, the chief of the War Staff, observed in October 1913 that British ‘war plans lay down definitely that one of our objects in war is to bring economic pressure on Germany by stopping her overseas trade’. The two available means of achieving this, he explained, were for Germany’s ‘mercantile marine to be destroyed’ and for ‘contraband to be seized’ from neutral vessels.42 Blockade, as a legally defined belligerent right, was no longer on the agenda.

Consequently, when war came, the Royal Navy was not in a position to declare a blockade of the German coasts and never did so. Instead, by Order in Council the British government promulgated a list of goods that it regarded as contraband by virtue of their military value. These were declared subject to seizure if they were consigned to the enemy or if it could be proven, irrespective of their stated destination, that they were ultimately intended for enemy use. In short, Britain instituted a form of contraband control. There was both an upside and a downside to this course of action.

The positive feature was that the basic mechanics of a system of contraband control were very easy to implement. As by British law ships could be inspected for contraband

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41 War Staff, ‘War Duties of Submarines’, 14 August 1913, TNA, ADM 1/8331. Bayly, ‘Seizure of Advanced Base’, 30 June 1913, TNA, ADM 137/452. ‘Operations in the North Sea; Proposals and Notes’, 27 July 1914, TNA, ADM 137/995.

42 Minute by Jackson, 16 October 1913, TNA, ADM 137/2900.
far from the enemy’s shores, cruiser cordons in the Channel and in the gap between Scotland and Norway were all that was needed to force neutral vessels to submit to the process of stop and search by British naval forces. Inspection, the very first step in the system, was thus legally and procedurally straightforward, albeit complex and time-consuming to implement in practice.

However, inspecting for contraband was not the same as stopping contraband. This proved to be much more difficult, entailing just the kinds of disputes with neutrals that had been anticipated before 1914. Moreover, to be effective as a form of economic pressure, contraband control required that the list of prohibited articles be a long and comprehensive one. However, as recently as 1909, in conformity with the then prevailing strategic outlook, the British delegates at the London Naval Conference had vigorously argued for numerous commodities and raw materials to be placed on the so-called ‘free list’ of items that could never be classed as contraband. Having not rethought their position since, this was still the position of the British government in August 1914 when the first wartime Order in Council was issued. The list of contraband goods was, therefore, quite a narrow one. In 1911 the likely desirability of extending the list in wartime had been raised by the then assistant secretary to the CID, Maurice Hankey. His boss and former DNI, Sir Charles Ottley, had dismissed the idea as too ‘violent a volte-face’ in British policy to imagine, even assuming, as he did not, that such a ‘defiance of the whole neutral world’ was actually possible. Events would prove that, although Ottley was not correct in his assessment of the impossibility of such a move, he was entirely right to anticipate difficulties. When, after the outbreak of war, it was desired that the contraband list be extended, many neutral states could not see why a position that was good enough in 1909 was no longer considered applicable, and took great exception to the process of augmenting the contraband list, the lawfulness of which they fiercely, if unsuccessfully, contested.

If the addition of multiple new items to the contraband list was of questionable legality, the measures adopted to tighten the contraband control system by restricting neutral trade, for example by rationing neutrals to pre-war levels of certain imported goods in order to ensure against their re-export to Germany, were in most cases blatant violations of existing legal principles and were undoubtedly unlawful. Yet, at the same time, they were absolutely necessary as far as Britain was concerned if goods vital to the German war effort were not simply to reach Germany via neutral harbours. Accordingly, if these measures were to be adopted, a suitable pretext needed to be found to circumvent the inconvenience of their patent illegality. The fig leaf resorted to in nearly all cases was the well-established juridical concept of reprisal. In public at least, British illegal acts were justified as a necessary if reluctant response to illegal German actions. Conveniently for the British government, German infringements of international norms were many and frequent. As a later British assessment of wartime policy conceded: ‘but for the illegal conduct of Germany, which enabled His Majesty’s Government to justify its actions as reprisals, … the Order in Council of the 11th

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43 Memorandum by Hankey, 15 February 1911, and Remarks by Ottley, 17 February 1911, TNA, ADM 116/1236.
March 1915 [would have been] difficult, and that of the 16th February 1917, impossible to justify.44

Nevertheless, even if of questionable legality, by such means the British were able progressively to sever German ties with international commerce. However, the effects of this approach were felt only gradually and there were many complications to slow the process down. By no means the least of these was the fact that stringent trading restrictions, while certainly capable of impacting adversely on Germany’s position, had the potential to damage the British economy as much as if not more than the German one. This would have come as no surprise to the British government, as it was a feature of applying economic pressure that had been identified in 1912 by a CID enquiry into trading with the enemy. The Treasury and Board of Trade representatives on that enquiry had been at pains to emphasize that as both a major entrepôt and as a prominent trading nation Britain would need to keep its commerce going if it were to meet the expense of a great power conflict. Accordingly, they had argued that severing all links with Germany, Britain’s best pre-war customer, was as likely to play havoc with Britain’s finances as it was to embarrass German industry. They had further pointed out that, in the Crimean War, trade with Russia had continued to Britain’s advantage. It was a precedent that they regarded as instructive. Was it not counterproductive, they argued, for Britain to cease trading with Germany, albeit indirectly, if by continuing such activity Britain’s war potential was actually enhanced?45

Another consideration was the recognition that cutting off German access to overseas supplies was not always the best way to hinder the German war effort. Contrary to popular assumptions, it was argued that the maintenance of some forms of trade might actually be a very effective means of dissipating German financial strength. The most obvious means of achieving this was by encouraging the Germans to purchase British-sourced non-essential luxury items, such as coffee and cocoa. Making these commodities available for purchase by Germany would contribute little to the German war effort, but their acquisition would require the expenditure of scarce foreign-currency reserves, specie that would flow straight into British coffers. The money thus expended could not be used by the Germans for really valuable war supplies, but once in British hands could be used for exactly such purposes by the Allies.46

All of these considerations meant that tightening the system of contraband control required time and effort, along with the reaching of definitive decisions on controversial questions that were the subject of considerable debate within government. It also required the creation of an extensive expert bureaucracy of a kind that simply did not exist in 1914. This administrative machinery had to be built up from scratch, with a variety of ad

44 Memorandum by the International Law Committee, 18 December 1918. Nicholas Tracy, ed., *Sea Power and the Control of Trade: Belligerent Rights from the Russian War to the Beira Patrol, 1854–1970* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 231.
45 French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning*, p. 61.
46 John McDermott, “A Needless Sacrifice”: British Businessmen and Business as Usual in the First World War’, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* XXI (1989), pp. 276–7, 278–9.
hoc bodies, such as the Foreign Office’s Contraband Department and the War Trade Advisory Committee, being progressively formed to undertake the necessary tasks. Only by 1916, with the subsuming of the various agencies into one overarching Ministry of Blockade, had the administrative aspects of this issue been resolved. Even then, the completion of the bureaucratic structure did not give the British government full latitude to do what it wished or even what it was now capable of doing. It was only with the entry into the war of the United States in 1917 that it was empowered with the freedom to act as it pleased without having to consider the negative ramifications on neutral opinion. Thus, it can be seen that a comprehensive system of economic pressure built upon contraband control took time to create and even longer to make fully effective.

Such were the consequences of going to war in August 1914 having assumed prior to May 1912 that blockade would be central to British naval operations, having written most war plans on the basis of that premise, and then at the very last minute having changed to an entirely different approach. The result of this sudden shift was that the bureaucratic machinery for implementing this strategy had to be built up from scratch.

II

Of course, the question might be asked, given that blockade was abandoned in May 1912, why more was not done in the two years and three months between this decision and the outbreak of war to align British plans for applying economic pressure more closely to the new dispositions of the fleet in the North Sea. The answer relates to what economic pressure was expected to achieve. It is often assumed that the goal was to act as a war-winning means of forcing German submission through the dislocation of the German economy. In light of post-war revelations of the impact of the ‘hunger blockade’ on the German people, it was natural to think that British planners must have known of the weapon’s potential, and that it was only a lack of willpower and decisive (ruthless) leadership that prevented its benefits not being realized sooner. In short, the benefit of hindsight transformed economic warfare into a great missed opportunity. However, while the severe dislocation of the German economy may well have become the goal of Britain’s naval leaders once the war was under way and static trench warfare had set in, before August 1914 the evidence suggests that economic pressure was conceived by most naval decision-makers as having a much more limited and specific objective.

While it is certainly possible to depict elements of the Admiralty as being whole-hearted supporters of economic warfare as Britain’s primary strategy in the event of war with Germany, it is important to appreciate that this viewpoint did not represent anything like the consensus that has sometimes been implied. This can be illustrated by contrasting the views of two of the most influential officers in shaping the navy’s strategic discourse before 1914: one-time DNI and subsequent secretary to the CID Charles Ottley and the former C.-in-C. Channel Fleet – later First Sea Lord – Sir Arthur Wilson.
The former contended that blockade would be war-winning because it ‘would sever an artery, essential … to the financial existence of Germany’. As he famously stated:

the mills of our sea-power (though they would grind the German industrial population slowly perhaps) would grind them ‘exceedingly small’ – grass would sooner or later grow in the streets of Hamburg and wide-spread dearth and ruin would be inflicted.

Sir Arthur Wilson fundamentally disagreed. While it was true that the British navy might by means of blockade bring about a ‘stoppage of direct over-sea trade from her own ports’, he had no confidence that this would prevent supplies from reaching Germany. As he elaborated, ‘as she would probably have free access to the sea through neutral ports this, although a temporary loss to her shipping interests, would not greatly affect her general trade’. Thus, ‘with Holland neutral’, Wilson believed that ‘a blockade of the German North Sea Ports would be almost useless’. Effectively, he took a diametrically opposite position to Ottley.

If there was a sharp difference of opinion between the Naval Intelligence Department and the naval leadership afloat during Ottley’s tenure as DNI, this lessened significantly when Ottley relinquished his post. The reason for this was that Ottley’s successor, Captain Edmond Slade, while an expert on economic warfare and a firm advocate of its use, was more alive than his predecessor to its potential limitations. On the one hand, he clearly recognized that Germany was fast ‘becoming a vast industrial nation’ and that, as this entailed a need for ‘the raw material with which to keep her industries going’, Germany possessed a vulnerability that Britain could exploit. Yet, keen though he was to make use of this, he was not as sanguine as Ottley as to its likely effect. This was partly because he was operating in a different strategic environment. Whereas during Ottley’s tenure as DNI the sheer magnitude of Britain’s naval superiority over Germany meant that a blockade of the entire German coastline, encompassing both Germany’s North Sea and Baltic ports, was a viable enterprise and one that Ottley had no doubt would be instituted, by the time Slade took office the increase in Germany’s relative naval strength made the prospect of pushing British forces into the Baltic an increasingly hazardous one. In November 1907 Slade, now DNI, while accepting that in an Anglo-German war Britain ‘shall be obliged at some point to enter the Baltic’, no longer conceptualized this as an operation that would commence at the very outset of the conflict. Rather, it would be attempted only later when it became ‘necessary to bring further pressure to bear in order to bring the war to a termination’.

48 Ottley to Corbett, 1 July 1905, Greenwich, National Maritime Museum, Richmond papers, RIC/9. Underlined in the original.
49 Ottley to McKenna, 5 December 1908. Quoted in Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, I, p. 379. See also Ottley to Vincent Baddeley, 16 November 1906, TNA, ADM 1/8947.
50 Sir Arthur Wilson to the Admiralty, 27 June 1905. Arthur J. Marder, The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880–1905 (New York, 1940), pp. 504–5.
51 Slade to Fisher, 25 November 1907, TNA, HD 3/133.
plans for even this operation had been put on hold. Whether this was a temporary or a permanent change is open to debate, given that as first lord from 1911 Churchill sought to revive the focus on the Baltic and even made ‘ultimate action in the Baltic’ his major goal in August 1914. Be that as it may, in the circumstances facing Slade from 1907 to 1909, the blockade of Germany could only be a partial one, restricted purely to the North Sea. Goods would, therefore, be able to reach Germany via the Baltic route. In addition, Slade held that it would be possible for Germany to circumvent aspects of the blockade in the North Sea and so mitigate its effects. Expensive though it might be to import goods through neutral ports, Germany would evade much of the pressure Britain could apply by such means. ‘The Dutch and Belgian ports’, he wrote:

are the feeders of such a vast region, a great deal of which would be neutral, that it would be practically impossible to prove anything against a vessel. Suspicion and presumption are not sufficient grounds to go on when dealing with a Court of Law, and it would be obviously impossible to check half the trade of Northern Europe because we considered that a small portion of it might be going to our enemy.

It might be noted that Slade was not alone in worrying about this. As late as December 1912 the CID was considering the problem that Belgium and the Netherlands posed to the British blockade.

Yet, more significant than such difficulties, for Slade coercion by economic means was simply not the pre-eminent instrument of war that it was for Ottley. ‘In order to increase the pressure on the enemy,’ Slade remarked, ‘and to strike at him financially, it is necessary to undertake secondary operations against his trade.’ However, as he went on to warn, ‘we must be careful to keep this in its proper place, and to remember that it is not the primary object of war’. This relegation of economic pressure from the top spot that it had held for Ottley, if not all of his contemporaries, to the status of ‘secondary operation’ naturally begs the question what the main objective now was. Slade made this clear with the further observation that ‘no consideration of attacking trade should be allowed to interfere with the operations against the main fighting force’. That, of course, was the German fleet. The issue to which Slade then turned was would the German fleet come out to fight, and if, as seemed likely, it would not, could such secondary operations as economic pressure help to achieve this. If Slade had a comprehensive answer, it does not appear to have survived. However, it would be a matter that would continue to exercise both him and his successors.

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52 Admiralty, ‘Naval Considerations regarding Military Action in Denmark’, February 1909, TNA, CAB 16/5.
53 Andrew Lambert, ‘“The Possibility of Ultimate Action in the Baltic”: The Royal Navy at War, 1914–1916’, in Michael Epkenhans, Jörg Hillmann and Frank Nägler, eds, *Jutland: World War I’s Greatest Naval Battle* (Lexington, KY, 2015), p. 79.
54 Slade, ‘Memorandum on “Continuous Voyage” and the Probable Result of Abandoning the Right’, 18 September 1907, Portsmouth, National Museum of the Royal Navy, Tweedmouth papers, MSS 254/477/1.
55 Minutes of the 120th Meeting of the CID, 6 December 1912, TNA, CAB 2/3, ff. 14–15.
56 Slade, ‘War with Germany’, 1 September 1906, TNA, ADM 116/1036B. Emphasis added.
Before August 1914 one of the principal problems facing the British naval leadership was the German battle fleet, a force whose mere existence constrained British freedom of action in the maritime sphere. At one level, this was a problem easily addressed. Few in Britain doubted that the German navy, which was both smaller in size than its British counterpart and without a proud history to inspire and encourage it, would be defeated in combat should an engagement with the Royal Navy take place. However, given that violent self-destruction at the hands of their enemies might not appeal to the German naval command, it was considered that engineering such a climactic battle might prove difficult. Some form of inducement was clearly necessary if the Germans were to be persuaded to come out of harbour and play the part that the British wanted them to play of committing suicide before a superior force. The incentive the Royal Navy came up with was to attack German trade. The 1908 war plans make particularly instructive reading on this point. As one section outlined:

Minor operations of an offensive character will be necessary for the purpose of … inflaming public opinion in Germany and inducing the nation to force their navy to reply to them. … The first and most obvious way of damaging Germany is the immediate stoppage of … her maritime trade.

Just in case this connection was not clear enough, a marginal comment on the first draft noted that the policy amounted to ‘forcing [the] German Fleet to expose itself to [our] offensive blow’.57

The basis strategic assumptions contained within the 1908 war plans were carried forward in the years thereafter, including in the period when the very idea of mounting an observational blockade of the German coast began to come under review. In late 1911 the prime minister set up a subcommittee of the CID to enquire into the question of trading with the enemy. On several occasions the main naval member of the enquiry, Rear Admiral Ernest Troubridge, the chief of the War Staff and the officer directly responsible for overseeing war planning, explained that economic pressure was intended to provoke a fleet action. Thus, as he outlined at the fourth meeting:

The more effectually we were able to stifle German trade … the greater would be the risks which Germany would be willing to run with her naval and military forces to secure the continuance of some trade, and running these risks might provide us with favourable means for defeating her forces.58

Similarly, at the fifth meeting, he noted:

Any increase in the suffering inflicted by naval means would produce a moral effect, and tend to excite public opinion in Germany to insist on the fleet coming out to meet ours, which was what we desired.59

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57 Proof copy of War Plan Germany W1, 10 June 1908, TNA, ADM 116/1043B1, f. 370.
58 Fourth meeting of the Sub-Committee on Trading with the Enemy, 29 January 1912, TNA, CAB 16/18A.
59 Fifth meeting of the Sub-Committee on Trading with the Enemy, 9 February 1912, ibid.
Troubridge’s position and the strategic assumptions it embodied were widely shared within the service. Sir William May, the former commander-in-chief of the Home Fleets and the chief umpire at both the 1912 and 1913 manoeuvres, noted in December 1912 that the capture of Germany’s overseas trade:

if done methodically, will cause Germany a vast amount of inconvenience. ... In all probability, the capture of German merchant ships will exasperate the nation, and the public feeling will be so strong that the German war fleet will be forced to come out and give battle to the British fleet.60

Given this widespread belief, it was not surprising that it formed the basis of Admiralty strategy. Nowhere is this clearer than in the December 1912 version of the naval war plan, which states:

The general idea is to use our geographical advantage of position to cut off all German shipping from oceanic trade … To relieve such a situation, Germany would be tempted to send to the North Sea a force sufficient not only to break up the lines of lighter vessels actually employed upon the blockade but to offer a general action.61

This point was reiterated by Troubridge’s successor as chief of staff, Sir Henry Jackson, when outlining the Admiralty’s war strategy to Winston Churchill in March 1913:

The War Plans are directed against Germany’s mercantile marine, with the hopes that sufficient pressure can be brought, through dislocating her trade, for the German Fleet to seek action with ours, and so end the struggle.62

It was then further reiterated in October 1913, when a new set of war orders was produced for distribution to the admirals commanding the various home squadrons. These declared that the idea underlying British war plans was ‘to exercise economic pressure upon Germany by cutting off German shipping’, an action, it was hoped, that would put the British battle fleet ‘in a position to bring the enemy’s fleet to action should it proceed to sea with the object of driving the cruiser’s off [that were interfering with German shipping]’.63

In short, between 1908 and 1913, the planning officers at the Admiralty consistently stressed that the logic of applying economic pressure to Germany was an operational one: forcing the German fleet to leave the safety of its harbours and give battle. This was not, as some have suggested, a blind quest for a second Trafalgar, but a rational desire to regain liberty of action. Only by defeating the German battle fleet – the instrument that kept the

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60 May, ‘Proposed Disposition of the British Fleet in the Event of War with Germany Alone’, December 1912, Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, I, p. 381.
61 ‘War Plan No. 1’, 16 December 1912, TNA, ADM 137/818.
62 Jackson, ‘Remarks on War Plans and on the First Lord’s Notes on the Subject’, 11 March 1913, TNA, ADM 116/3412.
63 ‘War Orders’, October 1913, TNA, ADM 137/818, f. 26.
majority of the Royal Navy’s assets tied to the fringes of the North Sea – could the British fleet regain its ability to deploy in full force where it liked and undertake all and any operations of its choosing. How the Admiralty would have used this freedom of action is never properly spelt out. However, there were many options. Deprived of the need to mask this German force, the Admiralty might have sought to establish a genuine blockade of Germany, conduct large-scale amphibious assaults, or, most probably of all, undertake major operations in the Baltic.  

However, first the German fleet had to be brought to action. While commercial blockade, as the stronger form of economic pressure, had long been the preferred instrument for achieving this, this did not mean that contraband control, the weaker form, was necessarily deemed insufficient for this purpose, and consideration had been given in the past to using it instead. Evidence of this comes from the 1907 war plans. These had considered a variety of different circumstances leading to war and had offered four different means of responding. Although three of the four contingencies (plans B to D) had conformed to type by imposing a rigorous observational (and hence commercial) blockade, the first of them, Plan A, had envisaged acting without this mechanism, making do instead simply with the enforced idleness of German shipping supplemented by contraband control. In justifying this alternative, the author of the plan, Captain George Alexander Ballard, a long-time stalwart of the Naval Intelligence Department and arguably the Royal Navy’s most experienced war planner, had fallen back on historical precedent. As he later explained, variant A of the plans:

followed in its general outline the idea which underlay our operations in certain of the Dutch wars [of the seventeenth century] … By intercepting the Dutch trade … we forced the Dutch fleets to come out and defend it, and so brought on fleet actions near our own coast.

His hope in 1907 was that similar means applied in modern times could achieve the same result against Germany. As Ballard summarized it, the role of economic pressure in this scheme, even if only in the form of contraband control, was ‘tempting the enemy to come out and then catch[ing] him’.  

Plan A had not been adopted in 1907 because Ottley, then DNI, regarded blockade as a greatly superior instrument of economic pressure and saw no reason not to apply it. Nevertheless, the precedent is significant, because in early 1912, at the very moment when a new naval leadership decided that blockade was no longer tenable and an alternative was needed, the officer appointed to head the Operations Division of the new Admiralty War Staff and thus to take charge of British naval war planning was none other than Captain Ballard. Not surprisingly, his solution to the planning gap created by the abandonment of blockade was to fall back upon the concept he had articulated five years previously and to seek to meet the Admiralty’s goal of enticing the German fleet to sea through the effects of contraband control.

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64 Lambert, ‘‘The Possibility of Ultimate Action’’, pp. 79–116.
65 Ballard to Fisher, 3 May 1909, TNA, ADM 1/8997.
66 Unsigned Memorandum [Ottley], ‘‘Notes on Attached War Plans’’, no date [1907], TNA, ADM 116/1043B2, f. 234.
Thus, the abandonment of observational blockade certainly created a major dilemma, but it was in the operational sphere – how to detect the egress from port of German naval forces in an era before effective over-the-horizon scanning. However, the fact that an alternative form of economic pressure already existed in the form of contraband control meant that there was no comparable urgency, as a result of the jettisoning of commercial blockade, to undertake a major reconsideration of Admiralty policy in the economic sphere. This is in itself revealing. Had the goal at this point been to bring about victory solely or even largely through economic dislocation, then the enforced abandonment of the only means widely accepted as being able to achieve this, and the substitution in its place of a method that was widely acknowledged to be much weaker and quite incapable of producing victory in its own right, would certainly have caused consternation in the Admiralty. However, for much more limited purposes, such as luring the German fleet to sea, contraband control was seen by many as adequate. Consequently, there would be an imperative to recast the policy only if the goal ever changed to the much more ambitious one of cutting Germany off entirely from global commerce and bringing victory through economic dislocation. Yet, such an ambitious goal was not articulated until the so-called ‘Reprisals Order’ of 11 March 1915, which sought for the first time to prevent the transit of all goods of enemy destination, origin, or ownership.

III

As we have seen, for the Royal Navy in 1914 economic warfare was not an overarching grand strategy, but merely a means to an operational end. This subordination reflected a keen awareness of the legal restrictions surrounding the use of economic warfare and a belief that victory over the German fleet would be required in order to make full use of the navy’s power, be it to undertake amphibious landings, threaten the Baltic, or disrupt the German economy. In conceptualizing economic warfare as a means of forcing the Germans to battle, the Admiralty was adopting a line of thinking very much in accord with the prevailing orthodoxy of the day. As Sir Julian Corbett, the foremost exponent of British naval doctrine, explained in his classic Some Principles of Maritime Strategy (1911), the two means of securing command of the sea were decision by battle and blockade.67 The former was naturally preferred, but when it could not be attained because the enemy would not oblige, the latter was an effective means of forcing him out, as history showed. Thus, just as Ballard had argued in 1909 when justifying his use of economic

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67 On Corbett’s relevance to contemporary strategic debates, see Donald Schurman, Julian S. Corbett, 1854–1922: Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe (London, 1981); J.J. Widen, Theorist of Maritime Strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and His Contribution to Military and Naval Thought (Farnham, 2012); Andrew Lambert, ‘The Naval War Course, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy and the Origins of the “British Way in Warfare”’, in Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy, eds, The British Way in Warfare: Power and the International System, 1856–1956: Essays in Honour of David French (Farnham, 2010), pp. 219–56. A different and somewhat iconoclastic view can be found in Nicholas A. Lambert, ‘False Prophet? The Maritime Theory of Julian Corbett and Professional Military Education’, Journal of Military History LXXVII (2013), pp. 1055–78.
warfare as a lure in his war plan of two years earlier, so Corbett maintained that the Dutch Wars of the seventeenth century provided the classic example of why one would embark upon such an operation and how it would work:

The attempt to seek the enemy with a view to a decisive action was again and again frustrated by his retiring to his own coasts, where either we could not reach him or his facilities for retreat made a decisive result impossible. … It was soon perceived that the only way of dealing with this attitude was to adopt some means of forcing the enemy to sea and compelling him to expose himself to the decision we sought. The most cogent means at hand was to threaten his commerce. Instead, therefore, of attempting to seek out his fleet directly, our own would sit upon the fairway of his homeward-bound trade, either on the Dogger Bank or elsewhere, thereby setting up a situation which it was hoped would cost him either his trade or his battle-fleet, or possibly both.68

Corbett, of course, taught history and doctrine to naval officers and worked closely with the Naval Intelligence Department.69 That his operational ideas matched those in the navy’s war plan is, thus, hardly coincidental. Both, however, are clear on one point. Economic warfare was not a national strategy in the run-up to 1914, but an operational means to a battlefield end. The implications of this are significant. If neither the continental commitment nor economic warfare represented a grand plan for victory, then Aston rather than Hankey was right. Britain might have had multiple plans in 1914, but it did not possess multiple strategies.

The consequences of this quickly became evident when the war began. The army leadership, having nothing other than a scheme for landing the Expeditionary Force in France, soon found that it was faced with the problem of learning how to beat the Germans on the battlefield. Ultimately Britain’s generals were successful, as the string of victories in the final hundred days of the conflict makes clear, but it was a laborious and time-consuming process and one that incurred enormous costs, both human and material. The situation for the Royal Navy was little different. Entering the fray with no clear means of keeping track of the enemy’s location and with a plan to induce battle as a result of contraband control, long recognized as the weakest form of economic pressure, Britain’s admirals had little choice but to improvise when the German fleet steadfastly refused to be drawn out. In this circumstance, making economic warfare work, despite the impossibility of declaring a legal blockade, was the sole remaining option. Unfortunately, few of the navy’s pre-war preparations, which had initially stressed military blockade over economic blockade and then highlighted contraband control over all other forms of economic warfare, were of much value in embarking upon a decisive assault upon the financial sinews of the German state. As a result, the means of waging such a war had to be learnt the hard way and the structures of implementation built from scratch. It was inevitably a slow and difficult process, made harder by Britain’s need to

68 Julian Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy (London, 1911), pp. 157–8.
69 Andrew Lambert, ‘Sir Julian Corbett, Naval History, and the Development of Sea Power Theory’, paper given at Strategy and the Sea: An International Conference in Honour of Professor John B. Hattendorff, All Souls College, Oxford, April 2014.
subvert long-accepted legal norms under the eyes of watchful neutral states. That it took several years to have any effect was the natural consequence of the failure to develop a grand strategy before 1914.

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