

Abstract

JULIAN CORBETT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MARITIME STRATEGY

by

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Sir Julian Corbett (1854-1922) is one of the two most influential theorists of sea power. He defined maritime operations, limited war, and our understanding of the “British Way of War,” while also foreshadowing the Great War at Sea. Corbett’s lasting theoretical contributions to strategic thought are captured in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911). It remains a centerpiece of military and international relations theory and continues to be studied in professional military education alongside Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Antoine-Henri Jomini, Carl von Clausewitz, and Alfred Thayer Mahan. Corbett’s influential theories were shaped by multiple influences, including Mahan, Corbett’s own study of British sea power, his reading and understanding of Clausewitz’s *On War*, and Admiral John Fisher’s naval revolution at the turn of the twentieth century. While Mahan linked sea power with national power, Corbett illuminated this relationship and displayed a keen understanding, developed through his own historical study, of the limits of sea power, and war more broadly, as an instrument of national policy. His influential theory on the role of sea power in the geopolitical context of the European balance of power at the turn of the twentieth century is a clear reflection of Britain’s rapidly changing strategic environment and the equally rapid changes in military technology. Heavily influenced by Admiral Fisher, Corbett, building on the work of Mahan and military theorist Carl von

Clausewitz, defined maritime strategy, limited war, command of the sea, and, at the height of the British Empire, laid the ground work for understanding a “British way of war.” Corbett was first and foremost a historian and a professional military educator. Corbett tied the study of history to the development of theory with a constant focus on the role of education in developing a leader’s critical thinking and judgment. Corbett introduced new interpretive approaches to the study of military history based on his interaction with the burgeoning military theory of the nineteenth century. Corbett’s historical writing evolved over a prolific decade of multi-volume works from 1898 to 1911 and directly influenced his conception of maritime strategy that underpinned his lasting contribution to military theory. Corbett was one of the earliest and most enduring contributors to fully establish the link between history, theory, and professional military education. *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* was the culmination of Corbett’s study of history and his lasting achievement. Ultimately, however, Corbett wrote *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, at Fisher’s behest, to educate officers and statesmen about the Royal Navy’s maritime and economic doctrine for dealing with the rising threat of Imperial Germany.



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## CHAPTER 1

### JULIAN CORBETT AND THE VERDICT OF HISTORY

Today, Sir Julian Stafford Corbett is generally considered one of the most influential theorists of sea power and a key proponent of linking policy and military strategy in a broader approach to grand strategy. Corbett's lasting theoretical contributions to maritime and strategic studies are captured in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911). Most modern analysis, however, suffers from a solitary focus on *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and fails to consider the work within context of Corbett's broader thinking and purpose for which he wrote. When placed in context, it is clear that Corbett was one of the earliest writers to fully establish the link between history, theory, doctrine, and professional military education. *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* was the culmination of Corbett's study of history, teaching at the Royal Navy College, and work for Admiral John Fisher at Admiralty. Ultimately, Corbett wrote *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, at Fisher's behest, to educate officers and statesmen about the Royal Navy's strategic and doctrinal thinking for meeting the rising threat of Imperial Germany. It is as an educational tool that *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* retains its lasting value.

Since the end of the Cold War, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* has returned to prominence in military and security studies. War Studies scholar J.J. Widen recently noted:

Only a theory can provide the necessary intellectual tools to understand the totality of a subject, in this case war at and from the sea. Corbett's work on maritime strategy presents such a rare theory. Like Carl von Clausewitz' *On War*, it has greatly influenced scholars and practitioners alike, and, therefore, warrants serious study and critical analysis if we aim to develop further the field of naval thought.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.J. Widen, *Theorist of Maritime Strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and his Contribution to Military and Naval Thought* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 1.



Since the publication of *Some Principles* in 1911, Corbett and his maritime doctrine have not always received as fulsome a reception or interpretation by either scholars or practitioners. When first published in 1911, *Some Principles* proved controversial, coming under criticism from defense analysts and many senior and retired naval officers. During the First World War, the controversy only increased as several commentators blamed Corbett and his theories for what they perceived as a lack of aggressiveness in the Royal Navy's officer corps, manifest, they argued, in the Battle of Jutland. After Corbett's death in 1922, his maritime strategy began to fade from professional consideration. By the Second World War and then throughout the Cold War, references to Corbett primarily relegated him to a minor player in Sir John Fisher's Admiralty during the "Dreadnought Age." Only after the American experience in Vietnam and the end of the Cold War did practitioners and scholars begin to reassess Corbett and the relevance of his theories to the post-Cold War world. This reassessment expanded into multiple new areas including: the development of the relationship between Corbett's thought and the other great military theorists of the nineteenth century; Corbett's influence on the Royal Navy during the "Dreadnought Age" and the First World War; and the role of the historian in influencing national policy and strategy debates.

Upon publication in 1911, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* received mixed reviews. Many in the Royal Navy, a service steeped in the Nelsonian tradition, were not receptive to Corbett's qualifications concerning the limitations of sea power. The leading public critic was noted historian and prominent military affairs commentator Spenser Wilkinson. Wilkinson provided regular commentary on British military policy in the *Morning Post* and became the first Chichele Professor of Military History at Oxford in 1909. While Wilkinson

respected Corbett's work as a historian, he launched some of the most vitriolic attacks on *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Wilkinson adamantly opposed, what he saw as, Corbett's departure from previous naval strategy: Corbett's claims that seeking out the enemy's main battle fleet should not always be a navy's primary objective, and Corbett's emphasis on limited war theory. In reviewing *Some Principles*, Wilkinson wrote:

It seems to me that in the absence of the personal experience which would justify an independent judgement...Mr. Julian Corbett, whose instinct seems to lead him on paths of his own. He seems to me to assume that the teachings of the strategists whose names I have mentioned (Admiral Philip Colomb, Admiral Sir Cyprian Bridge, Admiral Sir Reginald Custance, and Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan) are to be regarded as of doubtful value, and that he must begin de novo. He seems to question the conclusions which they regard as firmly established. My impression is that if Mr. Corbett's volume were read by young naval officers it must have a disastrous offset upon the Navy.<sup>2</sup>

Wilkinson attacked Corbett's lack of emphasis on decisive battle, writing that "the naval commander ought never allow anything but the enemy's naval forces to occupy the first place in his mind."<sup>3</sup> He accused Corbett of misinterpreting Clausewitz's consideration of limited war and misrepresenting the lessons of the Seven Years War in order to demonstrate the viability of a maritime power conducting a limited war against a continental opponent. While some of Wilkinson's vitriol was likely due to Corbett's services to the Fisher Admiralty, his fundamental disagreement with many aspects of Corbett's theory were clear. These attacks, coming from such an influential military publicist, negatively impacted perceptions of Corbett's work prior to the First World War. Corbett's arguments concerning decisive battle remained the most controversial aspect of *Some Principles* during his lifetime and drew critics both in and out of the service. The opposition to his attempt to see beyond the decisive battle culminated shortly after his death, when the Board of Admiralty issued a disclaimer on the title page of his third volume

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<sup>2</sup> Spenser Wilkinson, "Strategy at Sea," *The Morning Post*, February 19, 1912.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

of the official *Naval Operations: History of the Great War*, “Their Lordships find that some of the principles advocated in this book, especially the tendency to minimize the importance of seeking battle and of forcing it to a conclusion, are directly in conflict with their views.”<sup>4</sup>

Corbett did not live to see the disclaimer on his work, having died upon completion of this third volume in 1922.

After his death, Corbett and *Some Principles* slowly faded from discussions of naval and military strategy. According to historian Geoffrey Till, after the First World War and the failure of the Dardanelles campaign, “Corbett’s concept of maritime warfare was put into cold storage.”<sup>5</sup> Corbett, during the interwar years and Second World War, was primarily remembered as the controversial official historian of the Great War at sea. Corbett’s primary disciple in the study of naval history was Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, who, as a mid-grade officer, had first worked with Corbett in 1902 on a series of newspaper articles concerning education in the Royal Navy. Corbett had inspired Richmond to write and eventually publish a three-volume history of *The Navy in the War, 1739-48*, Richmond’s first foray into academic, primary source-based historical research.<sup>6</sup> Richmond became a staunch advocate for the use of history in both naval education and strategic planning. Richmond believed Corbett’s theories had been misunderstood and, therefore, often ignored in the years following the Great War. Ultimately, however, the outspoken and controversial Richmond failed to revive Corbett’s maritime strategy or make any significant lasting impact on British naval education, which actually regressed during the

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<sup>4</sup> Julian Corbett, *Naval Operations: History of the Great War* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1923), III:Title Page.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Till, “Sir Julian Corbett and the British Way in Naval Warfare,” in *Navies and Global Defense*, ed. Keith Neilson and Elizabeth Jane Errington (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Barry D. Hunt, *Sailor-Scholar: Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, 1871-1946* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1982), 119.

interwar years.<sup>7</sup> He did, however, work to advance much of Corbett's thought through collaboration with another prominent interwar military commentator, Basil Liddell Hart.

During the First World War, Liddell Hart had served as a captain in the British Army on the Western Front, but injuries suffered during a gas attack forced him to leave the service. He became an influential military correspondent with the *Daily Telegraph*. Drawing from the theories of Corbett, Richmond, T.E. Lawrence, and Sun Tzu, Liddell Hart, developed his "British Way in Warfare." A recent biographer characterized Liddell Hart as a "prolific raider" of others theories and the creator of an "invented tradition."<sup>8</sup> After the war as Corbett's theoretical work faded from view, Liddell Hart described his version of the "British Way of War," borrowing heavily from Corbett's *England in the Seven Years War* (1907). It was the limited commitment to an unlimited war which became the foundation of Liddell Hart's "British Way of War." Historian Andrew Lambert has argued that, in co-opting Corbett's principles, Liddell Hart transformed them "from a pragmatic flexible response into dogmatic prescription."<sup>9</sup> Liddell Hart published his arguments in *The British Way in Warfare* (1932). Despite borrowing heavily from Corbett, Liddell Hart's focus was never on maritime warfare. Corbett's more modest and persuasive argument came to be overshadowed by the work of Liddell Hart and his obsession with the British Army experience on the Western Front and a fervent desire to avoid repeating another British continental commitment. According to British military historian Brian Bond:

Liddell Hart was original only in his rather extreme and one-sided statement of the maritime case. To go back no further than the 1900s, Corbett, Esher, Hankey and Sir Herbert Richmond had all espoused similar views, and it would hardly be surprising if such a general strategic outlook was popular in naval circles.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 216, 235.

<sup>8</sup> Alex Danchev, *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), 170-5.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Lambert, "The Naval War Course, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and the Origins of 'The British Way of War,'" In *The British Way in Warfare: Power and the International System, 1856-1956: Essays in Honour of David French* (London: Routledge Publishing, 2010), 251.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought* (London: Cassell, 1977), 74-75.

Liddell Hart's less pragmatic approach continued to overshadow Corbett's thought throughout the Second World War and much of the Cold War.

Beyond Liddell Hart, the only other major military theorist to significantly engage Corbett's writing during the interwar period was the French Admiral and theorist Raoul Castex. Castex spent much of his naval career as a professor at the *École de Guerre Navale* and became the foremost naval authority during the interwar period. He was a strong advocate for historical instruction within the French Navy. Castex was promoted to Admiral in 1926 and wrote extensively on naval affairs throughout the interwar years. He published five volumes of his commentaries as the *Théories stratégiques* and many other works over the period. Castex, an ardent follower of Alfred Thayer Mahan, was highly critical of several aspects of Corbett's maritime strategy despite the fact that he adopted many ideas from *Some Principles*. He portrayed Corbett, a civilian, as ignorant of the realities of war and lacking the knowledge, expertise, and experience to challenge Mahan. Additionally, Castex was critical of Corbett's narrow British focus and resultant fixation on limited war, writing:

As a good Anglo-Saxon, he has a phobia about permanent armies on the continent...He rides his hobby-horse of limited war that he presents as original and above the understanding of continental strategists. Fundamentally, he only develops the well-known strategy of combined operations led by a strong power, strong from the naval point of view and weak from a terrestrial point of view. And, with little logic, he attacks in the name of the principles of that strategy those that govern the entirely different case of pure land warfare or of pure naval warfare. He breaks with the idea of the nation in arms, of the importance of organized force, of battle, of the offensive, etc.... He frequently looks across history, failing to recognize the military effort of England's allies during the wars of the first Empire.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Herve Coutau-Begarie, "Corbett and Richmond in France," In *Mahan Is Not Enough: The Proceedings of a Conference on the Works of Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond*, ed. James Goldrick and John B. Hattendorf (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1993), 282.

Castex argued that Corbett became preoccupied with the dangers of new technology to the dominant battle fleet and failed to consider many other scenarios. Yet, Castex had wrestled with Corbett's maritime strategy and acknowledged that:

Personally, he [Corbett] has given me an intense, intellectual and almost moral crisis. I have felt the columns of the temple move. I have gone down and verified the foundation. I have ascertained that they remain; he has only found some cracks there. For my part, I have examined, repaired and modified this foundation. Then, I have gone up again, reassured of the solidity of the new edifice, recognizing, despite all, this killjoy who obliged me to a disagreeable but useful review of myself.<sup>12</sup>

Castex concluded that Corbett's maritime strategy was primarily based on Great Britain's unique situation and held little relevance beyond Britain. Castex's arguments, influential at the time with many continental navies, also faded rapidly with the onset of the Second World War.

During the 1930s, *Some Principles* disappeared from the United States Naval War College required reading list, only to reappear again in 1972 as part of the readings for a course in strategy and policy.<sup>13</sup> As Liddell Hart borrowed Corbett's ideas without acknowledging the source, Richmond failed to substantially alter the Royal Navy's education system, and Castex drifted into obscurity, Corbett and his theories faded from professional military and strategy publications prior to and during the Second World War. Simultaneously, however, he began to reappear in naval history as professional historians began to address the "Dreadnought Age" and the First World War. Prior to the Second World War, American historian Arthur J. Marder was granted special individual access to Admiralty records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result of this exclusive access, Marder published *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (1940), and, after the war, he published his monumental five-volume *From the Dreadnought to*

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>13</sup> John B. Hattendorf, "Mahan is not Enough: Conference Themes and Issues," in Goldrick and Hattendorf, ed., *Mahan Is Not Enough*, 9.

*Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919* (1961-1970). Marder's work and the eventual opening of the Admiralty archives led to intense interest in the "Fisher Revolution," the Anglo-German naval arms race, and the First World War at sea; all topics that continue to generate disagreement and controversy to the present day. In the first volume of *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* Marder presented Julian Corbett as a minor figure supporting Admiral Fisher's reform program by providing historical case studies and policy editorials. Despite the limited coverage of Corbett, Marder's works were central to an emerging interest in the naval history of the period and led historians to address the role of Corbett, the historian, educator, and publicist.

Naval historians writing on Julian Corbett during the Cold War included Peter Stanford, *The Work of Sir Julian Corbett in the Dreadnought Era* (1951), Donald Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought 1867-1914* (1965) and the biography *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922* (1981), John Hattendorf, *Sir Julian Corbett on the Significance of Naval History* (1971), and Clark G. Reynolds, *Command of the Sea: The History and Strategy of Maritime Empires* (1974). These historians focused extensively on Corbett as a leading historian in the new field of naval history, his role as a professional naval educator at the Royal Naval College, and his influence within Admiral Fisher's inner circle at the Admiralty. Donald Schurman, as Corbett's sole biographer, is the most representative of the period and the most important in establishing the early historiographical approach to Corbett's life, career, and works.

While teaching naval history at the Royal Military College of Canada, Schurman became interested in the role of the naval historian in educating professional military officers. His interest led him to study the creation of the Royal Naval College in Britain and the early pioneers

in professional military education in the late nineteenth century. In *The Education of a Navy*, Schurman argued that, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, navies around the world wrestled with the tremendous technological change produced by the mature Industrial Revolution. Most naval officers became enamored with the rapid pace of technological change and focused on technologies' impact on naval strategy and tactics. In response to this increasing focus on technology, there arose a small group of men at the turn of the century who looked beyond the rapidly changing technological environment for enduring strategic lessons from the "Age of Sail." Schurman documented the contributions of John and Philip Colomb, John Knox Laughton, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Herbert Richmond, and Julian Corbett to the rise of naval history, professional military education, and British strategic thought. Schurman argued that, while these men had limited impact during their lifetimes, they ultimately, charted the course for naval history and professional military education. Schurman thoroughly analyzed the historical works of each of these authors, including Corbett's extensive historical output. He did not review Corbett's theoretical work, *Some Principles*. Schurman credited Corbett, among those covered, with the most advanced professional approach to the study of naval history.<sup>14</sup>

Sixteen years later, Schurman returned to his study of Corbett, publishing the only biography, to date, entitled *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922: Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe* (1981). Schurman remained focused on Corbett the historian and, while he noted *Some Principles*, he did not provide any exposition or analysis of that work. He argued that Corbett brought forward a conception of military history as an integral part of a broader general history of the state and international relations. Corbett deftly married warfare with state policy and understood the role of tradition and geography in limiting military means. Corbett's

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Schurman, *The Education of the Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought 1867-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 147-184.



earliest historical works developed the marriage of state policy and military strategy; this theme ran throughout all of his subsequent work. According to Schurman, Corbett's books were increasingly about statesmen attempting to achieve national objectives through the use of military power.<sup>15</sup> Schurman also greatly extended his analysis into Corbett's role and influence within the Fisher Admiralty. Schurman argued that Admiral Fisher transformed Corbett's life by bringing him to teach at the Royal Navy War Course and, by extension, the Admiralty where he observed and participated in strategy and policy debates throughout the "Dreadnought Age" and the First World War. Schurman also agreed with, and further expanded on, Marder's view that Corbett served as a publicist for the Fisher Admiralty.<sup>16</sup> Schurman, however, did not stray far from Corbett the historian. He used Corbett's two-volume history of *England in the Seven Years War* (1907) to analyze Clausewitz's influence on Corbett's thought rather than *Some Principles*. Finally, Schurman was the first to extensively document Corbett's struggles with the Admiralty in writing the "official history" of the Great War at sea. He concluded that Corbett's assistance to Admiral Fisher during the "Dreadnought Age" was his single biggest contribution. On the historical side, Schurman credited Corbett with transforming the work of Mahan into a scholarly occupation and pointing the path for naval historians to follow in using archival research to illuminate current strategic challenges.<sup>17</sup>

Schurman's analysis was based on his in-depth reading of all of Corbett's published works, including history, theory, policy editorials, and naval propaganda. Schurman remained the single most comprehensive source on Corbett's life and his extensive body of written works. However, within seven years of Schurman publishing the Corbett biography there was an

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<sup>15</sup> Donald Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922: Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1981), 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-40.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

extensive shift in historiographical focus from Corbett the historian to Corbett the military theorist. Even after this shift was well underway, Schurman continued to assert Corbett's importance as a historian far outweighed his theoretical contributions. At a conference on Corbett and Richmond hosted by the United States Naval War College in 1992, he argued that:

I have a really big problem in having Corbett elevated to the level of a universal thinker on sea power. I do not think he was that. I do not even think he was a strategist, and I don't think that his so-called *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, published in 1911, will live forever. I do think that, as a historian, who used archival material as the materials to shape his country's naval history, for that he will live a long time.<sup>18</sup>

Schurman, however, was in a rapidly shrinking minority as the historiographical debate changed to focus on Corbett the theorist.

Clark G. Reynolds' *Command of the Sea: The History and Strategy of Maritime Empires* (1974) served as a precursor to this change in historiographical focus. Following Schurman's lead, Reynolds, in his chapter entitled "The Golden Age of Naval Thought, 1867-1914," posited that, during the late nineteenth century, naval officers had become overwhelmingly focused on technology and its impact on warfare. In response to this age of technological instability, a school of historical thought arose in the late nineteenth century that sought to combat the overwhelming focus on technology at the expense of the lessons of history. According to Reynolds, this clash between the materialists and the historicists generated "a golden age of naval thought."<sup>19</sup> He placed Mahan and Corbett at the heart of this "golden age" and started a historiographical trend among naval historians of comparing and contrasting the two men's naval thought. In what was a much broader history of the period within a much broader work on maritime history, Reynolds provided a brief comparison of Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power*

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<sup>18</sup> Goldrick and Hattendorf ed., *Mahan Is Not Enough*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> Clark G. Reynolds, *Command of the Sea: The History and Strategy of Maritime Empires* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1974), 402.

with Corbett's *Some Principles*. He also provided a brief allusion to the influence of Carl von Clausewitz on Corbett's thought.

Reynolds brief comparison, however, was outside the historiographic trend for much of the Cold War and truly foreshadowed a return to Corbett's maritime strategy in 1988. During the Second World War and for much of the Cold War, Corbett and his maritime theory were no longer a part of military and strategic debates or publications. Michael Howard's *The Continental Commitment* (1972) was more representative of Cold War strategic thought.

Howard, in the preface to the 1989 re-print of *The Continental Commitment*, clearly recognized the influence of NATO and the Cold War on his own thinking when he wrote:

I was, in writing it (*The Continental Commitment*), conducting an argument with that older generation of naval and military historians, from Julian Corbett to Herbert Richmond and Liddell Hart, who urged the need for a maritime strategy, a specific 'British Way in Warfare' based on the avoidance of any Continental Commitment. The experience of the Western Front in 1914-1918 had led an entire generation, whose most articulate spokesman was Liddell Hart, to eschew a 'continental' strategy as an aberration from a historic norm. My own generation's experience of the Second World War and its aftermath indicated the contrary...A subsequent more dispassionate generation may therefore see this book with its implicit conclusions as a tract for the times, promoting my own conviction as to the importance of NATO to Britain's security, and as flawed in its analysis as the books of Liddell Hart.<sup>20</sup>

Many current historians have come to agree with Howard's reflective self-assessment. Clearly, Corbett's work was not a result of the trauma of the Western Front and had a much broader and deeper foundation in British history than did the works of Liddell Hart or Howard.

In a classic collection of strategic thought, *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought From Machiavelli to Hitler* (1941) edited by Edward Meade Earle, Mahan received a full chapter, while Corbett was covered with a single page in the chapter entitled "Continental

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defense Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London: The Ashfield Press, 1989), 8.

Doctrines of Sea Power” which focused on the French and German schools of naval thought.<sup>21</sup> Mahan remained at the center of naval theory after, in the opinion of many, his theories had been validated by the naval war in the Pacific and the decisive battles of Midway and Leyte Gulf. In 1986, Peter Paret edited an updated version of this classic work entitled *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, which became a foundational text for strategic studies. This later version had a new and fully updated chapter on Mahan, removed the chapter on the “Continental Doctrine of Sea Power,” and made no mention of Corbett or *Some Principles*. The inclusion and praise of Mahan at the expense of any mention of Corbett generated controversy within the naval history community, which had begun with Reynolds, to shift its focus from Mahan to Corbett.

The first response came from the United States Naval Institute which re-released Corbett’s *Some Principles* with an introductory essay from the British historian Eric Grove (1988). This effort was quickly followed by Barry Gough, *Maritime Strategy: The Legacies of Mahan and Corbett as Philosophers of Sea Power* (1988), John Gooch, *Maritime Command: Mahan and Corbett* (1989), Barry D. Hunt, *The Strategic Thought of Sir Julian Corbett* (1989), and John B. Hattendorf, *Recent Thinking on the Theory of Naval Strategy* (1989). Each focused on the juxtaposition of Mahan and Corbett as the two leading theorists of sea power and reflected the growing interpretation that Corbett’s work was more relevant to modern maritime and strategic thought than was Mahan’s. Each came to the same general conclusion, echoed by Barry Hunt, that, “Corbett was the superior historian and a more subtle and cautious strategic

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<sup>21</sup> The chapter “Continental Doctrines of Sea Power” was written by Theodore Ropp, who focused on his previous scholarship on the *Jeune Ecole*, Raoul Castex and Alfred von Tirpitz. Ropp briefly covered Corbett and Fred T. Jane together. Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 453. Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

theorist.”<sup>22</sup> Corbett’s approach to maritime strategy as a part of a broader national strategy which incorporated both land and maritime was clearly contrasted with Mahan’s sole focus on sea power. Grove concluded that “posterity has come to regard Corbett as by far the deepest and most flexible thinker among the classical naval strategists...Corbett has a stronger appeal than Mahan to the new generation of strategists.”<sup>23</sup> At the 1992 Naval War College conference, Grove disputed Schurman’s earlier claims, arguing:

as the latest editor of Corbett’s *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, I must reluctantly take issue with Donald Schurman’s assessment of Corbett as more a historian than a maritime strategist. Indeed, I would argue that what makes Corbett such an important naval writer is his ability to distill from the past the ‘normal,’ from which other factors - notably technology - might draw us, but to which there is a tendency to return...Corbett’s is a much surer intellectual foundation than Mahan’s for the formulation of modern strategic concepts for the present and future...Corbett is no mere dusty historian; he is *the* classical maritime strategist with a relevance both today and tomorrow.<sup>24</sup>

The comparative debate over Mahan and Corbett continued through the end of the Cold War and became central in the United States Navy’s search for new roles and missions following the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union.

Two distinct trends stemming from separate events came together at roughly the same time and led to a tremendous resurgence of writing on Corbett and *Some Principles*. The first event was the end of the Vietnam War, the second was the end of the Cold War. Following the Vietnam War, there was a tremendous growth of scholarly focus on Carl von Clausewitz and his seminal work, *On War*, among the United States military, foreign policy professionals, and academics. By the mid-1990s the rapidly increasing amount of Clausewitz scholarship led to a

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<sup>22</sup> Barry D. Hunt, “The Strategic Thought of Sir Julian Corbett,” in *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power: Britain and America in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John B. Hattendorf and Robert S. Jordan (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 1989. 110.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Grove, Introduction to Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), xlv.

<sup>24</sup> Goldrick and Hattendorf, ed., *Mahan Is Not Enough*, 263.

search for “disciples of Clausewitz” which brought many military and strategic studies scholars to Corbett and *Some Principles*. Concurrently, with the end of the Cold War, the United States Navy was left in search of new roles and missions. United States Navy professionals and naval historians searched both history and theory for relevant guidance for the future. These two trends came together between 1988 and 1995, leading to a rapid expansion of scholarly publications focused on Corbett the military theorist.

At the end of the Cold War, the United States Naval War College hosted two major historical conferences in back to back years that brought in the top naval historians, predominately from Great Britain, the United States, and Canada. Following in the tradition of juxtaposing Mahan against Corbett, in 1991 the College hosted a conference on the collected works and continued relevance of Alfred Thayer Mahan, following it in 1992 with the previously mentioned conference on the works of Corbett and Richmond. The proceedings of the second conference were collected and published in *Mahan is Not Enough* (1993). These conferences generated new scholarship and a spirited debate over naval and maritime theory that extended far beyond the collected works of the conferences.

Geoffrey Till, British naval historian and, since 2007, Chairman of The Corbett Centre of Maritime Policy Studies at King’s College, presented *Corbett and the 1990s* (1992) at the conference and embodied this search for Corbett’s relevance to modern navies and policymakers. He continued this theme with *Sir Julian Corbett and the Twenty-First Century: Ten Maritime Commandments* (1999) and *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (2004). Till introduced the argument that Corbett believed that the first function of the fleet was to support diplomatic efforts and serve a coercive function through naval diplomacy. Till also emphasized

the combined arms or joint operations approach that Corbett had advocated.<sup>25</sup> He reminded modern NATO navies, which had now gained command of the sea through the collapse of the Soviet Union, that Corbett had consistently emphasized that command of the sea was a means to an end and not the end itself. Till advocated for modern NATO navies to shift operational focus from blue-water to green-water operations. Till also argued in later publications that Corbett's theories and his understanding of the limits of sea power remained much more relevant to the twenty-first century than did Mahan's blue-water emphasis on fleet engagements. Till consistently returned to Corbett's emphasis on placing naval operations within a broader context of overall combined strategy under an overarching foreign policy.<sup>26</sup> Till's emphasis on the aspects of Corbett's *Some Principles* that were deemed most relevant in the modern era was taken up by other historians following the end of the Cold War.

At the same conference, historian Jon Sumida introduced arguments that Corbett's *Some Principles* should be seen primarily as a tool to educate the minds of naval professionals. Sumida, regarding Clausewitz, Mahan, and Corbett, consistently emphasized the great military theorists' role as professional military educators. As instructors at senior service colleges, they were intent on developing theories which would challenge the minds of senior officers. Sumida established this argument in *The Historian as Contemporary Analyst: Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir John Fisher* (1993), extended it in his survey of Mahan's works, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered*

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<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Till, "Corbett and the 1990s," in Goldrick and Hattendorf, ed., *Mahan Is Not Enough*, 218-221. Corbett, throughout his writing used the term "combined" to describe operations that involved army and navy forces operating together. Modern terminology refers to these operations a "joint" while "combined" operations involve forces from at least two different nations rather than different services. I will use combined to describe army-navy operations as Corbett did at the time of his writing.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Till, "Sir Julian Corbett and the Twenty-First Century: Ten Maritime Commandments," In *The Changing Face of Maritime Power*, ed. Andrew Dorman, Mike Lawrence Smith, and Matthew R.H. Uttley (London: Macmillian Press, 1999), 19.

(1997), and expanded his argument in *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (2008). Sumida featured Corbett in each of these works. In the initial work, Sumida focused on Corbett's role within Fisher's admiralty with an eye towards the role of a historian in influencing policy. Sumida concluded from his study of Corbett that:

the most appropriate role of historians with respect to the making of naval policy is not to provide either answers to critics or solutions to problems, but rather to raise the standards of inquiry, broaden perspectives, and otherwise modulate the process of discussion.<sup>27</sup>

This analysis led Sumida to review, in his judgment, the true purpose behind each of the theorists' publications and conclude that they were not primarily intended to influence policy or strategic decisions, rather, they were intended to educate. In discussing Clausewitz, Mahan, and Corbett, Sumida argued:

the most appropriate use of history thus may be as an effective preceptor of militarized executive temperament, not as a fund of models to be emulated. History properly applied to present requirements, in other words, is about how to study and what to learn rather than how to act.<sup>28</sup>

Sumida saw Corbett's historical works, primarily developed from his war course lectures, and *Some Principles* as fitting within the Clausewitzian view, that the role of history and military theory was primarily within an educational framework. Sumida, who had started his career focused on the "Dreadnought Age" and the "Fisher Revolution" eventually tied the modern naval search for relevant lessons to the other concurrent stream of scholarly focus, the influence of Clausewitz.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jon Sumida, "The Historian as Contemporary Analyst: Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir John Fisher," in Goldrick and Hattendorf, ed., *Mahan Is Not Enough*, 140.

<sup>28</sup> Jon Sumida, "Pitfalls and Prospects: The Misuses and Uses of Military History and the Classical Military Theory in the 'Transformation' Era," in *Rethinking the Principles of War*, ed. Anthony McIvor (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 136.

<sup>29</sup> Before exploring the world of military theory and professional military education Jon Sumida published a revisionist take on the "Fisher Revolution." Jon Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).



Much recent scholarship on Corbett focuses almost entirely on his military theory and strategic thought and its relationship to Clausewitz and *On War*. Following the Vietnam War, Clausewitz came to prominence within professional military education in the United States. Corbett was far from the first military historian or theorist to wrestle with and attempt to incorporate Clausewitz into their own thinking. The German “Continental School” had borrowed heavily from *On War*. However, rather than attempting to understand the full comport of his theory, they selectively used ideas taken out of context to fit their own views of the lessons of the Napoleonic Wars which revolved around the offensive and decisive battle. Mahan had also read Clausewitz’s *On War*, which was first translated into English by J.J. Graham in 1873, but shown no deeper understanding than the German school. Historian Christopher Bassford, in *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945* (1994), was the first Clausewitz scholar to focus attention on Corbett as one of the first military theorists to gain a deeper understanding of Clausewitz’s true import. Bassford analyzed Corbett’s application of Clausewitz’s theory to the maritime environment and emphasized his limited war concepts stating, “Julian Corbett stood almost alone as a limited war theorist in the period just before World War I” and “on the specific subject of limited war the only important British proponent of the idea was Corbett although he was a significant exception.”<sup>30</sup> While naval historians had long recognized Clausewitz’s influence on Corbett’s thought, Bassford introduced Clausewitzian scholars to Corbett.

Beatrice Heuser in *Reading Clausewitz* (2002) epitomizes the Clausewitzian approach to Corbett and *Some Principles*. Heuser argued that, “Corbett developed an original theoretical structure which draws on Clausewitz’s realistic writing but is self-confident enough to depart

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<sup>30</sup> Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8, 109.

from Clausewitz's views where his theories are inapplicable to the sea" and notes that, Corbett's theories remain applicable in the twenty-first century.<sup>31</sup> In marked contrast to *Makers of Modern Strategy* (1986), Azar Gat in *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (2001), Heuser in *The Evolution of Strategy* (2010), and Hew Strachan in *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (2013) all place Corbett firmly at the center of maritime and strategic theory

Almost all reviews of Corbett's thought, however, end with *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Three years after its publication, the greatest event of Corbett's lifetime, the First World War, for which he would have a front row seat in the Admiralty, played out along many of the lines of his theoretical work. Corbett continued to write and publish extensively on current military affairs during the war. British naval historian Andrew Lambert has started to extend Corbett scholarship beyond *Some Principles* by editing and publishing, in *21<sup>st</sup> Century Corbett: Maritime Strategy and Naval Policy for the Modern Era* (2017), seven relatively obscure essays by Corbett that Lambert found relevant to modern naval and historical thought. Few modern scholars, however, have reviewed and attempted to incorporate any of Corbett's later publications on either the Russo-Japanese War or the First World War into their analysis of his thought. After the long drought in Corbett studies during the Cold War, scholarship has proliferated in the years since the end of the Cold War and with Lambert's latest concentration on Corbett and *Some Principles*, the subject will likely remain a fertile ground for debate among both naval historians and strategic theorists.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico Press. 2002), 134.

<sup>32</sup> In addition to *21<sup>st</sup> Century Corbett*, Andrew Lambert, by 2018, had published multiple articles on Corbett, *Some Principles*, and the Royal Navy College and has a major new work, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict That Made the Modern World* scheduled to be published in November, 2018. During this period, he has become the most prominent advocate of Corbett and his British maritime doctrine.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORY

Julian Corbett's significant work and contributions to the increasing professionalization of naval history and military education, and their relationship to his developing maritime theory is often undervalued by many recent commentators on *Some Principals of Maritime Strategy*. Corbett was first and foremost a historian and professional military educator. Corbett introduced new interpretive approaches to the study of military history based on his own interactions with the burgeoning military theory of the nineteenth century. Corbett's historical writing evolved over a decade of multi-volume works published between 1898 and 1910, including: *Drake and the Tudor Navy* (1898), *The Successors of Drake* (1900), *England in the Mediterranean* (1904), *England in the Seven Years War* (1907) and *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (1910). His study of history during this prolific twelve year period directly influenced his conception of maritime strategy that underpinned his lasting contribution to military theory. In looking at Corbett's historical works, a number of influences characterize the changes in his approach to history over this twelve year period.

Julian Corbett was educated as a lawyer at Cambridge and came to the study of history relatively late in life. At the age of forty-five, Corbett, following an uninspired stint practicing law, decided to embrace writing and published four fictional novels; the most important of which was *For God and Gold* (1887). In working on this novel, Corbett researched privateering and piracy and became fascinated with Sir Francis Drake.<sup>33</sup> After these novels, he wrote two short biographies for the English Men of Action Series: *Monck* (1889) and *Drake* (1890). These short

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<sup>33</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 17. Corbett was admitted to the bar in 1877 and practiced law through 1882. After significant travel across the British Empire, he wrote and published four novels: *The Fall of Asgard* (1886), *For God and Gold* (1887), *Kopethua the XIII* (1889), and *A Business in Great Waters* (1894).

works brought him to the attention of former Royal Navy instructor and Professor of History at King's College, Sir John Knox Laughton. In 1895, Laughton, impressed by Corbett's work, invited him to join the Navy Records Society and start work editing and cataloguing British naval records from the late sixteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Corbett's fascination with Sir Francis Drake and his archival work with the British naval records led directly to his first work of true historical scholarship, *Drake and the Tudor Navy* (1898), launching his career as a professional historian.

As the academic discipline of history became increasingly professionalized in the nineteenth century, Laughton, Corbett, and a select group of military officers pioneered the pursuit of naval history. When Corbett attended Marlborough College (1869–73) and later Cambridge (1873-6), neither school offered history as an academic discipline. Like Corbett, none of the earliest pioneers in naval history were trained as historians. Unlike Corbett, however, they were professional military officers. During the “Age of Sail,” naval technology had remained relatively stable for well over three hundred years. The late nineteenth century, however, was a time a tremendous technological instability for navies around the world, as they attempted to incorporate new technologies from the Industrial Revolution. Coal and steam propulsion, steel armor, heavy guns, torpedoes, and submarines revolutionized navies at a pace never before seen in history; and the naval profession became obsessed with these developing technologies. As an increasing majority of naval officers concentrated on technology and its impact on warfare, a small select group began to look to history to provide broad, enduring strategic principles that would continue to shape naval warfare, despite the rapid pace of

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<sup>34</sup> Laughton to Corbett, January 3, 1895, *Letters and Papers of Professor Sir John Knox Laughton, 1830-1915*, ed. Andrew Lambert, (London: Naval Records Society, 2002), 103. Laughton first proposed Corbett undertake the editing of the State Papers from either 1585-87 or 1589-1596 for the Navy Records Society. Laughton had edited the papers of the Spanish Armada – 1588. Over the spring, additional correspondence finalized the arrangements with Corbett, who agreed to take on the papers from 1585-87 as they would benefit his ongoing work on *Drake and the Tudor Navy*.

technological change. In the United States Navy, Commodore Stephen B. Luce led the fight against the technical school arguing with a group of line officers, “your profession is the profession of war and yet you do not study war.”<sup>35</sup> Luce, and others like him, were representative of this school of historical thought that arose in response to the age of technological instability. They led what Reynolds described as “a golden age of naval thought,” and at the heart of this “golden age” were Mahan and Corbett, who became the founding partners and rivals in modern maritime strategic thought. Mahan’s work had a resounding worldwide impact on naval history, strategy, and national policy, while forming the baseline concepts that all later naval historians and theorists, including Corbett, had to account for in their own analysis.

Both Mahan and Corbett developed their historical works and strategic thought while serving as instructors at newly instituted naval war colleges. The rise of professional military education for senior officers within navies of the late nineteenth century demonstrably advanced the study of naval history. These schools targeted senior naval officers with the goal of improving their understanding of national policy and strategy, often through the study of history. The British founded the Royal Naval College at Greenwich in 1873, though its focus on educating senior officers did not begin until the College’s inaugural “War Course” started in 1900. In 1884, Luce founded the United States Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island with a much greater initial focus on educating more senior officers. Alfred Thayer Mahan was an active duty officer in United State Navy who had started his career as a young midshipman in the Gulf blockade during the American Civil War. After almost thirty years of unremarkable service in the Navy, Mahan accepted a teaching position, under Luce, at the newly created United State Navy War College in 1887. In preparing to teach senior naval officers at the

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<sup>35</sup> Ronald Spector, *Professors of War: The Naval War College and the Development of the Naval Profession* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1977), 14.

College, Mahan became an avid student of history and developed a series of lectures on the influence of sea power in early modern Europe. He eventually published these lectures in his earliest and most influential works, *The Influence of Sea Power on History, 1660-1783* (1890) and *The Influence of Sea Power on the French Revolution and Empire, 1783-1812* (1892). In focusing on British history and the role of the Royal Navy in protecting and promoting its trading empire, as well as France's failure to fully develop sea power, Mahan was primarily advocating that the United States dramatically expand the Navy and model the British approach to overseas trade and commerce. Immediately upon their release, Mahan's works were translated into Russian, German, Japanese, French, Swedish, and Spanish and made him a worldwide celebrity.

*The Influence of Sea Power on History* laid the foundation for modern naval history and was influential across the navies and capitals of the United States, Europe, and Japan. Mahan brought serious analysis of naval grand strategy and the art and science of naval command to the forefront of naval history. Mahan's fame carried over into the academic community and ultimately led to his selection as the President of the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1902. Mahan, despite his great eloquence, came to be criticized by other historians for oversimplification and for his lack of archival research and reliance on secondary sources. British Admiral Cyprian Bridge noted that "a desire to persuade his countrymen to have huge armourclads clouds even Mahan's clear historical vision."<sup>36</sup> In a speech before the AHA, Mahan, explaining his own historical methodology, offered, "original research was not within my scope, nor was it necessary to the scheme ... facts are only the bricks and mortar of the historian, clarity of structuring, content, and accessibility to readers are essential."<sup>37</sup> For Mahan,

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<sup>36</sup> Bridge to Laughton March 14, 1893, in *Laughton Papers*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 451.

providing meaning and significance were the most important aspects of historical research. In a 1916 article, “The Revival of Naval History,” Corbett wrote of Mahan, “the wonder is that Mahan could build as well as he did on a foundation so insecure.”<sup>38</sup> Despite the later criticisms of his historical work, no one had greater influence on the rapid growth in the study of naval history than Alfred Thayer Mahan.

While Mahan’s works were certainly more influential at the time, Corbett’s have stood the better test of time. Interestingly, Mahan’s most influential works were his earliest major publications. While he continued to write history and theory for the next twenty-five years, nothing approached the importance of his *Influence* series of works. Corbett, by contrast, started his research and writing at the same time as Mahan and published five multi-volume works of naval history and edited several volumes of primary source material over a twenty-year period before writing his most influential work of theory. Corbett’s own extensive research on the influence of British sea power and his keen understanding, integration, and expansion of key military theorists led to his development of a much more subtle, but durable, concept of maritime operations, expounded in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.

Corbett’s methodological approach to history reflected the teaching and mentorship of Sir John Knox Laughton. Laughton was a critical advocate in the professionalization of naval history and had a tremendous impact on Corbett’s development as a historian. Laughton entered the Royal Navy as a civilian instructor during the Crimean War. He became the head of the Department of Meteorology and Marine Survey at the Royal Naval College in 1873. When he retired from naval service in 1885, he became a professor of Modern History at King’s College in London. Laughton, having worked extensively with British Admiralty records and exploiting

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<sup>38</sup> Julian Corbett, “The Revival of Naval History,” *The Contemporary Review* (01 July 1916), 735.

the rising navalism of the 1890s, decided that it was important to open the official records to the public. In 1893, with the help of Admiral Bridge, he became the founding Secretary of the Navy Records Society to promote the study of naval history. Laughton edited what became the first published volume of the Society, *State Papers relating to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, in 1894 and held the Secretary position from 1893 to 1912.

The Navy Records Society under Laughton helped to transform the development and study of naval history. Laughton consistently focused on the professionalization of the study of naval history through an emphasis on primary source material and archival research. In editing and cataloguing the Admiralty records, Laughton increasingly came to notice and point out fallacies within some of Mahan's broader arguments. While finding many of Mahan's conclusions generally sound, Laughton was highly critical of assertions he found to be based on slight or selective use of evidence.<sup>39</sup> Despite the criticisms, Laughton maintained a full and long professional correspondence with both Mahan and Luce throughout the period. Laughton's own primary contributions to the field were practical and methodological; he greatly influenced Corbett's views on the use and importance of primary sources in the study of history. It would be left to Corbett, Laughton's most important disciple, to synthesize the role of maritime power in national strategy through his own study of history and military theory.<sup>40</sup>

Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power on History* certainly impacted Corbett's approach to historical research and writing. Corbett adopted the same broad strategic approach and concentrated on the purpose and function of naval operations and their linkage to overall national strategy and foreign policy. Corbett sought to place naval strategy within the context of military

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<sup>39</sup> Schurman, *Education of a Navy*, 84-96.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Lambert, *The Foundations of Naval History: John Knox Laughton, the Royal Navy and the Historical Profession* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998), 135.



strategy as one element of national power for use in achieving a political purpose. Corbett, however, remained much more measured and moderate than Mahan and he more clearly separated theory from history. At the International Congress of Historical Studies in 1913, Corbett lamented, “too often history has been used as a polemic device to prove almost anything, but during this period the discipline is changing with the advent of methodological sophistication and increasing rigor.”<sup>41</sup> Corbett also felt it was critical for him to place himself into the exact state of mind of the people he was writing about and understand the full context in which decisions were made, leading Corbett to be much more understanding of mistakes and poor decisions. In 1916, Corbett commented on his approach to history, writing:

let us be sure we set forth the facts as truly and fully as we can. It is not enough to relate the incident; we must also tell what led to it. It is not enough to tell how battles were fought; we must try to tell why they were fought, and what were the results that flowed from them...Above all we should be careful to keep in mind what they knew at the time, and be sure we are not assuming in them knowledge that was not in their possession, though it is now in ours... When in history you avoid error and injustice you have already gone far to sound teaching.<sup>42</sup>

Like Mahan, Corbett was focused on leadership and decision-making but Corbett attempted to fully understand the context and influences on any individual leader’s decisions. In his approach to history, Corbett consistently focused on gaining understanding rather than judging actions.

Corbett’s growing professionalism was evident in his turning the *Drake* (1890) biography into the much more extensive and insightful two-volume *Drake and the Tudor Navy* (1898). Corbett’s expansion of the Drake biography was greatly facilitated by his work with the Navy Records Society. During the last two years that he worked on *Drake and the Tudor Navy*, Corbett concurrently edited *Papers Relating to the Navy during the Spanish War, 1585-1587*

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<sup>41</sup> Julian Corbett, “Staff Histories” In *Naval and Military Essays*, ed. J.S. Corbett and H.J. Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 24.

<sup>42</sup> Julian Corbett, “The Teaching of Naval and Military History,” *History*, 1 (1916):15.

(1898). In the introduction, Corbett identified Drake's Cadiz campaign of 1587 "as the finest example of how a small well-handled fleet, carrying a compact landing force and acting on the nicely timed offensive, may paralyze the mobilization of an overwhelming force."<sup>43</sup> It is during the Cadiz campaign that Corbett first identified the "birth of sound and intelligent strategy as distinguished from the crude cross-channel raiding of the Middle Ages."<sup>44</sup> In *Drake and the Tudor Navy*, Corbett developed this "birth of sound and intelligent strategy," while also continuing to center the work on the life of Sir Francis Drake.

Most previous historical writing followed a biographical approach and tended to focus on battles, heroic actions, and exciting stories. The multi-volume English Men of Action Series published by Macmillan in the late nineteenth century fit well within that tradition. While Laughton had shifted his focus from heroic exploits to one of leadership, administration, and professionalism in *From Howard to Nelson: Twelve Sailors*, which he edited and contributed to in 1899, he and the other authors continued to address these themes through the study of the most famous British naval heroes. Corbett's first full work of history continued to echo that biographical tradition as he built the narrative around Drake and, to a lesser extent, John Hawkins. In the preface, Corbett felt the need to justify centering the rise of British sea power within the European geopolitical system on a single person by promoting Drake as an instrument of the state. He sought to strip away many of the myths, legends, and the romanticism surrounding Drake and restore his reputation as an admiral, statesman, and great military leader.<sup>45</sup> Beyond his focus on Drake, Corbett first outlined the limits tradition and geography

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<sup>43</sup> Navy Records Society, *Papers Relating to the Navy during the Spanish War, 1585-1587*, ed. Julian S. Corbett (Greenwich, UK: Naval Records Society, 1898), xliii.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, xlix.

<sup>45</sup> Julian Corbett, *Drake and the Tudor Navy: With a History of the Rise of England as a Maritime Power* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), I:vii.

placed on British strategic thinking. At this early stage in his career, however, he tended to compartmentalize the military and political while advocating the Mahanian view of command of the sea. He attributed the coming of war with Spain as inevitable and caused by Britain's aggressive commercial policy in the Americas.<sup>46</sup> After a long exposition of Drake's exploits that make up the majority of the first volume, Corbett concluded the volume with a discussion of a little known author, John Montgomery, and his treatise on naval thought written in 1570. It was Corbett's first foray into discussing naval thought and theory and demonstrated a clear reading of Mahan's *Influence* works, which he annotated in the discussion, as well as Rear Admiral Philip Colomb's *Naval Warfare* (1891). Corbett noted Montgomery's striking modernity, his descriptions of the seas as highways, and advocacy of a fleet strong enough to dispute command of the sea. In a clear allusion to Colomb's work, Corbett recognized some of Montgomery's arguments as reminiscent of Torrington's "fleet in being;" important for Corbett's later work. He noted that "the strategy he (Montgomery) approves is entirely defensive, and does not aim primarily at the destruction of the enemy's fleet."<sup>47</sup> According to Corbett, Montgomery's thought took hold of the Elizabethan navy and only needed Hawkins' mathematical mind and Drake's genius to implement the strategy. Clearly this early research informed Corbett's own coming disagreement with one of Mahan's central planks concerning the defensive and destruction of the enemy's main fleet. In the second volume, however, Corbett, in full agreement with Mahan's principles, attacked the British plan to divide the fleet into weak squadrons in the face of the main Spanish fleet and credited Drake's opposition to the plan and advocacy of "a new English school that Nelson brought to perfection" based on "that kernel of naval strategy to destroy the enemy's main fleet, and that no invasion is practicable without

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<sup>46</sup> Corbett, *Drake and Tudor Navy*, I:75.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, I:345-8.

command of the sea” and “the importance in naval warfare of taking the offensive and striking the first blow.”<sup>48</sup> At this early stage in his career, Corbett also shared Mahan’s skepticism of the *guerre de course* strategy, arguing that:

here we have the idea, since so often proved fatal and so often re-born as a new strategical discovery, that a naval war may be conducted on economical principles, and a great Power brought to its knees by preying on its commerce without first getting command of the sea.<sup>49</sup>

Corbett clearly identified Drake as the great genius that first enunciated the doctrine that would make Britain “mistress of the seas” which, in Corbett’s mind, far exceeded Drake’s other more famous exploits in importance.

By the 1911 publication of *Some Principles*, Corbett was much more cautious about advocating the seeking out of the enemy’s main fleet as he recounted Drake’s memorable memorandum. Corbett had come to recognize the chances of missing the Spanish fleet had been too great and Britain could not take that risk, writing “clearly, then, the maxim of ‘seeking out’ for all of its moral exhilaration, for all its value as an expression of high and sound naval spirit, must not be permitted to displace well-reasoned judgment.”<sup>50</sup> Corbett also revised his view of Drake’s originally proposed strategy from one focused on seeking out and destroying the main Spanish fleet to a strategy of using a small squadron to disrupt the Spanish mobilization which, therefore, did not warrant the risk involved. Finally in *Some Principles*, Corbett returned to Drake’s 1587 Cadiz operation as an example of his minor counterattacks, a tactic popular with inferior navies. While Corbett engaged some aspects of Mahan’s and Colomb’s theoretical works, *Drake and the Tudor Navy* remained largely rooted in the conventional hagiographic biography intended to celebrate the rise of the Royal Navy.

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<sup>48</sup> Corbett, *Drake and the Tudor Navy*, II:131-2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, II:129.

<sup>50</sup> Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 159, 171.

Corbett quickly followed *Drake and the Tudor Navy* with *The Successors of Drake* (1900), in which he moved away from the conventional biographical approach and began to highlight the limitations of maritime power, a theme that colored much of his later theoretical approach. *Successors* was a sequel to *Drake and the Tudor Navy* and covered the Anglo-Spanish War from the death of Drake in 1596 through the ascension of James I and the end of the war in 1603. In moving beyond the glorious victory over the Spanish Armada, Corbett characterized this period as “one of splendid failures and it is for this very consideration which makes it so well worth study today.”<sup>51</sup> Britain, a great naval power, struggled to bring the war against the vast Spanish Empire to a successful conclusion. Corbett realized Elizabethan England remained too poor and weak, economically, to force a decision on the Spanish Empire.<sup>52</sup> He also recognized that the history of sea power could not be treated as an independent aspect of war. He quoted Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, in arguing against a solely naval expedition “to the point of how little use is a fleet in command of the sea, if there be no land force with it to reap the full advantage of the position.”<sup>53</sup> In analyzing the failure of the two major British expeditions, Drake’s to Lisbon after the Armada and the Howard/Essex expedition to Cadiz in 1596, Corbett acknowledged that:

what was wanting was an army, and England had none fit for the work...they had not yet advanced to the knowledge that to enjoy the vantage ground of the sea you must have an army as mobile, as well organized, and as highly trained as your navy...England appeared as unripe for a standing army as she did for colonization, and under the circumstances peace was the best policy.<sup>54</sup>

Corbett concluded *The Successors of Drake* with what would become a central tenant of his theoretical approach to maritime strategy and a central point of divergence from Mahan:

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<sup>51</sup> Corbett, *The Successors of Drake*, (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), vi.

<sup>52</sup> Gat, *A History of Military Thought*, 483.

<sup>53</sup> Corbett, *Successors of Drake*, 52.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 407-8.

we know what Nelson did at Trafalgar, and forget that its real importance was what it afterwards enabled Wellington to do. We speak glibly of ‘sea-power,’ and forget that its true value lies in its influence on the operations of armies...(that) is the great lesson we have to learn in the failure of Drake’s successors.<sup>55</sup>

In *Some Principles*, Corbett articulated what he had learned from the inability of the British to exploit their victory over the Spanish Armada:

Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided, except in the rarest cases, either by what your army can do against your enemy’s territory and national life or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.<sup>56</sup>

*Successors* was a significant divergence from Mahan’s approach to naval history and proved a corrective to the more excessively propagandistic views of naval history by focusing on the limitations of maritime power and the influence of maritime operations on war more broadly.

Following this three-volume history of the Anglo-Spanish War, Corbett had become one of the leading naval historians in Britain. He also began to weigh in on the military affairs of the day through contributions to Henry Newbolt’s *Monthly Review*. In 1900, Corbett, a liberal imperialist, weighed in on the Boer War for the *Review*, writing “The Paradox of Empire” in which he argued that Britons must face the fact that their Empire existed and they needed to come together to resolve the problems of empire.<sup>57</sup> During 1902, Corbett wrote a three part article for the *Monthly Review*, entitled “Education in the Navy,” which was based on information provided by then Lieutenant Commander Herbert Richmond. Corbett argued against the current methods of officer initial entry training and education. After a brief sixteen month stay on the *Britannia*, cadets were immediately sent to sea to continue their education and training as naval officers. Corbett argued for a four-year, land-based education for cadets from

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>56</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 27.

twelve to sixteen years of age, followed by six years at sea for training as naval officers, and completed with a three year finishing school at the overhauled Royal Navy College at Greenwich. Corbett, channeling Richmond, primarily disagreed with the idea that cadets and midshipmen could be both trained and educated at sea, writing paradoxically that “you cannot train except at sea and at sea you cannot teach.”<sup>58</sup> Corbett’s publications brought him to the attention of Admiral John Fisher, then Second Naval Lord of the Admiralty, who was intent on revamping education within the Royal Navy among numerous other reforms. Fisher appreciated the support Corbett’s articles provided to his education reforms and noted both Corbett’s writing ability and the importance of the press in influencing political opinion in support of his reforms.

In 1902, Corbett also began lecturing full-time at the Royal Naval College at Greenwich as part of the new War Course designed to better integrate history and strategy into senior officer education. Laughton, who had primarily taught mathematics and meteorology, had introduced lectures on naval history during his last years with the College and Rear Admiral Philip Colomb had resumed those lectures during his tenure at the College. Despite these lectures, however, the study of naval history had not been integrated into the curriculum and remained sporadic until the implementation of the War Course.<sup>59</sup> It had been a constant fight for men like Laughton and Colomb to integrate the study of naval history into the curriculum. In response to Laughton’s discussion of “The Scientific Study of Naval History” delivered at the Royal United Services Institute in 1874, the Chairman of the Institute, Vice Admiral Frederick Nicolson, generally supportive, asked where the Royal Naval College was supposed to find time in its extensive

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<sup>58</sup> Julian Corbett, “Education in the Navy,” *The Monthly Review*, (March 1902) Part I:34-49; (April 1902), Part II:43-57; (September 1902), Part III:42-54.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Lloyd, “The Royal Naval Colleges at Portsmouth and Greenwich,” *The Mariner’s Mirror*, 52:2 (1966): 152-153.

program of studies for students to master naval history.<sup>60</sup> In 1900, Captain Henry May was appointed to the Royal Naval College to begin implementation of the new War Course, which he based on the program of instruction at the United States Naval War College. Corbett continued the fight for the full integration of historical study within all three levels of naval education when he took up the argument in “Education in the Navy” which eventually led to his hiring by May to teach naval history at the War Course. Corbett later described the system he helped implement upon arriving at the Royal Naval College:

Under the new scheme, as you know, cadets, while still young, began at Osborne, and after two years went on to Dartmouth. Then after a long period at sea, they came to the War College as commanders, captains, and rear-admirals...This method was particularly designed to lead up to the final study at the War College...entrusted to civilian lecturers, that is professed historians...as a Staff College and a School of Command, it was applied history that was wanted along with absolute history, that is, history in the broadest sense...naval history must go hand in hand with military, so both must never lose touch with political and diplomatic history.<sup>61</sup>

As a civilian who had never served in the Royal Navy, Corbett found teaching senior officers, who had spent a full career in the navy, extremely challenging. He recognized that he did not have the technical or professional service background of his students, but was convinced of history’s immense power as an educational instrument and that his scholarly approach provided an extremely important and, at the time, uncommon view. He warned equally against the civilian naval historian becoming isolated from the service and the naval officer being ignorant of history.<sup>62</sup> In addition to his status as a civilian, Corbett’s historical strategic message concerning the limitations of maritime power and the subordination of naval strategy to national

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<sup>60</sup> Nicolson Response to Laughton, In “The Scientific Study of Naval History,” *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, 18,79 (1874): 527.

<sup>61</sup> Corbett, “The Teaching of Naval and Military History,” 16-18.

<sup>62</sup> John Hattendorf, “Sir Julian Corbett on the Significance of Naval History,” *The American Neptune*, XXXI:4 (Salem, MA: The Peabody Museum, 1971), 278.



policy also proved unpopular with a great number of these naval officers raised on Nelsonian traditions and Mahan's writing. Corbett, in a letter to Henry Newbolt, described the challenge, "my strategic lectures are very uphill work. I had no idea when I undertook it how difficult it was to present theory in a digestible form to the unused organs of Naval officers."<sup>63</sup> During the First World War, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, in attacking the anti-intellectualism of the Royal Navy, provided a backhanded compliment to Corbett:

the Royal Navy has made no important contribution to the naval literature. The standard work on sea power was written by an American admiral, and the best accounts of British sea fighting and naval strategy are compiled by an English civilian (Corbett)...At the outset of the conflict we had more captains of ship than captains of war.<sup>64</sup>

More recently, however, historian Andrew Lambert has been much more charitable in his assessment of the War Course and Corbett's influence on Royal Navy officers attending the course. He argues that the leaders of the Royal Navy during the interwar years and into the Second World War, including David Beatty, Ernie Lord Chatfield, and Bertram Ramsay were all greatly influenced by the Course, its curriculum, and Corbett's teaching.<sup>65</sup> After his hiring by the Royal Naval College in 1902, Corbett came to write strictly for an audience of naval officers, educators, and policymakers, leading to a noticeable shift in style from a purely historical perspective to one of a professional military educator. Corbett directly tied his historical research and writing to the central strategic and naval debates of the day.

At the center of British policy debates in 1904 was the *Entente Cordiale* between Britain and France and the eventual reallocation of British forces from the Mediterranean to the North Sea in 1906. It is not surprising, therefore, that Corbett published his next major two-volume work, *England in the Mediterranean 1603-1714* (1904) in the midst of this strategic debate. In a

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<sup>63</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 44.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Stanford, "The Work of Sir Julian Corbett in the Dreadnought Era," *Proceedings*, 77,1 (January 1951): 575.

<sup>65</sup> Lambert, "The Naval War Course," 250, 221.

shift away from traditional naval history, Corbett adopted a thematic approach, taken from his lectures at the Naval College, to analyze Britain's ability to influence the continent of Europe through its strategic exploitation of the Mediterranean Sea. In Britain's decision to permanently station a fleet in the Mediterranean, Corbett recognized Britain's growing ability, through threat and deterrence, to leverage sea power in shaping outcomes in the complex world of European balance of power politics.<sup>66</sup> Corbett moved beyond biography and battles to an exclusive concentration on the connections between naval strategy, military strategy, national strategy, policy, diplomacy, and international relations. He argued that the Anglo-Dutch wars "were an episode in our history." The British move into the Mediterranean, however, had a lasting impact, broader implications for the modern world, and involved the "most vital preoccupation of the higher naval strategy."<sup>67</sup> In both a criticism of the contemporary state of naval history and his own more expansive view of the role and influence of sea power, Corbett noted that:

the majority of historians have ever ignored the naval influence except where now and then their attention is aroused by the thunder of a great battle. But, more often than not, the important fact is that no battle took place, and again and again the effort to prevent a collision is the controlling feature of widespread political action.<sup>68</sup>

Corbett hoped with his study to reveal how and why the British Mediterranean Fleet in modern times stood as a symbol and measure of British power in Europe. With *England in the Mediterranean*, Corbett also began to argue that military strategy is "deflected" by policy and politics and that one cannot evaluate a military strategy without understanding the broader political considerations informing that strategy.<sup>69</sup> Corbett declared the dispatch of Robert Blake's squadron to the Mediterranean in 1651 to be a revolution in Britain's conception of

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<sup>66</sup> Schurman, *Education of a Navy*, 160-3.

<sup>67</sup> Julian Corbett, *England in the Mediterranean: A Study of the Rise and Influence of British Power within the Straits, 1603-1713* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1904), I:vi.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, I:vii.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, I:115.

naval defense that was to have far-reaching consequences as the protection of the merchant marine became the chief end of the Royal Navy. The protection of oceanic commerce, trade routes, and critical chokepoints, such as Gibraltar, became the primary focus for British naval strategy.<sup>70</sup> According to Corbett, “from the point of view of the higher naval strategy no war is more illuminating instruction for our own time and that of the Spanish Succession. Objects of naval power closely resembled those which exist today.”<sup>71</sup> He credited William III with an understanding of continental politics that helped him recognize the leverage a small British force in the Mediterranean could bring to the European balance of power. In 1904, Corbett continued to see British power in the Mediterranean as the main guarantor of stability in Europe.<sup>72</sup>

As Corbett continued to lecture at the Royal Naval College, Lieutenant Colonel G.F.R. Henderson, a military historian at the Camberley Staff College, introduced Corbett to Carl von Clausewitz’s monumental work, *On War*.<sup>73</sup> *On War* impacted both Corbett’s approach to his historical analysis as well as his developing maritime theory. The deeper impacts of Clausewitz’s thought on Corbett and his theoretical approach will be examined in the following chapter. In terms of his historical writing, Corbett read *On War* prior to writing the two-volume *England in the Seven Years War* (1907). In fact, the structure of that work revolved around Corbett’s attempt to use Clausewitz’s political nature of war while also merging theoretical and historical approaches in a single work. Corbett had already developed a consistent focus on the connections between policy and strategy in his previous works, but became enthralled with the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., I:226-227, 319.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., II: 200.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., II:315.

<sup>73</sup> Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, 124.

structure and reasoning behind Clausewitz's dialectic approach to theory and history. It was a distinct shift from traditional history and Corbett felt the need to issue an apology to the reader:

it has been unavoidable to introduce a certain amount of strategical exposition. For this some apology is due to civilian readers. A less technical and more epic treatment of the great contest of maritime empire would doubtless have received a kindlier welcome...even for those who read history for its romance, for its drama, and its poetry, that surely the deepest notes of what they seek can only be heard when we watch great men of action struggling, as in some old Greek tragedy, with the inexorable laws of strategy, or rising on them in mastery of the inevitable catastrophe.<sup>74</sup>

Corbett's second chapter, in which he analyzes "the Nature and Object of the War," follow directly from Clausewitz's *On War*, as do many of his other analytical devices used to better understand the war and the opposing strategies. Captain Edmund Slade, the new director of the Naval College, along with Corbett, had selected the Seven Years War for inclusion in the curriculum because of its emphasis on combined operations. Corbett used the Seven Years War as the test case for his developing theory of a British limited war strategy. For Corbett, the study of the Seven Years War offered no better education in the higher principles of the art of war and strategy and should be central to the education of soldiers, sailors, statesmen, and diplomats.

As with Corbett's previous work, *England in the Seven Years War* followed from his lectures at the Naval College, the feedback from students, and his desire to understand strategy and theory through the study of history. Throughout the work, Corbett concentrated on William Pitt the Elder's unified approach to policy and strategy and Pitt's genius in subordinating military strategy to the higher political purposes of the war, while also constantly recognizing the frustrating complexity of coordinating military and political policy. In analyzing the start of the Seven Years War, Corbett once again noted how military and naval strategy are "deflected" by political considerations. The opening of the war demonstrated to Corbett "the way Governments

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<sup>74</sup> Julian Corbett, *England in the Seven Years' War: A Study in Combined Strategy* (London: Longman, Green, 1907), xxi.

limp and stumble to vital decisions when their path is encumbered by a tangle of political and strategical considerations.”<sup>75</sup> In considering Admiral John Byng’s failed relief attempt of Port Mahon, Corbett, unlike most naval officers or historians, took Byng to task for failing to understand his purpose and his seeking battle with the French fleet in the first place. According to Corbett, if Byng had clearly understood his objective, Richelieu’s Army rather than the French fleet, he would have cut the French lines of communication between Toulon and Minorca and forced the French to abandon the siege of Port Mahon or fight the British fleet on its own terms. Corbett, however, admitted that this strategy would be the last thing any British admiral would ever carry out. He argued that “for the average British admiral of that time there was nothing between attack and retreat. Their besetting strategic sin was failure to appreciate the power that lies in a well-applied defensive.”<sup>76</sup> Corbett, throughout his career as a historian and educator, consistently argued against the perceived British tradition of always seeking decisive battle regardless of the strategy or broader purpose of the war. Corbett consistently emphasized the difficulty in bringing about a decisive naval engagement and that decisive battle was not the sole function of the fleet. Corbett pointed out that the study of the Seven Years War revealed that command of the sea was only a means to an end and the primary function of the fleet was to support or obstruct diplomatic efforts, protect or destroy commerce, and hinder or support operations ashore. Corbett first advanced the argument that those who focus solely on destroying the enemy’s fleet are confusing the means with the ends of naval strategy. Corbett, also, for the first time delineated between strategy and minor strategy to which he relegates naval strategy and the movement of fleets within a theater of war. He declared that “the great dramatic

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 82-94.

moments of naval strategy have to be worked for,” a thought he expanded on in *Some Principles* to argue against Mahan and his overwhelming emphasis on concentration of force.<sup>77</sup>

Corbett also first advanced the idea of a broader maritime strategy that incorporated the functions of the fleet rather than the more narrowly focused naval strategy, a central argument in *Some Principles*. In the Seven Years War, Corbett saw the most effective and efficient use of combined operations and an example of how a nation with a weak army can effectively employ that army in conjunction with overwhelming naval power to effect the war on the continent. In analyzing the Louisburg and Quebec combined operations, Corbett identified a “remarkable advance in naval thought.” He argued that “every problem of naval strategy resolves itself ultimately into a question of attacking or defending maritime communications...because command of the sea means nothing but the control of sea communications.”<sup>78</sup> Corbett was developing his maturing principles concerning command of the sea and maritime operations. In his study of this war, he first developed one of his central arguments in *Some Principles* that, unlike on land, the sea is not subject to territorial ownership and its only value is as a means of communication. He advanced the argument that destruction of the enemy’s fleet is nothing more than a “means of seizing or preventing the enemy from seizing the main lines of communication.”<sup>79</sup> Corbett came to recognize that the British and French shared the exact same lines of communication in the Seven Years War, a phenomena that could not occur on land. Neither side could defend their own lines of communication without attacking their enemy’s line of communication. From these insights, Corbett argued that the “communication theory of naval strategy” was the foundation of British naval strategy from the time of the Seven Years War, in

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 1-3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 231.

which the British both attacked and defended lines of communication by placing a powerful fleet off the enemy's coast and ports and another off the objective coast and ports at each end of the lines of communication. He described the British establishment of Hawke's Channel Fleet off the French coast and ports and Boscawen's squadron off of Louisburg as securing the end points which, in turn, provided the security of the extended sea lines of communication.<sup>80</sup> Later in *Some Principles*, Corbett more fully developed these ideas on what it meant to command the sea.

Corbett also provided his first reference to Clausewitz's discussion of limited and unlimited war that he further developed in *Some Principles*. In *England in the Seven Years War* Corbett first raised the distinction between limited and unlimited war in arguing that the "strategy of both sides had been designed on the lines of a limited war" through 1758 with the British focused on the capture of Canada.<sup>81</sup> He introduced Clausewitz's theory of escalation and noted that the limited war continued to escalate as it spread to both the East and West Indies. British strategy had to incorporate the mission of global commerce protection and eventually escalated to include direct attacks on colonies in the East and West Indies. For Corbett, these regions became the focus of "cruiser warfare," which included independent scouting, commerce protection, and commerce raiding, and led to Corbett's initial discussions on the functions and missions of the various parts of the fleet. As France continued to suffer defeats in the limited war, Corbett argued that the theory of escalation naturally led the French in 1759 to propose a direct invasion of Britain.<sup>82</sup> In discussing the later years of the war, Corbett re-emphasized how military and naval strategy are deflected by politics. He noted the debates over the Mauritius expedition, aid to Prussia, potential Spanish entry into the war, and the Havana expedition were

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 232-4.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 361.

all caught up in the “tangled politics of war.”<sup>83</sup> Corbett argued that the Seven Years War demonstrated a clear change to a more scientific conception of naval warfare and the war provided “no clearer lesson in history how unwise and short-sighted it is to despise and ridicule a naval defensive.”<sup>84</sup> Corbett’s understanding of Pitt’s strategy became the foundation of his own strategic thought. Corbett solidified that foundation through addressing the great military theorists of the nineteenth century and then adapted for the “Dreadnought Age.”

Throughout his teaching at the Royal Naval College, Corbett continued working on his archival research. He had also continued his work with the Navy Records Society, cataloguing and editing two major works on official Royal Navy tactical instructions from the “Age of Sail,” *Fighting Instructions: 1530-1816* (1905) and *Signals and Instructions: 1776-1794* (1909). Despite the intense focus on strategy and policy in his own works, Corbett, through his work with the official records, was recognized as the preeminent expert on tactical fighting during the “Age of Sail.” In his final major historical work based on archival research, Corbett tackled the most discussed, remembered, and written about campaign in British history, the Napoleonic Wars, Trafalgar, and Admiral Horatio Nelson. In his most controversial historical work to that time, *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (1910), Corbett, as was his nature, analyzed the underlying British strategy behind the campaign. In focusing on the Admiralty’s overall strategy and operational combinations that ultimately brought on the battle, he approached the campaign from a different perspective than most previous writers and commentators who tended to concentrate on Nelson’s leadership and the battle itself. He noted the extensive amount of source material that most chroniclers had ignored in their obsessive focus on Nelson and the tactics and glory of the battle. His exhaustive research in the Admiralty records led Corbett to place the battle within

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 466.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 633-638.



a much broader strategic and operational context.<sup>85</sup> Corbett carefully reviewed strategic cause and effect to show that British sea power was a limited but effective arm of British foreign policy.<sup>86</sup> Sea power alone, however, was insufficient to defeat Napoleon and it ultimately required the combined efforts of Britain and the continental powers. Corbett argued that, “Trafalgar is ranked as one of the decisive battles of the world and yet of all the great victories, there is not one which to all appearance was so barren of immediate results... It gave England, finally, the dominion of the seas, but it left Napoleon dictator of the continent.”<sup>87</sup> In his final estimation of Trafalgar and the broader naval operations of the Napoleonic Wars, Corbett returned to the limitations of sea power. Through its overwhelming maritime operations, Britain had secured the British Islands and the Empire, it had swept French naval power and commerce from the seas, and “against any other man than Napoleon it might have done much more...as it was the sea had done all that the sea could do, and for Europe the end was failure.”<sup>88</sup> In another unique aspect of *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, Corbett tied the strategic and tactical together throughout the narrative. Corbett argued that Nelson’s true genius lay in always keeping the ends of the campaign in sight and recognizing battle as nothing more than a means to that end. Nelson, from the beginning of the campaign, recognized his mission was to protect Sardinia, Sicily, and Malta and remained focused on that mission when the French fleet escaped Toulon.

His (Nelson’s) dominate function was to keep command of the Mediterranean. For him that was always the end; the destruction of the Toulon fleet was only the means...No great captain ever grasped more fully the strategical importance of dealing with the enemy’s main fleet, yet no one ever less suffered it to become an obsession; no one saw more clearly when it ceased to be the key of a situation, and fell to a position of secondary moment.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Julian Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1919), vii.

<sup>86</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 62.

<sup>87</sup> Corbett, *Campaign of Trafalgar*, 452.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

In addressing Nelson's "true genius," Corbett was highly critical of certain writers, James Thursfield in particular, for selective use of source material that was directly contradicted by unimpeachable evidence. After the publication of *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, Thursfield demanded and received a full Admiralty Committee hearing, chaired by Admirals Bridge and Reginald Custance, on the truth of Corbett's claims with respect to Nelson's intent. The committee ruled in Corbett's favor, but the incident demonstrated the importance of Nelson and Trafalgar within Royal Navy tradition and British myth and memory. Corbett's representations, while accurate and complimentary, did not fit the popular perception of the Nelsonian tradition. *The Campaign of Trafalgar* was Corbett's last major work based on archival research. He spent the rest of his life focused on theoretical works, contemporary strategy and policy, and documenting the conflicts of the early twentieth century.

Corbett's combined historical works revealed the genesis of a British maritime doctrine, which Corbett articulated in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, incorporating his historical insights throughout the work.<sup>90</sup> Throughout his career, Corbett used new and innovative approaches to the study of British strategic and naval history, but always remained rooted in archival resources and attempted to remain true to that source material, while simultaneously seeking to remain relevant to professional naval officers and policymakers. While rooted in the study of the past, Corbett consistently maintained an orientation towards the present and future as he noted, "in trying to penetrate the past turn now and then to think of the future. For history is not a dead thing of the past; it is a living growth."<sup>91</sup> For Corbett history served as the foundation for theory and theory was meant to educate. This integration of history and theory for the purpose of education was instrumental to Corbett's developing maritime strategy.

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<sup>90</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 61-63, 124-129.

<sup>91</sup> Corbett, "The Teaching of Naval and Military History," 19.

## CHAPTER 3

### MILITARY THEORY AND PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

While British history formed the foundation of Corbett's approach to war and maritime strategy, he had quickly moved beyond the sole study of naval history to focus on the role history should play in informing contemporary approaches to policy, war, and strategy. Corbett began to seriously study military theory because of his requirement to provide relevant lessons to senior naval officers at the Royal Navy College. His reading of Mahan and Colomb had long exposed him to the inter-relationship between theory and history and Corbett, himself, had tentatively explored some of those concepts in his historical works. His introduction to Clausewitz's *On War* led to a much deeper engagement with military theory and its role in educating officers. His *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* stands in stark contrast to the predominate lines of nineteenth-century military thought which was increasingly focused on the evolving idea of "total war." In an era of the decisive battle and unconditional surrender, limited war was increasingly inconceivable and Corbett stood largely alone in his reinterpretation of *On War*. He also broke with the conventional naval wisdom espoused by Mahan and Colomb. Corbett, unlike the "blue-water" school, willingly recognized and discussed the limits of sea power and how maritime strategy contributed to the broader framework of national strategy. Corbett represented a clear break with nineteenth-century military theory. The political scientist Azar Gat argued, Corbett "proceeded to turn nineteenth-century military theory on its head, reversing almost each and every one of its sacred tenets and articles of faith."<sup>92</sup>

In approaching *Some Principles*, Corbett structured the work around three major sections. In Part I, Theory of War, Corbett drew heavily on Clausewitz's thought, which Corbett then

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<sup>92</sup> Azar Gat, *Development of Military Thought: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 248.

adapted and expanded to fit the maritime environment. In Part II, Theory of Naval War, he advanced his own interpretation of command of the sea while responding directly to many of Mahan's claims. Finally, in Part III, Conduct of Naval War, which historian Eric Grove called "the most sophisticated and complete exposition of battle-fleet naval operational doctrine available in the English language," Corbett presented the various ways naval power may be employed in gaining, disputing, and exercising command of the sea.<sup>93</sup> First, however, Corbett felt the need to address the purpose and role of theory itself.

Corbett was in complete agreement with Clausewitz on the role and importance of theory. It is no coincidence that Clausewitz, Mahan, and Corbett spent time studying and teaching history at their respective military colleges before writing theory. For each of them, the purpose of theory was to educate the mind of the professional military officer and civilian statesmen with an emphasis on improving judgement. Clausewitz described the purpose of theory in *On War*:

theory then becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls... Theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield; just as a wise teacher guides and stimulates a young man's intellectual development, but is careful not to lead him by the hand for the rest of his life.<sup>94</sup>

Mahan was an inveterate disciple of the Swiss military theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini. Jomini had served as a corps chief of staff in the French Army during the Napoleonic Wars and firmly believed in the value of both history and principles of war. Mahan, echoing Jomini, wrote:

Each is a partial educator; combined, you have in time a perfect instructor. Of the two, history by itself is better than formulated principles by themselves; for in this connection, history, being the narrative of actions, takes the role which we commonly call practical. It is the story of practical experience. But we all, I trust, have advanced beyond the habit of thought which rates the rule of thumb, mere practice, mere personal experience, above

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<sup>93</sup> Eric Grove, "Introduction" to Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, xxxii-xxxiii.

<sup>94</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 141.

practice illuminated by principles, and reinforced by the knowledge, developed by many men in many quarters. Master your principles, and then ram them home with the illustrations which history furnishes.<sup>95</sup>

Throughout *Some Principles*, Corbett emphasized that theory cannot serve as a guide to decisions, instead, he consistently referred to judgement as the key to strategic decision-making and the role of theory as critical in developing that judgement. In the introduction to *Some Principles*, Corbett quoted Clausewitz on the role of theory, “it (theory) is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately to guide him in self-education; not accompany him to the battlefield” and then expanded with his own assertion that, “theory is, in fact, a question of education and deliberation, and not of execution at all. That depends on the combination of intangible human qualities which we call executive ability.”<sup>96</sup> Both Corbett and Mahan believed that contemporary officer education had become overly technical and scientific and neglected the broader requirements for developing “executive ability.” Mahan wrote in “Naval Education” (1879):

I confess to a feeling of mingled impatience and bitterness when I hear noble duties and requirements of a naval officer’s career ignored, and an attempt made to substitute for them the wholly different aims and faculties of the servant of science... Science has been, and still is, achieving her magnificent conquests; and men, as always, in the presence of the achievements of the moment forget the triumphs of the past.<sup>97</sup>

Both Mahan and Corbett used the term “executive ability” in much the same sense as Clausewitz referred to military genius. Clausewitz described the central components of military genius:

During an operation decisions have usually to be made at once: there may be no time to review the situation or even to think it through... If the mind is to emerge unscathed from this relentless struggle with the unforeseen, two qualities are indispensable: first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retain some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead. The first of these qualities is described by the French term, *coup d’oeil*; the second is

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<sup>95</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1911), 17.

<sup>96</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 3-4.

<sup>97</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, “Naval Education” In Jon Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 17.

determination... *Coup d'oeil* therefore refers not alone to the physical but, more commonly, to the inward eye...the quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss.<sup>98</sup>

Mahan argued that decision-making was a critical element of war and that it could be improved through education. He, like Clausewitz, believed intuition was at the heart of judgment and was developed through wartime experience and through an education based on the study of history.<sup>99</sup>

Corbett, on the other hand, was much more reluctant than Clausewitz or Mahan to define the abilities required in a commander, yet he mirrored their analysis:

the conduct of war is so much a question of personality, of character, of common sense, of rapid decision upon complex and ever shifting factors, and those factors themselves are so varied, so intangible, so dependent upon unstable moral and physical conditions, that seems incapable of being reduced to anything like true scientific analysis.<sup>100</sup>

While Corbett clearly intended *Some Principles* as a tool to help educate senior naval officers in dealing with the contemporary maritime issues, unlike Clausewitz or Mahan, he saw the development of executive ability as outside the realm of theory.<sup>101</sup> Based on his experiences teaching senior officers, it is likely that as a civilian Corbett was more reluctant than Clausewitz or Mahan to directly address the executive ability required of military leadership.

The nineteenth century generated a burgeoning output of military theory informed by the experiences of French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Jomini and Clausewitz were the great interpreters of the changes in warfare brought on by the Revolution and Napoleon. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century their theories were adapted, advanced, and interpreted in various ways as militaries increasingly wrestled with the new technologies generated by the Industrial Revolution. The Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) became the interpretive lens

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<sup>98</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 102.

<sup>99</sup> Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy*, xiv, 104.

<sup>100</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Jon Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 24.

through which previous military theory was adapted into a growing “continental school” of military thought. The German Continental School had its legacy in the Prussian reforms of Gerhard von Scharnhorst, August von Gneisenau, and Clausewitz. However, Helmuth von Moltke’s (Elder) own thoughts, interpretations, and experiences came to dominate the German school in the late nineteenth century. Moltke foresaw the consequences of rising nationalism, urbanization, mass education, and communications in the politicization of the population and the likely effect this was to have on war.<sup>102</sup> Under Moltke, the Prussian (later German) Army focused on concentration of force to take the offensive and destroy the enemy in a decisive battle, a system based on the “nation-in-arms” and modern industrialized war. While Moltke fundamentally rejected universal rules or systems of war and consistently argued for flexibility in approach, his overwhelming success led to the eventual systemization of his thought into a German Continental School.

This German Continental School developed around a collection of intellectual officers, including Colmer von der Goltz and Friedrich von Bernhardi. They developed the theoretical framework for systematizing Moltke’s practices during the German wars of unification and incorporating Social Darwinism. Von der Goltz argued for the inevitability of war in his *The Nation in Arms* (1883) and believed it would employ the moral force of all the nation’s people in a life and death struggle for existence.<sup>103</sup> Bernhardi incorporated many aspects of Social Darwinism in his *Germany and the Next War* (1912) when he argued war had become a struggle for existence that would eliminate the weakest nations.<sup>104</sup> Both von der Goltz and Bernhardi advocated for the total mobilization of the nation’s resources making the “nation-in-arms” a

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<sup>102</sup> Gat, *Development of Military Thought*, 63.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-80.

<sup>104</sup> Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 127.

reality. In 1890, Hans Delbruck, a German civilian military historian, advanced an argument for two types of strategy – the strategy of annihilation and the strategy of exhaustion. Unlike von der Goltz and Bernhardt, the controversial Delbruck wrestled with Clausewitz’s limited war formulation and argued that Frederick the Great had used his limited resources to achieve limited aims and never sought the destruction of his enemies.<sup>105</sup> Delbruck, however, was rarely translated into English or mentioned in British military debates prior to the First World War.<sup>106</sup> Corbett also focused on Clausewitz’s limited war construction and his own expanded argument for limited war stood in stark contrast to the German Continental School. Corbett focused his argument against those in Britain who he felt were unduly influenced by the German Continental School and its interpretation of *On War*.

J.J. Graham had first translated *On War* into English in 1873, but serious British engagement with Clausewitz and the eventual incorporation of the German Continental School’s interpretation of *On War* did not occur in Britain until after the Boer War (1899-1902). Serious dissatisfaction with the British Army’s performance in that war led to the famous “Haldane Reforms” and Britain’s re-engagement with military thought and theory. Historian Christopher Bassford identified the period between the Boer War and the First World War as the “first golden age in Clausewitz studies” in Britain.<sup>107</sup> Numerous British officers, historians, and intellectuals read Clausewitz between 1900 and 1910. In 1905, the British Colonel and military historian, F.N. Maude, linked *On War* and Darwin in a fashion reminiscent of the German Continental School when he wrote:

Clausewitz was the first to define war as an extreme form of human competition. In other words he did for the nation what Darwin subsequently did for individuals, he

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<sup>105</sup> Gat, *Development of Military Thought*, 106-107.

<sup>106</sup> Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 87.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-75, 113.



showed that war was nothing more or less than the ‘struggle for the survival of the fittest’ on a national plan.<sup>108</sup>

Spenser Wilkinson advanced von der Goltz’s thoughts in his *War and Policy* (1900):

war in our time is bound to be a struggle for national existence, in which everything is risked, and in preparation for which, therefore, no conceivable exertion must be spared... The absolute form of war is deduced, not from any of the changes in weapons or in the organizations of armies, but from the entrance of nations into the arena which was before occupied by ‘sovereigns and statesmen.’ The national form is a bitter quarrel, and a fight which ends only when one or the other combatant lies prostrate and helpless at the mercy of his foe, whose first anxiety will be to prevent the beaten enemy from ever recovering sufficient power to be able to renew a quarrel with the hope of success... each side would, from beginning to end, aim at the total destruction of the enemy’s forces.<sup>109</sup>

Wilkinson became Corbett’s most virulent critic after the publication of *Some Principles* in 1911 due, in part, to Corbett’s advancement of Clausewitz’s limited war theory. Corbett was often a voice in the wilderness, criticizing the arguments of the German Continental School as well as his contemporaries in Britain. He critiqued the false assumptions that he believed they had drawn from the Napoleonic Wars:

First, there is the idea of making war not merely with a professional standing army, but with the whole armed nation – a conception which of course was not really Napoleon’s... It was but a revival of the universal practice which obtained in the barbaric stages of social development, and which every civilization in turn had abandoned as economically unsound and subversive of specialization in citizenship. Secondly, there is the idea of strenuous and persistent effort – not resting to secure each minor advantage, but pressing the enemy without pause or rest till he is utterly overthrown... Scarcely distinguishable from this is a third idea – that of taking the offensive... Finally, there is the notion of making the armed forces of the enemy and not his territory or any part of it your main objective.<sup>110</sup>

Corbett sought to dispel these assumptions and was one of the earliest to develop an understanding of some of the deeper aspects of Clausewitz’s nature of war as he expanded Clausewitz’s theory into the realm of maritime strategy.

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<sup>108</sup> F.N. Maude, *Evolution of Modern Strategy*, In Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy*, 129.

<sup>109</sup> Spenser Wilkinson, *War and Policy* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1900), 180.

<sup>110</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 22-24.

In addition to the German Continental School, many other late nineteenth-century military theorists selectively used Clausewitz's ideas, often taken out of context. The French Army focused heavily on the importance of morale and genius in *On War*, but ignored much of the deeper, more complex aspects, which placed morale and genius within the context of Clausewitz's unitary theory of war. Mahan read *On War*, but concluded that Clausewitz agreed with Jomini on all important points. Corbett, however, became one of the first to recognize aspects of Clausewitz's overarching nature of war and break from the German Continental School's interpretation. In *Some Principles, Part I, General Theory of War*, Corbett integrated his understanding of British military history with the broader theories advanced by Clausewitz to define limited war as applied to a maritime nation. Lieutenant Colonel G.F.R. Henderson, who had introduced Corbett to *On War*, called Clausewitz "the most profound of all writers on war. Clausewitz was a genius and geniuses and clever men have a distressing habit of assuming that everyone understands what is perfectly clear to themselves."<sup>111</sup> While Corbett was one of the earliest military theorists to incorporate some of the deeper aspects of Clausewitz's thought, he was also arguably the first in a long Anglo-American liberal tradition of divorcing war as a rational instrument of policy from Clausewitz's broader nature of war.

Corbett lectured at the War Course on "The System of Clausewitz" and first used Clausewitz's ideas and language in his *Strategical Terms and Definitions used in Lectures on Naval History*, more commonly referred to as the *Green Pamphlet*. Corbett, working with Captain Slade, the course director, first published the *Green Pamphlet* in 1906 and revised and reissued it in 1909. The *Green Pamphlet* was Corbett's first theoretical/doctrinal work and was intended to establish a common language and conceptual framework for teaching strategy at the

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<sup>111</sup> Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, 16.

College. Corbett opened the *Green Pamphlet* with “war is a form of political intercourse, a continuation of foreign politics which begins when force is introduced to attain our ends.”<sup>112</sup> In addition to war as an extension of politics, Corbett also co-opted Clausewitz in explaining the difference in the offensive and defensive. “The offensive, being positive in its aim is naturally the more effective form of war” while “the defensive, being negative in its aim, is naturally the stronger form of war.”<sup>113</sup> While incorporating these aspects of Clausewitz’s thought, the *Green Pamphlet* remained distinctly Jominian in style, language, arrangement, and purpose.

Additionally, Corbett advanced his own early views on command of the sea, common lines of communication and passage, and the objectives of naval warfare. The *Green Pamphlet* served as a forerunner to *Some Principles* and used many of the same themes and arguments, allowing Corbett to refine his thought and arguments over time.

While working on the *Green Pamphlet*, Corbett was also structuring *England in the Seven Years War* (1907) around Clausewitz’s political nature of war as discussed in the previous chapter. In *Some Principles*, his understanding of Clausewitz dominates Part I Theory of War. Clausewitz proposition that war is a political act and must remain subservient to the political purpose was a consistent theme in Corbett’s work. It was not new for Corbett; the emphasis on war, policy, and strategy was central to all of his historical writing. His own study of history had brought him to resounding agreement with Clausewitz, and in *Some Principles*, Corbett consistently delineates between a war’s purpose and the means used to achieve that purpose.<sup>114</sup> He accused many writers, including Mahan, of constantly confusing ends and means.

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<sup>112</sup> Julian Corbett. “Strategical Terms and Definitions used in Lectures on Naval History,” in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 307.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>114</sup> Corbett’s use of the term means is synonymous with the modern strategic conception of ways in the ends-ways-means strategic construction. In the modern sense means refers to resources, which Corbett does not address in his ends-means discussions.

Corbett adopted and, in many ways, clarified some of Clausewitz's arguments concerning the relationship between the offense and defense. In *Some Principles*, Corbett built on Clausewitz's concepts:

If our object be positive our general plan must be offensive, and we should at least open with a true offensive movement; whereas if our object be negative our general plan will be preventive, and we may bide our time for our counter-attack. To this extent our action must always tend to the offensive. For counter-attack is the soul of defense. Defense is not a passive attitude, for that is the negation of war. Rightly conceived, it is an attitude of alert expectation. We wait for the moment when the enemy shall expose himself to a counter stroke, the success of which will so far cripple him as to render us relatively strong enough to pass to the offensive ourselves.<sup>115</sup>

Corbett's description of the nature and the relationship of the offensive and defensive was taken directly from his reading of *On War*. Corbett, however, continued to develop that relationship along Clausewitzian lines when he argued that offense and defense are not about the object of war but about the means of achieving that object. Corbett argued that offensive and defensive are not mutually exclusive, rather, they are fundamental truths of war which are complementary. His views on the offensive and defensive differ considerably from Mahan. Mahan conceptually viewed the navy as the offensive element of sea power and a navy's bases and fortifications as the defensive: "In war, the defensive exists mainly that the offensive may act more freely. In sea warfare, the offensive is assigned to the navy; the defensive (guarding bases), it simply locks up a part of its trained men in garrisons."<sup>116</sup> Corbett concluded it would be "better to lay aside the designation 'offensive and defensive' altogether and substitute the terms 'positive and negative.'"<sup>117</sup> While these concepts are also present in *On War*, Corbett focused the argument on ends and means and developed the relationship so that it had a better conceptual application to war at sea in which positive and negative aims had better resonance than offense and defense.

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<sup>115</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 32.

<sup>116</sup> Mahan, *Naval Strategy*, 150.

<sup>117</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 32-33.

Corbett's thoughts on limited war became one of the most reviewed aspects of his theory. He advanced his limited war arguments as a counterweight to the rising influence of the German Continental School in the debates surrounding British Army reforms and the country's future strategic options. Corbett recognized in Clausewitz's discussions of "absolute war" and limited war the perfect analogy for explaining much of British strategic history. Corbett noted that Clausewitz came to his theory of limited war late as a result of his dialectic discussion of "absolute war" and the role of policy, but was never able to fully integrate his revelations before his death. Debatably, Corbett claimed Clausewitz would have come to the same conclusions if he had time to finish the work and recognize the ability of a maritime power to more fully execute limited war through command of the sea.<sup>118</sup> Clausewitz had consistently focused on continental wars. While he recognized the fact that policy often led to limited wars, the principle of escalation made the execution of a limited war, between nations that shared a common border, problematic. Clausewitz recognized that limited war was dependent on the geographical position of the objective, but he never associated the problem with its maritime potential. Corbett clearly recognized the implications of Clausewitz's limited war theory in the often quoted aphorism of Sir Francis Bacon, "he that commands the sea is at great liberty and may take as much or as little of the war as he will."<sup>119</sup> In commanding the sea, Corbett recognized that Britain had been able to isolate various theaters of war and conduct truly limited operations in locations of their own choosing. Corbett argued that:

limited war is only permanently possible to island powers or between powers separated by sea, and then only when the power desiring limited war is able to command the sea to such a degree as to be able not only to isolate the distant object, but also to render impossible the invasion of his home territory.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 57.

Through his study of British history, Corbett recognized that “limited wars do not turn upon the armed strength of the belligerents, but upon the amount of strength they are able or willing to bring to bear at the decisive point.” Corbett then credited Clausewitz with unknowingly discovering the secret of “the expansion of England.”<sup>121</sup> In adapting Clausewitz’s limited war theory to Britain’s maritime strategic context, Corbett developed his own innovative theory and led to the historian Hew Strachan’s assertion that Corbett was “the first really important strategic thinker produced by Britain.”<sup>122</sup>

It was Corbett’s limited commitment to an unlimited war, which he termed “war limited by contingent,” which became the foundation of a “British Way in War” promoted by Liddell Hart during the interwar years. The Peninsular War waged against Napoleon (1807-1814) was the classic case study of “war limited by contingent.” Corbett noted that:

it was not until the Peninsular War developed that we found a theater for war limited by contingent in which all the conditions that make for success were present... The real secret of Wellington’s success, apart from his own genius, was that in perfect conditions he was applying the limited form to an unlimited war. Our object was unlimited. It was nothing less than the overthrow of Napoleon.<sup>123</sup>

Corbett recognized the opportunities for executing a “war limited by contingent” on the continent of Europe had greatly receded due to the increasing continental mobility and flexibility brought about by the Industrial Revolution.<sup>124</sup> The technology of the Industrial Revolution made limited intervention in an unlimited war on the continent of Europe impracticable. Yet, it was a

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>122</sup> Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15. Of course Strachan is referring to a strategic thinker to write down a strategic theory. Corbett would likely argue that William Pitt the Elder was the greatest strategic thinker produced in Britain.

<sup>123</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 65.

<sup>124</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 70-71. Sir Halford Mackinder’s work is often used as counterpoint to Mahan. Corbett certainly knew Halford Mackinder. Mackinder’s arguments concerning a continental powers ability to exploit the railroad and modern communications allowed them to more fully exploit their greater resources and advantages over sea powers. Schurman notes Corbett and Mackinder shared a ride on the *HMS Russell* to Canada in 1908 for the anniversary of the British capture of Quebec, but does not elaborate on any interaction or possible influence of the *Geographic Pivot of History*. Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 101.

concept that still held great sway within Royal Navy planning circles during the first decade of the twentieth century and into the First World War.

Corbett, the first in a long Anglo-American liberal tradition, also divorced war as a rational instrument of policy from Clausewitz's broader nature of war. Corbett, through his historical research, had already come to see maritime power as an instrument of the state and his reading of *On War* only reinforced that view. Clausewitz's "wondrous trinity" was the intellectual underpinning of his nature of war. Clausewitz described the "wondrous trinity" as:

composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as the blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.<sup>125</sup>

In divorcing the instrument of policy from primordial violence and chance, Corbett served as a precursor to the largely American idea, developed during the Cold War and perpetuated after the fall of the Soviet Union, that war was a rational instrument of policy that could be focused and controlled to achieve a political purpose without regard for the other two legs of Clausewitz's trinity. This approach has also contributed to a unilateral view of war in which strategy is driven solely by policy goals with little regard for the enemy and their potential reactions, another concept anathema to Clausewitz's reciprocal nature of war. Corbett's failure to incorporate primordial violence, passion, chance and probability and their influence on war contributed to his misperceptions about British strategic options entering the First World War and the eventual course of that war.

Before introduction to Clausewitz and his nature of war, Corbett had long wrestled with Mahan's historical writings and all of their theoretical implications for naval thought. In *Some*

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<sup>125</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 89. The "wondrous trinity" is espoused by several historians as a better translation than the Howard and Paret translation of the "paradoxical trinity."

*Principles*, the influence of Mahan's structure and language is evident throughout Part II, the theory of naval war, and Part III, the conduct of naval war. Both men developed their theoretical concepts through the study of British military history during the "Age of Sail" and, while they used the same examples and case studies, they differed significantly in analysis and emphasis. Corbett was one of the first and most successful at coming to terms with Mahan's theories and, according to many modern naval historians, rectifying many of Mahan's perceived flaws. According to historian John Gooch, "both men related naval activity to political purpose – which is the fundamental requirement of all strategic theories. In this much they agreed, but when it came to detailed analysis and prescription, they differed profoundly."<sup>126</sup> In addition to his historical analysis of British sea power, Mahan's theoretical approach was greatly influenced by the writings of Jomini. During the nineteenth century, Jomini, through multiple publications, had become the most prominent authority on the Napoleonic Wars. Mahan's father, Dennis Hart Mahan, was a professor at the United States Military Academy and relied heavily on Jomini's writings in educating American officers of the Civil War generation. Mahan was exposed to both the French language and Jomini's strategic and theoretical writing from a young age. Jomini's writings influenced Mahan to always maintain the connection between war and policy, a view Corbett shared. Mahan expressed this view in a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt:

Have you read Corbett's *Seven Years War*? It is a good book. He brings out clearly that Pitt, besides imminent ability, had control of all three threads, – diplomatic, military, and naval, – and that in this, concentrated in one efficient man, consisted his great advantage. Jomini taught me from the first to scorn the sharp distinction so often asserted between diplomatic and military considerations. Corbett simply gives the help of putting the same idea into other words. Diplomatic conditions affect military action, and military considerations diplomatic measures. They are inseparable parts of the whole; and as such those responsible for military measures should understand the diplomatic factors, and vice versa. No man is fit for Chief of Staff who cannot be entrusted with knowledge of

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<sup>126</sup> John Gooch, "Maritime Command: Mahan and Corbett," in *Seapower and Strategy*, ed. Colin Gray (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press. 1989), 28.



the diplomatic situation. The naval man also should understand the military conditions, and the military the naval.<sup>127</sup>

Jomini's influence on Mahan and Clausewitz's influence on Corbett with respect to the connection between war and policy are almost identical.

Mahan combined his understanding of Jomini with his historical research to formulate his fundamental principles of naval strategy. Mahan's strategic focus on commerce shaped his tenets of naval warfare which tremendously influenced navies around the world prior to the First World War. Through his later writings, Mahan directly advocated for American maritime expansion and became a propagandist for sea power. During the Second World War, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson sarcastically proclaimed, "Neptune was God, Mahan his prophet, and the United States Navy the only true church."<sup>128</sup> Mahan's focus on sea power as an instrument of national power, seaborne commerce as essential to economic prosperity, and the necessity for colonial expansion, was a distinct product of the late nineteenth century. Mahan influenced naval proponents and future writers to adopt a broader conceptual basis that related sea power, seaborne commerce, and maritime activities to a nation's foreign policy, strategy, and economy.<sup>129</sup> Mahan identified six principle conditions that influenced sea power: geographical position, physical conformation, extent of territory, number of the population, national character, and the character and policies of the government. In discussing geographical position, Mahan contrasted Great Britain as an island power without fear of a land threat in opposition to France's many competing threats. He viewed the United States in the same light as Great Britain, with

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<sup>127</sup> Mahan to Roosevelt, January 13, 1909, in *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), III:276.

<sup>128</sup> Philip A. Crowl, "Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian." In Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 444.

<sup>129</sup> John B. Hattendorf, "Alfred Thayer Mahan and his Strategic Thought," *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power: Britain and America in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John B. Hattendorf and Robert S. Jordan (New York: St. Martin's Press. 1989), 83.

two great oceans separating the country from potential threats. By physical conformity, Mahan described the importance of a significant coastline with excellent harbors and ports. The extent of territory referred to the proportion of the population compared to its resources and length of seaboard. The number of population referred to the proportion of the population engaged in maritime activities. In discussing national character, Mahan focused on a nation's openness to commerce and fully developing and integrating colonial possessions into a broader worldwide economy. Finally, governments, in Mahan's view, played a critical role in fostering, maintaining, and protecting this integrated maritime system.<sup>130</sup> Nations that met these requirements were best positioned to take full advantage of the leverage of sea power to advance its foreign policy and commerce.

Mahan felt the United States met the first five required elements, despite some being less than ideal, and saw his role as influencing the government, the sixth requirement, to support the development of naval power and overcome some of the United States' natural limitations, such as a lack of colonies. Mahan was the first to seriously relate naval power to acquiring overseas colonies, expanding commerce, and increasing national wealth. He viewed Britain's dominant global position and great commercial wealth as resulting from its naval supremacy. Mahan's theoretical models were based on his study of British history, but he clearly saw them as transferable to the United States. Roosevelt, with whom Mahan developed a close and lasting friendship, relied on Mahan's work to justify an already expansive American "navalism," leading to the United States' emergence as a great naval power during this period. Kaiser Wilhelm II also praised Mahan's work and had it distributed across the German Navy. In 1894, the Kaiser wrote, "I am just now not reading but devouring Captain Mahan's book (*The Influence of Sea*

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<sup>130</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Charleston, SC: Bibliobaazar Publishing. 2008), 61-89.

*Power upon History*) and I am trying to learn it by heart. It is a first-class book and classical in all points. It is on-board all of my ships and constantly quoted by my captains and officers.”<sup>131</sup> Ultimately, however, the Germans failed to understand the true essence of the geographic and economic underpinning of Mahan’s principles.<sup>132</sup>

Mahan sought to draw lessons from the strategic level because he believed they were less susceptible to rapid technological change. Mahan also sought immutable principles for war at sea comparable to Jomini’s principles of land warfare. In a letter to Commodore Luce, President of the United States Naval War College, Mahan emphasized, “I will keep the analogy between land and naval warfare before my eyes. I expect to begin with Jomini.”<sup>133</sup> Mahan, Luce, and Jomini shared an enlightenment positivist approach to science and applied the same approach to their search for principles of war. Luce, in setting his vision for the Naval War College in which he sought to apply the scientific method to naval warfare, wrote, “the naval battles of the past furnish a mass of facts amply sufficient for the formulation of laws or principles which, once established, would raise maritime war to the level of a science.”<sup>134</sup> Mahan insisted that principles of land and sea warfare were essentially the same and relied heavily on Jomini’s ideas on positional advantage. Mahan agreed that the offensive was essential to success in war, writing in *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (1897), “War, once declared, must be waged offensively, aggressively. The enemy must not be fended off, but smitten down.”<sup>135</sup> Mahan held that the enemy’s main battle fleet was the primary objective and victory in a decisive battle would guarantee command of the sea. Mahan wrote, “if the true end

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<sup>131</sup> Gat, *A History of Military Thought*, 455.

<sup>132</sup> Margaret Tuttle Sprout, “Mahan: Evangelist of Sea Power,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 444.

<sup>133</sup> Mahan to Luce, January 6 and 22, 1886, In Gat, *A History of Military Thought*, 448.

<sup>134</sup> Stephen Luce, “Naval Warfare as a Science,” in Gat, *Development of Military Thought*, 175-176.

<sup>135</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Qontro Classic Books, 2010), 63.

is to preponderate over the enemy's navy and so control the sea, then the enemy's ships and fleets are the true objects to be assailed on all occasions."<sup>136</sup> In order to bring about this decisive battle, Mahan returned to Jomini's principles of land warfare and focused on the central position, interior lines, and concentration of force. Mahan used the term communications much in the same way Jomini discussed logistics with a focus on sources and lines of supply. Distant coaling stations were critical for establishing sources of supply, extending the operational reach of the fleet, and allowing flexibility in establishing lines of communication. Mahan also saw the importance of threatening an enemy's communications in order to force a decisive fleet engagement. The value of the central position allowed the fleet to operate on interior lines to threaten the decisive point and bring on the decisive battle. In that decisive battle, the fleet, in Mahan's view, must be composed of capital ships. Mahan's concepts formed an integrated whole and were tremendously influential at the turn of the twentieth century not only in the United States and Germany, but also in Britain. In 1893, John Knox Laughton, in the first of an ongoing correspondence with Mahan, wrote:

I venture to hope that you will not be annoyed at receiving a letter from me thanking you for the pleasure I have derived from your works and more especially from your last on the *French Revolution & Empire*. It is a great work, & ought to open the eyes of many on this side who are obstinately blind to many of the truths you have so clearly put forward. You will probably have seen Admiral Colomb's collected essays, lately published. It is interesting to note the general agreement between your views & his, though there are some points of difference, which are possibly more apparent than real.<sup>137</sup>

Laughton was referring to Admiral Philip Colomb's *Naval Strategy* published in 1891. Philip Colomb and his brother, John, were two of the first British officers to use history to inform naval thought. In 1867, Captain Sir John Colomb, a Royal Marine officer, advanced the idea that, historically, Britain's power was based on its permanent position as a great imperial trading

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<sup>136</sup> Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, 318-9.

<sup>137</sup> Laughton to Mahan, March 11, 1893, in *Laughton Papers*, 82-83.

nation. He, therefore, argued the entire imperial structure and trading system must be defended by combined army-navy co-operation and colonial contributions from around the globe. John Colomb was not a naval historian or a careful student of history, but was the first to place the navy's role in imperial defense within the context of British history and Britain's economy.<sup>138</sup> Admiral Philip Colomb was one of the first active naval officers in the period to take the study of history seriously and he became a strong advocate for its inclusion in all professional naval education. Philip retired from the Navy in 1886, became a professor of tactics at the Royal Navy College, and brought historical analogy into the classroom. Like Mahan, however, he predominately focused on using selected aspects and interpretations of history to promote his preferred naval strategy. In 1891, he published his greatest work on naval history and theory, *Naval Strategy*, in which he consistently interpreted facts to fit his conclusions and advance his own arguments.<sup>139</sup> He presented naval warfare and "command of the sea" as independent from national policy. Rather than separating strategy, operations, and tactics, Colomb blended them and did not distinguish differences in the levels of war. Colomb's work was completely overshadowed by Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* which had been published the year before. Laughton noted the general agreement between Mahan and Colomb on most aspects of naval strategy and their collected analysis became central to a forming consensus in Britain around a "blue-water" school of naval thought. Corbett, despite some agreement with this emerging "blue-water" school, became one of the first and the most effective challengers to the growing coalescence in late nineteenth-century naval thought.

Mahan's approach to naval war had infused the British military and naval establishment by the time Corbett published *Some Principles* in 1911. Spenser Wilkinson, a staunch advocate

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<sup>138</sup> Schurman, *Education of a Navy*, 24-34.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

of Mahan, was representative of many within British military circles that turned Mahan's theory into absolute dogma. In 1894, responding to the increasing French threat to British control of Egypt, Wilkinson wrote:

The admirable treatises on naval war which have appeared during the last five years have left no room for doubt as to the broad features of a conflict between England and France. Such a war must begin by a fight for the command of the sea – that is, the two navies will fight until one has destroyed the other or broken its force so that it must withdraw from the contest and retire to his fortified harbours.... Every motive impels each side to collect the strongest fleet that it can muster, and to go in search of the enemy and attack him.... On the outbreak of a war the Admiralty must get together the strongest fleet they can make up, and send it to find and attack the French fleet or the principal French squadron. Wherever the French fleet is the English fleet must go, must attack it, defeat it if possible, and then attack it again, never letting go until the French fleet is destroyed. The time for dividing the English fleet is after victory... But until a decisive battle has been won dispersion of the force is an opportunity to the enemy.<sup>140</sup>

In 1909, Wilkinson continued to emphasize the centrality of decisive battle to naval warfare in his response to the rising naval threat from Germany:

By victory, of course, I mean crushing the enemy. In a battle in which neither side is crippled, and after which the fleets part to renew the struggle after a short interval, one side or the other may consider that it has had the honors of the day.... It does not lead to the accomplishment of the purpose of the war, which is to dictate conditions of peace. That result can be obtained only by crushing the enemy's force and making them powerless to renew the contest.... The true strategical doctrine that the prime object of naval warfare is the destruction of the enemy's fleet, and therefore that the decisive point in the theater of war is the point where the enemy's fleet can be found.<sup>141</sup>

In addition to reflecting Mahan's views of naval warfare, Wilkinson's arguments also reflected the same underlying interpretation of Clausewitz advanced by the German Continental School that had become so pervasive in Great Britain. Corbett's reinterpretation of Clausewitz and his break with Mahan led to much criticism of *Some Principles* within the British military and naval community, especially from Wilkinson.

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<sup>140</sup> Spenser Wilkinson, *Command of the Sea* (London: Gregg Revivals, King's College, 1992), 31, 37-39.

<sup>141</sup> Spenser Wilkinson, *Britain at Bay* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), 110, 115.

Corbett, in his writings, adopted the same broader strategic approach as Mahan and focused on the purpose of naval operations and their linkage to overall national strategy and foreign policy. In a clear break with Mahan's approach, however, Corbett addressed war as an integrated whole, rather than separating naval warfare into an autonomous area of strategy. Corbett clearly recognized that land and sea warfare could not be separated from the greater whole, and, therefore, army and naval strategy could not be separated. According to Corbett:

it is the theory of war which brings out their (military and naval strategy) innate relation. It reveals that embracing them both is a larger strategy which regards the fleet and army as one weapon, which coordinates their actions, and indicates the lines on which each must move to realize the full power of both.<sup>142</sup>

This concept led Corbett to focus his theory on a maritime strategy, which combined naval and military strategy in a broader approach to sea power. Corbett relegated naval strategy to addressing the movement of fleets to carry out the broader maritime strategy. At the heart of any maritime or naval strategy was the concept of "command of the sea." Mahan described command of the sea as:

It is not the taking of individual ships or convoys, be they few or many, that strikes down the money power of a nation; it is the possession of that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy's flag from it, or allows it to appear only as a fugitive; and which, by controlling the great common, closes the highways by which commerce moves to and from the enemy's shores.<sup>143</sup>

Mahan treated these "highways" as Jomini treated lines of communication on land. In *England and the Seven Years War*, Corbett had demonstrated that Jomini's lines of communication must be approached differently at sea. Corbett disagreed with equating command of the sea with control of territory on land:

the error is a very general assumption that if one belligerent loses command of the sea it passes at once to the other belligerent...the most common situation in naval war is the

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<sup>142</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 10.

<sup>143</sup> Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, 170.

neither side has command; that the normal position is not the command of the sea, but an uncommanded sea.”<sup>144</sup>

With an “uncommanded sea,” Corbett focused on the right of passage and the sea as a barrier as much as a highway, which led to him defining command of the sea as the control of maritime communications.<sup>145</sup> Corbett viewed command of the sea as a relative concept and provided a lasting contribution to naval theory with his redefinition of command of the sea in *Some Principles*. This concept of command of the sea, led to Corbett’s argument that the primary objective of the fleet was to secure control of communications. If any enemy fleet threatened those communications, it must be destroyed, but that was only a means of securing control of communications which in turn was a means to further a greater policy objective. Corbett returned to his argument from *The Campaign of Trafalgar* that Nelson epitomized this understanding that command of the sea meant controlling communications, writing:

in Nelson’s practice at least their (cruisers) paramount function was to exercise control which he was securing with his battle squadron...the strategic distribution of his force was consistent throughout the whole period of his Mediterranean command...no man ever grasped more clearly than Nelson that the object of naval warfare was to control communications, and if he found that he had not a sufficient number of cruisers to exercise that control and to furnish eyes for his battle-fleet as well, it was the battle-fleet that was made to suffer.<sup>146</sup>

Once a nation had control of communications, it could exercise its command of the sea in order to defend against potential invasion, attack or defend trade, or support expeditionary forces.

Corbett also disagreed with Mahan and the “blue-water” school’s dogmatic adherence to concentration of force at the decisive point to bring on the decisive battle. Corbett focused on battle as a means rather than the end of maritime and naval strategy. Corbett’s argument that battle was one of multiple means stemmed from his adaptation of Clausewitz’s thought on

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<sup>144</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 91.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-101.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.



offense and defense to the maritime environment. In particular, Corbett felt the defense had received too little study in British naval thought and had been consistently underplayed by the British naval establishment. While tactically there may be no place for the defense at sea, Corbett argued, “the strategical defense has been quite as common at sea as it has been on land.” He used examples from the recent Russo-Japanese War to demonstrate the value of strategic defense and counterattack.<sup>147</sup> His consistent opposition to Mahan’s overwhelming focus on concentration of force derived from the fact that the enemy’s fleet could avoid battle. Corbett argued for dispersal in order to lure an enemy out, followed by “bold strategic combinations” to strike the enemy. He wrote, “war has proved to the hilt that victories have not only to be won, but worked for.”<sup>148</sup> Colomb also disagreed with Mahan on the adherence to concentration of force as an immutable principle of war. In reviewing French efforts during the Napoleonic Wars, Colomb argued that the inferior fleet maintained a distinct advantage in not concentrating:

The strength of the (French) strategic position consisted only in the division of the allied fleets in secure ports whence, under direction from a central station, they could issue and strike in combination on the isolated squadrons which their presence in poor compelled the masters of the sea to keep in watch upon them. It was their sudden issue and their unexpected stroke which gave them their power; as soon as their fleets were concentrated in one port, the danger to the masters of the sea had passed away, for they could concentrate too, and were no longer open to unexpected attacks by superior forces.... It was clear that by their concentration in one port they had ceased to become of any account during the remainder of the war.<sup>149</sup>

Corbett followed in Colomb’s path in arguing for bold combinations based on judgment and executive ability. Corbett examined the decision-making of Britain’s naval high command during the Napoleonic Wars in detail. His analysis centered on the intersection of diplomacy and military and naval action during the campaign of Trafalgar. He highlighted the circumstances

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>149</sup> Philip Colomb, *Naval Warfare: Its Ruling Principles and Practice Historically Treated* (London: W.H. Allen and Company, 1899), 172.

that produced Britain's dilemma, as presented by Colomb above, and justified the British decisions that also violated fundamental principles of concentration of force. In the summer of 1805, the British government divided the fleet to cover major operations in Italy and Africa as well as providing for the security of home waters. Although Corbett recognized the enormous dangers posed by such conduct, he concluded that "the whole question will serve as a warning that the broad combined problems of Imperial defense are not to be solved off-hand by the facile application of maxims which are the outcome of narrower and less complex continental conditions."<sup>150</sup> He argued for a flexible response that included attack and defense along with concentration and dispersion designed to meet the specific needs of the occasion and break from an unthinking dogmatic focus on concentration and decisive battle.

In his maritime strategy, Corbett expanded on Mahan's theories and went beyond his focus on fighting the decisive battle to destroy the enemy's main battle fleet. Corbett did not disagree that decisive battle was the only way of securing permanent command by naval means and the sooner it could be brought about, the better. Through his study of history, he also recognized that the decisive battle was fully embedded in Royal Navy tradition. He concluded with some sarcasm that, "No one will dispute it, no one will care even to discuss it, and we pass with competence to the conclusion that the first business of the fleet is to seek out the enemy's fleet and destroy it." However, he then made clear, "nothing is so dangerous in the study of war as to permit maxims to become a substitute for judgment."<sup>151</sup> Corbett was also critical of the "continental theorists" for taking this conception too far in their own overwhelming focus on destroying the enemy's army in a decisive battle:

An impression appears to prevail—in spite of all that Clausewitz and Jomini had to say on the point—that the question admits of only one answer. Von der Goltz, for instance, is

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<sup>150</sup> Corbett, *Campaign of Trafalgar*, 256-257, 264.

<sup>151</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 167.

particularly emphatic in asserting that the overthrow of the enemy must always be the object in modern war. He lays it down as "the first principle of modern warfare," that "the immediate objective against which all our efforts must be directed is the hostile main army." Similarly Prince Kraft has the maxim that "the first aim should be to overcome the enemy's army. Everything else, the occupation of the country, &c., only comes in the second line."<sup>152</sup>

According to Corbett, the primary object of naval forces was to secure communications and the fastest way to that end was through the destruction of the enemy fleet. At sea, however, the enemy could often avoid decisive battle and, therefore, it could not be the only means of securing the objective. He noted that often permanent control was not required to achieve a nation's objectives and it was more important to stop the enemy from using the sea for his own purposes, while ensuring the ability to use the sea for your own purpose. On many occasions, local or temporary control would suffice, leading to a much broader range of options in naval warfare.<sup>153</sup>

Corbett's arguments over decisive battle failed to convince many in the "blue-water" school, including Mahan. In 1911, commenting on a U.S. Naval War College wargame, Mahan wrote to the College's president, Rear Admiral Raymond P. Rodgers:

In this connection, I question the soundness of Corbett's dictum of not attacking the enemy where he is strongest; and the apparent inference, in the second paper, that "Blue's security lies in an approach on Orange's weakest flank." Corbett relies mainly on Clausewitz, whose authority is of the very first; but I conceive it is not the enemy's local strength, but the chance of success, and the effect produced by success, which should influence (the decision).<sup>154</sup>

Corbett's attempt to broaden the discussion of naval strategy beyond the sole focus on decisive battle drew the most criticism from the blue-water school throughout Corbett's lifetime.

Corbett also broke with Mahan over the value of defensive or negative operations in naval warfare. Corbett saw defensive operations for an inferior force as inherent in all attempts

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 91-93.

<sup>154</sup> Mahan to Raymond Rodgers, Long Island, March 4, 1911 in *Mahan Papers*, III:394.

to dispute command of the sea and he brought forward these views in the debate over the ‘fleet in being.’ The one area that Mahan and Colomb never came to agreement was over the ‘fleet in being’ concept. The ‘fleet in being’ arose from the Earl of Torrington’s (Admiral Arthur Herbert) explanation of his failure to bring the French Admiral Tourville’s much larger fleet to battle in 1690 until directly ordered by the Queen. This order led to the disastrous British defeat at Beachy Head. Colomb used Torrington’s defense of his actions to advocate the concept that an inferior fleet can avoid battle with a superior fleet and prevent invasions by remaining a constant threat. Colomb praised Torrington as a profound strategist who clearly understood the situation and maintained his calm in a difficult situation. Colomb argued that “if he (Torrington) could altogether avoid fighting and merely wait and watch, he would render the great French armament powerless, and entirely defeat its ends. It could do absolutely nothing if Torrington declined to be drawn into battle.”<sup>155</sup> In what became an ongoing debate, Mahan disagreed with Colomb’s analysis, arguing in a letter to Laughton in 1893:

I cannot, alas, go as far as he does in estimating the deterrent force of the smaller and weaker fleet, when the stronger lies between it and the operation which the stronger wishes to cover. One can admit to excellence of Torrington’s management in 1690, without being convinced, as I am not, that it was possible for Herbert to prevent the crossing of the force at Cherbourg if Tourville held his ground in mid-channel.<sup>156</sup>

In second letter to Laughton later in the year, Mahan continued his argument:

The inferior fleet should certainly fall back on its reinforcements, and avoid action; it’s ‘in being’ has doubtless its utmost effect while unimpaired by battle. I think Torrington in pleading his case naturally overstated his position; and of Colomb’s endorsement the ill effect appears to me in the recent *Quarterly* article, where ‘a fleet in being’ theory is accepted practically without qualification. My treatment of Torrington excited more adverse comment than any point in my first book... I have never conceded the position that his fleet after – or before Beachy Head prevented Tourville’s action, in the crossing of the French army.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Colomb, *Naval Warfare*, 116.

<sup>156</sup> Mahan to Laughton, March 21, 1893 in *Laughton Papers*, 85-86.

<sup>157</sup> Mahan to Laughton, December 1, 1893 in *Laughton Papers*, 95-96.

In the preface to the second edition of *Naval Warfare*, Colomb responded:

I committed myself to the belief that Tourville's action was an attempt to gain the command of the sea with a definite ulterior object, and that his failure to annihilate Torrington's fleet was, if not the only cause, yet a predominating cause, in preventing the ascent of the Thames, invasion of the south coast, and the insurrection of James's adherents. I did, in short, accept the view that Torrington and his naval supporters understood the real situation better than the English statesmen of the time, and most of the historians who subsequently wrote on the subject. A considerable body of critics have challenged my position... When leaders undertaking such descents almost invariably express the conviction that any "fleet in being" must be put out of being before the descent can be made; and because each of the two notable attempts to invade in defiance of the doctrine were disastrously frustrated by the "fleet in being" which it sought to ignore. Hence Torrington's operations are no more, and can be taken as no more, than one of a great group of occurrences whose cumulative evidence proves the rule.<sup>158</sup>

Corbett agreed with Colomb's assessment of Torrington's actions, but expanded the argument beyond its focus on defense from invasion to a method of disputing command of the sea. Corbett drew on a memorandum from Richard Kempenfelt, Chief of Staff of the Channel Fleet, during the War for American Independence which gave the "fleet in being" the highly aggressive spirit that was, in Corbett's opinion, its essence. Corbett quoted Kempenfelt's instructions to the Channel Fleet:

I may say all depends upon this fleet. 'Tis an inferior against a superior fleet. Therefore the greatest skill and address is requisite to counteract the designs of the enemy, to watch and seize the favorable opportunity for action, and to catch the advantage of making the effort at some or other feeble part of the enemy's line; or if such opportunities don't offer, hover near the enemy, keep him at bay, and prevent his attempting anything but at risk and hazard; to command their attention, and obliged him to think of nothing but being on their guard against your attack.<sup>159</sup>

An inferior navy could avoid battle and prolong the time in which the command of the sea was in dispute by its existence, and more importantly for Corbett, its aggressive actions short of bringing on Mahan's decisive battle. This led to Corbett's second option for securing command of the sea, the blockade. As with defense against invasion, Corbett's extensive discussion of

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<sup>158</sup> Colomb, *Naval Warfare*, viii-ix.

<sup>159</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 221-2.

open and closed blockades reflected the ongoing strategic debates during Admiral Fisher's time as First Sea Lord and are addressed in the following chapter.

In Mahan's view, the importance of a nation's commerce to its economy was fundamental to a nation's strength, which in turn led to his belief that wars were won by cutting off an enemy's trade at sea, bringing eventual economic collapse. The fundamental aim of naval strategy was the destruction of the enemy's commerce. In an article on the "Lessons of the War with Spain," Mahan made clear the centrality of commerce to his concept of sea power:

If navies, as we all agree, exist for the protection of commerce, it inevitably follows that in war they must aim to depriving their enemy of the great resource, nor is it easy to conceive what broad military use they can sub-serve that at all compares with the protection and destruction of trade.<sup>160</sup>

In the 1880s, France's traditional rivalry with Britain was reignited by the British occupation of Egypt. The French *Jeune Ecole* school of naval thought advanced a new theory of naval warfare that revived the traditional *guerre de course* by adding the new technologies of the industrial age. The movement reached its peak in 1886-7 when Admiral Theophile Aube, the leader of the *Jeune Ecole*, served as the Minister of Marine. Aube argued for an aggressive commerce-destruction campaign against Britain combined with strong coastal defenses. Aube's campaign was to be based on light commerce-raiding cruisers and torpedo boats, each carrying the newly developed self-propelled torpedo. The *Jeune Ecole* argued that the torpedo had made the battleship, the battle-fleet, and the blockade obsolete. Aube was planning to wage offensive war in the Mediterranean, defend in the Channel, and conduct commerce warfare in the Atlantic. The *Jeune Ecole*'s leading thinkers believed commercial warfare would produce an economic panic in Britain that would bring about social collapse.<sup>161</sup> The movement was short-lived and

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<sup>160</sup> Crowl, "Alfred Thayer Mahan," 455.

<sup>161</sup> Theodore Ropp, *The Development of a Modern Navy: French Naval Policy 1871-1904* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 155-180.

left the French Navy badly divided after Aube left office in 1887. Both Mahan and Corbett argued against the *guerre de course*. They did not believe raiding was an effective means of destroying enemy commerce and that it failed to protect one's own commerce. Mahan favored the decisive fleet action to destroy the enemy's main battle fleet, thereby gaining command of the sea and allowing the unhindered strangulation of an enemy's commerce, while also protecting a nation's own. Mahan concluded that, after gaining command of the sea:

the noiseless, steady, exhausting pressure with which sea power acts, cutting off the resources of the enemy while maintaining its own, supporting war in scenes where it does not appear itself, or appears only in the background, and striking open blows at rare intervals.<sup>162</sup>

Corbett drew many of the same conclusions on the attack and defense of trade and shared Mahan's views. He never saw the benefit of commerce raiding, from a British perspective, and rated French efforts at the *guerre de course* throughout history as little more than a nuisance. In *England and the Seven Years War*, Corbett argued that French commerce raiding had so little effect because British commerce was so large and the sea so vast that it overwhelmed French resources. Corbett wrote, "When the volume of commerce is so vast and its theatre so widespread as ours was even in those days, pelagic operations against it can never amount to more than nibbling."<sup>163</sup> The attack on the enemy's trade, however, was just as central to Corbett's maritime strategy as it was to Mahan's. Corbett wrote in *Some Principles*:

Since the object of war is to force our will upon the enemy, the only way in which we can expect war on commerce to serve our end is to inflict so much damage upon it as will cause our enemy to prefer peace on our terms to a continuation of the struggle. The pressure upon his trade must be insupportable, not merely annoying. It must seriously cripple his finance or seriously threaten to strangle his national life and activities.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, 240.

<sup>163</sup> Corbett, *England and the Seven Years War*, 639-40.

<sup>164</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 275.

Corbett captured the underlying rationale behind the Fisher Admiralty's developing plans for economic warfare against Germany. Economic warfare, blockades, and amphibious operations were all central to British naval planning prior to the First World War. Corbett's thoughts on each were shaped by the debates of the first decade of the twentieth century. Corbett was a man of his age and his theory in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* was heavily influenced by the challenges Britain faced prior to the First World War. The strategic debates of Corbett's era revolved around Admiral Fisher's naval reforms, the "Dreadnought Age," and the rise of Germany as a naval power and colored all aspects of *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.



## CHAPTER 4

### A MAN OF HIS TIMES: MARITIME THEORY IN THE AGE OF FISHER

Despite the great variety of influences on Julian Corbett and his thinking, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* was first and foremost a product of the “Dreadnought Age” and was meant to educate Britain’s civilian policy-makers in addressing strategic challenges at the turn of the twentieth century. The period between 1880 and 1911, during which Corbett developed his thinking on maritime strategy, was filled with unprecedented changes in naval technology, ship design, personnel, education, strategy, and tactics, all of which combined with equally unprecedented changes in Britain’s social, political, and international contexts. These changes were inherently linked, drove the strategic debates of Corbett’s generation, and colored all aspects of *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.

Central to this period’s rapidly changing naval technology was the transition from iron to steel in naval construction. The transition to steel went beyond new hulls and armor. It also brought dramatic changes in propulsion, armaments, and ammunition. Steel allowed the increased pressures in water-tube boilers, leading to the adoption of the triple-expansion steam engine followed by the turbine engine. Steel allowed for stronger gun barrels leading to the transition from muzzle-loading to breech-loading naval cannons, the introduction of new, more powerful propellants, improved armor-piercing shells, and quick-firing guns. These new breech-loading cannons were mounted first in open steel barbets and then the modern steel turret. Armor, during the period, transitioned from iron to steel and was rapidly improved through the use of compound armor, Harvey nickel-plated steel, and the Krupp cement-hardening process. The mine and self-propelled torpedo also matured rapidly during this period. Electric lighting,

wireless communication, mechanical and computer-assisted fire control, and early airships were all new technologies incorporated into naval warfare.

Following a period of great experimentation in ship design (1860-1880), the maturation of these new technologies actually led to increasing stability in ship designs and the emergence of standardized classes. The capital ship of the period transitioned from the monitor to the *en echelon* battleship, the pre-dreadnought, dreadnought, and finally the super-dreadnought. The frigate transitioned to the steel cruiser, taking on varying forms consisting of the protected cruiser, scout cruiser, armored cruiser, and eventually the battle cruiser. The torpedo led to the development of the torpedo boat and torpedo boat destroyer. It also became the primary weapon of the newly developed submarine. Minelayers, minesweepers, colliers, and a return of armed merchant ships all became factors in naval warfare during this period.

This rapid technological change had broad implications across all aspects of naval and maritime service, including tactics, personnel, education, training, funding, basing, and logistics. It also overlay a period of increasing challenges in Britain's social, political, and international situation. The era of the Pax Britannica was coming to an end and Britain was rapidly losing her relative industrial advantage over much of the developed world. Both the United States and Germany passed Britain in industrial output during this period. Rising social issues and demands for reform placed increasing pressure on British politicians to reduce expenditures on imperial defense. Yet, the same press, politicians, and broader public fed an increasing navalism. The international environment was increasingly shaped by rising imperialism, nationalism, social Darwinism, industrialization, and navalism, all inherently linked. As the Pax Britannica came to an end, so too did the era of Britain's "Splendid Isolation." Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Britain saw France and Russia as her primary adversaries on the world stage. Britain faced the

threat of war with Russia in 1878 over the Dardanelles and Russia's advance on Constantinople. Another crisis arose in 1885 over Russian expansion into Afghanistan and Central Asia. France clearly targeted Britain during the apogee of the *Jeune Ecole* and the *guerre de course* strategy under Admiral Aube in 1886-7. In 1894, France and Russia agreed to the Dual Alliance. Britain perceived this alliance as a direct threat to its interests in East and Central Asia, the Northern waters, and most importantly, the Mediterranean. As France launched new building programs for torpedo boats and commerce-raiding cruisers, Russia joined in the production of large, long-range commerce-raiding cruisers that could target Britain's vast ocean-going trade. The Fashoda crisis of 1898, France's brief challenge to British control of Egypt, created another war scare now exacerbated by the Dual Alliance. The French retreated, but the crisis highlighted the increasing challenge of imperial defense. The Royal Navy wrestled with plans to protect its imperial lines of communication, maintain naval superiority in the Channel, North Sea, and East Asia while also preventing the French Toulon Squadron effecting a potential junction with the Russian Black Sea Fleet in time of war.

Each of these war scares led to subsequent debates over operational plans and naval readiness. Not only were these debates carried out in Parliament and its subcommittees, but they were also played out in the press and broader public. In 1879, the Carnarvon Committee reviewed British imperial defense in this new age of steam and steel and framed the increasing challenges, many derived from the work of Captain John Colomb. In 1884, W. T. Stead published a provocative and controversial attack on British naval readiness, promulgating the notion of British naval weakness in an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled "What is the Truth about the Navy?" In response to the war scares and charges of unpreparedness, Parliament passed the Naval Defense Act of 1889, launching the most expensive naval-building program to

that point in British history. Historian Roger Parkinson characterized the 1889 Naval Defense Act as a significant overreaction to the true threats posed to British security and credited this act with starting the naval arms races that characterized the next two decades.<sup>165</sup> In response, France and Russia both increased their own naval building programs, which led Britain, in 1893, to initiate the even larger “Spencer Program.” At the turn of the twentieth century, Britain, France, and Russia had launched the first great naval arms race.

The naval officers and historians discussed in previous chapters injected their own reflections on the lessons of history and implications for the future into this rising tide of navalism. Mahan and Colomb published their most influential works between 1890 and 1892. Laughton founded the Naval Records Society in 1893 to better inform historical and current strategic debates with documentary evidence. Wilkinson published *Imperial Defense* (1892), *The Command of the Sea* (1894), and *The Brain of the Navy* (1895). Additionally in Britain in 1895, a select group of politicians, industrialists, retired naval officers, and other advocates formed the Navy League to publically advocate on issues concerning British defense policy. This rising navalism was on full display during the 1897 Spithead Naval Review for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. Yet, for all the war scares and charges of naval unpreparedness, it was the Boer War (1899-1902) that brought the debates over defense and naval policy to a head and led to the end of “Splendid Isolation.”

Britain’s traumatic experience in the Boer War had broad implications that drove social, economic, political, and military reforms, many of which will reappear throughout this chapter. In the short run, however, it led to Britain’s search for allies to relieve the effects of imperial

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<sup>165</sup> Roger Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy: The Pre-Dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War*, (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2008), 244-245.

overstretch and allow cuts in the increasingly debilitating expense of imperial defense. In 1902, Britain signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance to help protect British interest in East and Southeast Asia from Russian and French encroachment. In 1904, Britain signed the *Entente Cordiale* with France to bring about an end to Anglo-French colonial competition. That year was momentous in its implication for British defense policy and, more specifically, for the Admiralty. In addition to the *Entente Cordiale* eliminating France as a primary threat to British security, the Japanese attacked the Russians at Port Arthur, launching the Russo-Japanese War. This war ultimately devastated the Russian navy and eliminated Britain's other major maritime competitor. Additionally in 1904, Arthur Balfour's Unionist government established the Committee on Imperial Defense (CID) to ostensibly provide political oversight of defense policy and coordinate defense planning between the War Office and the Admiralty. Finally, and most importantly for the Royal Navy and Julian Corbett, on October 20, 1904, the day prior to Trafalgar Day, Admiral Sir John Fisher became First Sea Lord of the Admiralty.<sup>166</sup>

Sir John Arbuthnot Fisher, who first went to sea as a young midshipman in 1854, remains arguably the most controversial admiral in British naval history. Fisher has been almost universally portrayed as a materialist and volatile genius, who "was as renowned for his intelligence, wit, determination, and industry as he was for his deviousness, ruthlessness, and vengefulness."<sup>167</sup> While Fisher's reforms transformed the Royal Navy into a modern fighting force, they also divided the Navy and led to increasingly vitriolic attacks on both Fisher and his supporters, including Corbett. Fisher transformed Corbett's life by bringing him to the Royal

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<sup>166</sup> Upon assuming office, one of Fisher's first acts was to change the title from Naval Lord to Sea Lord for each of the top three naval members of the Board of Admiralty.

<sup>167</sup> Holger Herwig, "The Battlefleet Revolution, 1885-1914," in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050*. ed. MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119. There is general agreement among historians on Fisher's explosive personality and character.

Naval College and later into the Admiralty, becoming a friend and driving force behind much of Corbett's writing.<sup>168</sup> Historian Arthur J. Marder placed Fisher at the center of this entire age (1880-1919) with his magisterial works on the Royal Navy. Marder declared Fisher to be "the father of the material school" within the navy.<sup>169</sup> Many historians have followed this line and have portrayed Fisher as the arch-materialist in juxtaposition to a historical school which includes Corbett. They use Fisher's often quoted aphorism from his letter to Joseph Chamberlain to demonstrate his disdain for the study of history:

As regards the naval war, 'history is a record of exploded ideas,' because steam and wireless telegraphy have changed all the conditions... with the one great exception so eloquently described by Captain Mahan, Vol. II, page 118 (I know the place by heart, so I can quote it!) That sea power governs the world: Nelson's far distant storm-beaten ships, upon which the Grand Army never looked, stood between it and the dominion of the world.<sup>170</sup>

While Fisher was certainly the leading advocate of new and innovative maritime technologies, any cursory reading of Fisher's correspondence and official papers demonstrate a broad

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<sup>168</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 36.

<sup>169</sup> Arthur Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), I:xiii. The nature of "Fisher's Revolution" and his tenure as First Sea Lord has been vigorously debated among modern naval historians. Arthur Marder established the traditional approach in his monumental works which in addition to the five volume history also included *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940) and his commentary and editing of a three volume collection of Fisher's letters *Fear God and Dread Nought: the Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone* (London: Cape Publishing, 1952-1959). Marder established the rising German threat as the primary impetus for Fisher's reforms. Revisionists, starting with Ruddock Mackay in *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) first challenged some of Marder's conclusions in what remains the most complete biography of Fisher. Jon Sumida's *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) and Nicholas Lambert's *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) greatly expanded the challenge to Marder's interpretation through these works and multiple other articles. These revisionist argue that the French/Russia threat was still predominate when Fisher developed his reform agenda, and that agenda was largely driven by the need to reduce naval expenditures following the Boer War. Counter-revisionists have also emerged to challenge Sumida's and Lambert's arguments led by Matthew Seligman in *The Royal Navy and the German Threat, 1901-1914: Admiralty Plans to Protect British Trade in a War Against Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and David Morgan-Owen's *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics, and British War Planning, 1880-1914* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017). The counter-revisionist argue in these works and countless articles that the German threat was the driving factor behind the Fisher reforms, but for different reasons than Marder originally proposed. The argument is far from resolved. Many aspects of Mackay's, Sumida's and Lambert's revisionist argument remain consistent with Corbett's own writing during the period, including *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.

<sup>170</sup> Fisher to Chamberlain, November 10, 1900, in *Fear God*, I:165.

historical background whether discussing his heroes, Nelson, Napoleon, and Cromwell, quoting Mahan, or immediately reading Corbett's latest book as soon as it was published. Fisher was never constrained by history and never allowed principles or the "lessons of history" to trump his own judgement. Fisher described some of his views to First Lord Selborne in response to his opponents' charges of inconsistency:

Absolutely regardless that what is right today may be wrong tomorrow! But he traded on what we all dislike – *the charge of inconsistency!* Why! The two most inconsistent men who ever lived, the two greatest men who ever lived, and the two most successful men who ever lived, were Nelson and Napoleon! Nelson most rightly said that no sailor could ever be such a born ass as to attack forts with ships (*he was undoubtedly right*), and then he went straight at them at Copenhagen...*Circumstances alter cases!* That's the answer to the charge of inconsistency.<sup>171</sup>

Fisher certainly had been in the forefront of many of the key technological changes within the Royal Navy and had a unique ability to see beyond the limitations of early prototypes to envision the future impact of mature technologies on naval warfare.

Early in his career, Fisher was exposed to the growing technological demands placed on officers in the late Victorian navy. He served an early tour at Britain's premier gunnery school, HMS *Excellent*, and returned in 1871 to serve a four-year tour as the first Chief of Torpedo Instruction, becoming one of the staunchest advocates of the torpedo within the Royal Navy. In 1881, Captain Fisher became the inaugural commander of Britain's first *en echelon* battleship, *Inflexible*. *Inflexible* was also the first British warship to have electric lights. Fisher led *Inflexible* in the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882, in, arguably, the Royal Navy's last action as a force designed for the Pax Britannica. The Royal Navy, previously organized for deterrence through coastal bombardment and policing the seas as a constabulary force, started three decades of increasingly rapid change. Fisher was at the center of that change.

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<sup>171</sup> Fisher to Selborne, October 19, 1904, in *Fear God*, I:332.

In 1883, Fisher returned for his third tour on HMS *Excellent*, this time as its commanding officer. The contemporary historian of the *Excellent* noted “this period [1883-6] may be considered to mark the ‘revolution’ in Naval Gunnery, particularly as regards training.” The historian made clear not all credit should go to Fisher. He was served by some very progressive staff officers that revolutionized gunnery training programs.<sup>172</sup> Fisher was clearly building a reservoir of equally progressive and reformed-minded followers that would eventually become known as the “Fishpond.” During his time commanding *Excellent*, Fisher placed great emphasis on the development of the quick-firing medium gun. After his appointment as the Director of Naval Ordnance in 1886, he saw the guns incorporated across the Royal Navy. During this period, Fisher also provided information to the journalist W.T. Stead to support his scathing critique of the Royal Navy’s unpreparedness for war. Fisher never shied away from using the press to advance his reform agenda.

Fisher, promoted to Rear Admiral, became the Admiral Superintendent of the Portsmouth Dockyard in 1891. He oversaw the reorganization of the yard and expedited the construction of the *Royal Sovereign*, first of the 1889 Naval Defense Act pre-dreadnoughts. A year later, Fisher joined the Admiralty as the Controller where he led the fight for the adoption of the water-tube boiler and, relying on the technical expertise of William White, played a major role in championing the development of the torpedo-boat destroyer. Fisher was Commander-in-Chief, North America and West Indies from 1897-1899. He took a keen interest in the Spanish-American War and hosted the American Admiral William Sampson on his flagship *Renown* at Bermuda to congratulate Sampson on his victory over the Spanish in the Battle of Santiago de Cuba. Fisher was subsequently appointed to Britain’s most prestigious fleet command,

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<sup>172</sup> Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone*, 174.



Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean (1899-1902), at a time when Britain feared the threat of a Franco-Russian combination in the Mediterranean designed to exploit Britain's war in South Africa. According to Fisher's biographer Ruddock Mackey, "the next two years were to find him at the peak of his powers and in his most creative vein" and while Fisher's dynamism was an important ingredient, his ability to listen, learn, and experiment with the ideas of gifted junior officers, specialists from all fields, was the key to his success.<sup>173</sup> During his tenure in the Mediterranean, Fisher developed relationships and experimented with the ideas of several subordinates including Captain Percy Scott, Commanders Reginald Bacon and John Jellicoe, Lieutenant Herbert Richmond, and Marine Captain Maurice Hankey. For each ally Fisher won, however, he was equally adept at creating enemies. Later Admiral of the Fleet, Enrle Chatfield, served as a lieutenant in Fisher's Mediterranean Fleet and recorded his judgements of Fisher in his memoir:

Fisher had a practice of consulting young officers which was proper enough in itself. But, regrettably, he spoke to them in a derogatory way about their superiors. It was his ruthless character and his scorn of tact that led to violent criticism... There were many who hated him, and he hated them. His was not a method of leading smoothly but of driving relentlessly and remorselessly... Whether the Navy could ever have emerged from its old ways in time for the Great War without his forceful acts is difficult to estimate, but in my opinion it could not. At our end of the scale he helped us, devoured our ideas, and stimulated us with his own, while at the other end his record was one of ruthlessness, creation of enemies and the splitting of the Navy into two parties.<sup>174</sup>

The opposition to Fisher continued to build during his tenure in the Mediterranean as Director of Naval Intelligence Admiral Reginald Custance became a keen opponent because of Fisher's constant complaints to the Admiralty. Fisher also publicly reprimanded his Second-in-Command, Admiral Charles Beresford, over a minor ship-handling error at Malta. Fisher did not

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 224-226.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 230.

like Beresford, probably because of his social status and mixed role as a naval officer and a politician. In 1894, Fisher had written to Lord Spencer to:

draw your attention to Beresford's indirect criticism of the Admiralty in his interview as to rearming certain ships, reserves, Gibraltar, etc. He really is very stupid, but he can't resist self-advertisement. What I fear is an explosion by Sir Frederick [First Naval Lord Admiral Frederick Richards], who justly thinks it outrageous that an officer on full pay should act in this way.<sup>175</sup>

Beresford and Custance came to lead the "opposition party," discussed by Chatfield in his memoir. That opposition became known as the "Syndicate of Discontent."

As Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Fisher had direct access to Lord Selborne, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and he started developing a relationship with the First Lord in an attempt to win his support for his reform agenda. Specifically, during Selborne's visit to Malta, Fisher advocated reform of the Naval College. He followed the conversation with a letter to the First Lord:

We want the Naval War College *very, very, badly*, and we want a Naval Von Moltke at the head of it... There are a great many things we want our Naval Von Moltke to tell us when you have started him at the head of the Naval War College! What distance shall we open fire? How near shall we approach the enemy in view of the gyroscope? If not within 2500 yards, what is the use of fighting tops weighing tons and tons and the weight of the still weightier masts that carry them? Also, in such a case, how about the utility of small machine guns, and is it any use keeping locked up in submerged torpedo rooms those valuable and highly trained Torpedo Officers and Seamen Torpedo Men? What are the cruisers going to do in a general action? We have our own ideas in the Mediterranean! What are the ideas elsewhere?<sup>176</sup>

On February 9, 1902, Lord Selborne offered Fisher the post of Second Naval Lord at the Admiralty despite the reservations of First Naval Lord Admiral Walter Kerr.

Julian Corbett first came to Fisher's attention later in 1902 when Corbett became closely involved in the reform of professional military education. Corbett had worked with Richmond on

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<sup>175</sup> Fisher to Spencer, September 26, 1894, in *Fear God*, I:122.

<sup>176</sup> Fisher to Selborne, July 29, 1901, in *Fear God*, I:203-4.

the “Education in the Navy” series of articles discussed previously. Fisher expressed his gratitude to Corbett and hinted at further plans for officer education.

I have just finished reading your most excellent article in the monthly review. It is conceived in the exact right vein to meet the present situation. I cannot thank you sufficiently for it!...You must please come and stay with me when I am Admiral at Portsmouth, and I hope to make your mouth water when unfolding further plans, which I must wait a year to disclose.<sup>177</sup>

While he was Second Naval Lord, Fisher started his reforms with officer entry, training, and education, which became known as the “Selbourne Scheme.” Fisher’s decision to adopt common entry, training, and interchangeability for engineering and line officers was a social revolution within the navy and the most controversial of Fisher’s early reforms within the fleet. Because of his consistent portrayal as an arch-materialist, Fisher rarely has received credit for creating and resourcing the War Course at the Royal Naval College.<sup>178</sup> Corbett’s hiring to teach at the War Course, later in 1902, was part of Fisher’s agenda for improving senior officer education. While Fisher and Corbett agreed on the vital importance of the War Course, their priorities and focus were clearly different, as expressed in Fisher’s previous letter to Lord Selborne which focused on training senior officers on the best techniques for employing the new technologies in development. In “Naval Necessities,” published soon after Fisher became First Sea Lord to outline his reform agenda, he revealed the importance of the new War Course:

How many of our Admirals have got minds?...The paucity of efficient admirals is the most serious matter...The least capable in the respective ranks of the Navy are the admirals. It’s not their own fault solely, they have had no education, and this blot will continue till we have a Naval War College established at Portsmouth.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Fisher to Corbett, July 6, 1903, in *Fear God*, I:274-5.

<sup>178</sup> Andrew Lambert, “History is the Sole Foundation for the Construction of a Sound and Living Common Doctrine: The Royal Naval War College, Greenwich, and Doctrine Development down to BR1806,” in *The Changing Face of Maritime Power*, 45.

<sup>179</sup> John Fisher, “Naval Necessities I,” in *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, ed. P.K. Kemp (London: Naval Records Society, 1960), I:21.

Fisher wanted the War Course and the Naval War College moved to Portsmouth so that flag officers and captains could practice fleet maneuvers using squadrons of destroyers. Corbett started his long association with the Royal Naval College at Greenwich and later moved with it to Portsmouth. Corbett, a committed liberal imperialist, had matured during the events of the previous twenty years; his thought had been shaped by his own study of British naval history starting when he had joined the Naval Records Society in 1894. By 1904, he had published his first book, compiled specifically from his War Course lectures, as *England in the Mediterranean*, but he had remained on the fringes of the great military and foreign policy debates of the previous two decades. The “Fisher Revolution” was about to begin and it had a tremendous impact on Corbett and his thoughts on maritime operations. Corbett became intimately involved with the reform agenda during Fisher’s term as First Sea Lord (1904-1910). The strategic debates surrounding Admiral Fisher’s naval reforms, the rapid pace of technological change, and the rise of Germany as a naval power, colored all aspects of *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.

Fisher became the First Sea Lord on October 20, 1904 with a mandate from Lord Selborne and the Conservative government to reduce the naval estimates. The month before announcing Fisher was to replace the retiring Kerr, Lord Selborne had listed his priorities for the incoming First Naval Lord, starting with:

1. *Economy of Estimates*.-It is quite certain that the Navy Estimates have for the present reached their maximum in the present year. In 1905-1906 not only can there be no possible increase, but if necessary, for the influence of the Admiralty over the House of Commons and for stability of national finances, that we should show a substantial decrease.<sup>180</sup>

The Naval Defense Act of 1889 and the Spencer building programs of the 1890s had caused monumental growth in the British naval estimates. Following the costly Boer War and the split

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<sup>180</sup> Selborne to Fisher, May 14, 1904, in *Fisher Papers*, I:xvii.

in the Conservative party over Joseph Chamberlain's tariff reform and imperial preference plan, the Conservative cabinet was determined to reduce defense spending to cut income taxes and lower the corn duty. In 1903, when Joseph Chamberlain's son, Austen, became the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he faced a serious budgetary crisis and sought immediate cuts in defense spending with a focus on the naval estimates.<sup>181</sup> The sweeping Liberal electoral victory in 1906 only brought increased pressure on Fisher and the Admiralty to continue to reduce the naval estimates to allow the new Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal government to implement its social welfare reform agenda. For Britain's political leadership in the first decade of the twentieth century, the greatest selling point of Fisher's reform agenda was the promise of substantially reducing the naval estimates. Under Fisher, the Admiralty reduced Britain's naval budget by ten percent in 1905 and, by 1908, had further reduced it by another three percent.<sup>182</sup> The hallmark of Fisher's administrative style was his relentless drive to achieve efficiency and effectiveness, maximum effectiveness with minimum waste.

Fisher had foreseen the coming requirement to cut the naval estimates while Second Naval Lord, writing to journalist James Thursfield in 1903:

"We can't go on with such increasing Navy Estimates and I see my way very clearly to a *very great reduction* WITH INCREASED EFFICIENCY! That sounds nice and will I think come true! But the Reform will require the 3 R's: Ruthless, Relentless, Remorseless."<sup>183</sup>

When Fisher became the First Sea Lord, he had a fully developed reform agenda that he believed would not only reduce the naval estimates but greatly increase military effectiveness. He sent

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<sup>181</sup> Martin Daunton. "The Greatest and Richest Sacrifice Ever Made on the Altar of Militarism: The Finance of Naval Expansion, 1890-1914." in *The Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age*. ed. Robert Blyth, Andrew Lambert and Jan Ruger (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 39-41.

<sup>182</sup> Jon Sumida, "Naval Armaments Race, 1889-1922," in *The Sea in History – The Modern World*, ed. N.A.M. Rodger and Christian Buchet (Suffolk, UK: Boydell and Brewer Press, 2017), 151.

<sup>183</sup> Fisher to Thursfield, July 5, 1903, in Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone*, 285.

that plan to Lord Selborne two days prior to becoming First Sea Lord. He shortly thereafter published it to the Board of Admiralty as “Naval Necessities” better known as “the Scheme.”

According to Fisher, it was a completely integrated approach:

It will be obvious then that the whole of this business is the regular case of “the house that Jack built,” for one thing follows another, *they are all interlaced and interdependent!* That’s why it was said to begin with:-

*The Scheme! The Whole Scheme!!  
And Nothing But the Scheme!!!*<sup>184</sup>

Fisher moved immediately to extend his revolutionary reforms across the service by initiating changes in manning, organization, ship design and procurement, communications, finances, and logistics. Corbett found himself called to serve as a publicist for the Fisher Admiralty. Corbett wrote regularly in journals, supporting Fisher’s reforms with historical analysis, while also continuing his own teaching, archival research, and professional writing. This dual role led to increasing tension between Corbett, the historian, and Corbett, the theorist and publicist, as he contributed to the most complex and controversial policy debates of the age. In 1907, Corbett publicly supported two of Fisher’s most controversial policies, the building of the revolutionary all-big gun *Dreadnought* and the fleet reorganization.

Fisher and the Admiralty’s decision to design and build an all-big gun, turbine-driven battleship and subsequent battle cruisers have drawn much historiographical debate over the years. Global trade defense remained a central Admiralty focus during the first five years of the twentieth century. Historian Roger Parkinson notes that Britain spent more on cruisers than battleships from the passage of the Naval Defense Act in 1889 to 1904.<sup>185</sup> Since the French had shifted focus to armored cruisers with the launching of the *Dupuy de Lome* in 1890, followed by Russia’s launching of their large armored cruisers *Rurik* (1892) and *Rossia* (1893), Britain had

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<sup>184</sup> Fisher, “Naval Necessities, I,” in *The Fisher Papers*, I:20.

<sup>185</sup> Parkinson, *Late Victorian Navy*, 219-221.

turned to the development of large armored cruisers to protect her vast sea lanes, laying down thirty-two armored cruisers in the six years (1898-1904) before Fisher became First Sea Lord. Revisionist historians, led by Jon Sumida and Nicholas Lambert, argue that Fisher envisioned merging the battleship and armored cruiser designs into a “fusion ship” that would ultimately save money in the extremely tight budgetary conditions faced by the British government in the first decade of the twentieth century. Fisher designed the fast all-big gun “fusion ship” to protect Britain’s vast overseas trading empire, while defense of the British Islands from invasion was left to a “flotilla” of torpedo boats and submarines. It is clear that Fisher was obsessed with speed and his resultant fusion design became known as the battle cruiser. Fisher had completed the outline of his designs by May, 1904 while he was Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth.<sup>186</sup> He personally selected and appointed the members of a Committee on Design to develop the final *Dreadnought* and armored cruiser designs. During the earliest planning meetings, the Committee saw the French and Russian navies as the greatest threat to Britain’s lines of communication.

Throughout much of 1904, Balfour’s early CID meetings debated the training, provisioning, and transport of British Army reinforcements to India in case of war with Russia.<sup>187</sup> Fisher, on October 22, 1904, two days after becoming First Sea Lord, faced the Dogger Bank incident in which the Russian Baltic Fleet fired on and sank several British fishing trawlers leading to a rising fear of war with Russia, which was already at war with Britain’s ally, Japan. Fisher’s Committee of Design started meeting later that fall and approved the final designs for *Dreadnought* and *Invincible* in January, 1905. Fisher continued to be the staunch

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<sup>186</sup> Roger Parkinson, *Dreadnought* (London: I.B. Tauris and Company, 2015), 87.

<sup>187</sup> David G. Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics, and British War Planning, 1880-1914* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 87-98.

advocate of the battle cruiser and argued for increased battle cruiser production at the expense of dreadnoughts for the remainder of his administration. In 1909, Fisher wrote Lord Esher, “the First Sea Lord wanted ‘Indomitables’ alone and *not Dreadnoughts*; but we had to compromise, as you know, and got 3 ‘Indomitables’ with the Dreadnoughts; and all the world now, headed by A.K. Wilson, have got ‘Indomitables’ on the brain! Hip! Hip! Hurrah!”<sup>188</sup> When Fisher returned to the Admiralty in October, 1914, he immediately ordered five new battle cruisers laid down between January-June, 1915. He was not, however, able to replace dreadnoughts with this “fusion design” due to conservative naval and political resistance, as well as, the rising German naval threat in the North Sea. The *Entente Cordiale* (1904) with France, Russian defeat at Tsushima (May 27-28, 1905), and the Moroccan Crisis (1905) gradually shifted British defense focus from France and Russia and the “two-power standard” to a rising Germany and the new “60% fleet standard.” Political leaders and the public became enamored with the dreadnought “arms race” with Germany and a potential great fleet engagement in the North Sea.

For both Fisher and Corbett, however, it is clear they believed the revolutionary nature of the *Dreadnought* and subsequent *Invincible*-class were in their speed, not their armament or armor. As Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean in 1900, Fisher had described his views on a new type of battleship to Lord Selborne:

*The golden rule to follow is not to allow ourselves to be ‘out-classed.’* The French are going to build vessels of 14,865 tons, and that means that our new battleships must be of considerably larger displacement, and we must certainly exceed them in speed, for, if we do not, we give them the option of refusing or bringing on an action! We give them the ‘weather gauge’ of the old days.... I will give you my experience of the value of speed in battleships (an experience that impressed me immensely!) When I was Commander-in-Chief in North America. I, on one occasion, ‘mopped up’ all the cruisers one after another with my flagship the battleship *Renown*.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Fisher to Lord Esher, September 13, 1909, in *Fear God*, II:266.

<sup>189</sup> Fisher to Selborne, December 19, 1900, in *Fear God*, I:173-4.



In a 1901 letter to naval journalist Arnold White, Fisher recounted a job offer he had received to replace Andrew Noble at the head of the Armstrong's Elswick shipbuilding firm and expanded on his thoughts concerning ship design:

I should immediately set to work to revolutionize naval fighting by building on speculation a battleship, cruiser, and destroyer on revolutionary principles – oil fuel, turbine propulsion, equal gunfire all around, greater speed than any existing vessels of their class, no masts, no funnels, etc., and I should then build them all in 18 months and sell them for double their cost and ‘stagger humanity’ – and put up the Elswick shares 50 per cent! *Now, don't quote any of the above: it's copyright*, and I don't want it to get out!<sup>190</sup>

Corbett defended Fisher's *Dreadnought* design against critics, such as Custance and Mahan, in “The Strategical Value of Speed in Battle-ships” (1907). Corbett based his defense almost entirely on the importance of speed in the strategic and operational employment of these new ships. Mahan had argued that firepower and range should never be sacrificed for speed. Fisher was not impressed with Mahan's arguments:

I see Mahan has been trotted out by *The Times*, but as a Yankee officer told me lately, he is *passé*, and has become a second Brassey and equally a bore! The advocates of small battleships and low speed have been so often pulverized (and never so effectually as by the French Admiral Gervais) that it's a wonder how they can ever get anyone to print such nonsense.<sup>191</sup>

Corbett acknowledged Mahan's opposition yet questioned his methods:

the arguments in favor of this view have been ably presented, amongst others, by Capt. Mahan in America... Yet the fact remains that they have entirely failed to convince the Admiralty Staffs of any naval power... It is never pleasant to find that the theorists and practical men are not at one... It is that the theorists are once again arguing on the surface, while active men have probed to the bed-rock.<sup>192</sup>

In Corbett's argument, endurance and radius of action, the source of much opposition to increasing speed, was more dependent on the number and location of coaling stations than on a

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<sup>190</sup> Fisher to White, January 28, 1901, in *Fear God*, I:185.

<sup>191</sup> Fisher to Tweedmouth, October 5, 1906, in *Fear God*, II:96-97.

<sup>192</sup> Julian Corbett. “Recent Attacks on the Admiralty,” in *21<sup>st</sup> Century Corbett: Maritime Strategy and Naval Policy for the Modern Era*, ed. Andrew Lambert (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 38.

ship's coal carrying capacity. In Corbett's view, forcing an enemy to conform to speed in battleships offered a tremendous advantage to the British due to the vast number of coaling stations across the British Empire.<sup>193</sup> Corbett, however, in an introduction to the War Plans later in 1907 provided the clear warning from history concerning the battle cruiser:

beware of the tendency of intermediate types to merge into primary types. Just as mounted infantry twice merged into cavalry, so may the "Invincibles" tend to assert themselves as the sole type of battleship, and this, whether correct or not in the future, would be to overstep the limits within which at present their existence is justifiable.<sup>194</sup>

In his defense of the dreadnought policy, Corbett attacked the tradition that the Royal Navy must always take the offensive and argued that:

You cannot get perfect concentration on any one point of the war, the secret of all strategy, without defensive operations elsewhere...the foundation of all strategy is that the offensive connotes the defensive always. The worst of all mis-readings of British naval history is that extraordinary fetish of the offensive, as if the offensive were a thing that could stand by itself. It is a fetish that kills strategy. It grew up in the days when we had that easy command after Trafalgar. It killed strategy just as Trafalgar killed tactics.<sup>195</sup>

For Corbett, this remained a foundational principle throughout his strategic writings.

Another of Fisher's major reforms to come under criticism during his early administration was the reorganization of the fleet, the concentration of the battleships in home waters, establishment of the nucleus crew system, and, most controversial, the decommissioning and scrapping of many aging and obsolete vessels, ships which Fisher had deemed too weak to fight and too slow to run away. The reorganization was largely based on increasing financial and manning constraints. The decommissioning of so many ships and the fact that many of the battleships relocated to the British Islands were placed into reserve status with nucleus crews was

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<sup>193</sup> Julian Corbett, "The Strategical Value of Speed in Battle-ships," *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, 51:353, (1907): 827-828.

<sup>194</sup> "War Plans-1907," in *Fisher's Papers*, II:327.

<sup>195</sup> Corbett, "The Strategical Value of Speed in Battle-ships," 831-832.

a clear response to financial and manning shortfalls following the Boer War. Opposition to Fisher and his reforms within the navy began to coalesce around Beresford, Custance, and Admiral Cyprian Bridge as the “Syndicate of Discontent” grew increasingly outspoken in their opposition to Fisher. Beresford was the most prominent British naval officer after Fisher and Sir Arthur Wilson. Beresford, however, was also a Member of Parliament. Fisher’s promotion to Admiral of the Fleet and extension as First Sea Lord on December 4, 1905 effectively blocked Beresford from becoming First Sea Lord himself, further increasing Beresford’s animosity toward Fisher. Beresford replaced Wilson in command of the Channel Fleet in April 1907 and remained in direct and open conflict with Fisher and the Admiralty for the rest of Fisher’s tenure. Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg, a friend of Fisher, attributed much of the blame to the First Sea Lord, writing in 1909:

J.F [Fisher] was determined that Beresford would not have so big and honorable a command [as Wilson had held]. I think C.B. [Beresford] has been treated badly, although he is not a patch on Arthur Wilson, as he himself firmly believes... You know how much I admire J.F. He is a truly great man, and almost all his schemes have benefited the Navy. But he has started this pernicious partisanship in the Navy.<sup>196</sup>

The “Syndicate of Discontent” launched increasingly hostile attacks on Fisher and his reforms in local newspapers and journals. Fisher enlisted Corbett to respond to these attacks and, in February, 1907, Corbett published “Recent Attacks on the Admiralty” in which he took on Fisher’s critics and proved influential in retaining support for Fisher’s reform program. Corbett attacked each of the charges against the Admiralty often discrediting their historical analogies and assertions, developed primarily by Custance:

To history they have appealed, and by history let them be judged... A naval historian is the last person in the world to belittle the value of naval history in clearing questions of today, but he cannot deny how misleading history may be if we look for guidance on the surface instead of seeking the underlying conditions which give that surface its conformation. The value of history is not only to set forth the experience of the past, but

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<sup>196</sup> Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone*, 363.

also to show when some radical change of fundamental conditions has made that experience dangerous precedent.<sup>197</sup>

While Fisher believed Corbett's efforts bought him an additional eighteen months to advance his agenda, the "Syndicate of Discontent" continued their attacks by combining their efforts with the War Office in attacking the Admiralty's war plans for the defense of Britain against invasion.

Until the creation of the Admiralty War Staff under the leadership of First Lord Winston Churchill in January, 1912, the First Sea Lord directly handled naval war planning with limited assistance from the Department of Naval Intelligence. Fisher, against the recommendations of Corbett and other close associates, consistently opposed the creation of a naval staff for war planning, preferring instead to keep planning firmly under his personal control. When Corbett approached Fisher recommending creation of a naval staff in December, 1905, Fisher replied, "I have not seen my way to dis-associate the 1<sup>st</sup> Sea Lord from the present way of doing business, but there's force in your remark that an effete 1<sup>st</sup> Sea Lord would be the very devil!"<sup>198</sup> The Assistant Secretary, and later Secretary, of the CID, Sir Maurice Hankey, a confidant of both Fisher and Corbett, noted in his memoirs that the lack of a naval staff "did not matter much, so long as the strategical side was directed by a genius like Fisher, who supplied the need himself, with the personal assistance of men of the caliber of [Captain Charles] Ottley [Director of Naval Intelligence, 1905-1907]."<sup>199</sup> Fisher had always relied on a close circle of confidants. In 1902, as he started developing his "scheme" that became the foundation of his reforms, he had relied on his "seven brains" which included Jellicoe, Henry Jackson, and Charles Madden each of whom eventually served as an Admiral of the Fleet.<sup>200</sup> Later during his tenure, he added others,

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<sup>197</sup> Corbett, "Recent Attacks on the Admiralty," 33-35.

<sup>198</sup> Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone*, 354.

<sup>199</sup> Maurice Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914-1918* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 73.

<sup>200</sup> Fisher to Selborne, October 21, 1904, in *Fisher Papers*, I:6.

including Captain George Ballard, as his primary operational planner, Captain Ottley as DNI, Hankey at CID, Captain Edmund Slade, the new director of the Royal Naval College and later DNI, and Corbett, “the pen behind the fleet.”<sup>201</sup> In 1906, Fisher had decided to incorporate the Royal Naval College into his war planning apparatus, writing to Corbett, “Someday later I want to interest you in my scheme for the extension of the Naval War College at Portsmouth. I hope to fascinate you!”<sup>202</sup> Corbett responded extremely positively:

I rejoice at what you tell me...those who are in strongest and most serious opposition to you – so far as I understand them – will find, if you carry this new idea through, the main strength of their current switched off. It is your supposed neglect [of war planning] of what you are now devoting yourself to, that is their strongest line of attack.<sup>203</sup>

Corbett then published two articles in *The Times* supporting the expansion of the War Course to include strategic planning, and Fisher responded:

I have nothing but praise again for your second article, as it is precisely what is required to assist in our expansion...Dear Ottley is a little fearful of his Department being lowered, but I have reassured him, and you have plainly indicated that there will nothing be done to ‘wrong or overshadow the well-trying Department of Intelligence.’<sup>204</sup>

Under the directorship of Slade and with the assistance of Corbett the Royal Naval College took on this new role in Admiralty war planning. As previously discussed, Slade and Corbett produced “Strategic Terms and Definitions used in Lectures on Naval History” to establish a common doctrinal foundation for students and to facilitate staff planning. Ballard led the planning effort from December 1906 to April 1907 and was assisted primarily by Hankey and supported with wargames carried out by Slade at the War College. The War Plans established economic warfare through commercial blockade as the primary means of waging war against

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<sup>201</sup> Liam J. Cleaver, “The pen behind the fleet: The influence of sir Julian Stafford Corbett on British naval development, 1898-1918,” *Comparative Strategy*, 14:1, (1995): 45-57

<sup>202</sup> Fisher letter to Corbett, May 12, 1906, in *Fear God*, II:81.

<sup>203</sup> Corbett letter to Fisher, May 13, 1906, in *Fear God*, II:82.

<sup>204</sup> Fisher letter to Corbett, June 11, 1906, in *Fear God*, II:82.

Germany. If additional pressure was required, they explored the possibility of amphibious descents along the German coast to increase the pressure. Of note, it made no mention of a decisive battle with the German High Seas Fleet. Fisher asked Corbett to write the introduction to the final draft of these war plans, “I would be glad to see you on a very secret matter about some war plans to which I think you could add most materially in their educational value.”<sup>205</sup> Corbett drew heavily on the *Green Pamphlet* to write the introduction. “Some Principles of Naval Warfare” for “War Plans-1907” provided the theoretical and historical foundation for naval strategy and, in some cases, contradicted the plan itself.<sup>206</sup> Corbett used many of the same constructs he employed later in *Some Principles* and firmly argued for his communications theory of naval warfare. After receiving Corbett’s first draft of the introduction, Fisher returned it with his comments and changes, stating “*Please do not hurry as the sole object I have in view is to make it appeal to the non-professional* and you’re the only one I know who can do this.”<sup>207</sup> Upon completion, Fisher sent the War Plans to Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, with the comment that “I think you will find Part I (Some Principles of Naval Warfare) the finest bit of strategical exposition you ever (will) read.”<sup>208</sup> Fisher also sent copies to King Edward VII, Lord Tweedmouth, Richard McKenna, and other key members of the Cabinet. Fisher had developed deep respect for Corbett’s ability to use theoretical and historical insights to explain Admiralty strategic concepts in an extremely accessible way for civilian decision-makers. It is notable in this introduction that Fisher highlighted the impossibility of developing viable war

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<sup>205</sup> Fisher letter to Corbett, March 9, 1907, in *Fear God*, II:120.

<sup>206</sup> “War Plan 1907,” in *Fisher Papers*, II:318-468.

<sup>207</sup> Fisher to Corbett, April 4, 1907, in Nicholas Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 74.

<sup>208</sup> Fisher to Grey, January 23, 1908, in *Fear God*, II:156.

plans unless one understands the situation which led to war and the political objectives established by the civilian leadership:

Naval strategy even in war never has a clean slate. Its whole purpose is to gain diplomatic and political ends and to diplomacy and foreign politics it must always be subservient, particularly in peace. The fleet exists to secure our ends in the easiest way and the easiest way is peacefully without treading on our neighbours' toes or stirring up needless opposition.<sup>209</sup>

Fisher's respect for Corbett's abilities to educate a civilian audience on naval and maritime strategy eventually led him to ask Corbett to publish a broader primer on naval warfare and Admiralty strategic thought for Britain's civilian leadership.

Late in 1907, the Admiralty's war planning came under increasing criticism from both the "Syndicate of Discontent" and the British War Office. A CID sub-committee, chaired by the Chancellor of the Exchequer Herbert Henry Asquith, held a series of hearings on the potential threat of German invasion. Both services had a history of exaggerating the threat of invasion. The navalists emphasized the danger of invasion to maintain the navy's share of the defense budget, while Lord Roberts and the army used the danger of invasion, or "the bolt from the blue," to emphasize the need for universal training and conscription.<sup>210</sup> In defense of the Admiralty's planning, Corbett presented a historical analysis of previous threatened invasions of England: 1588, 1744, 1759, 1779, and 1805. Corbett's argument proved central in convincing the Committee to back the Admiralty and Fisher's defense plans over the opposition of the War Office. Fisher, increasingly frustrated with what he believed was unwarranted scrutiny and criticism, held to his 1904 pronouncement that "if the Navy is not supreme, no Army however

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<sup>209</sup> "War Plan 1907," in *Fisher Papers*, 341. Christopher Martin, "The 1907 Naval War Plans and the Second Hague Peace Conference: A Case of Propaganda," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28:5 (October, 2005): 833-856. Martin argues that Fisher actually wrote this concluding paragraph, VIII-Peace Preparations, and I concur. While Corbett consistently emphasized the political ends, the emphasis on the fleet for deterrence in peacetime is distinctive of Fisher. The remainder of this section is written in Fisher's style without the usual distinctive rhetoric and language. It does not fit with Corbett's style of writing.

<sup>210</sup> John Gooch, *The Prospects of War* (London: Frank Cass Publishing, 1981), 11.

large is of the slightest use. It's not invasion we have to fear if our Navy is beaten. IT'S STARVATION!"<sup>211</sup> Corbett expressed the same sentiment in *Some Principles*, arguing that "an invasion of Great Britain must always be an attempt over an uncommanded sea...if we have gained complete command, no invasion can take place, nor will it be attempted. If we have lost it completely no invasion will be necessary."<sup>212</sup> According to Corbett, Britain's traditional system made the invading army's transports the primary objective of the flotilla under the cover of the battle-fleet.<sup>213</sup> In a letter explaining the Admiralty's position to his good friend and key ally, King Edward, Fisher expressed one of his often repeated aphorisms, which, in this case he attributed to Foreign Secretary Grey:

our intervention in a Continental struggle by regular land warfare is impracticable, and combine naval and military expeditions must be directed by us against the outlying possessions of the enemy, or, in the splendid words of Sir E. Grey, 'the British Army is a projectile to be fired by the Navy.' The foundation of our policy is that the communications of the Empire must be kept open by a *predominant fleet*, and *ipso facto* such a fleet will suffice to allay the fears of the old women of both sexes in regard to the invasion of England or her island colonies.<sup>214</sup>

In *Some Principles*, Corbett argued for this same expeditionary role for the British Army within his communications theory of maritime war. Fisher's constant battles with the War Office and Army leadership between 1904 and 1910, however, severely limited coordination and helped prevent any combined Army-Navy training for expeditionary warfare.

The final showdown between Fisher and Beresford occurred just after Beresford's retirement when Beresford wrote to Asquith, now the Prime Minister, alleging the total mismanagement of the navy by the Fisher Admiralty. Beresford forced Asquith's hand, leading to another hearing on Admiralty policy and planning in the CID in 1909 with Asquith as chair.

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<sup>211</sup>Fisher, "Naval Necessities, I, in *Fisher Papers*, I:18.

<sup>212</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles*, 239.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>214</sup> Fisher to King Edward, October 4, 1907, in *Fear God*, II:143.



Ultimately, Fisher again won the day, but to his great frustration only won the tepid approval of the Committee. This combined with the divisions in the navy, led to his early retirement in January, 1910. During and after each of these sets of hearings, the calls for Fisher to create an Admiralty War Staff increased and Corbett again joined the effort. Corbett recognized Fisher's genius and supported most of his initiatives, but he never became a blind follower. Late in 1908, after the "invasion scare," Corbett's advocacy for the permanent formation of a combined Army-Navy planning staff, over Fisher's objection, and his refusal to publish views in which he disagreed with Fisher led to a straining of the relationship and Corbett's subsequent decline in influence within the Admiralty. In refusing Fisher's latest propaganda request, Corbett replied that his historical research was more important and too time consuming.<sup>215</sup> Corbett did, however, continue teaching at the Royal Naval College and wrote to Fisher on his retirement:

What a glorious command it has been! No one, I think, has ever had such a five years. Historians in the coming time will bring up against it, as they do now at Trafalgar. It will mark an epoch as clearly and indisputably as Nelson did his. There are not many of whom it can be said, 'He realized his epoch,' and that is what you have done. You have shown men what they were trying to do and shown them how to do it. The great art of war has made a stride that can never be retraced, and it is your work. To me it is a great source of intense pride to have been associated with it. For half a century at least, and probably more, they will be able to say of you: '*Si monumentum requaeris, circumspice*', [if you seek his monument, look around you] and your monument will cover the face of the seas and tell the world that England is still in front. What a glorious work!<sup>216</sup>

In this, Corbett was certainly correct; for whether historians call it the "Dreadnought Age" or the "Fisher Revolution," they continue to argue over Sir John Arbuthnot Fisher and the age he marked. Undoubtedly, Fisher made a lasting impact on Corbett and his strategic thought and, in April 1910, Fisher encouraged Corbett to expand on his ideas from the war plans introduction into what became *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Fisher's intent was for Corbett to

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<sup>215</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 67-73.

<sup>216</sup> Corbett to Fisher, January 25, 1910, in *Fear God*, II:293.

publish a clear statement on naval warfare and the Admiralty's naval doctrine to better educate British civilian leadership, key decision-makers, and the broader public on the traditional and proper employment of British military forces.<sup>217</sup>

In discussing the role of the historian in contemporary policy debates, Corbett argued for the “free collaboration between the historical expert and the naval expert.” The naval expert brought technical expertise and the modern experience of seamanship and Corbett relied extensively on the naval expertise of men like Fisher, May, Slade, Richmond, and Hankey in formulating the concepts in *Some Principles*. The historical expert, however, brought a sense of scholarship which:

is only attained by long and devoted service – by long mental discipline, by regular initiation into methods of dealing with historical evidence, of tracing it to its sources, of testing their value, and finally by raising upon it conclusions which are as free, as fallible human minds can make them, from preconceived ideas.<sup>218</sup>

Judgment in strategic thought and the political ends dominated Corbett's approach to writing *Some Principles*. Corbett's “Theory of Naval War” in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, in addition to being a response to Mahan, was also an exposition of Fisher's broader naval thought and direction. Corbett's views on command of the sea and control of communications matched those of Fisher and were reflected in some of the goals behind his naval reforms.

In advocating for “flotilla defense,” which Corbett covers extensively in *Some Principles* under defense against invasion, Fisher hoped to free his high-priority battle cruisers to serve in the role of Nelson's cruisers securing control of Britain's extended sea lines of communications. Facing significant budget shortfalls, but remaining focused on imperial defense, Fisher believed

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<sup>217</sup> Andrew Lambert, “Sir Julian Corbett, Naval History and the Development of Sea Power Theory,” In *Strategy and the Sea: Essays in Honor of John B. Hattendorf*, ed. N.A.M. Rodger, J.Ross Dancy, Benjamin Darnell and Evan Wilson (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2016), 194-197.

<sup>218</sup> Julian Corbett, “Staff Histories, 1913,” in *21<sup>st</sup> Century Corbett*, 100.

battle cruisers, using wireless telegraphy, could replace the numerous protected cruisers in the role of securing Britain's control of the sea on a global scale. In addition to the battle cruiser, Fisher also invested heavily in submarines, torpedo boats, destroyers, and communication and intelligence services.<sup>219</sup> During Fisher's administration, British naval spending on flotilla craft (submarines, destroyers, and torpedo boats) increased from one-tenth to one-quarter of overall naval expenditures by 1909.<sup>220</sup> Fisher was one of the earliest and strongest advocates of the submarine in the Royal Navy. He wrote to Prince Louis of Battenberg in 1904:

1) the submarine is coming into play in Ocean Warfare almost immediately; 2) with a Whitehead torpedo the submarine will displace the gun and revolutionize naval tactics; 3) no single submarine will ever be obsolete...Drop the battleship out of the programme but at any cost double the output of submarines...This is big talk but it's coming! I've been living with the submarines lately or would not say this!<sup>221</sup>

In his "Constitution of Fleets" chapter, Corbett described each of these priorities and their fit in the overall fleet structure. This exposition was a clear outgrowth of Fisher's thought. Britain, according to Corbett, had historically relied on the "flotilla" to defend the narrow seas against enemy privateers and lightly armed transports. These small vessels had always been the first line of defense against invasion. Cruisers had the dual and often conflicting role of securing communications and providing the "eyes of the fleet." Corbett argued that the function of the battle-fleet was to protect the cruisers and the flotilla in the execution of their missions:

If the object of naval warfare is to control communications, then the fundamental requirement is the means of exercising that control...in no case can we exercise control by battleships alone. Their specialization has rendered them unfit for the work...We could exercise control with cruisers alone if the enemy had no battle-fleet...on cruisers depends our exercise of control; on the battle-fleet depends the security of control...the true function of the battle-fleet is to protect cruisers and the flotilla at their special work.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 6-10.

<sup>220</sup> Lawrence Sondhaus, *Naval Warfare, 1815-1914* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2001), 199.

<sup>221</sup> Fisher to Prince Louis, January, 1904, in Barry Gough, *Churchill and Fisher: Titans at the Admiralty* (Barnsley, UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2017), 29.

<sup>222</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 113.

In finding the solution to the problem of control through armored cruisers, Corbett agreed with Fisher and noted that, historically, Britain had solved this problem by the “introduction of a supporting ship, midway between frigates and true ships-of-the-line...the 50-gun ship came to be essentially a type for stiffening cruiser squadrons.” He also recognized, with the development of the battle cruiser, the same argument had re-emerged from Nelson’s day surrounding the proper employment of the cruisers to control communications or to reinforce the battle-fleet as the “eyes of the fleet.”<sup>223</sup> Corbett never resolved the issue and neither did the Royal Navy.

Corbett identified the traditional roles of the battleship, cruiser, and the flotilla; Fisher’s modern conceptions remained consistent with traditional British experience. Corbett saw these concepts and distinctions as rooted in Britain’s historical adherence to a communications theory of maritime warfare of which “no man ever grasped more clearly than Nelson that the object of naval warfare was to control communications.”<sup>224</sup> Corbett, however, argued that the “mobile torpedo” has truly brought on a revolution in naval affairs. According to Corbett, the torpedo had, for the first time, given the flotilla a true battle power; the flotilla now threatened the battle-fleet. Corbett recognized that “the battle-fleet became more an imperfect organism than ever” and this “new condition meant that unaided it could no longer ensure its own defense.”<sup>225</sup> According to Corbett, the most absorbing problem within naval circles at the time was the defense of the battle-fleet. Corbett was again completely in line with Fisher and the Admiralty, and he provided a foreshadowing of the later “Grand Fleet of Battle” concept in which cruisers and flotilla vessels were required to protect the battle-fleet itself. Corbett argued that the only real distinction in modern times was between vessels primarily armed with guns and those

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 119-122.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 121-123.

primarily armed with torpedoes. Due to the recurrence of a formidable rival in the North Sea, however, Corbett left open the possibility of adapting the “overthrow” theory of the British soldier-admirals of the Anglo-Dutch Wars in which first priority was destruction of the enemy fleet in the North Sea.<sup>226</sup>

Once a nation had control of communications, it could exercise its command of the sea, to defend against any potential invasion, attack or defend trade, or support expeditionary operations. After decisive battle, Corbett’s second option for securing command of the sea was the blockade. As with defense against invasion, Corbett’s extensive discussion of naval and commercial blockades, as well as open (distant) and close blockades, reflected the ongoing strategic debates during the Fisher years. For Corbett, the naval blockade was a means of gaining command of the sea, while the commercial blockade was a means of exploiting that command. The *Jeune Ecole* had first argued in the 1880s that technological changes had made the blockade obsolete. Through fleet maneuvers and his increasing exposure to, and belief in, torpedoes, submarines, and destroyers, Fisher no longer saw a close blockade as feasible and Corbett agreed in the opening of his discussion of blockades in *Some Principles*. However, Corbett became much more contradictory in his arguments in the rest of the chapter. After clearly stating his own and Fisher’s view that the close blockade was not feasible, Corbett left open the possibility of a close blockade being required by circumstances and executed just beyond the night range of destroyers and the day range of submarines.<sup>227</sup> Corbett’s argument reflected the more limited capabilities of destroyers, submarines, and torpedoes in 1911 as well as changing thought within the Admiralty.

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 126-127.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 200-204.

Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson, who replaced Fisher as First Sea Lord in 1910, was actively reconsidering the close blockade of German ports after becoming increasingly concerned with German submarines escaping into the North Sea and threatening Britain's battle fleet and cruisers. Wilson and the Admiralty re-considered a close blockade using flotilla forces backed by cruisers to prevent the escape of German submarines from the North Sea ports. They viewed the seizure of German coastal islands, such as Heligoland and Borkum, as critical to Britain's ability to base and sustain a blockade using the short-range flotilla. In 1913 after retiring from the Navy, Wilson revisited the close blockade as an influential member of the CID:

I think the advent of the submarine is the reason which makes the close blockade absolutely necessary, and that the Admiralty must put its wits together to see how they will keep that close blockade, or else the submarine will get out. The principal danger is the submarine which will get out.<sup>228</sup>

While Corbett kept the possibility of close blockade open in *Some Principles* as potentially required for protecting British trade, he clearly advocated for an open, or distant, blockade designed to strangle Germany through a long-term commercial blockade, but did not account for the growing threat of the submarine now under consideration at the Admiralty under Wilson.<sup>229</sup>

Corbett's approach to the employment of submarines in 1911 was distinctly British and completely in line with Fisher's own thinking on the subject during his tenure as First Sea Lord. The submarine, based on its state of development in 1910, was seen as a defensive weapon and a centerpiece of the "flotilla defense." Corbett was entrenched in the British model of commerce attack and prevention, which consisted of destroying or blockading the enemy's main battle-fleet and then sweeping his commerce from the sea or blockading it in port. He never saw the benefit

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<sup>228</sup> Arthur Wilson, "Reports and Proceedings of Sub-Committee on Overseas Attack," in David Morgan-Owen, "Cooked up at the Dinner Hour? Sir Arthur Wilson's War Plan Reconsidered," *English Historical Review*, CXXX:545 (2015): 889.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

of commerce raiding, from a British perspective.<sup>230</sup> Corbett, with his strong respect for international and maritime law, could not envision submarines sinking commercial shipping without warning. Here he differed dramatically with Fisher. Corbett's respect for the law stemmed from his legal background and his understanding of the multiple legal arguments over neutral shipping and prize regulations that developed during the "Age of Sail."<sup>231</sup> Fisher, however, never carried any compunctions about international law or treaty restrictions. After his retirement from the Admiralty, Fisher recognized the submarine's continued growth in capability and, with his much more realist views of war, clearly envisioned German unrestricted submarine warfare.<sup>232</sup> In May, 1913, Fisher wrote "The Oil Engine and the Submarine" in which he clearly predicted German unrestricted submarine warfare. He wrote a second version in June and distributed it to key cabinet ministers. The section on submarines and commerce shocked both Churchill and Asquith.<sup>233</sup> In response to Fisher's concerns, Admiral Jellicoe responded to Churchill that "I cannot conceive that submarines will sink merchant ships without warning."<sup>234</sup> Fisher had asked Corbett to review his submarine memorandum and Corbett after reading the work replied "this is immense. It makes me feel as if I had a flash of lightning by the tail." Corbett also went on to ask "do you really think the power now-a-days would incur the odium of sinking merchant ships out of hand?"<sup>235</sup> It was one of the few areas in which Corbett proved less than prescient, while Fisher continued to demonstrate his understanding of technological change and its impact on the future of war at sea.

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 268-279.

<sup>231</sup> Julian Corbett, "The Capture of Private Property at Sea," in *21<sup>st</sup> Century Corbett*, 71-89.

<sup>232</sup> Memorandum by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher, "The Oil Engine and the Submarine" May, 1914 and reiterated in Fisher to Asquith, May 15, 1914, in *The Submarine Service, 1900-1918*, ed. Nicholas Lambert (London: Naval Records Society, 2001), 226, 248.

<sup>233</sup> Gough, *Churchill and Fisher*, 193-195

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>235</sup> Corbett to Fisher, 30 November 1913, in Gough, *Churchill and Fisher*, 197.

Corbett, however, clearly understood the broader importance of economic warfare to a maritime power. Economic warfare was absolutely central to Corbett's theory of maritime warfare and British strategy against a continental power. In *Some Principles*, Corbett argued:

interference with the enemy's trade has two aspects. It is not only a means of exerting secondary economic pressure, it is also a primary means towards overthrowing the enemy's power of resistance. Wars are not decided exclusively by military and naval force. Finance is scarcely less important. When other things are equal, it is the longer purse that wins... Anything, therefore, which we are able to achieve towards crippling our enemies finance is a direct step to his overthrow.<sup>236</sup>

Corbett's respect for international law combined with his understanding of maritime strategy led him to argue vehemently against all limitations on belligerent rights prior to both the 1907 Hague Conference and the 1909 London Naval Conference. In 1907, Corbett published "The Capture of Private Property at Sea" in support of the Admiralty campaign against limiting belligerent rights at the Second Hague Conference. Many radical Liberals in Britain during the late Victorian age had argued for free trade and against belligerent rights with the slogan "free ships, free goods." Many felt commerce should continue between belligerents in wartime and that reciprocal commercial arrangements would eventually eliminate war altogether.<sup>237</sup> In the "Capture of Private Property at Sea" and, later, in *Some Principles*, Corbett argued that economic warfare was the primary means for a maritime power to oppose a continental power, "all, then, that we can possibly gain from our enemy upon the sea is to deny him its use and enjoyment as a means of communication" and that private property is treated much more equitably at sea than it is in land warfare.<sup>238</sup> He also appealed to the many traditionalists that sought victory through

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<sup>236</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 102.

<sup>237</sup> Bernard Semmel, *Liberalism & Naval Strategy: Ideology, Interest, and Sea Power during the Pax Britannica* (Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 68-85.

<sup>238</sup> Julian Corbett, "The Capture of Private Property at Sea," 78.



decisive naval battle. He argued that “if we are denied the right to attack an enemy’s commerce we should lose the one sure and rapid means of forcing his battle-fleet to a decision.”<sup>239</sup>

Fisher, however, was never concerned about the effect of international law on British naval strategy or policy and remained quite outspoken from his own attendance at the Hague Conference in 1899. In 1908, Fisher wrote in response to the Liberal government’s call for the London Naval Conference:

it don’t signify a ‘tinkers damn’ what laws of blockade you make. ‘MIGHT IS RIGHT’ & when war comes we shall do just as we jolly well like! *No matter what your laws are!* We’ve got to win and we ain’t going to be such idiots as to keep one fist tied behind our back! There’s a law against sinking neutral merchant ships but we should sink them – every one! ... these worms don’t understand it & looked at me as a wild lunatic.<sup>240</sup>

Eyre Crowe informed Foreign Secretary Grey, sponsor of the London Naval Conference, of Fisher’s private views:

Sir J Fisher told me personally 3 days ago that in the next big war, our commanders would sink every ship they came across, hostile or neutral, if it happened to suit them. He added with characteristic vehemence, that we should most certainly violate the declaration of Paris and every other treaty that might prove inconvenient.<sup>241</sup>

Fisher certainly understood the limits of his and the Navy’s power over these types of policy decisions. Through his own bellicose bluster and Corbett’s refined historical and legalistic arguments, Fisher focused on influencing policy-makers and impressing upon them the keen importance of commercial warfare within British maritime doctrine. In the introduction to the “War Plans – 1907,” Corbett compared war at sea with war on the land:

Naval war asks nothing but to be permitted to control the active life of the enemy at sea. To demand control of a maritime Power that it should surrender the right of controlling communications at sea is no more reasonable than to demand a military Power that it should surrender controlling an enemy’s roads and railways...It is only necessary,

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>240</sup> Fisher to Garvin, November 5, 1908, in Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, 99.

<sup>241</sup> Records of Meeting with Mr. McKenna in Edward Grey’s Room at the HOC, December 15, 1908, in Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, 99.

therefore, to keep the communication theory of naval warfare in mind to lay bare the fallacy of the whole idea of immunity of private property at sea.<sup>242</sup>

In *Some Principles*, Corbett argued that commercial war must be extensive in application to bring an enemy to the negotiating table:

Since the object of war is to force our will upon the enemy, the only way in which we can expect war on commerce to serve our end is to inflict so much damage upon it as will cause our enemy to prefer peace on our terms to a continuation of the struggle. The pressure on his trade must be insupportable, not merely annoying. It must seriously cripple his finance or seriously threaten to strangle his national life and activities.<sup>243</sup>

Commercial war for Corbett consisted of a distant blockade which “in the long run a rigorous and uninterrupted (commercial) blockade is almost sure to exhaust him before it exhausts us, but the end will be far and costly.”<sup>244</sup> Economic warfare for Corbett was clearly a long-term strategy to defeat a continental opponent.

As part of that long-term strategy, Britain had to defend its own trade; and, in accordance with contemporary conventional wisdom, Corbett argued against the old convoy system as a means of protecting trade. Corbett contended that “modern developments and changes in shipping and naval material have indeed so profoundly modified the whole conditions of commerce protection.”<sup>245</sup> As early as the Carnarvon Commission following the 1878 war scare, British merchants, ship owners, and naval officers had declared that convoys were not efficient nor practicable in the modern circumstances.<sup>246</sup> These modern developments and changes included the abolition of privateering, the fact that steam reduced the range of warships while greatly increasing the variability of trade routes, and the development of wireless telegraphy. In Corbett’s view, these changes fundamentally altered the circumstances of trade protection.

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<sup>242</sup> “War Plans-1907” In *Fisher Papers*, II:321.

<sup>243</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 275.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 266-268.

<sup>246</sup> Parkinson, *Late Victorian Navy*, 84.

Corbett clearly saw the volume of British trade as a great protection in itself and that British trade could sustain losses as it always had in the past.

The final means of exploiting command of the sea that Corbett addressed in *Some Principles* was the execution of amphibious expeditions, which were also important in Fisher's own strategic planning. Fisher's War Plans from 1907 had reviewed multiple potential expeditions against the German North Sea and Baltic coasts as a secondary way of increasing pressure on Germany. In a letter to Lord Esher, Fisher supported combined amphibious operations with the army under navy command:

Again, I say, the *Regular Army* should be regarded as a projectile to be fired by the Navy! The Navy embarks it and lands it where it can do the most mischief!...They never know where the devil the brutes are going to land! Consequently, instead of our military maneuvers being on the Salisbury Plain and its vicinity (ineffectually apeing the vast Continental Armies!), we should be employing ourselves in joint naval and military maneuvers, embarking 50,000 men at Portsmouth and landing them at Milford Haven or Bantry Bay! This would make the foreigners sit up!<sup>247</sup>

Yet, Fisher was constantly antagonistic towards the Army and its leadership, as he expressed to journalist Arnold White in 1910, "comparatively, the Navy is vital and the Army a plaything! It is not invasion we have to fear; it's starvation! The Army is a plutocracy and rules Society. The Navy is poor and democratic."<sup>248</sup> After Corbett reviewed Britain's long history of expeditionary warfare, he continuously emphasized the need for a combined staff to plan and execute amphibious expeditions.<sup>249</sup> As with their disagreement over the naval staff, Corbett broke with Fisher over the control of amphibious expeditions. Fisher believed in naval control of all expeditions and his attitude towards the War Office always hindered expeditionary planning and combined training during his years at the Admiralty.

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<sup>247</sup> Fisher to Esher, November 19, 1903, in *Fear God*, I:291.

<sup>248</sup> Fisher to Arnold White, March 25, 1910, in *Fear God*, II:317.

<sup>249</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 298-299.

Corbett's support for the "Fisher Revolution" and the opposition from the "Syndicate of Discontent" contributed to the opposition to *Some Principles*. While Corbett's work found little support within the Royal Navy beyond Fisher's inner circle, it did portend many aspects of the way the Great War was fought at sea. What was almost unique about this period of rapid technological transformation, however, was Britain's lack of experience and opportunity to employ the new technology in a major war at sea. The Sino-Japanese and Spanish-American Wars were often dismissed by navalists because in each the losing side was deemed to be too weak and backward to pose a serious naval threat. However, the Russo-Japanese War, pitted the British-trained and equipped Japanese Navy against Britain's long-time rival Russia. It was the most studied war of the age as naval officers sought the lessons of modern naval warfare. Corbett was no different and his review of the Russo-Japanese War had a significant impact on his understanding of modern technology and its impact on maritime strategy.

## CHAPTER 5

### CORBETT'S MARITIME STRATEGY AND THE REALITY OF WAR

Few modern scholars have reviewed Corbett's "official" Admiralty publications on the Russo-Japanese War or the Great War with an eye towards better understanding his military theory. While working on *Some Principles*, Corbett was simultaneously researching and writing a two-volume study on *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905*. All of the world's major navies keenly observed the Russo-Japanese War in order to draw lessons on the impact of new technologies on modern naval warfare. It was the first war between major powers in over thirty years, a period which had seen tremendous technological change. As discussed in the previous chapter, Britain considered France and Russia the primary challengers to her empire at the turn of the twentieth century. In response to increasing European expansion into Asia, Britain had turned to the emerging Imperial Japanese Navy as a potential counterbalance. British naval attachés serving with the Japanese Navy provided training, material, education and guidance to Japan's rapidly developing navy. During the war, the Royal Navy also embedded observers with the Japanese fleet.

The lessons drawn by the Royal Navy generally focused on the impact of new technologies, such as the mine and torpedo. In the Admiralty's "Review of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance," written in the immediate aftermath of the war, the principle focus was on mine warfare, drawing extensive conclusions of about the effectiveness of mines in closed waters.<sup>250</sup> The British naval observers also concentrated on long and intermediate range gunnery and heavily influenced the gunnery debate over large caliber batteries and quick-firing secondary batteries. Advocates on both sides of the *Dreadnought* debate attempted to use lessons from the

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<sup>250</sup> British Admiralty, "Review of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance," in *Fisher Papers*, II:98-106.

war to support their own arguments for or against the elimination of secondary armaments on capital ships. Many naval officers and defense commentators, however, were frustrated by their study of the Russo-Japanese War and often concluded that there were no universal lessons.<sup>251</sup> Most reviews revolved around the fear of mines, which many believed had dominated the war. They also emphasized the importance of the quality and morale of the officers and crews which mattered much more than the ships or material.<sup>252</sup> Corbett, however, consistent with his previous historical studies, took a very different approach to the study of the Russo-Japanese War. Rather than focus his analysis on the impact of technology, Corbett provided a strategic and operational analysis of the war using the ideas he was developing for *Some Principles* as his framework for understanding the war. These two works, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War*, clearly informed each other.

Corbett had lectured extensively on the Russo-Japanese War at the Royal Naval College with a focus on how an island power had overthrown a continental power through the combined efforts of its fleet and army. In 1909, Admiral Alexander Bethel, Director of Naval Intelligence, asked Corbett to write a naval history of the war which presented “strategy illustrated by historical analogues.”<sup>253</sup> In August 1910, after the Admiralty resolved a debate over whether a civilian or naval officer should be employed for the work, Corbett agreed to write a two-volume study of the war. Corbett’s research was heavily based in secret material provided by the Japanese and augmented by the correspondence between the British Admiralty and Foreign Office. Corbett’s work had to be reviewed and approved by a committee composed of the new DNI Captain Thomas Jackson, who had replaced Bethel, Captain Ballard, then Director of Naval

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<sup>251</sup> Sondhaus, *Naval Warfare 1815-1914*, 197.

<sup>252</sup> Richard Dunley, “The Royal Navy’s Interpretation of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-5,” *War and Society*, (2015): 260.

<sup>253</sup> Corbett, *Diary* September 12, 1909, in Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 137.

Operations, and Admiral Ernest Troubridge, chief of the new Admiralty war staff. Upon completion of the review in January 1914, the Admiralty classified the work confidential and only published six copies, all of which were maintained under the control of the Admiralty Library for use by senior naval officers.<sup>254</sup> Overcome by the events of July 1914, Corbett's *Maritime Operations* was largely forgotten until naval historian John Hattendorf was able to get it declassified and published in 1994.

Corbett approached the Russo-Japanese War with the same methodology and style that he used in all of his historical writing. As with his previous works, his analysis was from a distinctly British perspective rather than Russian or Japanese. Corbett framed the war as a “combined or amphibious war” which did “not depend upon the relative strength of the national armies, but upon how far the respective fleets could control the relative amount of military force that could be brought to bear on the territorial objectives.”<sup>255</sup> Writing in 1911 in the midst of the naval arms race with Germany, Corbett was distinctly drawn to the lessons of this particular war because it matched an island (sea) power against a continental (land) power and illustrated many of the principles Corbett had drawn from his own study of British history. The war, from the Japanese perspective, clearly fit within Corbett's limited war framework. Corbett argued that:

for Russia the war must take the unlimited form in the sense that victory could only be obtained by the complete overthrow of her enemy and the entire destruction of his power of resistance. Yet,...the object was not of sufficient importance to warrant the expenditure of force such a war would demand...The interest of Russia was, indeed, so remote and small relatively to her great historical interest in Europe.<sup>256</sup>

Japan, however, strictly limited its objectives to the Korean peninsula and Port Arthur, both of which were susceptible to command of the sea. Japan could wage a classic limited war which

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<sup>254</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 140-144.

<sup>255</sup> Julian Corbett, *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), I:13.

<sup>256</sup> Corbett, *Maritime Operations*, I:63.

Corbett had described in the opening chapters of *Some Principles*. Corbett made extensive use of the Russo-Japanese War in *Some Principles* to illustrate Clausewitz's argument that the divergent values nations place on their own wartime objectives limited wars. He concluded that "every statesman knows that in counting forces for war the first thing to determine is to what extent the spirit of the people will be enlisted, and what sacrifices they will be induced to make for the objective in view...in Russia the limit of willing sacrifice would be quickly reached" and, due to the limited nature of the object, "Japan was able to undertake the war with all the moral elements of strength...and that is the simple explanation of why the weaker power was able to force its will upon the stronger."<sup>257</sup> Corbett's key conceptual addition to limited war theory, maintaining command of the sea effectively prevented an opponent from escalating the war and provided the perfect opportunity for conducting a limited war, was central to his analysis. Corbett's theory informed his study of the war which in turn informed his theory.

Many British observers argued that the war and specifically the Battle of Tsushima confirmed Mahan's ideas on concentration of force, offensive action, and the decisive battle leading to command of the sea. Mahan, himself, highlighted the strategic importance of the concentration of the battle fleet from his own observations of the Russo-Japanese War. In Mahan's view, the dispersion of Russian forces led to the resounding success of the Japanese Navy. Russian division of forces, he noted, failed to protect either Port Arthur or Vladivostok in the Pacific. Additionally, Mahan wrote, "with the fleet divided between the two oceans, one half may be overmatched and destroyed, as was that of Port Arthur; and the second (the Baltic Fleet), on coming, prove unequal to restore the situation."<sup>258</sup> Mahan's thought was shaped specifically

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., II:398.

<sup>258</sup> A. T. Mahan, "Retrospect Upon the War Between Japan and Russia," in *The Influence of History on Mahan*, ed. John B. Hattendorf (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1991), 168-169.



by the American challenge of dividing the fleet between the Atlantic and Pacific. Mahan's focus fit American circumstances but did not, in Corbett's view, meet British requirements. Corbett believed that the British needed to fully exploit the advantages of attack and defense as well as concentration and dispersal. Corbett repeatedly emphasized sea power's need to influence the situation on the ground and took a different view of naval operations in the Russo-Japanese War.

Corbett noted that the objectives of the Imperial Japanese Navy throughout the war were defensive in nature. The Japanese Army was responsible for the offensive action required to defeat the Russians in Korea and Manchuria and secure the peninsula from Russian encroachment. The Navy supported the Army through combined operations that included both amphibious operations and coastal bombardment. The Navy's most critical task, however, was to defend the sea lines of communication. Admiral Stepan Makarov was the first Russian commander to realize that the only path to Russian victory lay in aggressive offensive action by the Russian Navy to dispute, then gain command of the sea and attempt to cut the Japanese lines of communication. Admiral Heirhachiro Togo employed aggressive actions within a broader defensive framework. According to Corbett, during the first phase Togo "without fighting a decisive battle, had paralyzed the action of the Russian main fleet and had finally exposed it to destruction by the Army."<sup>259</sup> Both the blockade of Port Arthur and the victory at Tsushima arose from the defensive nature of the Japanese maritime campaign. The example fit perfectly with Corbett's arguments in *Some Principles* for the value of an aggressive, active defense that exploited both dispersion and concentration to achieve the political purpose of the war. Corbett credited Togo with the idea to:

hold his battle fleet back on the defensive, he intended to give his defense a highly active form, which we should class as a minor counter-attack to prevent an offensive movement on the enemy's part...The Admiral's view of his function was characteristic of his

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<sup>259</sup> Corbett, *Maritime Operations*, II:385.

unfailing grasp of a combined problem and was in full accordance with our own traditional practice.<sup>260</sup>

Corbett remained frustrated by what he saw as the “blue-water school’s” excessive focus on concentration and the offensive at the expense of Britain’s much more flexible “traditional practice.” For Corbett, the Battle of Tsushima was the result of the Japanese Navy’s defensive strategy as he noted in *Some Principles*:

Probably the most remarkable manifestation of the advantages of the strategic defensive is also to be found in the late Russo-Japanese War. In the final crisis of the naval struggle the Japanese fleet was able to take advantage of a defensive attitude in its own waters which the Russian Baltic fleet would have to break down to attain its end, and the result was the most decisive naval victory ever recorded.<sup>261</sup>

Corbett also used the Russo-Japanese War to further explore combined operations. He argued that the early phase of the war “is, perhaps, the most interesting and instructive and certainly the most original phase of the war. That phase was specially distinguished by the Japanese as the period of ‘Combined Operations.’”<sup>262</sup> He was duly impressed by the intimate cooperation between the two services in conducting tactical amphibious operations in this early phase of the war. Corbett argued that the amphibious nature of the war made it impossible for the Russians to determine the Japanese line of operation. Corbett identified the problem that the Russians had in detecting the probable location for landing the Japanese Second Army on the Liaotung Peninsula as “owing to the difficulty of locating a line of operation overseas, the Japanese were left to complete their disembarkation without any possibility of interruption from the Russian Army.”<sup>263</sup> In *Some Principles*, Corbett directly compared and contrasted British operations in Quebec during the Seven Years War with Japanese amphibious operations in the Russo-Japanese War to

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<sup>260</sup> Corbett, *Maritime Operations*, I:75.

<sup>261</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 38.

<sup>262</sup> Corbett, *Maritime Operations*, I:187.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, I:226.

argue that mobile amphibious operations offered tremendous flexibility in modern warfare to any nation that had gained command of the sea.<sup>264</sup>

Yet, to Corbett, at the operational and strategic level the Japanese amphibious design “seems crude and immature” when compared with “the work of Wolfe and Saunders at Quebec.”<sup>265</sup> The service cooperation was limited to the tactical level and, in Corbett’s view, the Japanese missed several operational and strategic opportunities to exploit the flexibility provided by the sea. He argued that the Japanese combined operations simply used the sea for transport and, once landed, the Army reverted to independent operations on a continental model. Corbett believed that the Japanese failed to exploit the mobility, surprise, and deception afforded by a truly mobile amphibious force and concluded that:

the handling of the Japanese force was cramped and unenterprising, and that it showed no appreciation of the power that should lie in the kind of operations in which they were engaged. Their crude divorcing of the army and the fleet and their rigid concentration on the Russian front are all the more inexplicable.<sup>266</sup>

Corbett offered an interesting new addendum to his view of command of the sea, stating; “clearly what is needed in such cases is not mere physical preponderance—it is the sense of security...the test question then becomes, not have we a fair chance of success? But, is there not danger of disaster.”<sup>267</sup> Corbett argued that the Japanese had won command of the sea in 1904; but, because the remnants of the defeated Russian fleet remained at Port Arthur, the Japanese never felt that sense of security that would allow them to exploit the great advantages of wide-ranging mobile amphibious operations. This led Corbett back to the “fleet in being” concept, “a fleet defeated even severely need never cease to count” as long as it can cause anxiety on the part of the enemy

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<sup>264</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 302-303.

<sup>265</sup> Corbett, *Maritime Operations*, I:260.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, I:262.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, I:470.

commander it could prevent the enemy from exploiting their command of the sea.<sup>268</sup> Corbett drew the lesson that, when a fleet's primary initial objective was defensive, such as defending the army's sea lines of communication, it must carry out active minor operations for extending the area of control, as the Japanese had in the early phases of the war.<sup>269</sup> Corbett clearly saw application for this principle in any future war in which the Royal Navy would have to secure the crossing of an expeditionary force to the European continent.

A key part of Togo's defensive strategy was the employment of his main fleet as a covering force between Port Arthur, the main Russian base in the Yellow Sea, and Japanese amphibious operations and lines of communication. This operation evolved into the blockade of Port Arthur and the viability of a close blockade became another key area of Corbett's interest. Corbett had declared the close blockade a thing of the past in *Some Principles*, but then hesitated and opened the possibility of a close blockade using flotillas based off the immediate coast of the enemy. Corbett found the precedent for this in the Russo-Japanese War in which Togo maintained the blockade of Port Arthur using the main battle-fleet during the day and replacing it with flotillas of destroyers and torpedo boats at night. The key to this system was the ability to base the flotillas locally. From the perspective of British naval planners prior to the First World War, this reinforced the importance of Heligoland and Borkum to any viable close blockade of Germany. Corbett also recognized the impact of the mine and torpedo on the blockade and on naval warfare more broadly. The mine was the most feared weapon to emerge from the Russo-Japanese War and was used extensively around Port Arthur by both sides. Corbett recognized the mine as "a new factor in the strategy of blockade which went far to obliterate any practical

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., I:471.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., II:391.

distinction between the close and open form.”<sup>270</sup> Yet, the Japanese continuously proved unable to effectively close Port Arthur, which caused Togo great anxiety. It also prevented him from fully exploiting his command of the sea and again demonstrated the power of a “fleet in being.” Corbett also detailed the failure of the torpedo to have any meaningful impact during the war, often citing the overwhelming numbers fired during engagements without any hits. Corbett offered mixed views on the torpedo’s impact on blockades, writing:

it will be seen that the Japanese blockade was in effect much closer than that of the British prototype, a conclusion of no little interest in view of the opinion, which was then held universally in European navies, that the torpedo had rendered a blockade of the Brest type no longer a possible operation of war. The explanation would seem to be that in practice the torpedo danger proved to be no greater under steam than the weather obstacle under sail.<sup>271</sup>

After equating the torpedo’s threat to the blockade as being no greater than the weather during the age of sail, Corbett also provided this caveat to the torpedo’s failure in the war:

as the range and accuracy of the weapon itself are continually increasing, and higher direct effects may be looked for with higher training and improved tactics, defensive evolutions by the squadron attacked will remain more necessary than ever...brilliant and devoted as was the spirit in which the Japanese handled their flotillas, it is clear that they never rose to this higher grasp of the true functions, and until we see the torpedo used with boldness and sagacity in just coordination with the other arm it would be more than unwise to condemn it as ineffective.”<sup>272</sup>

Clearly, based on his writings in *Some Principles*, Corbett recognized the increasing capability of the torpedo and had much greater confidence in the effectiveness of British flotillas. He, however, learned very little about the challenges of employing destroyer and torpedo boat flotillas from his study of the war due to his condescending view that the flotilla’s failures were due in large part to the Japanese and Russian lack of boldness and sagacity. In *Some Principles*, Corbett opened the door to new possibilities for the torpedo’s impact on naval warfare:

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<sup>270</sup> Corbett, *Maritime Operations*, I:241.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, II:73.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, I:413.

since that war (Russo-Japanese) the art of torpedo warfare has developed very rapidly. Its range and offensive power have increased at a higher ratio than the means of resisting it...The unproved value of the submarines only deepens the mist which overhangs the next naval war.<sup>273</sup>

The next naval war was on the minds of many at the Admiralty between 1911, when *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* was published, and early 1914, when *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War* was finally published. The theoretical study and debate over the history, technology, strategy, and tactics of maritime warfare was about to be tested under the hard reality of war, and Corbett had a front row seat.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Corbett was still occasionally lecturing at the Royal Naval College. In late August, 1914, on the recommendation of Admiral Edmund Slade, Corbett was hired by the Committee of Imperial Defense to be the official historian of the war at sea with the additional duty of drafting official war memoranda for the Admiralty's War Staff. Corbett was initially tasked with writing the Grand Fleet instructions sent to Admiral Jellicoe upon his assumption of command of that fleet in August, 1914. Fisher had long-marked Jellicoe as the future commander of the fleet in time of war, having written in 1911 of a private visit with First Lord Winston Churchill:

*"To get Jellicoe Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet prior to October 21, 1914, which is the date of the Battle of Armageddon. He will succeed Callaghan automatically in two years from December 19, 1911, so will have all well in hand by the before-mentioned date!...Everything revolves around Jellicoe!"<sup>274</sup>*

Upon the seventy-three year old Fisher's recall to the Admiralty in December, 1914, Corbett regularly consulted with the First Sea Lord and returned to drafting papers advocating Fisher's wartime proposals for the Cabinet and War Council. Immediately after his return to the Admiralty, Fisher had Corbett draft a memorandum on the value of an attack to gain command

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<sup>273</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 231.

<sup>274</sup> Fisher to Arnold White, November, 1911, in *Fear God*, II:416.

of the Baltic. The Royal Navy's access to the Baltic had been a central tenant of British naval operations throughout Fisher's long career. Since the Crimean War, access to the Baltic had proven critical in the British gaining leverage over Russia and during Fisher's tenure as First Sea Lord access to the Baltic became a fundamental point of leverage against Germany. Admiralty war planning between 1905 and 1907 focused extensively on cutting Germany's vital line of communications with Scandinavia and Britain's primary training exercises in 1905-6 were the Channel Fleet's Baltic cruises under the command of Admiral Wilson.<sup>275</sup> The Army, however, felt Fisher's "Baltic Project" was not feasible and it was quickly dismissed by the War Council.<sup>276</sup> Fisher published Corbett's memorandum as "The Baltic Project" in his *Memories and Records* (1919) in what historian Andrew Lambert has characterized as "a criticism of Churchill's strategic judgment."<sup>277</sup> Both Fisher and Corbett envisioned a long war that would ultimately be decided by the commercial blockade and they did not envision moving into the Baltic to cut Germany's vital links to Scandinavia until 1917. Fisher, after leaving the Admiralty for the final time, continued to push the "Baltic Project" with Prime Minister Lloyd George:

And here we are with our Fleet passive and unable to frustrate this German Sea attack on Russia. All this due to the grievous faulty Naval strategy of not adopting the Baltic Project put forth before Mr. Asquith in association with the scheme of a British Army advancing along the Belgian coast...An Armada of 612 vessels was constructed to carry out this policy, thanks to your splendid approval of the cost when you were Chancellor of the Exchequer.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Shawn Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887-1918* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2012), 76-106.

<sup>276</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 159-160. Most scholars have agreed with the Army and War Council assessment and dismissed Fisher's Baltic schemes both in pre-war planning and again in 1914/1915.

<sup>277</sup> Andrew Lambert, "An Edwardian Intellectual at War: Julian Corbett, and the Battle for British Strategy," *Corbett Paper, No. 18*, ed. David G. Morgan-Owen (London: The Corbett Centre for Maritime Studies, 2017). Lambert, however, has recently argued Fisher's "Baltic Project" was perfectly feasible, did not include major amphibious operations in Denmark (as some have asserted) and was focused on cutting Germany's vital trade link with Sweden. Lambert asserts that, because this link was so vital to Germany, the High Seas Fleet would have been forced to defend the Baltic and should have been the focus of British strategy rather than the Dardanelles. Lambert makes a strong argument, but attributes too much of Fisher's thinking and strategy to Corbett. Throughout the article, Lambert overemphasizes Corbett's influence on Fisher while diminishing the reverse.

<sup>278</sup> Fisher to Lloyd George, March 28, 1917, in John Fisher, *Memories and Records*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), II:222-223.

In 1915, however, Churchill was not content with Fisher's long-term strategy and wanted the navy to make a more immediate impact on the war. Corbett had described the nature of war against continental powers in *England in the Seven Years' War*:

Of late years the world has become so deeply impressed with the efficacy of sea power that we are inclined to forget how impotent it is of itself to decide a war against great Continental states, how tedious is the pressure of naval action unless it be nicely coordinated with military and diplomatic pressure.<sup>279</sup>

In arguing for the validity of remaining on the defensive in 1915, Fisher quoted Corbett from the same work in writing to Lloyd George in January, "there is no clearer lesson in history of how unwise and short-sighted it is to despise and ridicule a naval defensive."<sup>280</sup> As Churchill shifted the Admiralty's focus to the Dardanelles, Maurice Hankey, secretary to the War Council, asked Corbett to write a historical appreciation of Admiral John Duckworth's campaign against Constantinople in 1807 to emphasize the requirement that it be a combined operation. Fisher, in 1906, had provided his own thoughts on the Dardanelles to then First Lord Tweedmouth and had used the Duckworth example:

The forcing of the Dardanelles is, in the first place, a military operation, is sketched out in Ottley's paper herewith, and with the altered conditions of German supervision and German handling of the Dardanelles defenses, and German mines and German torpedoes, I agree with Sir John French that we cannot now repeat [Admiral] Sir Jeffrey Hornby's passage of the Dardanelles [1878], and even if we get passage, there is the getting back, as [Admiral] Sir John Duckworth found to his cost [1807].<sup>281</sup>

Corbett produced the paper for the War Council as both he and Hankey supported the Dardanelles operation, but only if it was a true combined campaign. In the paper, Corbett argued that the failure to land army forces could lead to a second humiliation and anger the expectant Russians.<sup>282</sup> Corbett also produced a memorandum supporting combined operations to secure

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<sup>279</sup> Corbett, *England in the Seven Years' War*, I:5.

<sup>280</sup> Fisher to Lloyd George, January 11, 1915 In Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, 317.

<sup>281</sup> Fisher to Tweedmouth, July 27, 1906, in *Fear God*, II:84.

<sup>282</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 161.



the port of Alexandretta in Syria. Each of these papers supported campaigns that fit within the strategic framework Corbett had developed in *Some Principles*, and he strongly opposed what he viewed as the continental shift in British strategy. After Fisher's resignation in May, 1915, Corbett's role at the Admiralty returned to a much lower profile as the official historian of the naval war.

Corbett, however, produced one additional paper before the war ended in 1918 entitled "The League of Nations and Freedom of the Seas" in response to President Woodrow Wilson's call for freedom of the seas in his fourteen points. Corbett repeated many of the same arguments from his days opposing similar conventions at The Hague and London conferences prior to the war. He had no faith in a League of Nations bringing peace to the world, arguing, "the truth is that even the most devoted and sanguine advocates of a League of Peace realize that complete extinction of war by that means is not to be expected. It is more than can be believed – at least until human nature has mellowed much farther."<sup>283</sup> As long as wars were to continue, nations must have the right to capture property at sea; without that right, naval battle, Corbett argued, would be entirely meaningless. The interdiction of a nation's commercial activity at sea "has always been a potent means of bringing it to reason" and, in Corbett's view, one of the greatest deterrents to war. It was a deterrent which this new League of Nations must have because "a voice in the council chamber is not determined by reason alone, but in a much higher degree by the force behind it."<sup>284</sup> Corbett, in making his argument, recognized that opinion in the United States on freedom of the seas had already shifted during the latter stages of the war as the pragmatic overruled the idealistic.

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<sup>283</sup> Julian Corbett, "The League of Nations and Freedom of the Seas," In *21<sup>st</sup> Century Corbett*, 120.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-124.

In 1916, Corbett, speaking in honor of Sir John Knox Laughton, maintained a very optimistic tone and vision for the role of history, while also urging the British people to keep the war within the broader spectrum of British history:

Do not be discouraged by the present. It may seem a catastrophe which renders all that went before insignificant and not worth study for men of action. Let us remember that great wars always had this effect at the time. While we are close to a stupendous event it seems like a flood that has gathered up and swept away everything on which the old lore rested. But it is not so. As time gives us distance we see the flood only as one more pool in the river as it flows down to eternity, and the phenomena of that pool, however great it may be, cannot be understood unless we know the whole course of the river and the nature of all the tributary streams have gone to make its volume. No, a great war does not kill the past, it gives it new life.<sup>285</sup>

After the Battle of Jutland, however, the criticism of Corbett and *Some Principles* from Wilkinson and Admiral Custance in the *Times* and Lord Sydenham (George Clarke) in the House of Lords increased. They perceived a lack of aggressiveness in the Royal Navy officer corps for which they blamed Corbett and his theories. Strategically, however, the British did not fight the war as Fisher or Corbett had envisioned. In May 1918, Corbett lamented the course of British strategy in a much different tone than his earlier speech in 1916, writing to Fisher:

I wept when I knew our whole Expeditionary Force was going to France, and felt what it would mean, and how Pitt [the Elder] would turn in his grave. Perhaps as Germany had got the initiative so completely, it could not be helped; but there is the cause of tears all the same. When the time came to strike amphibiously for a decision, we had nothing to strike with. The first chance, as you saw, was at the Dardanelles, and once the decision obtained there we could have passed to the final one in the Baltic. Oh these blessed Germanised soldiers with their decisive theatre... It is the most bigoted soldiers' war we have ever fought, and this at the end of all our experience. Why didn't I devote my life to writing comic opera, or collecting beetles? I might just as well. But now my fate is to tell the stupid story of the war as it is; not, alas, as it might have been. I had hoped when you came back, but already the soldiers had entangled us too far even for you to drag us out. We deserve each other's pity.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Corbett, "The Revival of Naval History," 740.

<sup>286</sup> Corbett to Fisher, May 18, 1918, in *Fear God*, III:538-539.

As the official historian of the war at sea, it was now his fate “to tell the stupid story of the war as it is; not, alas, as it might have been.” Corbett completed the first three volumes of *Naval Operations: History of the Great War* before he passed away in 1922. Corbett’s tone in his letter to Fisher pervaded *Naval Operations*. It was a story of mistaken strategy, missed opportunities, and tragic consequences.

In 1914, as he prepared to take on the official history of the naval war, Corbett had discussed his approach for writing “staff histories” or “histories which are required as soon as possible after a war had been fought.” He discussed the drawbacks in attempting these histories:

one is, that frankness about political and other external deflections is not entirely possible, since the time has not come when such matters can be laid openly upon the table. The other, that since they are written in the lifetime of the men who fought them there is a tendency to modify criticism.<sup>287</sup>

In “Teaching of Naval and Military History,” Corbett “offered these two principles—first, never to lose hold of the essential unity of the Fleet and the Army; and, secondly, to avoid all criticism that does not come from the lips of the really great masters. I would even say avoid criticism as a rule, altogether.”<sup>288</sup> Corbett, for the most part, followed his own admonitions in writing *Naval Operations*. He placed combined operations at the center of the war and discussed each in great detail with respect to both the Royal Navy and the Army. Throughout Corbett’s later works, he was always keen to separate continental warfare theory (the German model) from a distinctly different maritime warfare theory (the British model). Corbett’s strategic narrative of the war centered on the growing influence of the continental approach which, he argued, came to dominate the maritime approach that he had so staunchly advocated. In 1915, Lord Esher wrote to Hankey, the secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defense and War Council:

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<sup>287</sup> Corbett, “Staff Histories,” 27-28.

<sup>288</sup> Corbett, “The Teaching of Naval and Military History,” 15.

do we worry about history? Julian Corbett writes one of the best books in our language on political and military strategy. All sorts of lessons, some of inestimable value, may be gleaned from it. No one, except perhaps Winston (Churchill), who matters just now has ever read it. Yet you and I are fussing about the strategical history of the war. Obviously history is written for schoolmasters and armchair strategists. Statesmen and warriors are left to pick their way through the dusk.<sup>289</sup>

Both Esher and Hankey were strong advocates of the maritime approach and lamented the direction the war had taken.

The war itself, rather than leading Corbett to adjust any of his previous contentions, only hardened Corbett's ideas expressed in *Some Principles* and that fact comes through clearly in *Naval Operations*. Corbett's third and final volume concluded with Jutland and became the most controversial of his collected works. Henry Newbolt, a long-time friend and colleague, finished the final two volumes of *Naval Operations*.

Both Corbett and Newbolt worked solely with British sources, many of which remained classified until after the Second World War when Arthur Marder was granted exclusive access. E. Y. Daniel revised *Naval Operations* in the 1930s using the German official history to correct many factual errors and misperceptions about German operations and intentions caused by the authors limited range of source material. Corbett had remarked in "Staff Histories" that official histories:

must also serve as a complete chronicle of the war, in which the part of every unit must have justice done to it, with the result that we are sometimes smothered with a mass of detail acquired at vast labor and expense which has little or no value for the main purpose in hand...still it must be said in the eyes of a professed historian these works are not quite history, rather they are like collections of documents – materials for history.<sup>290</sup>

In regard to the mass of unit and operational detail, Corbett certainly met his intention. Enough so to lead Marder to remark:

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<sup>289</sup> Schurman, *The Education of a Navy*, 190.

<sup>290</sup> Corbett, "Staff Histories," 27-28.

I have not attempted, as regards detail, to rival the official combat narrative in *Naval Operations* by Sir Julian Corbett and Sir Henry Newbolt. These five stout volumes cover the details of the war at sea more than adequately, indeed to the point where one often finds oneself in need of a machete to hack one's way through the jungle of facts.<sup>291</sup>

Corbett knew he could not write an objective history of the Great War at Sea. As a professional historian, he knew that he was too close to the event, too involved in the event, and lacked sufficient access to source material. He, therefore, captured as much material as he could for future historians, while also inserting his own veiled interpretations. As far as interpretation, the Admiralty declined all responsibility for what Corbett wrote in *Naval Operations*. Despite near constant battles with the Admiralty and other senior officials, Corbett's narrative remained largely intact. Taking account of the many inevitable problems with official histories such as *Naval Operations*, Donald Schurman declared that Corbett's strategic viewpoint "was advanced in detail showing cause and effect with clarity and brilliance" and he also highlighted how Corbett found ways to insert his own opinions and criticisms into the narrative if one "reads between the lines."<sup>292</sup>

Under the framework for maritime operations that Corbett had detailed in *Some Principles*, the first volume of *Naval Operations* turned on the methods of securing command of the sea. Corbett characterized this first phase of the war as the fight for general command of the seas. It is an expansive volume that covers actions across the globe and concludes with Battle of the Falklands which, according to Corbett, gave Britain a working command of all the oceanic trade routes. Throughout *Naval Operations*, Corbett reiterated many themes and arguments from *Some Principles*, starting with the primary function of the fleet and that "strange misreading of history:"

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<sup>291</sup> Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, II:vii

<sup>292</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 177.

By a strange misreading of history, an idea had grown up that its primary function was to seek out and destroy the enemy's main fleet. This view, being literary rather than historical, was nowhere adopted with more unctiousness than in Germany, where there was no naval tradition to test its accuracy.<sup>293</sup>

In the initial discussions of British strategy, Corbett argued that the commitment of the British Expeditionary Force for the defense of Belgium reflected Britain's traditional historic precedents and he argued that the landing at Ostend "affords one more example of the freedom of maneuver which a fleet may give to a Continental army by a firm hold on the coastwise lines of supply and passage."<sup>294</sup> As the Army increasingly had to secure the French flank, Corbett lamented the fact that "the centre of military energy had drifted far away from the sea, and never, perhaps, since Blenheim had our army in a great war seemed so entirely divorced from the fleet."<sup>295</sup> In addition to the transport and securing of the Army's lines of communication, Corbett covered the other combined operations to seize German overseas possessions. These operations, he argued, were not about territorial acquisition, but were central to seizing command of the sea. Corbett noted that "all operations were to be regarded primarily as designed for defense of our maritime communications ...the single object was to deprive the enemy of his distant coaling and telegraphic stations."<sup>296</sup> Corbett pointed out that, for many officers expecting the great decisive sea battle during this initial phase of the war, things did not go as expected. Yet, had they paid more attention to the historical rather than the literary they would not have been surprised:

It was the inertness of the High Seas Fleet that was the greatest surprise to naval officers... Yet it was but the repetition of what occurred in the old French wars when France had the inferior fleet. By massing an overwhelming concentration at the vital point the Admiralty had made sure of the command of the Narrow Seas upon which their whole system was built up. They had also made sure of a crushing decision on "the day," but incidentally they had made it inevitable that "the day" would be indefinitely

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<sup>293</sup> Corbett, *Naval Operations*, I:2.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, I:125.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, I:168.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, I:129.

postponed. All experience shows...an enemy will never risk battle except for some vital end which cannot be obtained any other way.<sup>297</sup>

Corbett had thoroughly emphasized this very point in *Some Principles*, arguing that decisive battles “have to be worked for” and emphasizing the importance of dispersion to draw an enemy out, followed by rapid concentration of force at the decisive point. Corbett had always argued that Britain’s greatest victories were products of aggressive leadership that was willing to accept the risk of dispersing the fleet and only concentrating in the face of the enemy.

When Fisher returned to the Admiralty in October, 1914, he immediately began to implement some of the ideas that had inspired several of Corbett’s arguments in *Some Principles*. After the Battle of Coronel on November 1, 1914, Fisher directed that two battle cruisers be detached from the Grand Fleet and dispatched to the South Atlantic to deal with Admiral von Spee’s Squadron. In addition, he ordered the construction of the three shallow-draft battle cruisers, the *Furious*, *Glorious* and *Courageous*, for his eventual “Baltic Project.” Fisher also ordered an increase in construction of flotilla vessels and included monitors and other craft that would become part of what Corbett called Fisher’s “siege fleet.” Many of Fisher’s actions in reorganizing the force on his return to the Admiralty were based on the same ideas and priorities that had inspired Corbett’s chapter on the constitution of fleets in *Some Principles*; and unsurprisingly, Corbett was complimentary of Fisher’s actions in *Naval Operations*. Corbett closed the first volume after the Falklands with the assessment that “in a little more than four months the command of the outer seas had been won, and we were free to throw practically the whole weight of the Navy into the main theatre.”<sup>298</sup> Upon the conclusion of the first volume,

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., I:157-158.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., I:436.

Corbett entered into a battle with the Admiralty and other powerful figures to get his work approved and published.

Winston Churchill was dissatisfied with his portrayal in volume one and posed strong opposition to its being published. Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss, First Sea Lord at the time, advised Corbett to revise his own work and remove any criticism that was merely Corbett's opinion, but not change any of the facts even if the presentation of those facts implied criticism. Churchill, however, continued to object even after Corbett made certain revisions. Maurice Hankey supported the publication of the book and had its discussion added to the Cabinet's agenda. The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, read the book and told Hankey, "no one could have dealt with these difficult matters with such perfect discretion."<sup>299</sup> Corbett enlisted the support of noted historians Charles Oman and Charles Firth in preparation for taking his fight public, when Churchill finally agreed to publication with his own comments added as Appendix D to the work. Corbett's revisions, based on Wemyss' recommendation, left others to "read between the lines." In Corbett's view, the strategic choices during this phase of the war evoked little debate or controversy. Britain had followed its traditional strategy and, while there had certainly been mistakes and setbacks, at the end of the first four months of the war the Royal Navy had attained working command of the sea more quickly than anyone had expected. As Corbett moved into the second volume, he had to address how Britain would exploit its command of the sea and review what he viewed as the first real controversial choices in British strategy.

While Corbett officially followed Wemyss' advice in the second and third volumes, the "reading between the lines" became much more obvious as Corbett skillfully expressed his

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<sup>299</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 181-182. Schurman's final chapter is devoted to covering the controversy surrounding *Naval Operations* and Corbett's fight to publish each of the three volumes with the least revisions. It is the most extensive account of this controversy and my accounting is based entirely on Schurman's work.



criticisms without directly attacking or blaming anyone. It was during this phase that Corbett believed British strategy started to diverge from its historical traditions with tragic consequences. It is also during this phase that Corbett was most actively involved in the strategy and policy debates. He had supported Fisher with papers advocating “the Baltic project,” objecting to a purely naval attack on the Dardanelles, and supporting combined operations at Alexandretta. Corbett was invested in the policy-making during this period and it is evident in his writing.

According to Corbett, Britain had established a general command of the sea after the destruction of von Spee’s squadron at the Falklands. Only in home waters, the Channel and North Sea, was Britain’s command of the sea in dispute. In *Some Principles*, Corbett had outline the two methods of disputing command: the “fleet in being” and minor counterattacks. The Germans employed both methods to dispute command of the Channel and North Sea. The husbanding of the High Seas Fleet clearly fit Corbett’s definition of a “fleet in being” and forced Britain to concentrate its capital ships for any potential sortie of the High Seas Fleet. Corbett also went into great detail about the German Navy’s minor counterattacks, which included coastal raids, mining, and submarine operations as both sides disputed command of the North Sea and Channel. As with much of Corbett’s writing, however, his real focus was at the strategic level and the methods of exercising command of the sea.

The Dardanelles was the central driving narrative of the second volume. Corbett had supported Fisher’s “Baltic Project” which included combined operations between the Army and Fisher’s “siege fleet” to capture German-controlled submarine and Zeppelin bases in Flanders as the project’s first phase. Corbett argued that “whenever it had been found impossible for the British fleet to seek out and destroy that of the enemy, the primary alternative had always been to

seek out and destroy the enemy's bases in concert with the army."<sup>300</sup> After securing the Flanders coast, specifically the Zeebrugge-Ostend-Bruges triangle, the second phase consisted of extensive mining of the North Sea to protect the Royal Navy's flank, followed by the third phase, when the "siege fleet" backed by the three new shallow draft battle cruisers moved into the Baltic to sever Germany's lines of communication with Sweden and complete the commercial blockade. The Grand Fleet, in the North Sea, would await the sortie of the High Seas Fleet which both Fisher and Corbett felt would be forced to defend Germany's critical lines of communication with Scandinavia. In retrospect in *Naval Operations*, Corbett continued to argue this was the strategic option Britain should have followed and never adhered to those that argued that it was not feasible. Corbett recognized the risks of moving into the Baltic when he delivered his "Baltic Project" memorandum to Fisher writing "the risks, of course, must be serious; but unless we are fairly sure that the passive pressure of our Fleet is really bringing Germany to a state of exhaustion, risks must be taken to use our command of the sea with greater energy."<sup>301</sup> After laying out the planning and debate over the Flanders and Baltic operations, Corbett moved to the genesis of the Dardanelles campaign, which took center stage in the narrative.

While Corbett had preferred the Baltic project, the Dardanelles, in his view, was an equally viable option for executing Britain's traditional maritime strategy and had consequential objectives that fully supported the war effort. In fact, Corbett found that "diplomatically the case for developing our military power in the Eastern Mediterranean was overwhelming, and far outweighed all that could be said for the Flanders plan."<sup>302</sup> He, however, had never supported a purely naval attack on the Dardanelles; and, during the war, he had provided a historical analysis

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<sup>300</sup> Corbett, *Naval Operations*, I:55.

<sup>301</sup> Fisher, *Memories and Records*, II:222.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, II:68.

arguing that any Dardanelles operation must be a combined operation with the army's full support. Corbett attributed the failure to provide troops to the Dardanelles initially to the army's growing reliance on a continental doctrine that had taught them that force must always be concentrated at the decisive point in the decisive theater. He argued that the decision to attack without troops was a fatal compromise between a major combined operation to achieve decisive strategic results and a simple diversion to support the struggling Serbian and Russian forces.<sup>303</sup> Corbett saw the issues with the Dardanelles planning as stemming from a failure to identify the problem, stating "history is filled with cases in which councils of war were unable to reach a sound and quick conclusion simply from a failure to state with perfect lucidity and precision what the problem was they had to solve."<sup>304</sup>

At multiple points in his discussion of the Dardanelles campaign, Corbett developed an argument that was only implied in *Some Principles*. He argued that the army had adopted a continental mindset that called for directly attacking the enemy's strength. The constant calls for more troops and more offensives on the Western Front was only enhancing Germany's greatest strength. Corbett argued that Britain's advantages "were the power of freely combining naval and military force against the point where the system of the Central Powers was weakest, while standing securely on the defensive in the main theater."<sup>305</sup> According to Corbett, the debate over the Dardanelles:

raised in acute form the fundamental differences between the traditional British method of conducting a great war and the Napoleonic method which with all continental nations had become strict orthodox creed. Our own idea had long been to attack the enemy at the weakest point which could give substantial results, and to assume the defensive where he was strongest. The continental method was to strike where the enemy's military concentration was highest and where a decisive victory would end the war by destroying his armed forces....The obvious and logical [British] policy, therefore, was to postpone

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., II:129-129.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., II:178.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., II:290.

the offensive in the main theater...the Dardanelles offered the ideal objective which supported our doctrine.<sup>306</sup>

Corbett, throughout the second and third volumes, argued that Britain should remain on the defensive on the Western Front and reinforce the Dardanelles as that was the decisive theater for the British method of conducting the war. He argued that, from the beginning and at every critical decision point in the Dardanelles campaign, the commanders were not provided sufficient resources for victory.<sup>307</sup> At heart, Corbett believed in the use of Britain's maritime power to defend the British Islands and attack the enemy's weakness. These same arguments became the foundation of Liddell Hart's *British Way of War* and his later, much more developed, *Strategy of the indirect approach*. After the introduction of ground troops, Corbett fully supported the Dardanelles campaign; he identified the breakdown of the May, 1915 combined offensive as the:

definite landmark in the progress of the war. The hope of rapidly completing the investment of the Central Powers and opening up direct communication with Russia was at an end. Further progress by combined operations was out of the question without many more troops.<sup>308</sup>

Corbett concluded the second volume at this turning point in the Dardanelles campaign, and this second work surprisingly met little resistance and was published in 1921. The next volume proved to be the most anticipated and controversial of all of Corbett's works.

Corbett spent the first half of the third volume on the end of the Dardanelles campaign and the decision to withdraw from Gallipoli. Corbett took the opportunity with the landings at Suvla Bay and the expert withdrawal of British and Commonwealth forces from the peninsula to tout Britain's continued expertise in combined operations. Corbett, in these descriptions, was

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., III:41.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., III:

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., II:383.

trying to influence British post-war strategic thinking to returning to a traditional maritime strategy. Corbett began the chapter on the Suvla landings:

in the long history of British warfare there is a special feature which distinguishes it from that of any other country. The precession of years is marked by a series of great combined expeditions which, over and above those which were planned as diversions or for seizing subsidiary strategical points, were aimed at definite thrusts at the decisive points of a world-wide war.<sup>309</sup>

Corbett declared the conception, planning, and organization of the combined operation at Suvla to have surpassed those of Quebec and Walcheren and demonstrated significant improvement over the initial landings. He touted the British method of having co-equal commanders which, while not without its challenges, truly required them to coordinate their operations closely, taking each's concerns into account. Corbett was equal in his praise of the combined operations withdrawing the forces; but for him, this was the most tragic and far-reaching moment of the war. In Corbett's opinion, it marked the complete subversion of traditional British maritime strategy by a costly continental doctrine that was to have dire consequences for Britain. Corbett described it in these terms:

When the momentous order that was to end the tragedy of the Dardanelles went forth, to the deep regret of the navy... with the broader outlook their world-wide activities gave them, they were in a better position to know all that the order meant than men whose view of the war had long been almost entirely confined to the continental aspect of the great wars of the past... As naval thought read our long and rich experience, it was by close coordination of naval and military force that we had always held the balance and had built up the Empire. Now there was to be a complete divorce, and each service was to play a lone hand. Whether inevitable or not, at the moment it was a thousand pities.<sup>310</sup>

Corbett's entire description of the debates, the decision, and the withdrawal itself was tinged with an overwhelming sense of deep regret.

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., III:84.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., III:246.

As Corbett transitioned from the Dardanelles to describing the Battle of Jutland, he changed his entire style, tone, and approach. Gone was the analytical historian who was trying to document every fact and every detail for future historians; Corbett the novelist had returned. Corbett had long before recognized that his writing of history never had public appeal and he had apologized to the public in previous works. In describing Jutland, he gave the public what they wanted: a rousing heroic sea battle that brought out the smell of cordite and the soaking splash of bracketing shells. His writing in these chapters was often melodramatic and even theatrical, as one example describing the loss of Admiral Hood and the *Invincible*:

Just as the mist was riven and from the *Derfflinger* her tormentor was suddenly silhouetted against a light patch of sky. Then as another salvo from the *Invincible* straddled her she began rapid salvos in reply, in which probably the *Konig* joined with just as many. One after another they went home on the *Invincible*. Flames shot up from the gallant flagship, and there came again the awful spectacle of a fiery burst, followed by a huge column of dark smoke which, mottled with blackened debris, swelled up hundreds of feet in the air, and the mother of all battle cruisers had gone to join the other two that were no more. As her two consorts swerved round her seething death-bed they could see she was rent in two; her stem and stern rose apart high out of the troubled waters as though she touched the bottom...the intrepid Admiral met his end, gilding in his death with new lustre the immortal name of Hood.<sup>311</sup>

Corbett's complete change in tone and style served more than just to please the public. Since the Battle of Jutland, several commentators had blamed Corbett's teachings for an overriding caution in the Royal Navy's officer corps which, in their view, led to indecisiveness at Jutland. In Corbett's rendition of the battle, all British officers and seaman acted aggressively and heroically. During the Jutland account, Corbett repeatedly praised individual officers for acting within the finest traditions of the Royal Navy.

Additionally, the Jellicoe-Beatty feud was ongoing when Corbett was writing *Naval Operations*. Corbett likely had as much knowledge about Jutland as anyone, including the

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 366-367.

participants. Corbett had interviewed Jellicoe and many of the participating officers immediately after the battle in 1916 in his capacity as official historian. He had extensively reviewed the Admiralty's first official "Record of the Battle of Jutland" produced by Captain J.E.T. Harper and had refused to write the introduction for it because of the errors he believed it contained. Corbett had fully reviewed, and was just as skeptical of, the "Staff Appreciation" produced by Kenneth and Alfred Dewar. Corbett clearly believed Jellicoe had made the correct decisions, based on the strategic situation and the information he had at the time, and that comes through very clearly in *Naval Operations*. His criticisms are reserved for Admiral David Beatty, but the reader again has to "read between the lines" as Corbett often softens any criticism by pointing to the inevitable fog and friction of war. On September 8, 1922, Corbett sent the final draft to the Committee on Imperial Defense for official review. He died two weeks later on September 22, 1922. The controversy over publication of this volume continued well after Corbett's death. Many of the same Corbett critics were not happy with his defense of Jellicoe; others at the Admiralty were not happy with Corbett implying they had not passed intelligence to Jellicoe in a timely fashion. Beatty was not happy with his portrayal, and the Army strenuously objected to the narrative surrounding the Dardanelles decisions. Ultimately, the Admiralty agreed to publish the work as written with an unprecedented, for their own sanctioned official history, disclaimer on the title page:

The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty have given the author access to official documents in the preparation of this work, but they are in no way responsible for its production or for the accuracy of its statements. Their Lordships find that some of the principles advocated in the book, especially the tendency to minimize the importance of seeking battle and enforcing it to a conclusion, are directly in conflict with their views.<sup>312</sup>

Even in death, Corbett could not escape Mahan and the overwhelming allure of decisive battle.

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<sup>312</sup> Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett*, 186-193. Schurman provides extensive coverage of the fight to get volume three published and the toll the controversies took on Corbett's health.

While Corbett covered the operational and tactical aspects of the commercial blockade and submarine war in the volumes he wrote for *Naval Operations*, he did not provide any greater strategic analysis of these two central aspects of the war at sea. Corbett clearly recognized the importance of the submarine war and the fact that it was an entirely unexpected aspect of the war for him and many others. In the introduction to the series, Corbett had written that no one before the war would have anticipated having convoy after convoy pressing to Europe or that the submarine could cut through the British system of commerce protection.<sup>313</sup> It is likely that Corbett intended to cover these aspects of the war in the final two volumes of the series as Newbolt did after Corbett's death. Newbolt's final volume of the series was almost entirely concerned with the submarine war. Corbett also never provided his strategic assessment of Jutland, which was probably slated for the beginning of the fourth volume. In 1921, he did, while writing the Jutland account, deliver the Creighton Lecture in which he addressed the Napoleonic Wars. The lecture was a clear indication that the Great War had not significantly changed Corbett's views of maritime strategy; it had actually reinforced them. He addressed naval operations after Trafalgar, arguing that "judged by the standard of modern historical scholarship, naval history between Trafalgar and Waterloo is a trackless desert."<sup>314</sup> Corbett argued that the war violated all military doctrine; Britain should never have won this war according to continental doctrine. Britain had violated the ultimate doctrinal principle of concentrating the greatest possible force against the enemy's main strength. Corbett continued:

so valuable and even sacred is this article of faith that even seeming to question its applicability to all possible conditions of war is to raise at once a cry of heresy a charge of heresy connotes the existence of dogma; and, of all diseases from which strategical fault can suffer, dogma is the most fatal. When dogma steals in at the door, reason flies out of the window.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Corbett, *Naval Operations*, I:2.

<sup>314</sup> Julian Corbett, "Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar," in *21<sup>st</sup> Century Corbett*, 130.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.



Corbett then briefly detailed the vital naval and combined operations that occurred in the ten year period between Trafalgar and Waterloo. These operations, according to Corbett, were ultimately more critical in engineering the defeat of Napoleon than either Trafalgar or Waterloo. After regaling the audience with the tremendous feats and exertions of the naval war after Trafalgar, Corbett concluded:

nearly every current belief about the later exhausting years of our struggle with Napoleon needs modification – even the cardinal belief, the effect of Trafalgar. Going even lightly over the ground, its striking analogy to our latest struggle brings forth a whole harvest of unsettled queries; and the one which for me at least is the most insistent is this: *What material advantage did Trafalgar give that Jutland did not give?*<sup>316</sup>

It was Corbett's final question for the "blue-water school" of maritime strategists and his final plea for broadening the approach to maritime operations.

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 146.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

Most modern scholars of Julian Corbett and *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* focus on Corbett's use of history to inform his maritime theory, the influence of Clausewitz on his strategic theory, or the principles that remain most relevant to modern navies. It continues to be studied in naval war colleges and military theory classes around the world alongside Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Jomini, Clausewitz and Mahan. While Corbett certainly made a lasting contribution to maritime and strategic theory, that was not Corbett's purpose in writing *Some Principles*. Corbett was not attempting to write a Clausewitzian "universal theory" of naval or maritime war, or a Thucydidian "possession for all time," or even Jominian/Mahanian principles of naval war. Corbett was attempting to capture the Royal Navy's strategic and doctrinal thinking, as embodied in 1911 by the Fisher Admiralty, in an accessible form to educate senior military and political leaders.

*Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* was the culmination of a turbulent decade of change within the British military establishment and British strategic thinking. Corbett wrote from a British context, used British history, and was writing to educate British officers and statesmen who were preparing the most powerful navy in the world to both defend a global empire and defeat a great continental power. In understanding any military theory, the context in which it was written is critical to understanding the implications of that theory. In his approach to theory, Corbett was certainly much closer akin to Clausewitz than he was to Mahan or Colomb. Corbett relied on his much deeper study of British history to establish the context for developing a British maritime doctrine, initially targeted against Russia and France but by 1911, focused on Imperial Germany. Mahan and Colomb relied much more heavily on the case study

approach to history, finding historical case studies that best supported their theories, rather than developing a much broader context for wrestling with current strategic concerns. Historian

Geoffrey Till points out that the military's use of history is:

often approached more in the spirit of finding 'something that fits' rather than something that helps us understand...After all, Corbett wrote, 'the value of history in the art of war is not only to elucidate the resemblance of the past and the present but also their essential differences.' In fact, the chief utility of history for the analysis of the present and future lies in its ability, not to point out lessons, but to isolate things that need thinking about...History provides insights and questions, not answers.<sup>317</sup>

Corbett identified one of the most important aspects of using history to inform military and strategic thought in highlighting the need to understand their "essential differences," rather than just looking for similarities. During the "Dreadnought Age," Corbett had combatted the simplistic approaches to naval history that often searched for rules and principles to fit every situation. Throughout *Some Principles*, Corbett had taken on Mahan, the German Continental School, and, most vehemently, the "blue-water" school in Britain that had turned Mahan's theory into abject dogma. While Clausewitz influenced Corbett's approach, Corbett's theory remained rooted in his study of history, which he applied to the challenges of educating modern British officers.

*Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* was clearly a product of the "Dreadnought Age" and the "Fisher Revolution." It marked a unique blend of historical study, military theory, and Corbett's experience in the Fisher Admiralty during this tempestuous first decade of the twentieth century. History has long been the foundation of theory, and military theory the foundation for military doctrine and strategy. Corbett was one of the most enduring contributors to fully establish the link between history, theory, doctrine and professional military education. He sought to be relevant to professional naval officers and policymakers, while always

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<sup>317</sup> Geoffrey Till, *Maritime Strategy and the Nuclear Age* (London: McMillan Press, 1982), 223-5.

attempting to remain true to the source material. However, Corbett's historical strategic message concerning the limitation of maritime power and the subordination of naval strategy to national strategy and government policy proved unpopular with a great number of Royal Navy officers raised in the Nelsonian tradition. Neither Corbett's message nor methods resonated beyond a small, select group of historically-minded officers and these attitudes carried over from his lectures to his writings on maritime strategy. This integration of history and theory for the purpose of education was instrumental to Corbett's developing principles of maritime strategy, but it was the "Fisher Revolution" and the rapidly changing British strategic environment that fueled Corbett's work.

Corbett sought to capture the strategic and doctrinal thought of the Fisher Admiralty and fit that thought within the broader context of British history in order to make it more accessible to officers and statesmen. He was a clear adherent to Clausewitz's descriptions of military genius and, in Admiral Sir John Fisher, Corbett had found what he saw as Britain's modern strategic/naval genius. In stressing the contemporary importance of *Some Principles*, some modern scholars have argued that Corbett greatly influenced Fisher, his reform agenda, and strategic thought. However, the correspondence between the two men clearly indicates Fisher's overwhelming influence on, not only Corbett, but all those around him. Fisher has too often been misrepresented as the arch-materialist and hostile to the historical school of thought. While Fisher certainly advocated for the rapid incorporation of new technologies, he was not beholden to technology and deftly discerned the advantages and limitations of technology and the new challenges that would confront the Royal Navy. Fisher, however, was never hostile to history or the historical school, despite his rhetoric. He pushed for education reform within the Navy and the establishment of the War Course at the Royal Naval College. He read voraciously and was

immersed in the history and traditions of the Royal Navy. Fisher was an intuitive decision-maker and relied on his vast experience with all aspects of the Royal Navy and all regions of the British Empire. He inherently understood Britain's broader strategic situation and needed Corbett to translate his understanding and vision for the employment of British maritime power for Britain's civilian leaders. History provided Corbett the context and correct questions for Fisher and his associates. Fisher and the select officers around him provided the relevant answers for the Royal Navy prior to the First World War. Ultimately Corbett wrote *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, at Fisher's behest, to educate British statesmen about the Royal Navy's economic and maritime doctrine for dealing with the rising threat of Imperial Germany. Corbett effectively communicated that strategic/maritime doctrine in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and, with the exception of the convoy system, it proved remarkably accurate in forecasting the First World War at sea. Understanding Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* remains important today as an excellent example of how leaders should effectively use history and theory to build the context for current doctrine and future strategy and drive the questions that need to be asked of all future strategic options. Any attempt to address grand strategic issues requires building context and recognizing complexity rather than trying to simplify problems. Fisher and Corbett clearly recognized the importance of context, complexity, and judgment and continuously fought against simple principles and dogmatic axioms. Because of its deep historical context and the clear German threat, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* is arguably the best strategic/doctrinal exposition ever written and came as close as any in accurately predicting the course of the First World War at sea.

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