

SHORT TITLE

SUPREME COMMAND DURING AN AGE OF TRANSITION : ENGLAND, 1904 - 1914

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THE EVOLUTION OF BRITISH DEFENCE STRATEGY
1904 - 1914
A STUDY IN SUPREME COMMAND
DURING
AN AGE OF TRANSITION

by

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A country may have powerful armed forces, led by brilliant commanders ; it may have statesmen of great competence ; it may have a civil population which is disciplined and resolute ; it may have immense wealth ; it may have industries which are most efficiently organised ; but unless the statesmen and the soldiers at the summit work together in a spirit of mutual esteem, the essential co-ordination between those diverse elements of strength will be lacking, and there is bound to be a deadly waste of blood and treasure .

ISMAY

PREFACE

THIS is a study in supreme command, its nature and the course of its development within the fabric of the English Constitution during the decade or so prior to the shattering of the peace of the old world and the coming of the War in Europe. It is a study concerned with an examination of the formulation and development of defence policy only in so far as these factors helped determine the course and outcome of the struggle, which occurred during these years, to establish an effective form of supreme command.

Essentially, then, this is a work devoted to an examination of the underlying relations between the military and political organs of society, together with the internecine struggles within those organs, which shaped and determined the outcome of the search for a viable mechanism of supreme command. It is a study of soldiers in conflict, sailors in disagreement and statesmen in opposition, in as far as these civil-military and intra-military relationships influenced the nature and course of the development of supreme command. Within these same limitations it is also a study of the process of revolution and reaction which occurred within England's military institutions during the years between the close of the war in South Africa and the advent of the Great War in Europe.

It is, furthermore, a study of the development of an institution and an idea during an age of transition. One must, of course, avoid the proverbial pitfalls of hindsight, but, nevertheless, it must clearly be understood that for England, as indeed for all Europe, the years between the retirement of Lord Salisbury and the coming of the War in 1914 were years of diplomatic frenzy, mounting tension, and increasing apprehension of war. It was a decade which, militarily speaking, was to witness the realignment of the Powers, the decline and rebirth of French military virtue, the vigorous expansion of Germany's recently established High Seas Fleet, the reform, refurbishment and renewal of the Royal Navy,

the birth and development of the British Expeditionary Force, and, finally, for England, the rejection of long and trusted tradition in the adoption of a wholly military strategy without relation to the exercise of sea power. Of these developments, all are, indeed of concern for the purposes of this study - but only in so far as they affected the broader problem of the development of supreme command.

It was the recognition of these developments, and the events that lay behind them, that increasingly led a number of England's finest political and military minds to a serious consideration of the country's military resources and the most profitable method of their employment. In so doing these statesmen, notably Arthur Balfour, Reginald Viscount Esher and Richard Haldane discovered that before any such decisions could be taken, it was first necessary to create the machinery of inter-departmental and civil-military co-ordination and control so as to impart sanity and reason to any such decisions. And it is with these efforts and their relative success and failure with which this work is concerned.

Nevertheless, while this was in some respects, indeed, a recognisable age of transition, there was much in the future which remained unknown, even unguessed. No one fully appreciated, even fewer suspected, that modern technology and the economic capacity of the nations had vastly changed the face of warfare. Indeed, of those few who had some inkling of these developments, such as Repington and Esher, none arrived at conclusions to whose veracity history was to bear testament.

To put it somewhat more simply, while one must regard this decade as an age of transition - at least in the terms of the present limited consideration of the development of a higher form of defence co-ordination and control - it was by no means an age of transition in terms of warfare as a whole - at least not in the eyes of contemporary observers. Thus it would be well to point out that Balfour, Esher and Haldane, the leaders of this search for effective supreme command, were themselves in the van of those who upheld the traditional value of sea power at a time when the military revival was leading to the development of a radically new foreign and defence policy predicated upon direct independent military intervention upon the Continent.

In the original draft of this work I had included a chapter dealing directly with the Dominions and defence planning. However, on reconsideration, I decided to omit this section on the interests of immediate relevance. The Dominions most certainly had a serious impact upon the development of defence planning, and to some extent of defence policy, while their actions occasioned a series of clashes between the soldiers and the sailors. Nevertheless, I consider that these events had little direct or, indeed, positive impact upon the broader question of the development of supreme command. The Dominions, unwilling to make use of the Defence Committee very largely because they tended to feel that membership tied them to the support of England's policies, were never in a position to directly influence the nature or the development of the organs of supreme command.

As far as nomenclature is concerned I have followed no particular rules ; for the most part the meanings of such words as 'military', 'naval' and 'defence' are, I hope, readily apparent from their context. By and large, wherever practicable the word 'militarily' has been used in the narrow sense of that word, while 'defence' has been utilised to denote the armed services as a whole. 'Supreme Command' is itself a somewhat overworked and imprecise term ; I have used it here consistently to denote the higher direction and co-ordination of defence policy and planning. Finally, I would add that the appellation 'England' has been employed throughout in much the same spirit as that set forth by A.J.P. Taylor in his recent work on post-1914 'English History'.

To Doctor Robert Vogel, of the Department of History at McGill, I extend my sincere thanks for his unfailing encouragement and advice, and for the many long hours endured in often animated discussion and argument. To Professor C.C. Bayley I extend also my appreciation for the sustained interest which he has shown in my work from its inception. Finally, I most gratefully acknowledge the support of the McConnell Foundation which has made much of the far-ranging research and the writing of this treatise possible.

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The 25th Anniversary of the Battle
of Cape Matapan, 28th March 1966

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CHAPTER ONE

THE COMMITTEE OF IMPERIAL DEFENCE

There is a time for all things : there is even a time for change ; and that is when it can no longer be resisted.

H.R.H. The Duke of Cambridge,
Commander-in-Chief ; 1856 - 1896.

Our National problems of defence are far more difficult and complex than those of any other power. They require exhaustive study over a much wider field. The grave danger to which we call attention remains, and demands effective remedy. The British Empire is pre-eminently a naval colonial power. There are nevertheless no means for co-ordinating defence problems, for dealing with them as a whole, for defining the proper functions of the various elements, and for ensuring that, on the one hand, peace preparations are carried out upon a consistent plan, and, on the other, that in time of emergency a definite war policy based upon solid data can be formulated.

Report of the War Office Reconstruction
Committee ; 1 January 1904.

THE spectre of the Committee of Imperial Defence looms heavy and black across these pages, just as in the midst of England's summer its substance permeated and influenced the politics of the decision making process. As this story unfolds the Committee will be revealed winding its tortuous path through virtually every branch of government. In some respects the Committee was itself a symbol of those times, a product of both the trusted and the untried, a reflection of the hope, the fulfillment, the despair and the disillusionment that was the sorry tableau of uncertainty, of seeking without cognisance of one's direction, against which was acted out the story of the evolution of England's defence policy during those disturbing, disquieting, though hopeful, years before 1914. And yet the Committee's chimeric aspect set it apart from that confidence which hall-marked the golden age of England ; forever it remained a promise unfulfilled. The

Committee of Imperial Defence never evolved as the centre for strategic planning. In spite of all its paper prestige the Committee lacked the driving force to create such a focus of power in the midst of a vacuum of leadership. In sharing its supreme functions with the great departments of state, those traditional loci of power in the defence establishment, the Committee of Imperial Defence became merely an additional competitor ; a part of that division of labour imposed not for the sake of order or efficiency, but rather as the price exacted for an arrogant tradition of departmental anarchy. The story of the Committee during these years is stamped with the tragedy of a noble ambition unfulfilled. Like an innocent in politics, the sheep among the wolves, its initiative and determination was soon sapped by the weight and influence of the established hierarchy. Disillusioned, without the strength of leadership, deprived of the momentum of influence, the Committee too sank into that mire of bureaucratic sectionalism which it had sought to purge from the halls of the defence establishment. But when the decade was young, and when England was still the centre of the world, the Committee of Imperial Defence was launched upon a career of reform designed to bring together every arm of the decision making process into a supreme forum for defence co-ordination. But this was not to be. The importance of the Committee of Imperial Defence must not be minimised ; but its importance lay not in its successes but in its inadequacies. This is not to say that the Committee fulfilled no positive role, or that its inception and design was anything short of magnificent ; but between that inception and its final position within the framework of the decision making process, there lay a decade of misunderstanding, undermining and misapplication which finally resulted in the almost total perversion of that vision which had given birth to its inception.

Regardless, whether the Committee of Imperial Defence be viewed in terms of the promise of 1902, or from the vantage point of August, 1914, it must still tower as a lasting tribute to the imagination and foresight of Arthur James Balfour. Balfour was possessed of the most penetrating and brilliant mind of any Prime Minister in the history of his country ; not withstanding the many doubts which have been raised concerning his

administrative abilities on the Treasury Bench.¹ For many years prior to his assumption of the burdens of governments Balfour had applied himself to the broader problems of the defence of England and the Empire ; in 1893 writing to Sir Charles Dilke, who perhaps alone approached Balfour's intellectual stature, A.J.B. had noted :

I have always been in favour of a Defence Committee of the Cabinet with expert advisers and permanent records carrying on the work from government to government.²

Reaching back into the late 1880's much effort had been expended in order to evolve some form of organ suitable for the overall direction of Imperial defence planning. But the problem had never before been considered with the same breadth of understanding, wisdom or appreciation which Mr. Balfour brought to it during the brief tenure of his 'lame-duck' government in the years after 1902. Balfour had recognised in the events of the Boer War the implications of the tremendous changes which were being wrought upon the art of warfare. Whereas many of his contemporaries understood that the time for a drastic overhaul of the defence establishment was long overdue, the Prime Minister realised that this renewal would involve a completely new attitude and approach towards the higher preparation and conduct of war. While he understood that half measures and 'muddling through' would no longer suffice in the business of preparing for and fighting a modern war, he saw too that the solution lay not merely in the reform of the existing establishment but far more fundamentally in a reshaping of the overall function of government as the supreme organ for the conduct of warfare. Indeed, his realisation of this need, his desperate understanding of the necessity for a total re-orientation of defence thinking, played an important role in his decision to cling to power during those last futile months before December 1905 and the great triumph of the Liberals at

1 - Gibbs, N.H., & Keith, A.B., The British Cabinet System, (London, 1952), p. 58.

2 - Young, K., Arthur James Balfour, (London, 1963), p. 226.

the polls the following month.³ It has even been suggested that Balfour felt it more than merely a responsibility of his office to effect changes in the organs of the supreme command, but that, in view of the succession of disasters at the War Office culminating in the chaos of the South African war, the Prime Minister felt it incumbent upon himself to make retribution for the shortcomings of his colleagues through the establishment of an entirely new and viable concept in supreme defence planning capable of rising to the demands of modern warfare.⁴

The key to Mr. Balfour's new understanding lay in his recognition of the need for a council upon the highest level to co-ordinate the great offices of state, especially the Admiralty and the War Office, whose intimate co-operation in time of war was, he realised, of fundamental importance. But, while he knew that without the co-ordination of the services all pretence at supreme defence planning was pointless, he entertained, nevertheless, additional hopes envisaged upon the same heroic pattern. Balfour clearly foresaw that with the growth of the Dominions, and their development as mature political entities, they would increasingly demand a more decisive voice in the ordering of the overall defence of the Empire. He understood the importance of the establishment of a body wherein the finest intellectual talent of the Empire could be brought to focus upon the crucial business of the development of a consistent and feasible policy in keeping with the strategic necessities dictated by the ever changing international position of England and the Empire. In 1902 such thoughts were pipe-dreams. Balfour was well aware that before he could ever hope to draw the Dominions into the inner defence counsels of the Empire, it was essential to induce order upon the chaos which held sway over both the War Office and the Admiralty, together with the even more fundamental need for the establishment of the most elementary principles of inter-service co-operation and co-ordination.

3 - Gibbs, N.H., The Origins of Imperial Defence, (Oxford, 1955), p. 6.

4 - Johnson, F.A., Defence By Committee : The British Committee of Imperial Defence, 1885 - 1959, (London, 1960), p. 61.

In order to solve these problems Mr. Balfour established the Committee of Imperial Defence. As with most other 'changes' in the fabric of the English constitution this new body was in fact the result of a mutation of a former organ of the constitution. This body, the old Defence Committee of the Cabinet, had never sought to distinguish itself and was, in short, a defunct organization. In December, 1902, it received a severe shake up from the Prime Minister, and the Committee of Imperial Defence was born. In this early form the Committee represented a complete departure from all previous tradition both in making the professional chiefs of the Navy and the Army full sitting members - rather than merely advisers, and in the establishment of the forerunner of the future celebrated Secretariat of the Committee of Imperial Defence.

In the autumn of 1903 Balfour took the Chair of the Defence Committee following upon the retirement of the Duke of Devonshire.⁵ In so doing the Prime Minister indicated his determination to entrench the new committee as a permanent focus for all governmental defence planning. This determination was underlined in November of the same year by the establishment of a committee of inquiry charged with investigating the possibilities of undertaking reform at the War Office, and designed to entrench and formalise the new Defence Committee of the Cabinet. Thus was born the 'War Office Reconstruction Committee', better known simply by the name of its chairman - Reginald, Viscount Esher. The Esher Committee was designed as the first move in Balfour's campaign to completely overhaul the entire defence establishment in its every aspect. For as Balfour wrote many years later :

There was no co-ordination, no co-operation between the people in charge of land and sea war, and defence. It was obvious a civilian Cabinet could form no judgement, and I had the idea, which was really original. I don't say that out of conceit, - I mean simply that the Defence Committee had no precedent.⁶

The Esher Committee worked swiftly and ruthlessly producing its recommendations for a supreme organ of defence planning and co-ordination in January, 1904. Confirmation

5 - Johnson, Defence By Committee, p. 54.

6 - Dugdale, B.E., Arthur James Balfour, First Earl of Balfour, (London, 1936), Vol. I, p. 365.

of what Balfour had long thought to be the case was contained in a letter to the Prime Minister on 11th January :

We are driven to the conclusion that no manner of War Office reform will avail unless associated with provision for obtaining and collecting for the use of the cabinet all information and advice required for shaping national policy in war, and for determining the necessary preparations in peace. Such information and advice must necessarily embrace not only the sphere of the War Office, but those of the Admiralty and other offices of state.⁷

Thus was the Secretariat of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and indeed the Committee itself, conceived, the Secretariat being the one organ of that organisation which in its long years of operation has consistently, as an institution, stood above reproach.

During the few months remaining to Balfour as Prime Minister the Committee, formally constituted by the famous Treasury Minute of 4th May, 1904, devoted much of its attention to the problems of Indian frontier defence. Its role as the centre of planning for Imperial Defence as a whole was not developed during these early years due not only to the almost universal preoccupation with Indian affairs, but also to the over-shadowing influence of the practical reforms being carried out in the War Office and throughout the Army as the result of the findings of the Esher Committee, not to mention the revolution being wrought at the Admiralty by Sir John Fisher.

This aspect of feverish reform both within the Navy and the Army, together with the agonizing frustration being caused in the War Office by a succession of ill-advised Secretaries of State, has been overlooked by one recent critic of Mr. Balfour's handling of the Committee of Imperial Defence.⁸ While no doubt Balfour was not perhaps the most capable of administrators, it must be remembered that the Committee was still very young and inexperienced, the Services themselves were consumed by their own momentous all-embracing reforms, and the government as a whole was fighting a doomed rearguard

7 - Sydenham of Coombe, Baron (George C.), My Working Life, (London, 1927), p. 173.

8 - Mackintosh, J.P., 'The Role of The Committee of Imperial Defence Before 1914', The English Historical Review, Vol. LXXVII (1962), pp. 494 - 495.

political action. Given time, Balfour possessed the necessary prestige and initiative, together with a suitable opinion of his own position,⁹ to enforce his new understanding of the need for supreme defence planning and co-ordination upon the services. Indeed Balfour's accomplishment with respect to the Committee of Imperial Defence must be the object of considerable admiration, especially when viewed in terms of the overall political-situation which was dominated by the fact, which Churchill has since noted, that Balfour had 'succeeded only to an exhausted inheritance' when he had taken over the reigns of governments in the summer of 1902.¹⁰

Furthermore, it must be understood that in military, as against political, terms the Committee itself had roots which claimed their origins deep within the rivalry between England and Russia upon the border of the Empire in India. In actual fact the real importance of this threat had greatly diminished with the dawn of the twentieth century, and even before had been very largely a figment of the imagination. But, whether real or imagined, the fear of trouble with Russia on the Indian frontier had not receded from either the military or the political mind. One has only to glance through the correspondence between Sir George Clarke, the first secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence, and the Prime Minister to realise that Indian problems had become the focal point for the activities of the Committee during these early years. As an aside the very volume and detail of this correspondence serves to underline Balfour's consuming interest in defence matters. Between December, 1902, and December, 1905, the Prime Minister called eighty-two formal sessions of the Committee to order¹¹: of these no less than forty-three were either wholly or in part devoted to Indian defence matters. A perusal of the C.I.D. Papers for this same period reveals no fewer than seventy-five printed memoranda dealing with Indian military problems. A memorandum submitted to

9 - Gibbs & Keith, The British Cabinet System, p. 431.

10 - Churchill, W.S., The World Crisis, (New York, 1923), Vol. I, p. 21.

11 - The first twenty-two sessions were chaired by the Duke of Devonshire, The Lord President of the Council.

the Committee in February, 1905, by the Prime Minister opened with the following statement :

This Paper proceeds on the assumption, which I have elsewhere endeavoured to establish, that the main purpose for which the army exists is . . . the protection of the outlying portions of the Empire, and notably of India.¹²

Lord Selborne writing to the Prime Minister in early April, 1904, with respect to a number of naval problems, summed up this entire concern in noting 'the exhaustive manner in which the C.I.D. has endeavoured to treat the problem of the N.W. frontier of India'.¹³ Again on 30th March, 1905, the Prime Minister stated to the Cabinet :

It is agreed that the main purpose for which a large army is required is the defence of India . . .¹⁴

The advent of the Liberal government in December, 1905, led many responsible figures, especially Mr. Balfour, to fear for the continued life of the still infant Committee. In February of that year Sir George Clarke had pointed out to a rising Liberal-Imperialist, Richard Burdon Haldane, that : 'You will, I know, forgive me for saying that in matters bearing on national defence a Liberal Government would not - on taking office - command great confidence. The numbers of people who would welcome an immediate change if they felt assured on this point is very large'.¹⁵ Lord Selborne, at that time First Lord of the Admiralty, in the body of a memorandum submitted to the Cabinet in March, 1904, had come even closer to the bone :

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- 12 - 'Our Present Minimum Military Requirements and proposals for fulfilling them by a Reorganization of the Regular Army and Militia', Memorandum by the Prime Minister, 24 Feb. 1905. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 5/1/21C.
- 13 - Selborne to Balfour, 5 Apr. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49707.
- 14 - 'Army Reorganization', Memorandum by A.J. Balfour, 30 Mar. 1905. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/75, No. 54.
- 15 - Clarke to Haldane, 6 Feb. 1905. Haldane MSS, MS 5906.

The gravest danger which confronts us in connection with the Committee of Imperial Defence seems to me that it should be allowed to lapse in the future by some such Prime Minister as Sir Henry Campbell - Bannerman or Mr. Gladstone.¹⁶

Some measure of the apprehension with which Balfour himself viewed his replacement on the Committee by Campbell-Bannerman may be drawn from this note which

Sir George Clarke penned to his former chief in mid-December, 1905 :

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman accepts the C.I.D. in principle .
We must now try and get him to like it, and I think this may be possible.¹⁷

This same tone, excessive care lest disaster befall, may be gleaned from the following letter which Clarke wrote to Balfour on 2nd February, 1906 :

We had our first Committee meeting yesterday. It was an interesting study of human nature, I think - as did Lord Esher - that it went off quite well. I need not say how I missed you. There was plenty of discussion, sometimes wide off the mark. We did not arrive at any definite conclusions and Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman was a little at sea at first, but I earnestly hope all will go smoothly now that the ice is broken¹⁸

Viscount Esher writing to John Sandars, Balfour's private secretary, in October 1905, expressed for the C.I.D. the fear that :

. . . Campbell-Bannerman will let it die of inaction : that Clarke will be disgusted, and accept a governorship : and that then Spenser Wilkinson will take his place, or the Committee will revert to what it was, a spasmodic meeting of Cabinet Ministers, calling themselves the Defence Committee.¹⁹

16 - 'Memorandum on the proposals of the War Office (Reconstruction) Committee in respect of the Committee of Imperial Defence', The Earl of Selborne, 4 Mar. 1904. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/69, No. 38.

17 - Clarke to Balfour, 16 Dec. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

18 - Clarke to Balfour, 2 Jan. 1906. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

19 - Esher to Sandars, 7 Oct. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

Esher's very position on the Committee had arisen out of Balfour's concern for its continued life ; he had added Esher to the Committee as the personal representative of the King in the autumn of 1905 in anticipation of the demise of his government.

As Esher enthusiastically noted to his old friend in a letter some years later :

. . . I always remember that you put me on the Committee to 'hold the fort' for you - So I propose to fight them. When you become Prime Minister again I shall be ready to say my nunc dimittis.²⁰

No more forceful or telling comment upon Balfour's anxiety may be cited.

Fortunately, however, the Liberal-Imperialists of the new government, notably Mr. Haldane, were impressed with the need for sound comprehensive defence planning even at the risk of what many considered to be an invasion of cabinet responsibility. Haldane was coming increasingly to realise that the situation had deteriorated to the point where drastic action was essential if any satisfactory remedy was to be found. It would be pointless to enter into a long and tedious discussion concerning the subsequent development of the Committee under the guidance respectively of Lord Sydenham, Sir Charles Ottley and Lord Hankey. Suffice it to say that the Committee grew in size and importance over the years before 1914 spawning Sub-Committees from time to time designed to examine the many aspects, both military and civilian of the preparation for war. All of this work culminated in Lord Hankey's famous 'War Book'. In short the C.I.D. embarked upon an exhaustive study of the trivia of England's war preparedness, while almost completely overlooking the more fundamental problem of basic defence posture.

The advisory position of the C.I.D. was at once both its strength and its weakness. The Committee's advisory capacity is of especial note in view of the fact that its membership effectively constituted an inner council of the cabinet on the crucial issues of foreign policy and defence.²¹ The strength of this arrangement lay in the fact

20 - Esher to Balfour, 31 Dec. 1909. Balfour MSS. Add. MS 49719.

21 - Gibbs & Keith, The British Cabinet System, p. 112.

that such an organisation upheld the principles of cabinet solidarity in that all of the Committee's decisions were presented merely as advice for the guidance of the prime minister when discussing defence issues in cabinet. Mr. Balfour had underlined the advisory capacity of the Committee in a memorandum submitted to the Cabinet in late February, 1904 :

In considering its constitutional position, it is necessary to observe that in one fundamental particular it differs from any other part of our existing governmental machinery. It is consultative, not executive. It has no administrative functions : it cannot prescribe a policy to the Cabinet, nor give directions to the Army or to the Navy. Its duty is purely to advise ; and though advice on military matters in which the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for War, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and their technical assistants are agreed, is advice almost certain to be taken, still, the Defence Committee, as such, has no power to enforce it.²²

Nevertheless such a situation, regardless of how many times it might in fact have violated the letter, if not the law, of cabinet solidarity, revealed the essential weakness of the Defence Committee ; for constituted as it was, a solely advisory body at the disposal of the prime minister on matters of defence, it followed that the relative success or failure of the Committee depended very largely upon the leadership and degree of interest evinced by its chairman. Asquith, a man both weak in his personality and in his position, exhibited an unwarranted amount of concern for the purity and preservation of cabinet responsibility.²³ Now while it is true that as the years went by the Committee was accused of undermining cabinet responsibility in its adoption of decisions on matters of defence policy without reference to the cabinet, nevertheless the fact remains that the paucity of leadership on the part of both Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and Mr. Asquith crippled the development of the Committee as the true focal point for all defence co-ordination and planning. It is evident that the only figure with the

22 - 'A Note on the Constitution of the Defence Committee', A.J. Balfour, 29 Feb. 1904. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/69, No. 33.

23 - Johnson, Defence By Committee, pp. 104, 141, 156.

necessary prestige under ordinary circumstances to be able to direct such a revolution in the fields of strategic planning and inter-service co-operation was indeed the prime minister himself. He alone possessed anything more than an advisory capacity on the Committee, neither was he prejudiced in regard to these vital matters by virtue of holding any of the seals of the great departments of state, especially those of either the Admiralty or the War Office. Lord Sydenham, the first Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence, has written :

Under the British Constitution as now operating, it is vital that the Prime Minister of the day should make himself fully acquainted with the larger problems of National Defence involving decisions for which he is inevitably responsible²⁴

In Lord Sydenham's view Balfour had shouldered these responsibilities admirably ; Clarke, who was not one to mince his words, told Mr. Balfour on the occasion of his resignation :

Your current wish in connection with Imperial Defence must have great and lasting results. Whatever now happens, it cannot be undone, and it will be more and more widely recognised as time goes on.

I do not think any future Prime Minister can avoid personal and direct responsibility for dealing with all matters affecting national security, and you have provided him with means to acquire the necessary knowledge to arrive at reasoned opinions.²⁵

Unfortunately, however, the two Liberal prime ministers who followed Mr. Balfour failed singularly to live up to any such responsibility. Mr. Asquith, having little interest in defence matters, ignored the C.I.D. for many long spells ; during the years of his administration prior to the Agadir crisis the Committee as a whole met on only fourteen occasions as compared to the eighty-two full sessions during Mr. Balfour's three years as Prime Minister. This is not to say that the two pre-war prime ministers

24 - Sydenham of Coombe, My Working Life, p. 177.

25 - Clarke to Balfour, 5 Dec. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

had no sympathy with the Committee or with its aims, they simply did not understand either the motives which had prompted Mr. Balfour or the staggering problems posed to a country such as England in the event of a future war with any sizeable adversary. Speaking in the House on 5th March, 1903, Mr. Balfour had underlined the role of the C.I.D. as he hoped to see it evolve :

The New Defence Committee is more ambitious . . . in its scope. The idea the Government had in establishing it is not to take up from time to time questions referred to it by the Cabinet, but to make it its duty to survey as a whole the strategical and military needs of the Empire, to deal with the complicated questions which are all essential elements in that general problem, and to revise from time to time their own previous decisions, so that the Cabinet shall always be informed and always have at its disposal information upon these important points. They should not be left to the crisis of the moment, but when there is no special stress or strain the Government and its advisers should devote themselves to the consideration of these broad and all-important issues.²⁶

For example it might well be pointed out that the Invasion Sub-Committee inquiry of 1907 - 1908 was in fact forced upon Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman in part by Lord Roberts, Colonel Repington and other supporters of the National Service League, but more directly as the result of pressure from Mr. Balfour himself. Asquith was willing enough in October, 1908, to establish a new Sub-Committee in order to examine the problems of Imperial defence as a whole, but once again the initiative came from outside ; in this case from the Secretary of the Committee, Captain (Rear-Admiral) Sir Charles Ottley. It must, of course, be understood that it was precisely the task of the Secretariat to suggest topics for investigation, though the suggestion ought hardly to have been necessary on such fundamental issues. But the point is that whereas Asquith was willing enough to permit such investigations, he lacked the foresight and enthusiasm necessary in order to become the active catalyst upon which the Committee's effectiveness was wholly dependent. In glancing through the minutes of these C.I.D. meetings summoned while

26 - Parliamentary Debates (Authorized Edition), Vol. 118, 4th Ser.,
5 Mar. 1903, Col. 1579.

Asquith was Prime Minister one is struck by the Chairman's tremendous organizational ability, by the facile manner in which he restricted discussion to the point at issue ; but the same perusal reveals also that Asquith's performance never went beyond that of a presiding manager, his participation in the body of the discussion is notable only for its singular absence. But perhaps this passivity of Asquith's may best be illustrated from the following passage which appears in Lord Hankey's memoirs ; it clearly indicates that perhaps Asquith's grasp of the more fundamental purposes of the Committee of Imperial Defence was not all that it might have been :

On returning from summer leave in the autumn of 1909 I realised that apart from matters of routine, we were threatened with a shortage of work. The big policy inquiries that had kept us so busy during the last eighteen months were all completed My own feeling was that we had arrived at a junction in the history of the Committee at which, If we did not take some decisive step forward, we should slip back. I therefore wrote a memorandum entitled 'The War Organisation of the British Empire', which I submitted to Ottley. He forwarded it with his own reply to Haldane, who warmly commended it. Ottley then sent the whole correspondence to Asquith, who read it, but took no immediate action to give effect to it. Nevertheless this Memorandum played a considerable part in the future development of our defensive preparations. It contained suggestions for the study of a number of questions including the following - the compilation of the War Book, this being the first reference to the subject ; measures of economic pressure beginning with an investigation of a policy of 'days of grace' to enemy merchant ships, to be followed by consideration of such questions as the cornering of raw materials in war and financial blockade ; the capture of enemy colonies ; the co-operation of the Dominions in the Committee of Imperial Defence for the study of these and similar questions ; also intelligence, treatment of aliens and our own economic position.²⁷

Hankey goes on to relate how the projects mentioned in his memorandum were in fact taken up by various Sub-Committees of the C.I.D. following upon a decision taken not on

27 - Hankey, Baron (Maurice P.), The Supreme Command, (London, 1961), Vol. I, p. 85.

Asquith's initiative but rather as the fruit of Haldane's constant agitation for co-ordinated defence planning. Haldane's anxiety over Asquith's failure to make proper use of the Committee had led him to urge the creation of a proper Defence Ministry, though his motives went beyond mere concern for efficiency in that he wanted to remove such delicate matters as defence policy from the gaze of his pacifist and 'Little Englander' colleagues in the Cabinet. Writing to Balfour in August 1910 Viscount Esher noted that he had told Haldane :

. . . I felt sure . . . that you [Balfour] would concentrate all 'Defence Schemes' in your own hands, and that your First Lord of the Admiralty and Secretary of State for War would be instruments of your policy and not its masters.

That was the true purpose of the Committee of Imperial Defence, i.e. that the Prime Minister should be the 'Minister of Defence' for only he can co-ordinate all the departments concerned in the immense business of providing for the defence of the Empire²⁸

Haldane had raised this matter with Esher owing to his anxiety for the continuation of his policies at the War Office should the government fall over the House of Lords crisis. No clearer illustration of Balfour's fundamental attitude towards the Committee can be put forward. Viscount Esher, himself a proponent of Haldane's Defence Ministry, writing at the close of December, 1909, concerning the stagnation in the Committee of Imperial Defence, noted that:

Wilson, who is at the Admiralty now every day, has objected and cannot see the Committee of Imperial Defence has anything to do with the general planning of Naval and Military operations in certain contingencies. He maintains that these are matters which should be left to the Chief of the General Staff and the First Sea Lord to discuss and arrange between themselves.

This of course is putting the clock back some years. If Asquith acquiesced in this view it would strike a very severe if not a deadly blow to the Committee of Imperial Defence.²⁹

28 - Esher to Balfour, 16 Aug. 1910. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

29 - Esher to Balfour, 24 Dec. 1909. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, (London, 1934), Vol. II, p. 428.

The context of the above remark is not of immediate concern at this point. It is sufficient to realise that Esher's faith in Asquith's leadership and determination on defence issues was such that he could voice only doubt on so vital a matter.

Viscount Haldane, not without some evident disapproval, has remembered of his old friend and former colleague :

From the beginning he meant to be Prime Minister. For this position nature had endowed him to a great extent, but only to some extent. He had the best intellectual apparatus, restricted to grasp, understanding and judgement, that I ever saw in any man. He was a serious person in those days. His photograph makes him look like a stern Nonconformist. I remember passing along the Horse Guards with him when he touched my arm and pointed to the figure of John Bright in front of us - 'there he said is the only man in public life who has risen to eminence without being corrupted by London society'. In 1885 I got into the House of Commons as Member of East Lothian. I had more daring than Asquith and took the risk, - a considerable one, of entering Parliament while still a Junior. Next year Asquith followed my example, and I introduced him to East Fife where he had a secure seat for many years. He had not been long in the House of Commons before he made a brilliant speech, and this, coupled with his great Oxford reputation, turned the attention to him not only of his leaders but of the public. His diction was faultless, and his voice was a powerful one. He rarely made a bad point, and it was a surprise to nobody when in 1892 Mr. Gladstone made him Home Secretary. But before that time he, and Grey, and Arthur Acland, and Sydney Buxton and I formed an organization of young Liberal members which had much of the future in its hands. We acted with a good deal of independence, and we shaped policy by our influence. Asquith did not originate much, he was not a man of imagination, but when we had worked anything out we always chose him to state it for us, - a thing he did to perfection.³⁰

This statement serves to corroborate the conclusions which have already been drawn from the minutes of the C.I.D. meetings with respect to Asquith's mental rigidity. Asquith

30 - 'Note on Letters contained in my Boxes', autumn 1926, pp. 4-5.
Haldane MSS, MS 5923.

was, indeed, not a man of imagination any more than he was one willing to take risks.

While it may well be that Hankey is entirely correct in his assertion with respect to the War Book that 'From the King to the printer, everyone knew what he had to do',³¹ no doubt Hankey would not approve of the evidence of his own words, as quoted above, with respect to Asquith's attitude towards the Committee of Imperial Defence. But the fact cannot be escaped that he errs seriously in asserting :

Our policy may have been good or bad ; there may be room for argument on this. But there are two criticisms to which Asquith's Government is not open - that it had no policy or that its policy was not arrived at after the most thorough investigation.³²

One has only to cursorily examine the events of 4th to 12th August, 1914, in order to realise that this statement has no validity either in terms of political or military preparation on the levels of either grand, or even simple, strategy. However, Hankey does not err in his belief that the War Book could not have been better prepared or put into operation - given, of course, the thesis that few understood or had even any inclination of the nature or extent of the conflict for which they were planning. But what was the use of such detail, as contained in the War Book, when the fundamental considerations which governed the nature of such instructions had not been thrashed out and formulated into an effective defence policy ? Not Hankey, Haldane or Fisher, not even Grey could effect such a fundamental decision alone. The C.I.D., supervised so expertly by Ottley and Hankey, arranged all the details, drew up the schedules, and saw to it that everything which could be done on their level to bring together the War Office and the Admiralty was effected ; but it was Asquith alone who could give all the components value, reason and direction by channeling them into the service of a clearly understood fundamental strategic policy. This discrepancy was, indeed, to become a favorite and recurring theme of Sir John Fisher's in later years ; but even as early as October 1903 'Jackie'

31 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, p. 139.

32 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, p. 76.

was haranguing the Prime Minister :

It has been put in the very forefront that the organisation of the War Office is intimately associated with our Naval Strength. Who has yet stated exactly what we want the British Army to do ?
No one !³³

Balfour's great contribution lay in the establishment of the C.I.D., and his initiation of a new spirit of reform throughout the Defence Establishment. It was Asquith's task to make use of these tools, so painstakingly fashioned, in order to impose a unity and direction upon the formulation of overall defence policy which had previously been so lacking. In the face of the challenge Asquith turned away, as he did in so many issues which threatened to raise the same note of controversy. Asquith, in short, failed to fulfill the promise of Balfour's beginnings.

Had Asquith accepted the challenge which was the legacy of Balfour's premiership, had he shown the necessary leadership, had he created the necessary centre for strategic planning and co-ordination, his hand would have in no way been forced in deciding the crucial issue of England's attitude towards the Continental combinations as they emerged in July-August 1914. On the contrary, possessed of a clear and precise image of England's strategic requirements and capabilities, he would have been in a far more solid position to take the wisest decision in terms of the vital interests of England and the Empire. But having once achieved that decision of international policy, a decision based upon a thorough understanding of the limitations imposed by strategical necessity and ability, then the implementation of that decision would have involved no more than an automatic shift over to the fundamental strategic policies, complete with their intricate superstructural secondary planning, which ought to have been arrived at without ambiguity during the years before 1914.

Like so many of his contemporaries Asquith only half understood the need for a supreme defence planning and co-ordination council. It was not that the Prime Minister

33 - Fisher to Balfour, 'A Brief Precis of the Principal Considerations That Must Influence Our Future Naval and Military Policy', 19 Oct. 1903. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.

failed to see anything of value in the C.I.D., rather he refused to recognise the immediacy of the problem and preferred to defer indefinitely those necessary but unpleasant decisions which were so vital to the defence policy of the Empire during the years before the Great War. Viscount Esher, the close confidant of both King and Cabinet during these years has left this contemporary evaluation of the Prime Minister :

Asquith's mind is a perfect instrument and he takes points after the manner of a trained lawyer. But he lacks some element of character, perhaps hardness. I should say he was a soft man ; and his chin recedes when an attack is possible or imminent.³⁴

Esher's opinion of Balfour, by way of contrast, has already been made clear ; but by way of confirmation the following extract from his 'Journals' for December, 1908, deserves note :

His superiority to his contemporaries in grasp and courageous thinking is . . . marked.³⁵

Viscount Haldane recalling his days in Asquith's Cabinet has noted :

. . . it was organization for war and organization of industry which were the two subjects that fascinated me during the ten years of Liberal Cabinet life, and I did not succeed in educating my colleagues, although I got the Army re-organized, the Navy influenced and more Universities founded. The situation grew more and more difficult as liberalism, growing older and more inert seemed to me to be losing touch Anyhow by degrees the conviction deepened with me that Asquith was not sufficiently moved by new ideas to give the nation the lead it needed³⁶

Leadership, that was the crucial issue. Asquith was content enough to allow both himself and the C.I.D. to become immersed in the detail which was forced upon the Committee by those who, like Haldane, recognized the organization's shortcomings, but were themselves in no position to influence the more fundamental aspects of defence

34 - Journals, 27 Nov. 1907. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 263.

35 - Journals, 28 Dec. 1908. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 364.

36 - 'Note on Letters contained in my Boxes', autumn 1926, pp. 16 - 17.
Haldane MSS, MS 5923.

planning - to fill the vacuum of centralised leadership. Yet in spite of all this peripheral activity, which has caused Hankey to wax enthusiastically of the work of the C.I.D. - especially after his appointment as Assistant Naval Secretary in 1908 - the very fact that over the span of years between December 1905 and August 1914 the Committee of Imperial Defence convened formally on only forty-six occasions, as compared with the eighty-two full sessions summoned during Mr. Balfour's brief period in office, is evidence enough that the organization had lost itself in the details of defence planning within its myriad sub-committees. One might argue that this procedure became necessary owing not only to the lack of leadership exhibited by Asquith, but also as the result of the large expansion of the Committee which Asquith had swollen with retired soldiers and statesmen. This is hardly an excuse. Though this expansion of the Committee, which had tended to convert it into a graceful pasture for 'Elder Statesmen and Soldiers' who had been put out to grass, clearly showed how completely Asquith had failed to grasp the true importance and potential of the C.I.D. Hankey, always one to be attracted to the trivia while overlooking the wider issues, expressed his annoyance with Asquith over this development.³⁷ But, of course, it was merely a lesser symptom of a far more sinister malady - a malady which Lord Hankey chose to ignore. Balfour placed this matter in its correct perspective, with reference to Asquith's overall attitude towards the C.I.D., after the war :

As a matter of fact the Liberals never understood it properly - and I believe Campbell-Bannerman really thought of abolishing it! However, it survived; I think Haldane saw the point of it better. But they went about asking this person and that person to sit on it, till there was a danger of some of these people thinking they had a right to be on it; there was a danger of it becoming a centre for Elder Soldiers - who are even more dangerous than Elder Statesmen.³⁸

37 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, pp. 47 - 48.

38 - Dugdale, Arthur James Balfour, Vol. I, p. 369.

Clearly then, Balfour did not consider that the legacy, bequeathed to his country in 1905, had been developed into that organisation which he had hoped would emerge with the passage of the years. Perhaps the criticism which has been heaped upon Asquith appears a trifle harsh. The Prime Minister had, after all, to retain the unity of a Cabinet deeply divided on diplomatic and social issues, a Cabinet of individuals wholly unlike the pliable instrument which Balfour had been able to turn to his own ends. But, nevertheless, the issue of leadership must not be overlooked or minimised ; Asquith, unlike Campbell-Bannerman, lacked the fibre to overtly enforce his will - especially in such matters as defence policy which held little attraction for him. But the flaw was by no means confined to the politicians and their politics, for while leadership was no doubt the fundamental issue nevertheless it must not be forgotten that the Services were as unwilling to co-operate with one another as they were to submit to any central authority. It is, therefore, towards the War Office and the Admiralty that we must turn in order to find the second fatal flaw which contributed towards the government's failure to evolve any effective higher organisation for supreme planning and defence co-ordination.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NEW ARMY

For the attack only two things are necessary : to know where the enemy is and to decide what to do. What the enemy intends to do is of no importance.

Colonel Loiseau de Grandmaison ;
1912.

. . . in preparation for my book on Foch . . . I had to investigate the question of how the Franco-British entente of 1904 developed into military staff arrangements that, when the 1914 crisis came, had committed Britain to support France and to a Continental strategy, far more deeply than the British Government were aware - leading to the abandonment of her basic policy and strategy in war. That study also brought me to see how unthinkingly the prevailing Continental strategic doctrine had been swallowed in Britain by the then newly created General Staff, and came to be accepted by the Government it advised without any realisation of the natural consequences.

Captain B.H. Liddell Hart ;
1965.

DURING the brief span of years between the end of the South African War and the coming of the war in Europe, the British Army was transformed from a rather inefficient imperial constabulary into the nucleus of what was to become a vast host drawing upon every last resource of the nation. This transformation, this reversal from the inadequate to the ill-considered, was accomplished not upon the lines of a preconceived blueprint, but rather as the result of the inability, indeed the unwillingness, of the embryonic, stunted, defence establishment to channel what was undoubtedly needed reform along realistic and sensible lines. As is so often the case, the Army Reforms which followed upon the Boer War were initiated with no clear view as to their final purpose with the ensuing consequence

that the machinery of reform soon shook itself free from any co-ordinated, intelligent, overall direction.

The nineteenth century British Army had managed to retain some vestige of the prestige of Wellington and Waterloo, that is until it was faced with the denouement of the scandalous Crimean campaign. Impecunious, starved for brains, and shunned by successive governments the Army sank into a morass of inefficiency and aimlessness. With the Duke of Cambridge as Commander-in-Chief the officers' mess was seldom the scene of inspired debates on military topics - except perhaps when the conversation turned upon such matters as regimental rectitude or became heated over the tactical implications of the day's polo fixture¹. True, the Army remained a respectable refuge for the sons of gentlemen, though there is evidence that by the close of the century both the Army and the Church had been reduced to bickering over the available recruits¹. Lord Ismay, has recalled the dismay with which his parents received his decision to give up his proposed diplomatic career in order to join the Army. It was not that the Army offered any special professional attraction of itself, for as has been pointed out the prestige of a military career was very much in question by the close of the nineteenth century. Rather Ismay's decision was symptomatic of the restlessness of his generation, the generation of Winston Churchill. Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, Asquith's daughter, has noted with regard to this thirsting for adventure at a time when the country was at its apogee of power and influence:

Of the First World War it may be said that never has such a gay and brilliant generation been so ardently prepared to meet an early death. The great and terrible opportunity which lay in wait for them was unforeseen, unguessed-at by the youth of 1896 who scoured a placid world in search of danger.¹

It was indeed a placid world ; so Ismay, therefore, chose to join the Indian Cavalry for with them he could savour both the opulence and grandeur of the Raj together with the romance and adventure of the North-West Frontier. In all of that 'placid world'

1 - Bonham Carter, V., Winston Churchill As I Knew Him, (London, 1965), pp. 31 - 32.

England viewed the Indian frontier defence issue as virtually her sole military problem - only through service in India did the 'Imperial Constabulary' offer the adventure and glamour customarily associated with an Army career. And so Hastings Ismay followed the 'great man' in search of danger and fame. But his father, while permissive, was very far from pleased feeling that he had reared his son for a more illustrious career than that offered by the British Army. Ismay has recalled his father's views upon the military in general and cavalry officers in particular :

My father was particularly upset at the idea of my joining the Indian Cavalry, and never tired of telling the story about the cavalry officer who was so stupid that even his brother officers noticed it.²

Ismay makes the further rather damning observation upon his own brother officers :

Many of my contemporaries were destined to be killed or crippled in the First World War and, partly for that reason, an unusually high proportion of them went to the top of the military ladder. Notable among them were Field-Marshal Lord Gort, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Newall, Generals Platt, Giffard, Riddell-Webster, Franklyn and Heath, and Air Chief Marshal Ludlow-Hewitt.³

The Army provided those who were possessed of a suitably large private income with the necessary entrée into London's society ; it had the attributes and advantages of a London club. The British Army was not a professional military organization. The very concept of a professional officers' corps was repugnant to soldiers who preferred to see themselves cast simply as the gentry of England standing guard over the hearth of Empire. A laudable enough ambition ; but, unfortunately, one which failed to tally with the hard facts of international politics and Imperial Defence. The course of the war in South Africa was proof enough even for the most rabid Gladstone Liberals that something, they knew not quite what, had to be done about reforming the Army.

2 - Ismay, Baron (Hastings L.), The Memoirs of General The Lord Ismay, (London, 1960), p. 4.

3 - Ismay, Memoirs, p. 4.

Tentative moves in the direction of reform had been initiated during the late 1880's and 1890's. These attempts - particularly those of the Hartington Commission - had been aimed at something more than logistical reorganisation in seeking to eliminate the bottleneck of power which the office and the person of the Commander-in-Chief had imposed upon the entire military establishment. These early moves in favour of the creation of a general staff system had, undoubtedly, been bitterly opposed by Cambridge, and, interestingly enough, by the then Secretary of State for War, Campbell-Bannerman, who stated that he felt such a thinking organ dedicated to the planning of the wars of the future, designed to rise to any contingency, posed a grave threat to the liberties of his countrymen and was of itself prejudicial to the peace of all Europe.⁴ Such opposition must not be brushed aside simply as the doctrinaire mouthings of a typical disciple of Bright and Cobden who had allowed his beliefs to get the better of his sounder judgement ; for Campbell-Bannerman's criticism while wrong in terms of the form, that is the future Imperial General Staff, was correct in terms of the substance, for the military rebirth which was, at that moment, upon the threshold of conception was in short order to run riot and force England headlong into an ill-considered war involving the resources of the country in a military campaign upon the Continent.

It was traditional virtue for the government of the day to ensure the continued impecuniosity of the military establishment : a virtue which became a temporary vice only once in every decade, and that upon the occasion of the perennial invasion scares. The Liberal tradition of British politics had been very largely built upon the necessity of the virtue of maintaining the military arm at a minimal strength lest its purpose be perverted by 'men of evil disposition'. It is at once both a measure of how successful this policy had been, and how useless the Army in fact was, that the government was willing to relinquish its executive control over the Army very largely into the hands of a military personage, indeed a regal appointee of the blood-royal. Whereas that same government considered the naval service so vital to England's security that the office of the Lord High

4 - Ensor, R.C.K., England 1870 - 1914, (Oxford, 1936), p. 291.

Admiral had long ago been placed in commission, its functions being executed by a Board composed of political and professional advisers responsible to Parliament. Clearly Victoria's governments did not feel that the advantage to be gained from imposing such a system upon the British Army was at all commensurate with the certain wrath of the old Queen. The corollary to which was that the government did not consider the military establishment a significant threat to the integrity of the Constitution. But then by the same token neither did the British Army offer any real deterrent to the great predatory land powers of the Continent who were increasingly becoming a major threat to the Empire.

Prior to 1899 in the midst of that period of tranquility which is traditionally referred to as the Pax Britannica the British Army had managed to function reasonably successfully as a glorified fire-brigade designed to maintain law and order within the bounds of the Empire. Its appalling organization was suited well enough to quelling the dervishes of the Sudan, or the wild and savage tribesmen of Afghanistan ; but when faced with a well-equipped resourceful enemy, such as the Dutchmen of the Boer Republics, this post-Caldwell British Army was stripped of all pretence to military prowess or technical capability. The South African war revealed that only the Royal Navy stood between the Empire and the enemies of Great Britain, and, further, that the country was incapable of answering any serious military threat to the life of the Empire.

And so it was that the concern of the late 1880's and 1890's blossomed into a chorus of demand for immediate and far-reaching reform following upon the debacle in South Africa. But it must be understood that it was a demand simply for a reformed military establishment capable of meeting and overcoming any threat to the Empire, from any quarter, and especially from the great imperialist powers of Europe. There was no question of creating a new concept in military organization, there was no intention of establishing a military capability of such magnitude as to be able to deal effectively with the great land powers of the Continent upon an equal footing within Europe. For it was readily sensed, if not clearly understood that such a military policy was incompatible with England's political, strategic and economic intents, and would be so foolhardy that it might serve ultimately only to ensure the doom of the Nation and seal the fate of the

Empire.⁵

However, just as the events of the Boer War had summoned forth a growing chorus of popular demand for military reform, so too they had revealed that tides of change were beginning to make themselves felt within the Army. The great pivotal campaign in South Africa had given the nation its first truly military hero, Lord Kitchener notwithstanding, since Wellington in the person of Field-Marshal Lord Roberts. Curiously enough in terms of the annals of military affairs, and yet understandable with regard to the military reorientation which was to follow upon the close of the war, Roberts became the fount of the revival within the Army. He was one of those rare military figures who, having risen to the pinnacle of their profession, are yet capable of objective criticism of themselves and of the system which had shaped their careers. Lord Ismay, a close observer of soldiers of various pedigrees at the pinnacle, has noted in this respect :

The higher a soldier rises in his profession the more sheltered his life becomes. He is surrounded by a large and loyal staff, whose aim it is to do their utmost to spare their chief from unnecessary troubles or unpleasantness. Without being in any way 'yes men', their sense of discipline does not permit them to oppose his wishes too forcibly, or to state their own case too boldly. Thus, the commander becomes more and more accustomed to having his own way and more and more prone to resent criticism.⁶

Roberts, was, therefore something of a remarkable exception from his brother officers in his more basic attitudes, quite apart from his detailed advanced thinking.

Roberts had succeeded Viscount Wolseley as Commander-in-Chief in 1901 and following upon his successes in South Africa in that year he brought with him to the top a stable of younger officers who collectively were to shape the new British Army in its

5 - See : Parliamentary Debates (Authorised Edition), Vol. 93, 4th Ser., 13 May 1901. Col. 1572.
Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), The Committee of Imperial Defence, (London, 1912), p. 4.

6 - Ismay, Memoirs, p. 209.

every aspect during the years before 1914. Douglas Haig, Henry Wilson, Gerald Ellison, James Grierson, Henry Rawlinson, Charles Callwell, Frederick Maurice, Ian Hamilton, Horace Smith-Dorrien, William Nicholson, John French and William Robertson were to be swept into the War Office's key appointments in the course of the few years following upon the war in South Africa. These were the men of whom Haldane noted shortly after assuming office :

The men one comes across, the new school of young officers, entitled to the appellation of men of science just as much as engineers and chemists, were to me a revelation ; and the whole question of the organization of the Army is fraught with an interest which, I think, is not behind that of the study of any other scientific problem. A new school of officers has arisen since the South African War, a thinking school of officers who desire to see the full efficiency which comes from new organisation and no surplus energy running to waste.⁷

Major-General Haig, as a case in point, had first been brought to Haldane's attention by Balfour whose recommendation was strongly supported by the King. Edward commended Haig to Haldane as an outstanding example of the new professional breed of soldier, and as the

. . . officer whose experience of staff work in the field and whose higher abilities should be utilised in this particular branch the [War Office], whose initiative and organizing power are at this moment much wanted.⁸

As the result largely of Esher's energies Haig was recalled from Kitchener's staff in India to take up the W.O. appointment of Director of Military Training.⁹ In this capacity he became Haldane's chief aide during the difficult months of 1907 and 1908 when the War Office was fighting desperately to find approval, not only in the country but within

7 - Terraine, J., Douglas Haig : The Educated Soldier, (London, 1963), p. 44.

8 - Charteris, J., Field-Marshal Earl Haig, (London, 1929), p. 34.

9 - Esher to Kitchener, 21 Dec. 1905. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, ed. M.V. Brett (London, 1934), Vol. II, p. 132.

the Cabinet, for the sweeping reforms accomplished in the face of centuries of tradition by the establishment of the Territorial Force.¹⁰ Haig has been vilified on every quarter for his conduct both as Commander of the First Army Corps and later as Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France. But it is important to underline not only Haig's contributions to the New British Army, but also that the Westerners of a decade later were the bright lights of expectation who dominated this era of renewal and initiation. As will shortly be seen much exaggeration and bombast has accompanied the praise heaped upon the establishment and operation of the General Staff. In truth the Staff was more a symbol of the new age than a practical functioning instrument. Nevertheless it must not be forgotten that it was Douglas Haig who was responsible for the inception and evolution of the extension of the British Staff system to the Empire as a whole. Haldane himself was never altogether satisfied with the administration of the Army, expressing on several occasions his admiration of the German system whereby the administrative and staff functions were wholly divorced. In the British system the Chief of the Imperial General Staff was himself ipso facto the First Military Member of the Army Council, the responsibilities of which extended over the entire administrative fabric of the Army, as distinct from its operational direction.¹¹

These new men were to impart an entirely new professional flavour to the British Army, a flavour which in due course was to transform the 'Imperial Constabulary' into a fully-fledged Continental-style military establishment based upon the principles of mass and compulsion. But, as is so often the case, while Lord Roberts had given these men their initial beginnings they themselves soon commenced to press forward ideas of their own, and with the rise of this 'thinking army' Roberts was soon pushed aside eventually to fall victim of the axe of the 'Dauntless Three' on the Esher Committee. Upon the

10 - Charteris, Haig, p. 38.

11 - See : Appendix I, 'The Administrative and Operational Organisation of The War Office and The Admiralty'.

military sidelines, but nevertheless at the forefront of the reform movement, stood such outstanding 'string-pullers' as Lt.-Col. Charles à Court Repington, Professor Spenser Wilkinson, Viscount Esher and, of course, Mr. Haldane.

These then were the men who dominated the reorientation of England's military establishment during the years prior to 1914. Their motives were very largely mixed, as various as their differing thoughts upon the eventual role of the New Army in world affairs. Without doubt some of the soldiers, notably Henry Wilson and Wully Robertson, regarded the military revival, in part at least, as a vehicle for the pursuit of personal power and influence. Others, such as Haldane and Esher, recognised that the true 'military' needs of the Empire and of England rested upon the maintenance of British sea power and they, therefore, acted accordingly. For the others they stood somewhere between these polarities, torn by the conflict between their professional punctilio and a broader view of England's vital interests. But it is important not to attempt too closely to pigeonhole these men, for many of them suffered from the common fault of their era, as perhaps of all eras, in that few of them bothered to logically think through the consequences of their actions. Douglas Haig is perhaps the best example of this type. Still others became bogged down in the trappings of their newly won power and position, with the result that they really fell back into that morass within which the bulk of their fellow officers had been too long content to move; Sir John French's decline is perhaps a good incident of this particular process of erosion. But, as will be seen, throughout every level of the military establishment there reigned a miasma of confusion and misconception arising from the paucity of executive governmental supervision and control. From the outset this feebleness gave rise to a series of seemingly minor military coups which were eventually to drive England to participation in a vast continental holocaust.

All of these men had been deeply affected by their consciousness of England's relative military incapacity compared to the readily obvious capability of the armies of Continental Europe. The profound influence of French and German military organization and strategic thinking was patent upon all of them. As will be seen this influence ranged from Haldane's moderate well-balanced acceptance of the better facets of the Prussian military system, to the fanatical and suicidal embrace of French military dogma by

Henry Wilson. It is of some note that whereas Haldane approached the problem of reform from a largely military view-point, the soldiers, notably Wilson, were far more deeply motivated by the potential political advantages which they envisaged.

No longer were the leading military figures speaking in terms of romantic skirmishes upon the outposts of Empire, but rather now they were thinking of a military commitment of forces within Europe. The precise nature of the purpose to which this New Army was to be put on the Continent remains one of the most clouded and yet most important issues of pre-war military strategic planning. Regardless of what Haldane and Esher had in mind it seems clear that the soldiers had no intention of permitting the British Expeditionary Force to be employed merely as a Naval appendage. It is evident that from the outset Henry Wilson had been thinking in terms of a full-scale military commitment directly to the heart of any Continental conflict. Wilson's major objection to the Haldane Reforms lay in the lack of provision for any rapid expansion of the Army upon the outbreak of war in Europe.¹² It is instructive to tie this fact into Wilson's support for Lord Roberts' campaign for compulsion in the interests of Home Defence. But Henry Wilson held no exclusive patent upon revolutionary new ideas ; in the autumn of 1906 Haig is found writing to Ellison :

Our object in my opinion should be to start a system of finance suited to the 'supposed situation', i.e. a great war requiring the whole resources of the nation to bring it to a successful end. Even if the proposed system costs more in peace, it should be inaugurated provided that it is more practical in war The Germans seem to be going ahead with the utmost self-assurance and energy, so that the crisis is sure of coming before many years are over.¹³

Repington, in spite of his advocacy of the retention of the voluntary principle for the first line army, was baldly sounding a radically new note in asserting :

12 - Wilson, H.H., Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson Bart. : His Life and Diaries, ed. Charles E. Callwell (London, 1927), Vol. I, p. 76.

13 - Terraine, Haig, pp. 40 - 41.

. . . the turn of compulsion will come The hands of the clock move steadily on, but the hour of that change has not yet struck.¹⁴

Haig himself is stated to have viewed the B.E.F. from the very earliest as an 'advance guard' under whose protection a mass army could be organized.¹⁵ Discounting the natural bias of hindsight the following extract from Robertson's somewhat acerbic reminiscences reveals yet further and even more controversial evidence of the revolution in military thought :

Grierson was as convinced as myself that the only policy consistent with the interests of the Empire was an active alliance with France and Belgium¹⁶

There were also strivings within these same military circles against the stranglehold exercised by 'ignorant' civilians over military affairs, a stranglehold which had, admittedly, hitherto seldom been exercised in anything other than a negatively financial manner. Some, such as Ellison, felt merely that in time of war all decisions of policy ought to be left in military hands.¹⁷ Others, and here Wilson must once again be pilloried, asserted that the civil authority had no business meddling in any aspect of the formulation or exercise of military power. At the close of 1901 Wilson had noted in his rather frank, and therefore somewhat indiscreet, diary :

The whole idea of governing the army by a civilian, whose whole training has been political expediency, and who knows less about the army than I do about the navy, is vicious in theory and hopeless in practice.¹⁸

And if Wilson's choice remarks upon Haldane's competency passed many years later are any indication it would seem that the reforms initiated by the Esher Committee had done

14 - Cited : Luvass, J., The Education of an Army : British Military Thought, 1815 - 1940, (Chicago, 1964), p. 311.

15 - Charteris, Haig, p. 42.

16 - Robertson, W.R., From Private to Field-Marshal, (London, 1921), p. 139.

17 - Ellison, G., The Perils of Amateur Strategy, (London, 1926), p. xxvi.

18 - Diary, 31 Dec. 1901. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 47.

little to mellow his views. Indeed, the entire spectrum of the 'new men' from Haig through Ellison to Robertson and Wilson was marked by a very conscious and oft-expressed contempt for politics and politicians. Perhaps this was natural enough in itself ; but one has only to glance at contemporary Germany and more especially France to perceive an identical attitude on the part of the professionals towards the politicians. In short Wilson's attitude was merely the reflection of a fashionable trend of thought within the 'new army'. After all if military powers upon the Continent demanded such an attitude the men of England's 'new army' must follow suit as they had already done in so many other areas.

The substance of the reforms which were actually carried through after the close of the war in South Africa do not fall within the scope of the present study. The War Office, that traditional graveyard of ministerial reputations, proved to be no less disastrous for the careers of St. John Brodrick and Arnold-Forster. Both of these men failed to satisfy the demands for reform, which emanated from every quarter, very largely because they lacked the humility to admit that others too possessed ideas worthy of attention. Arnold-Forster's conduct at the War Office was such that King Edward was led to the observation that the journalist turned Secretary of State for War was 'not quite a gentleman'.¹⁹ However, Arnold-Forster's arrogance must be granted indulgence in recalling the disgraceful, if effective, behaviour of the War Office Reconstruction Committee chaired by Viscount Esher. As the work of the Committee progressed Arnold-Forster felt himself to be continually under observation, and realising that neither the King nor the Prime Minister trusted him to effect the necessary reforms he became thoroughly obstructive. Early in January 1905 Arnold-Forster became positively insulting in his tone towards Balfour questioning the efficacy of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and implied in a letter to the Prime Minister that he, Balfour, was dithering over his own resolution concerning the proposed use for which the Army was to be prepared. On 21st January 1905 the Prime Minister wrote to Arnold-Forster observing somewhat coolly :

19 - Cited : Young, K., Arthur James Balfour, (London, 1963), p. 230.

I am not sure that I quite understand the first paragraph in your letter of the 13th, in which you say that, "in despite of hard work on the Committee of Defence, both you and your colleagues on that body are still quite in the dark as to any exact knowledge of what the Army is for, or what ought to be its true dimensions". For my own part I have no doubt whatever as to the purposes for which we require an Army ; and though doubt may legitimately exist as to what its "true dimensions" ought to be, this is due to the changes of opinion on the part of the Indian Government as to the number and character of the reinforcements they would require, and the dates at which they would be required, after war broke out with Russia.²⁰

This was far more than a technical misunderstanding for Arnold-Forster was himself consumed with the 'Indian Frontier Bogey', as he had noted in a letter of 13th January 1905 to the Prime Minister :

I . . . believe that great dangers threaten us from India, and possibly in Africa, and that to provide against these dangers we must have a well trained Army capable of large expansion in time of war.²¹

If Balfour's message was perhaps lost on Arnold-Forster, such was clearly not the case with Viscount Esher who noted in a memorandum for Sandars dated 1 May 1905 :

The Prime Minister has laid down in the plainest language the maximum use to which our Army is likely to be put and the maximum numbers which can be safely maintained in peace.²²

Clearly the Secretary of State for War was indeed 'not quite a gentleman'. Nevertheless as Henry Wilson noted in his diary early in February 1904 :

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- 20 - Balfour to Arnold-Forster, 21 Jan. 1905 ; 'Army Reorganisation (Sub-Committee) : Correspondence between the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for War'. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/74, No. 10 .
- 21 - Arnold-Forster to Balfour, 13 Jan. 1905 ; 'Army Reorganisation (Sub-Committee) : Correspondence between the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for War'. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/74, No. 10.
- 22 - Esher to Sandars, 'Memorandum on Army Reorganisation', 1 May 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49718.

This morning I was summoned before the Esher-Fisher-Clarke Committee, and Esher asked me if I would undertake the new office which dealt with the Staff College, staff officers, their training and appointment, R.M.A., and R.M.C. and promotion exams . . . Gerald Ellison tells me the Committee will go on their galloping career, kicking out and appointing, destroying and constructing at a pace and with a lack of knowledge which quite takes one's breath away.²³

And the day before he had noted :

Gerald Ellison lunched with me and I impressed on him with all my power that this bull-headed way of proceeding will absolutely ruin the scheme, which in itself had some excellent points.²⁴

There is here also something of the professional's resentment of civilian interference. Wilson obviously realised that without the prestige such as that possessed by the Esher Committee nothing could prevail against the 'old school', but on the other hand he was unable to suppress his own prejudices.

Nevertheless by and large the effects of the Esher Committee were warmly applauded by the younger men, and its Chairman was elected an honorary member of the Junior Officers Naval and Military Club to his evident delight. He was immensely pleased to receive the support of French.²⁵ In a letter of 30th January 1904 he noted that alone of all the senior officers only Roberts 'is full of congratulation'.²⁶ And in late March of that year Haig enthusiastically wrote :

I never believed it possible to get such a thorough reorganisation without undergoing first of all some military disaster ! At the time it seemed impossible to get the country and the politicians to interest themselves in the condition of the Army. Now, thanks to your energy, things seem on the right road for efficiency.²⁷

23 - Diary, 12 Feb. 1904. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, pp. 55 - 56.

24 - Diary, 11 Feb. 1904. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 55.

25 - Esher to M.V. Brett, 30 Jan. 1904. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 39.

26 - Journals, 3 Feb. 1904. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 42.

27 - Haig to Esher, 23 Mar. 1904. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, pp. 50 - 51.

Regardless, Arnold-Forster's performance was lamentable ; and although his ideas on the General Staff were in due course to obtain fruition under the tutelage of Haldane and Haig, it had become clear by early 1905 that he was not the man to carry through the reform of the Army. But the Government was already in its death throes and Balfour had no intention of risking its tenuous life in forcing the resignation of the Secretary of State for War. Writing to Kitchener in December 1905 Viscount Esher made no effort to disguise his delight at the demise of Arnold-Forster if not of the Balfour Government :

The change of government has produced one great good at least. It has rid us of Arnold-Forster. I hope that now, the scheme for the Army, which I have had much at heart, will have a fair trial. And above all I hope that we shall see Douglas Haig here, and that you will put no difficulty in his way. It will be of no disservice to you, to get him at home here, and at the W. O., for a short spell.²⁸

Kitchener was of the old school.

Richard Haldane, Arnold-Forster's successor, was a man of a very different cast. A philosopher turned jurist Haldane had chosen to go to the War Office, rejecting the comfortable plum of an offer of the Home Office, in the belief that there he could make a most significant and far-reaching contribution. His only stipulation was that he receive also a seat within the Cabinet, a privilege which Arnold-Fisher had not enjoyed. Unlike his predecessor, Haldane had not decided upon the War Office because of any deep-seated conviction that he held the magic charm which would in a trice cure the ills of the military establishment. Some measure of his humility together with an inkling of Arnold-Forster's colossal failure may be gleaned from the following letter of 19th December 1905 which the new Secretary of State for War penned to the Liberal Party's 'grand old man', Lord Rosebery :

My own work I find very interesting. But the business of reforming the War Office - though it is capable of accomplishment - is one which will need a succession of ministers. My first task has been to get the Generals on to good terms with each other. As they are no longer on deadly terms with

28 - Esher to Kitchener, 21 Dec. 1905. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 132.

the S. of S. this has not been difficult. The second has been to begin the work of a complete survey of the Army as a whole - with a view of getting in the end a definite objective. This is already begun. The past work of the Defence Committee has given a starting ground. I have eliminated from the Council one man who was better for the field than the office and brought in Sir William Nicholson - an acute big brain - but not a very easy man. Still I need him badly.²⁹

It is evident that this was a period of reliance upon 'big brains' in the army. But to think was not enough : better not to think at all than to think badly. This letter clearly reveals that Haldane had entered upon his task with a wholly open mind ; clearly he did not regard the pre-occupation of the Balfour Government with the Indian Problem as altogether desirable. Further it would indicate some doubt concerning a recent assertion that Haldane entered office a confirmed disciple of the evils of the North West Frontier, only to be converted overnight to an even deeper belief in the efficacy of the Continental Strategy.³⁰

Haldane inaugurated his administration of the War Office with a frank confession to his top military advisers of his almost total lack of knowledge concerning their profession.³¹ There was much truth in his assertion especially when viewed in terms of his extensive angling for the Lord Chancellorship which he dearly coveted. Haldane had, no doubt, received Asquith's letter from The Athenæum of 7th December 1905 with a profound sense of disappointment :

I am empowered this morning to offer the Foreign Office to E. Grey and an offer of the War Office will soon be on its way to you. The Woolsack being in spite of all my arguments and efforts given elsewhere, I judged from our talk the other day that this would be the place which you would like best, e.g. better than the Home Office.³²

29 - Haldane to Rosebery, 19 Dec. 1905. Haldane MSS, MS 5906.

30 - See : Guinn, P.S., British Strategy and Politics 1914 to 1918, (Oxford, 1965), p. 13.

31 - Haldane of Cloan, Viscount (Richard B.), An Autobiography, (London, 1929), p. 183.

32 - Asquith to Haldane, 7 Dec. 1905. Haldane MSS, MS 5906.

Many years after all these events had passed into distant memory General Sir James Edmonds stated that in his personal experience dating back to the 1880's he had never known any other Secretary of State for War willing to make a similar admission.³³ Gerald Ellison, mindful of the behaviour of Arnold-Forster and of the Esher Committee's conduct, agreed to serve as Haldane's Principal Private Secretary on condition that the Secretary of State agreed to abandon any pre-conceptions he might have entertained.³⁴ Viscount Esher, in the course of a lengthy missive to Kitchener, then Commander-in-Chief in India, written at the close of December 1905, noted with respect to Haldane :

The new Secretary of State cannot fail to do well. Above all he has determined to walk slowly, and has no preconceived ideas. He is adroit, shrewed and exceedingly clever.³⁵

But if Haldane's ignorance was genuine, he determined to rectify the deficiency without delay. He devoted himself to the task of learning as much as he could from his professional advisers, and set about familiarising himself with the fundamentals of French and German military organization and thought through the medium of the writings of du Picq and Clausewitz.³⁶

Haldane's assertion that it would take many years to effectively reorientate the Army must not be overlooked.³⁷ A generation is needed to create a school of military thought. Yet for all their veneer of professionalism these men were in essence merely playing at soldiering - at best a very dangerous game. Unlike the French, the British did not labour under the yoke of a monolithic military doctrine ; but equally they lacked

33 - Cited : Johnson, F.A., Defence By Committee : The British Committee of Imperial Defence, 1885 - 1959, (London, 1960), p. 82.

34 - Terraine, Haig, p. 39.

35 - Esher to Kitchener, 21 Dec. 1905. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 132.

36 - Haldane of Cloan, An Autobiography, p. 185.

37 - See above, page 37, Footnote No. 29.

the flexibility of the German Army which was the dividend of balanced experience. The Bendlerstrasse, in spite of the almost universal belief in a war of movement, concentrated upon the development of machine guns and heavy artillery. The French considered such devices too cumbersome ; while the British, apart from Haldane and a few lesser lights, do not seem to have even considered the problem. The last productive technological development prior to 1914 must be credited to Mr. Balfour's foresight. Balfour was responsible for the adoption, against the will of his party to say nothing of the 'little Englander' opposition, of the quick-firing 18-pounder fieldgun which was to prove to be the B.E.F.'s most useful weapon during the first few months of the war. Indeed, Balfour had adopted this highly successful weapon in the face of the weight of professional opinion which had favoured a smaller, less powerful, weapon of decided inferiority. Later Mr. Balfour wrote of this episode :

The re-arming of the Field Artillery I considered vital for the safety of the Empire and worth risking a débâcle in the Unionist Party and I determined not to go out of office until we were so far committed to the expenditure that no Liberal Government could have withdrawn from the position.³⁸

Nevertheless by 1914 the weapon had become obsolete and was decidedly inferior to its French equivalent to be found in the 75 mm gun for field operation. Haldane, in the course of his account of pre-war preparations excuses the War Office's failures in the more obvious fields of technical development on the grounds that the vast preponderance of professional opinion anticipated a short sharp mobile war in which cumbersome weaponry would be more in the nature of a liability than an asset.³⁹ This statement can serve only to underline the depth of England's involvement in France's military affairs ; for as has already been noted British military thought on the advisability of the offensive to the negation of all other strategic or tactical principles had been somewhat revised after the bitter experiences paid for so dearly in South Africa. Besides British officers, even Haldane himself, attended German manoeuvres quite regularly ;

38 - Cited : Young, Arthur James Balfour, p. 232.

39 - Haldane of Cloan, Viscount (Richard B.), Before The War, (London, 1920), pp. 169 - 170.

even if they failed so consistently to observe the development of German heavy artillery they could always rely upon the Intelligence Department of the Directorate of Military Operations as a reliable source from which to glean the necessary information upon such 'foreign developments'. But it would seem that the Intelligence Department never volunteered any data upon these matters ; although, as Robertson has pointed out, the information was obtainable readily enough. He relates how, in 1907, after being retired from the Foreign Section of the Operations Directorate on half pay, he employed his idle time, before being posted to Aldershot, in translating 'some German military publications'. He relates how these pamphlets amply revealed Germany's new emphasis upon the development of heavy artillery.⁴⁰ Robertson further states that similar information was widely available, and that indeed it was known to many highly placed officers that Germany was 'especially interested in machine guns'. Indeed the Germans created special machine gun battalions many years before the advent of the deadlock on the Western Front. Obviously then there was no dearth of information as regards the enemy's evaluation of items such as the machine gun ; for example, of its value vis-à-vis the rifle, or of the relative merits of light as against heavy artillery. Indeed post war studies have revealed that some fifty per cent of the deaths and injuries suffered in the trenches on the Western Front were caused directly by the effectiveness of incessant heavy artillery bombardment.⁴¹

All of this must not be confused with the arguments concerning the wretched volume of industrial production which was suited to little more than a three month war, concerning which military doctrine almost universally assumed that all would depend upon Clausewitz's classical swift, and hopefully glorious, battle. The duration of the conflict, the belief in a short war, may not be presented as an adequate excuse for the British Army's failure to develop a new technical capability. There was no deep-rooted dogma to deter them. They had the example of Germany, however poor, before them.

40 - Robertson, From Private to Field-Marshal, p. 152.

41 - Falls, C., The First World War, (London, 1960), p. xviii.

But they had permitted the French to ensnare them. In truth they remained an army of amateurs.

In short throughout these years prior to 1914 the soldiers were too busy entrenching their newly won position to be able to devote much attention to matters of military technique. Quite apart from the oft mooted lack of what may be labelled as conventional weaponry-heavy artillery, machine guns and suitable quantities of field artillery - the Army was apparently utterly devoid of all original thought on such matters as the development of altogether new concepts in matériel. There was no military equivalent of the 'Dreadnought'. No ballastic innovation such as that pioneered by the Admiralty for its new capital ships and submarines. No firm adoption of the new methods of communication - especially wireless.

It is conceivable that this vacuum arose not so much from any innate conservatism but rather from technical incapacity; but the interesting aspect of the whole problem lies in the fact that apart from Haldane's personal interest in dirigibles the War Office devoted no constructive thought to material whatsoever, let alone to actual research or experimental development.

The only British contribution to the military technology of 1914 was the khaki battle-dress which was another painful legacy of South Africa. The salutary effect of the Boer War was reflected in the Army's refusal to openly embrace the French concepts of strategic and tactical thought which began and ended with a fundamental belief in the efficacy of the offensive staying-power of the 'elan', a school of thought which one eminent observer has described as 'pure witchcraft . . . rivalled only by the dervishes of the Sudan'.⁴² Even Henry Wilson, who as Director of Military Operations was to be thoroughly taken-in by the French General Staff, was driven in September 1912 while

42 - Fuller, J.F.C., The Decisive Battles of the Western World and Their Influence Upon History, (London, 1956), Vol. III, 'From the American Civil War to the End of the Second World War', p. 186.

attending manoeuvres in France to note in exasperation :

The cavalry was very ill-handled as they would not dismount.
Curious these Frenchmen be so obstinate about the 'arme
blanche' Cavalry men and horses excellent, but is
all 'arme blanche' - So useless.⁴³

But then the British Army was a patchwork of contradictions and inconsistencies. While Wilson was deprecating the folly of French tactics his colleagues such as Repington and Haig were eulogising the excellent offensive spirit of the revised Cavalry Manual of 1907.⁴⁴ Though to be fair it must be noted that of all the world's cavalry forces, including that of the United States, the British had, by 1914, become the most defensive minded.⁴⁵ But this was a semantic comparison and to argue the degree of 'defensiveness' would have little more than semantic value. To conclude this litany of inconsistency it would be well to note that Robertson has recalled how the Staff College, where he succeeded Wilson as Commandant in 1910, had dwelt upon the importance of the offensive to the exclusion of all defensive tactical thought.⁴⁶ It would seem, then, that the defensive lessons learnt in the South African school had departed into oblivion just as had their main proponent, Lord Roberts. It is a measure of Wilson's politicking that not only was he willing to turn a blind eye to the implications of the war plans of the French General Staff, but also to the offensive school orientation within the War College, where he, a disciple of Roberts', had strong doubts concerning the philosophy of 'elan'. Once again one is faced by the extraordinary inconsistency of military thinking.

43 - Diary, September 1912. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 116.

44 - See below, page 48.

45 - Taylor, W.L., 'The Debate Over Changing Cavalry Tactics and Weapons, 1900 - 1914', Military Affairs, Vol. XXVIII, Winter 1964 - 1965, p. 180.

46 - Robertson, From Private to Field-Marshal, pp. 176 - 178.

The War Office had no policy on the issue of the doctrine of the offensive. Broadly speaking the cavalry generals in defending their own self-interest wholeheartedly embraced its tenets. Wilson had strong reservations as did many of those who had first-hand experience of the army manoeuvres of the Great Powers on the Continent. Once again the new school, including Wilson, are found slavishly aping the Continental paragons. The cavalry charge was always the grand finale which climaxed the Kaiser's army manoeuvres. No doubt to witness this spectacle was a majestically thrilling experience. But this was merely playing at war ; an expression of strident militarism. An expression explaining not only its appeal but also the reluctance of the new men to reject it. The charge was in some respects the apogee of the professional spirit. Who was to gainsay the military professionalism of the Kaiser's army?⁴⁷ Colonel Seely has recalled a visit to the German army manoeuvres of 1906 ; he noted that the offensive tactics employed simply had no relationship to reality as he himself had experienced it in South Africa.⁴⁸

In essence the trouble lay in the failure to evolve a set of military precepts fashioned to suit the unique requirements of England. There was no effort to encompass such a development. The 'new men' did not adopt the 'new measures' which Fisher had demanded as a member of the Esher Committee ; rather they aped their peers across the Channel - both French and German. Great Britain's military requirements were as unique as her geographical and political position in the world ; as such they could only be successfully fulfilled by the application of original ideas. It is one thing to copy selectively, quite another to ape indiscriminately. The problem was never approached from the view-point of the country's interests, but rather was seen always within the framework of the professional requirements of a self-conscious military establishment. The

47 - Taylor, 'The Debate Over Changing Cavalry Tactics and Weapons', p. 178.

48 - Seely, J.E.B., Adventure, (London, 1930), pp. 119 - 120.

machinery for such work did not exist in a sophisticated enough form. Neither did the men. Lloyd-George was to realise the cogency of this fact many years later as the Great War was itself drawing to a close. Early in 1918 the Prime Minister had cast about for a commander to replace Haig only to discover as he noted after the war :

There was no conspicuous officer in the Army who seemed⁴⁹
to be better qualified for the highest command than Haig.

And so the military machine ran riot shaking itself free from government control in its quest for professional fulfillment, completely disregarding the vital interests of the country and the military needs of the Empire.

Much extravagant nonsense has been written of the indeed important milestone reached in the annals of British military affairs with the creation of the General Staff. The General Staff never fulfilled the more profound hopes of the Esher Committee ; in the course of a memorandum, submitted to the Cabinet in late June 1905, Esher and his colleagues had stated :

. . . the effect of a General Staff should be to create
and consolidate military opinion on sound and generally
accepted lines. Such machinery has been hitherto
absolutely wanting in our army, with results always serious
and occasionally disastrous.⁵⁰

Unfortunately the new body was not sufficiently self-assertive to avert the final and irreparable disaster. Repington was never able to express any satisfaction with the actual process of the evolution of the Staff during these years.⁵¹ In fact its establishment did little to increase military efficiency or to encourage practical military thought ;

49 - Lloyd George, D., War Memoirs, (London, 1936), Vol. VI, p. 3424.

50 - 'The General Staff (Memorandum by the War Office Reconstruction Committee)',
28 Jun. 1905. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37.78, No. 115.

51 - Luvaas, The Education of an Army, p. 312.

it was not until Haig extended the system to the Army as a whole that it began to evolve as the heart of a unified staff system. The Staff did not become the supreme centre of any system dedicated to the evolution of strategic thought. The Directorates of which the Staff was composed retained the de facto initiative and responsibility for strategic planning. This abdication of a responsibility never properly assumed will become increasingly important as this discussion proceeds. The real significance of the General Staff, from 1909 onwards to be styled the Imperial General Staff due largely to Haig's exertions, lay in the fact that its very existence was recognition of the need for a new professional 'thinking' army. It provided tangible evidence of the new movement towards professionalism within the Army. The first Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Neville Lyttleton, was one of the many officers caught between the old and the new schools within the Army. He had distinguished himself in South Africa but as with Kitchener this experience had not served to predispose him towards the new radicalism which was swiftly coming to dominate military circles. His appointment was bitterly opposed by the 'new men' of whom Fisher and later Haldane were so full of praise. Lyttleton had no interest in the Continental Strategy which lay at the root of all 'advanced' military thought. It was Lyttleton who in response to a query from Haig had stated that the General Staff considered 20,000 men ample for Haldane's projected 'British Striking Force'.⁵² Fisher had described Lyttleton as 'the dullest dog I'd ever met'; and in his place the Admiral strongly pressed for the appointment of Sir John French as the first Chief of the General Staff.⁵³ French's career, which Captain Liddell-Hart has noted was characterised by a mock-professionalism, had also attracted the attention of Viscount Esher;⁵⁴ in a letter of early August 1904 to Fisher he had noted with regard

52 - Haig, Earl (Douglas), The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, 1914 - 1916, ed. R.N.W. Blake (London, 1952), p. 22. Charteris, Haig, p. 39.

53 - Fisher to Esher, 17 Jan. 1904. Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. I, p. 298.

54 - Liddell Hart, B.H., Through The Fog of War, (London, 1938), p. 49.

to both Lyttleton and French :

Lyttleton does not disappoint me, for I knew precisely what he was. There are no first-rate lieutenant-generals, except French. He is developing so fast that in a few years he will be the Fisher of the sister service. He possesses enthusiasm and character. Most of these other fellows have neither. If he had a quarter of your intellect, my dear colleague, we could reform the Army as well as the W.O.⁵⁵

Once again it must be stressed that the new men of 1904 must not be viewed with the disillusioned hindsight of subsequent events. To be fair to French it might well be added that Liddell-Hart's remark was no less true of the vast majority of the 'new men'.

Regardless Lyttleton's somewhat complacent, if not obstructive, conduct very soon estranged Henry Wilson who managed to persuade Haldane to add William Nicholson as Third Military Member of the Army Council in order to represent the interests of the new school.⁵⁶ Lyttleton was not unaware of Wilson's influence in this matter and needless to say such unbecoming behaviour, a common complaint with Wilson, did not ingratiate him with the Chief of General Staff ; yet it is a measure of the power and influence of the 'new men' that they were able to force Lyttleton, against his wishes, to appoint Wilson to the coveted and increasingly important Commandantship of the Staff College at the close of 1906.⁵⁷ Although Haldane had agreed to the possibility of making Nicholson C.G.S. at some future date there is evidence, which will be produced in due course, that the 'new men' were not entirely at ease with Nicholson regarding him more as a puppet to be manipulated than truly one of their own breed. Nicholson was altogether a relatively pliable individual despite Haldane's feelings to the contrary.⁵⁸ But he was tarred with the brush of the old school, having served at the War Office as Director-General of Mobilization and Military Intelligence from 1901 to 1904. Therefore

55 - Esher to Fisher, 3 Aug. 1904. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. I, p. 49.

56 - Collier, B., Brasshat : A Biography of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, (London, 1961), p. 96.

57 - Collier, Brasshat, p. 99.

58 - Haldane to Rosebery, 19 Dec. 1905. Haldane MSS, MS 5906.

he did not qualify as one of Jackie Fisher's 'new men', a drawback which Sir John underlined with his customary exuberance in a letter to Sandars, Balfour's private secretary, of late January 1904.⁵⁹ By way of corroboration there was even talk in the inner circles of the 'New Army' during 1906 of removing Lyttleton in order to make way for one of their own brightest lights - Major General Sir Douglas Haig.⁶⁰

Obviously the old ways were dying hard. Even during Wilson's three and a half years at Camberly a staff tour was conducted annually near Mount Snowdon 'to illustrate the peculiarities of hill warfare on the North-West Frontier of India'.⁶¹ Repington, for all his advanced thinking, was nevertheless one of those concerned with the 'Indian Frontier Bogey'. Further, there is perhaps some significance in the fact that the majority of these 'thinking soldiers' to a lesser or greater degree advocated the retention of the cavalry arm. Foremost of these disciples were French, Repington, Haig, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Henry Wilson.⁶² These were perhaps the only men in the whole of the British Army who had even heard of Clausewitz or Jomini still less to have had read and comprehended their studies on war and warfare. Lord Roberts, an enlightened and respected soldier though nevertheless a product of the old school, was one of the very few diametrically opposed to the retention of the cavalry arm. The revised Cavalry Manual of 1907, rewritten supposedly with respect to the lessons of South Africa, which had been very mixed in cavalry experience, and of the American Civil War, stated in part nevertheless :

The essence of the cavalry spirit lies in holding the balance between fire power and shock action It must be accepted as a principle that the rifle, effective as it is,

59 - Fisher to Sandars, 23 Jan. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.

60 - Charteris, Haig, p. 34.

61 - Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 70.

62 - Collier, Brasshat, p. 98.

cannot replace the effect produced by the speed of the horse,
the magnetism of the charge, and the terror of cold steel.⁶³

Repington's response was typical : the manual 'is sound, the spirit excellent and the arm efficient mounted or on foot . . . and in keeping with the true cavalry spirit which scorns mathematical calculations'.⁶⁴ While Haig pontificated that the 'role of the cavalry on the battlefield will always go on increasing'.⁶⁵

In short it must be clearly understood that the military renaissance had taken the form not of a measured response to the perils implicit in the burgeoning economic and technical capability of the nations, but rather that of a natural reaction on the part of a military newly conscious of its own professionalism to seize upon the opportunity provided by the crisis in South Africa and the general reawakening of the Great Powers to heave itself from out of a tradition of poverty and inefficiency, thereby propelling itself into the forefront of the nation's affairs. For many of the 'new men' this implied reaching far beyond the goals which the political authority envisaged ; it was, indeed, implicit that the military revival, the professionalism which was unique in post - 1660 British experience, had to so entrench itself in the forefront of the nation's defence capability that no shadow of a chance could possibly exist that the Army would once again tumble back into the morass of ineffective inefficiency from which it had so recently departed. These were soldiers who were intensely proud of their profession. They placed it above all else, in some cases even before the interests of their country. Like most professional soldiers they were able to convince themselves that a strong military establishment was fundamental to the national interest. With the possible exception of Henry Wilson, these were men who believed deeply in the folly of their country's refusal to face the military facts of membership within the fabric of European nations, a status which they

63 - Cited : Luvaas, The Education of an Army, p. 316.

64 - Cited : Luvaas, The Education of an Army, p. 316.

65 - Cited : Liddell Hart, Through The Fog of War, p. 48.

firmly believed in and concerning which they considered that England had no choice but to accept in the military terms of Continental warfare.

In those circumstances these 'educated soldiers' applied to their own country the great military principles governing the conduct of war which had been long accepted upon the Continent. Their mistake lay in their inability to stand back from their professional concerns and to thus realise that for an Empire and an Island based not upon a continent but around the entire globe the European military system was simply not applicable.

Some of the deeper causes underlying this attitude have already been explored ; in essence their actions arose not from any recognition on their part of a fundamental change upon the military map of Europe, but rather from the seizure of what the soldiers saw as an opportunity to equal and perhaps to supercede the Navy as the traditional focus of the nation's 'military' life. In many, perhaps most, cases this was no coldly calculated observation. On the contrary, it was the automatic reaction of the professional mind to a golden opportunity. Few of these men understood even the shadow of the consequences of their actions upon the future life and fortune of England and the Empire ; and those who claimed knowledge were to be proved tragically wrong in their convictions.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FIRST STEP

My mournful and supreme conviction is that this agreement is much more likely to lead to complications than to peace.

The Earl of Rosebery ; April 1904.

The long and the short of the matter is that, to secure peace, we must maintain the Entente with France, and attempts from outside to shake it will only make it stronger.

Sir Edward Grey ; December 1906.

The 'Entente' with France also entails possible duties upon this nation, which are by no means so plain and obvious, and yet most clearly engage the honour of us all.

Reginald Viscount Esher ; 1910.

Owing to the Entente Cordiale which had been cemented with France, we had accepted military . . . commitments, the precise character of which remained unknown Without knowledge of the Cabinet as a whole, our bluest of blue water policies had been abandoned. Thus we entered upon four years of war, in which we lost a million men and won twenty years of unrestful peace.

Sir Archibald Hurd ; 1941.

THE 'military conversations' between the French and British General Staffs, which were commenced early in 1906, have over the years become one of the most contentious debating points in the recent diplomatic and military experience of Great Britain. The diplomacy of the 'Entente' does not come within the scope of this study. The purpose of what follows is to set forth the thesis that the Staff Conversations were initiated by the

new generation of soldiers and their supporters for military reasons ; that this 'military' initiative was approved by the Government largely for its own diplomatic purposes ; and that with the passage of time the diplomatic aims were perverted into military goals of a nature far more profound than those envisaged by the soldiers who had initiated the whole affair. But the complications which enshroud the Conversations did not cease at this point. The Foreign Office's deliberate withholding of the decision to undertake the Conversations from the Cabinet as a whole is a well known story. The emphasis upon the secret and the non-committal was directly responsible not only for the confusion over the relative importance of the Conversations vis-à-vis defence planning as a whole, but also for the widely diverse significance attached to them by both the civil and military authorities. The stress laid upon the hypothetical and the secret became in essence a carte blanche permitting interpretation of all shades. Was the British Expeditionary Force to be sent to French or to Belgian ports ? was it to operate on the French left or the Belgian right ? was it to be used merely to uphold Belgian neutrality and safeguard the Channel ports, or was it to operate within France as an integral part of the French Army under the orders of the French High Command ? or indeed was it to be used upon Belgian soil simply as an extension of British sea power ? The Conversations became all things to all men - at least to those few who were aware of their existence. No-where was opinion more diverse than in the War Office itself. The secrecy of the Conversations extended to the Committee of Imperial Defence and thus prevented any balanced evaluation of the possible role of an expeditionary force within England's overall defence policy. The relationship of the War Office with the C.I.D. was largely moulded by the existence of the Conversations and as such this interesting problem will be dealt with later in discussing the C.I.D.'s relations with the Admiralty and the War Office. The Conversations, which ultimately were to dominate England's strategic posture in the war, were never openly discussed within the Committee. But this is to digress. The inception of the Conversations formed the 'first step' on the part of the 'new men' in the direction of forging a 'military' defence policy unique in the affairs of England. It was a logical move directed by the spirit of the new professionalism which was so dependent upon Continental military thought and organization.

The new 'Thinking Army' could not be content merely with the form of European military organization, it needed to give a substance to that form, a *raison d'être* for its very existence.

Some effort has already been expended in these pages to underline the obsession with Indian defence problems which marked the deliberations of both the Army Council and of the Committee of Imperial Defence during the Balfour years. Bearing this fact in mind together with Mr. Balfour's support of the precepts of the 'Blue Water School' and his opposition to the formation of any expeditionary force, it must be assumed that the Unionists never undertook to make military overtures to either the French or the Belgian governments. Evidence, based upon a detailed examination of the available sources with this particular question in mind, has recently been presented to endorse this more generally based view.¹ Furthermore, the evidence which will shortly be presented of the deliberations within British 'military' circles which commenced in mid-December 1905, renders any claim to the contrary redundant. This much may be said with certainty : the British Government had no 'military' policy with regard to the Continent prior to December 1905 ; there were no arrangements between the French and British General Staffs at that date ; that if any overtures had been made they had emanated from the more junior, anti-German, diplomats in the Foreign Office and at the Embassies in Paris and St. Petersburg ; and, finally, that such overtures, if made, had not involved military discussions and did not enjoy the confidence of any responsible political or military figures. Indeed, when Mr. Balfour was made aware of the existence of the Conversations in 1912 he noted :

1 - Monger, G., The End of Isolation : British Foreign Policy, 1900 - 1907, (London, 1963), pp. 236 - 238.
See also : Taylor, A.J.P., The Struggle For Mastery in Europe, 1848 - 1918, (Oxford, 1954), p. 435.

It came upon me as a shock of surprise - I am far from saying of disapproval - when I found how rapidly after I left office the Entente had, under the German menace, developed into something resembling a defensive Alliance.²

Besides it is inconceivable that Balfour, so strong a Prime Minister and so devoted to the broader principles of Imperial Defence, would have sought so completely to re-order the fundamental basis of England's strategic policy especially at a time of such political unrest. There is no contemporary evidence to support any claim to the contrary ; ample primary material has been cited in earlier chapters concerning the obsession with the Indian North-West Frontier, and the more general concern with Imperial Defence matters ; again there is much primary evidence to support the claim that the Conversations were initiated after the collapse of Balfour's Government. In truth the Conversations were the product of neither the Unionist nor the Liberal Governments, but rather of the interregnum between the fall of Balfour's Government and the great electoral victory of Campbell-Bannerman's Cabinet in January 1906. But the vacuum in government created by the political events during the month of December 1905 was amply exploited and filled by the military.

It has already been seen that the 'new men' of the British Army were unduly deferent to Continental military thought and organization. This deference, this aping of the masters, was the root cause of the adoption of the Continental Strategy by the British Army during the years following the war in South Africa. Haldane's efforts to familiarise himself with the writings of Ardant du Picq and Karl von Clausewitz were not solely academic in nature, nor were they intended merely to acquaint him with the dominant schools of thought prevailing in the great military establishments on the Continent. For in the precepts of Clausewitz may be found the very soul of the Continental Strategy ; that core of thought which lay behind the decision to send the British Expeditionary Force to fight in the main theatre of conflict rather than upon secondary

2 - Cited : Dugdale, B.E., Arthur James Balfour, First Earl of Balfour, (London, 1936), Vol. I, p. 374.

fronts. In Clausewitz's emphasis upon the decisive importance of the full scale battle as the climax of the offensive lay the essential military refusal to sanction operations in any but the main theatre. The 'new men' of 1906 were the 'Westerners' of 1915 who sneered at the predilection of the politicians for 'side-shows'. Repington, for example, was not only a disciple of Clausewitz but a friend of Mahan whose principles of naval concentration Repington translated into the military sphere in order to reinforce his advocacy of the Continental Strategy.

As late as 30th March 1905 Arthur Balfour, referring to Army reorganization, had stated to the Cabinet :

It is agreed that the main purpose for which a large army is required is the defence of India³

An earlier paper on 'Our Present Minimum Military Requirements' by the Prime Minister, submitted to the C.I.D. in late February 1905, had expanded upon this theme noting that conflict with Russia in India was

. . . the most formidable of probable wars, calculations based upon it will suffice for any war of lesser magnitude. This is the fundamental military problem which has to be considered and its satisfactory solution will include all others of a minor nature. ⁴

However, the 'new men' did not agree with this 'Imperial' view of England's military problems and took grave exception to the Prime Minister's conclusion that the 'expense involved in creating an expeditionary force' even for Imperial service was 'out of all proportion to the possible benefits which might accrue therefrom'. Nor were the soldiers content to await a change of political opinion on these matters ; long before the arrival of Haldane in Whitehall the 'new men' had been considering the possible role of the British Army in a future war upon the Continent. Indeed, as early as the autumn of 1902

3 - 'Army Reorganization', Memorandum by the Prime Minister, 30 Mar. 1905. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/75, No. 54.

4 - 'Our Present Minimum Military Requirements and proposals for fulfilling them by a Reorganization of the Regular Army and Militia', Memorandum by the Prime Minister, 24 Feb. 1905. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 17/3* .

Robertson, at that time Head of the Foreign Section of the Intelligence Department, had asserted :

Instead of regarding Germany as a possible ally we should recognise her as our most persistent, deliberate, and formidable rival.⁵

Two War Office papers, respectively entitled 'The Military Resources of Germany and Probable Method of their Employment in a War between Germany and England',⁶ and a 'Memorandum on the Military Policy to be adopted in a War with Germany',⁷ were submitted to the Committee of Imperial Defence, in February 1904, but contained no suggestion whatsoever of direct British involvement upon the Continent. Though the second of these papers did note at its conclusion :

The case of a war with Germany originating from our treaty obligations to Holland or Belgium is a more complicated problem⁸

Taken together these papers postulated that Germany's only chance of victory lay in the extremely hazardous undertaking of a military invasion of England ; and that England's only 'power of offence' lay in 'the destruction of her [Germany's] sea-borne trade'. It is interesting to note, that whereas the second paper suggested amphibious operations against Heligoland and the German mainland the first rejected any such ideas as impracticable in view of Germany's network of railways. In point of fact these opinions were by and large in concert with the C.I.D. consensus that such a war was extremely

5 - Cited : Robertson, W.R., Soldiers and Statesmen, (London, 1926), Vol. 1, p. 23.

6 - 'The Military Resources of Germany and Probable Method of their Employment in a War between Germany and England', Memorandum by the Intelligence Department of the War Office, 7 Feb. 1903. C.I.D. Papers, 23 Feb. 1904, Cab. 3/1/20A.

7 - 'Memorandum on the Military Policy to be adopted in a war with Germany', Intelligence Department of the War Office, 10 Feb. 1903. C.I.D. Papers, 23 Feb. 1904, Cab. 3/1/20A.

8 - 'Memorandum on the Military Policy to be adopted in a war with Germany', 10 Feb. 1903. C.I.D. Papers, 23 Feb. 1904, Cab. 3/1/20A.

unlikely and had little relationship to British interest. However, it would be well to note that the paper dealing with Germany's 'Military Resources' was the product of Wully Robertson's pen, the same Robertson who had warned against the menace of Germany eighteen months earlier. Obviously the terms of reference, that is a simple Anglo-German conflict, had little relationship to reality ; what is interesting is the difference in attitude within the War Office which these papers revealed. For the second paper, which had been prepared by one of Robertson's colleagues, Lieutenant-Colonel E.A. Altham, a product of the old school, had concluded :

Finally, it may be said that, although public opinion in England seems for the moment adverse to cooperation with Germany, yet, from a strategic point of view, an understanding with that Power on questions as to which we have common or conflicting interests would greatly strengthen our general position.⁹

While Altham's technical capability as a soldier might not have been up to the standards of the 'new men' it would appear that he was endowed with a much broader grasp of England's strategic position. Clearly the divergence between not only the Army and the C.I.D., but also the 'new men' and the old school at the War Office was becoming apparent.

Evidence has already been presented to show that many of the 'new men', including Haig, Robertson, Grierson and Henry Wilson, had been thinking increasingly in terms of a British military involvement in future wars upon the Continent. The War Office itself, while shading its opinion to some degree, remained substantially in step with C.I.D. opinion. A memorandum of 12th May 1904 presented by the Secretary of State for War to the Cabinet had explicitly stated :

1. The Regular Army must in the future be maintained principally for the purpose of action overseas, and chiefly in India.

9 - 'Memorandum on the Military Policy to be adopted in a war with Germany', 10 Feb. 1903. C.I.D. Papers, 23 Feb. 1904, Cab. 3/1/20A.

2. That portion of the Regular Army which is left at home, after the needs of India and of the colonies have been met, must be sufficient, with the assistance of the Auxiliary Forces to protect the United Kingdom against 'raids'.¹⁰

Robertson's paper to the C.I.D. of February 1904 had in effect maintained that the possibility of a successful invasion by Germany was not out of the question. But if Robertson's views were out of step with those of the War Office and the C.I.D., his more general suspicions of a future conflict with Germany were gaining respectability in many circles. Few entertained fears of war with Germany as the result of some simple disagreement, rather they were apprehensive of a possible conflict arising out of England's treaty obligations to Belgium. Sir George Clarke, one of the 'dauntless three', and the first man to head the Secretariat of the Committee of Imperial Defence, was one of those concerned with this possibility. On 1st August 1905 he had addressed a memorandum on the matter to the C.I.D. :

In the event of a Franco-German War, military exigencies might induce the Germans to violate the Neutrality of Belgium. The inducement is certainly stronger for Germany than for France, which has much less to gain from such violation.¹¹

In order to strengthen his petition for an investigation of the problem, Clarke wrote to the Prime Minister on 17th August requesting :

May I ask the G.S. to work out another problem ? In the event of another Franco-German war, the question of Belgian neutrality would turn mainly upon the exigencies of the belligerents. In 1870, neither of them would have gained real advantage by a violation of Belgian territory. The great system of French fortresses since created has somewhat altered the military conditions. So to some extent has

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- 10 - 'Principles involved in the scheme for Army Reform proposed by the Secretary of State for War', 12 May 1904. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/70, No. 66.
 - 11 - Cited : Sydenham of Coombe, Baron (George C.), My Working Life, (London, 1927), p. 185.

the construction of the Belgian fortified positions at Namur and Liège, which I was sent to examine and report upon some years ago. The present state of the Belgian Army is another factor in the present problem.

I think, therefore, that it would be well that the G.S. should be asked to prepare a paper discussing (1) the military advantage (if any) which Germany or France might expect to attain by a violation of Belgian territory, and (2) the measure of resistance which Belgium, if backed by us, would be able to offer to such a violation. Possibly also (3) the time it should require to put two Army Corps, or their equivalent into Antwerp.

A study of this kind is just what the G.S. would like, and they might (perhaps) be able to achieve more success than in dealing with the India frontier.¹²

The Prime Minister was, however, not exactly taken with Clarke's proposals fearing perhaps the more far-reaching consequences of such a study. The Secretary is found writing again to Balfour just a few days later :

May I ask the G.S. to take up the Belgian question about which I wrote ? It would give them useful occupation.¹³

But by mid-September events had moved in Clarke's favour and on 17th September he wrote to the Prime Minister from Weymouth :

The Foreign Office [are] to send you a memorandum I have written on Collective Guarantees as in the case of Belgium. The general conclusion at which I arrived was that such guarantees always breakdown in practice unless - which rarely happens - the interests of all the guaranteeing Powers require the fulfillment of the obligation when the critical moment presents itself. The principle advantage of a guarantee seems to be that it (1) provides a *cassus belli* for any guaranteeing Power whose interest it may be to oppose the violation of the Treaty and (2) gives a guaranteeing Power some right to obtain information as to the military preparations and the measure of effective resistance of the guaranteed State. I think, therefore,

12 - Clarke to Balfour, 17 Aug. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

13 - Clarke to Balfour, August 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

that we ought to know exactly what the military position of Belgium is, and I am glad you approve the preparation of a memorandum on this question.¹⁴

The diplomatic questions raised here are not of immediate concern ; what is significant for our purposes is the fact that there was a reviving military interest in Continental affairs. Clarke, it must be remembered, had not only served on the Esher Committee, but was himself a retired Army officer of considerable ability who had amply demonstrated his sympathy with the 'new men' of the Army. While it is true that his career was shortly to be abruptly curtailed, it must not be overlooked that both Esher and Fisher regarded Clarke, at this point, as one of the 'acute big brains' of the new era of military revival.

The General Staff's response to Clarke's questions came in the form of a memorandum dated 23rd September which was deposited at the offices of the C.I.D. Secretariat at Whitehall Gardens on 29th September. The conclusions arrived at by Lyttleton and his aides are fascinating very largely in terms of what they do not say :

After consideration of the various arguments . . . the weight of opinion among military writers both of France and Germany appears to be that the prospective military advantages to be gained by France or Germany by making an advance through Belgium, either as their main effort or as a subsidiary movement, do not afford sufficient justification for such a serious step as the violation of the neutrality of a neighbouring state with its almost inevitable consequent political complications. And it is generally considered unlikely that Belgium will form part of the theatre of war during the first operations. It must not, however, be inferred from this that Belgium can in any way feel assured that her frontiers will not be violated at a later stage in the hostilities.¹⁵

14 - Clarke to Balfour, 17 Sept. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

15 - 'The Violation of the Neutrality of Belgium during a Franco-German War'. Memorandum by the General Staff, 23 Sept. 1905. C.I.D. Papers, 29 Sept. 1905. Cab. 4/1/65B.

As will later be seen this view was to prevail with the General Staff for many years, though its implications for military thought were to be vastly altered. Clearly this was a reply both in keeping with Lyttleton's complacency and Balfour's desires not to become involved in warfare upon the Continent. Here, for the time being, the matter was closed. But it is of note that the Staff did not hold the Neutrality of Belgium immediately vulnerable in the event of a Franco-German war. This fact is to be remembered. No attempt was made by Lyttleton to suggest that, regardless, perhaps England ought to take steps to ensure the integrity of Belgian soil ; the opportunity of preparing an expeditionary force, for use, essentially, against Germany in the event of war, was not seized. In truth the 'new men' had not yet penetrated to the top of the military establishment. Yet the excuse of Belgium was to be pleaded by the 'new men' who were to plan the Conversations less than three months later. Placing Henry Wilson within the context of the attitudes of the 'new men' it is perhaps understandable why he described the staff at the War Office as a 'vacillating, ignorant crowd'.¹⁶

The findings contained within the above-mentioned General Staff memorandum of 23rd September 1905 claimed in part to be based upon the outcome of the 1905 war games.¹⁷ Only it neglected to add that the very terms of reference of one such game had assumed what the General Staff denied in its memorandum : that Belgium would be violated in the event of a Franco-German war. The 1905 games had arisen out of the concern of the 'new men' over the possible course of a German attack upon France. The then Director of Military Operations, Major-General Sir James Grierson, had devoted these games to a hypothetical Franco-German war in which the neutrality of Belgium would be violated, and where the German strategy would be to 'turn the French position on the Meuse'.¹⁸ In the course of the resulting games Robertson, who com-

16 - Wilson, H.H., Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson Bart. : His Life and Diaries, ed. Charles E. Callwell (London, 1927), Vol. I, p. 57.

17 - 'The Violation of the Neutrality of Belgium during a Franco-German War', Memorandum by the General Staff, 23 Sept. 1905. C.I.D. Papers, 29 Sept. 1905. Cab. 4/1/65B.

18 - Robertson, Soldiers and Statesmen, Vol. I, p.24.

manded the 'German' forces, clearly demonstrated that the French Army could not prevail without the military assistance of England. Grierson's directives for the games, based upon common-sense, very closely anticipated the Schlieffen Plan which at that time was only beginning to emerge in a detailed way from the Great General Staff. As to whether the outcome of the games was truly genuine, or whether it was merely the reflection of what Grierson and Robertson had wanted, is a debatable point ; however it has been noted elsewhere that the games did 'bear a very close resemblance to the actual situation in 1914, especially the advance from Aix-la-Chapelle, north of the Meuse and Sambre, outflanking the French in overwhelming strength'.¹⁹ Of course, it may be argued that such thinking implied not the necessity of sending military aid to France, but that the soldiers pre-supposed faulty French military dispositions. But this is not the point. For here were two responsible officers, in excellent positions to influence the new Secretary of State for War, whose strategic attitudes were clearly orientated towards the Continent. It is further to be noted that what Grierson considered to be the 'obvious' German strategy in any war with France was categorically rejected by Lyttleton in his Staff memorandum of 23rd September to the C.I.D. As with so much pre-war thinking, military thought at this juncture was in an almost hopeless muddle. For, aside from the divergence between Lyttleton and Grierson, officers such as Charles Callwell, at that time Assistant Director of Military Intelligence, were drastically changing their views from one day to the next. In August 1905 Callwell approved Fisher's alleged plans for a landing on the Schleswing coast of some 120,000 men - a stand which was wholly at variance with the views expressed by Robertson in his memorandum to the C.I.D. of February 1904.²⁰ Yet in October of the same year Callwell is found noting :

19 - Tyler, J.E., The British Army and the Continent, 1904 - 1914, (London, 1938), p. 18.

20 - 'The Military Resources of Germany and Probable Method of their Employment in a War between Germany and England', Memorandum by the Intelligence Department of the War Office, 7 Feb. 1903. C.I.D. Papers, 23 Feb. 1904. Cab. 3/1/20A.

. . . it is probable that the most useful purpose to which it [the British Army] could be put would be to give support to the French Armies in the field.²¹

A view such as this was not only poles apart from Fisher's ideas on combined operations but, indeed, it was suggestive of the most 'advanced' type of British military thought that was to gain full acceptance only under Henry Wilson. Though it might be added, that leanings towards this end were to become apparent in top military circles before the close of 1905.

Thus when Mr. Balfour handed over his seals on 4th December 1905 the 'military situation' was as follows : the 'new men' were gradually becoming more and more influential despite the fact that the Army Council and the General Staff were largely composed of officers not entirely in sympathy with their aims ; the former Unionist Government had, upon the advice of the Chief of the General Staff, concluded that in the event of a Franco-German War England would not necessarily be called upon to safeguard the neutrality of Belgium ; the views of the General Staff as a whole and those of the 'new men' widely differed upon the nature of the course of a future Franco-German conflict ; and finally that the General Staff had no particular desire to involve Great Britain in a Continental War, and was itself not representative of the aggressive new professionalism which was coming rapidly to dominate military circles.

Balfour's tumble from office signalled an unseemly scramble on the part of the 'new men' to redefine England's strategic needs. They seized upon the vacuum created by the interregnum to turn the strategic posture of the country away from Imperial Defence and towards involvement upon the Continent. The actual approaches made by Grierson and Repington to the French General Staff through Huguet have been well documented.²² These will not be discussed here. But far more important for our purposes were the steps which Sir George Clarke and Viscount Esher initiated at the same time, steps which very

21 - Callwell to Ballard, 3 Oct. 1905. Cited : Monger, The End of Isolation, p. 231.

22 - See : Monger, The End of Isolation, pp. 236 - 256.

largely shaped Repington's approaches to the French General Staff. In a letter to Esher of 15th December 1905, a letter which with all his correspondence on the subject of the Conversations was omitted from Esher's published papers, Clarke noted that England's possible role, both military and naval, in a Continental war had, in spite of all his urgings, 'not been thought out at all'.²³ Just a few days beforehand Esher had lunched with Georges Clemenceau and in the course of discussing the forthcoming Algeciras Conference the 'Tiger' had pleaded with him

. . . to arrange very secretly what military and naval action should be taken in the first week, should war unfortunately be the result of Germany finding herself in the minority at the conference.²⁴

Following upon these events, a mixture of the immediate and the long term, Esher and Clarke decided to bring professional naval and military opinion to bear upon the nature of possible British involvement in a war upon the Continent.

The upshot of the Esher-Clarke decision was the convening, on 19th December 1905, of a conference of some of the leading 'acute big brains' at the offices of the Committee of Imperial Defence in Whitehall Gardens. To this first meeting they had invited Captain Charles Ottley, at that time Director of Naval Intelligence and Fisher's right-hand-man, together with Lieutenant-General Sir John French - surely the epitome of the 'new men' during those early years. At this first Conference these four considered possible naval, combined and military action - in that order. In discussing combined operations the Conference rejected any notion of capturing specific islands off the German coast, although they did favour

The seizure of some point on the mainland which might afterwards be used by a large combined French and British force which could threaten either Berlin or the lines of communication of the German armies operating against France.²⁵

23 - Clarke to Esher, 15 Dec. 1905. Cited : Monger, The End of Isolation, p. 239.

24 - Cited : Monger, The End of Isolation, pp. 239 - 240.

25 - 'Notes of a Conference held at Whitehall Gardens', 19 Dec. 1905.
C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 18/24*.

As far as 'purely military' action was concerned the Conference laid down the following terms of reference :

- I The dispatch of a force to hold either Antwerp or the Namur and Liège positions.
- II The furnishing of a contingent to the French armies in the field, or in the second line.²⁶

The first of these alternatives applied only in the event of the violation of Belgian neutrality by Germany. In such an eventuality they concluded :

. . . it is improbable that British troops could reach the fortified positions on the Meuse before they were attacked. Our action might, therefore, be limited in the first instance to the defence of Antwerp. If however, the Belgians were assured of assistance in the defence of the latter, they would be able to increase the garrisons of the Meuse considerably, and these positions should be able to offer a protracted resistance, in which we might be able to co-operate.²⁷

But in the event of a straightforward Franco-German conflict the second of these alternatives would not 'confer any real advantage upon our allies in the great battles', and in any case such a course of action 'might be unpopular in this country'.²⁸ And besides

Even if the French were defeated on the frontier, however, such a rapid advance on Paris as occurred after the battle round Metz in 1870 would not be possible, and in the period which must elapse, Great Britain, assuming adequate effort, would be able to put 120,000 men in the field, with as large a force preparing to follow.²⁹

It is fascinating to note how completely the Conference was to reverse itself, both upon this point and upon its approval of combined operations on the North German Coast,

26 - 'Notes of a Conference held at Whitehall Gardens', 19 Dec. 1905.

27 - 'Notes of a Conference held at Whitehall Gardens', 19 Dec. 1905.

28 - 'Notes of a Conference held at Whitehall Gardens', 19 Dec. 1905.

29 - 'Notes of a Conference held at Whitehall Gardens', 19 Dec. 1905.

within the few weeks that followed.

In conclusion the Conference urged that the Admiralty examine the possibilities of co-operation with the Ministre de la Maritime both in the general sphere of naval operations as well as in the area of the combined operations off the German Coast, an operation for which the Conference imagined the French could spare something in the order of 100,000 men.³⁰ They urged also that plans be drawn up for the conduct of commerce warfare, and for the transport of troops and their disembarkation in the Baltic, at Belgian ports and at French ports.³¹ French was asked to work out, with the assistance of the Admiralty, a scheme for the embarkation of upwards of 120,000 troops for dispatch to FRENCH ports ; to do likewise with regard to sending 100,000 British and 100,000 French troops to the Baltic and North Sea German coasts ; to bring the War Office to face facts and reduce the expenditure of equipment upon the Indian Army ; to study methods for the withdrawal of troops from the Empire in emergencies ; to consider ways of raising extra reinforcements in England ; and to urge the War Office and the Admiralty to

. . . obtain any information as to the measures contemplated by the French in the event of an emergency, it would be a great advantage. Information as to the mobilization scheme of Belgium and the means available for the defence of the Meuse positions would also be valuable.³²

The secrecy which surrounded these proceedings was marked ; clearly the members of the Conference feared that the new government would put a stop to them if they were revealed at this stage. Clarke pleaded with Esher not to say anything ; Esher's response was encouraging for, as he noted, 'this has advantages for it leaves us free'.³³

Fisher, needless to say, regarded the deliberations of the Conference concerning possible operations in France or Belgian with abhorrence ; he vetoed their proposals

30 - 'Notes of a Conference held at Whitehall Gardens', 19 Dec. 1905.

31 - 'Notes of a Conference held at Whitehall Gardens', 19 Dec. 1905.

32 - 'Notes of a Conference held at Whitehall Gardens', 19 Dec. 1905.

33 - Cited : Monger, The End of Isolation, p. 244.

refusing to discuss his Baltic plans and noting that no over-sea operations could be undertaken until the situation in the North Sea had been clarified. Ottley was, however, somewhat more sympathetic than Fisher and readily admitted that his chief's remarks did not preclude operations below the debouch of the Channel at Dover into the North Sea. In any case the second Conference, which assembled on 6th January 1906, vetoed the earlier proposals for combined operations in the Baltic at the outset of war.³⁴ It is interesting to note that the Conference disagreed with the opinion of the General Staff in virtually assuming that any Franco-German war would involve the violation of Belgian neutrality. In fact even at this early date the Conference minutes reveal a clear drift towards direct assistance to France even in the event of the violation of Belgian neutrality :

Having regard to the figures worked out by Sir John French and to the comparative ease with which the Straits of Dover could be guarded by the Navy, it appeared that, even if the military operations in Belgium were to be undertaken, the best course would be to disembark our troops in the northern French ports.³⁵

The step from disembarkation at French ports to direct assistance to the French Army was to prove to be deceptively small in accomplishment, though momentous in its implications.

As the result of these Conferences Repington was commissioned to approach Huguet with the famous list of questions for the French General Staff concerning the possible role of both the Navy and the proposed Expeditionary Force in the event of war with Germany. On 12th January the Conference was convened for a third time to consider, it must be assumed, the substance of the French reply. By this point the terms of reference had been narrowed, owing to the nature of the French response, to 'the embarkation of troops . . . for the French coast'. By way of conclusion the Conference

34 - 'Notes of a Conference held at 2, Whitehall Gardens', 6 Jan. 1906.
C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 18/24*.

35 - 'Notes of a Conference held at 2, Whitehall Gardens', 6 Jan. 1906.

. . . was strongly of opinion that arrangements for the mobilization and transport to the northern French ports of the force above defined should be worked out with the utmost possible completeness. Dover, Folkestone, Newhaven, and Southampton might be assumed as the ports for embarkation, the French harbours as far south as Havre being regarded as the places of disembarkation. It should thus be possible, in the event of emergency, to furnish at once to the French authorities the details necessary to enable them to deal with railway transport.³⁶

In spite of the stipulations made to the French General Staff there is here no mention of Belgium, not even of the *cassus belli* let alone of actual operations in Belgium. Fisher, understandably, drew the line at this point, for he realised that the Conference was involving England in an undertaking which at best would result in the British Army operating in Belgium as an extension of the French Army's left wing and at worst as an integral part of the French Army operating in France. Sir John withdrew Ottley and refused further Admiralty co-operation.³⁷

As the result of the Conference on 12th January it was decided that Grierson should work out all the necessary details for the transport to France of two Army Corps, four Cavalry Brigades, and two Brigades of Mounted Infantry.³⁸ In spite of all the stipulations involving Belgian neutrality made to the French this decision as indeed the whole tenor of the Conferences, the lack of interest in Belgium at Whitehall Gardens, was decidedly ominous. Furthermore, it is to be kept in mind, that, in replying to the Repington questions, the French General Staff had insisted upon the necessity of placing the British force under direct French command.³⁹

There is considerable and justifiable confusion as to precisely when the new Government was informed of these developments. The assertion of one observer that the

36 - 'Notes of a Conference held at 2, Whitehall Gardens', 12 Jan. 1906.
C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 18/24*.

37 - Hankey, Baron (Maurice P.), The Supreme Command, (London, 1961),
Vol. I, p. 62.

38 - 'Notes of a Conference held at 2, Whitehall Gardens', 12 Jan. 1906.

39 - Tyler, The British Army and the Continent, p. 41.

Committee of Imperial Defence took the entire matter under consideration on 12th January is clearly incorrect, and arose, no doubt, from a confusion between the official Committee and the group of individuals who met in Conference during these crucial weeks at the Whitehall Gardens offices of the C.I.D..⁴⁰ Regardless, the traditional view maintains that Repington reported at least some part of his talks with Huguet, which dated back to 28th December, to Sir Edward Grey. This is, however, by no means to suggest that Grey, or for that matter anyone else in the Cabinet, had become party to the Whitehall Gardens' Conferences. Nevertheless, by 8th January Grey, having been lectured at some length by both Esher and Clarke, had been moved sufficiently to get in touch with Haldane, who was campaigning in Scotland. It is clear from the tone of Grey's letter to Haldane that both Clarke and Esher had been earnestly playing up the immediacy of the problem owing to the international crisis :

Persistent reports and little indications keep reaching me that Germany means to attack France in the Spring. I don't think these more than precautions and flourishes, which Germany would naturally make apropos of the Morocco conference.

But they are not altogether to be disregarded. A situation might arise [unexpectedly] in which popular feeling might compel the Govt. to go to the help of France & you might suddenly be asked what you could do.

Fisher says he is ready, by which I take it means that his ships are so placed that he can drive the German fleet off the sea & into shelter at any time.

I don't ask you give any definite answer in a hurry, but I think you should be preparing one.⁴¹

Here there is no mention of Belgium. Thus by 8th January Grey, if not Haldane, had become party to what was in essence a conspiracy on the part of the 'new men' both inside and outside the Army who hoped to present their proposals, somewhat in the form of

40 - See : Tyler, The British Army and the Continent, p. 42. Dunlop, J.K., The Development of the British Army, 1899 - 1914, (London, 1938, p. 240.

41 - Grey to Haldane, 8 Jan. 1906. Haldane MSS, MS 5907.

a fait accompli, to the new Government which was, as they understood only too well, dominated by its pacifist and 'Little Englander' elements. Here was an almost classic example of the professional cowing the civilian by insisting upon the immutability of his 'advice'. 'Almost', because while Haldane remained skeptical Grey required little persuasion. Grey and Haldane met at Berwick on 12th January and agreed on the advisability of joint planning, emphasising, of course, that such action should in no way bind the Government to any particular line of action in the event of war. Haldane was appointed to the task of convincing Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman of the necessity for such action, which surprisingly, he accomplished successfully during the course of the following week. Nevertheless Sir Henry, who had no doubt been faced with a classical argument of professional immutability, would have preferred not to have yielded to this Liberal-Imperialist sentiment, for as he told his leader in the Upper House, Lord Ripon, early in February 1906 :

I do not like the stress laid upon joint preparations. It comes very close to an honourable undertaking and it will be known on both sides of the Rhine.⁴²

The Prime Minister was to have his prescience confirmed only too well with the passage of the years. On 15th January Sanderson, the long-time Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office and one of the wiser diplomats when it came to dealing with Germany, wrote to Grierson :

I showed your letter of the 11th to Sir E. Grey, and he spoke to Mr. Haldane on the subject. They agree to your entering into communication with the French Military Attaché here for the purpose of obtaining such information as you require as to the method in which military assistance could in case of need be best afforded by us to France and vice-versa. Such communication must be solely provisional and non-committal.⁴³

42 - Campbell-Bannerman to Ripon, 2 Feb. 1906. Cited : Monger, The End of Isolation, p. 250.

43 - Sanderson to Grierson, 15 Jan. 1906. British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898 - 1914, ed. G.P. Gooch & H. Temperley (London, 1928), Vol. III, No. 214.

Though Sanderson does go on to authorise Staff Conventions with the Belgians, it cannot be denied that the official approval of the French staff conversations was not based upon any necessary *cassus belli* arising out of a German violation of Belgian neutrality.

The political whys and wherefores of Campbell-Bannerman's agreement and Grey's somewhat reticent behaviour are not of immediate concern to this study. Suffice it to say that the Prime Minister was faced with an almost impossible task in both holding his Cabinet together as well as to meeting the demands of each faction without offending the others. It was because of this, that Campbell-Bannerman became party to Grey's refusal to reveal the Conversations to the Cabinet. Grey's ready acceptance of the proposals put forward by the Whitehall Gardens' Conference indicates how pre-conceived his notions were upon the nature of British foreign policy. Unlike Lansdowne, Grey was unable to reject old premises in his efforts to adopt an objective viewpoint.⁴⁴

Haldane's acceptance, on the other hand, of the proposals for joint planning with the French General Staff, was far more significant than Grey's. Haldane was well known for his openness of mind on matters of foreign policy - in fact so much so that he was even at this early date accused of pro-German leanings. It must be assumed that his decision to back Grey's proposals arose from his view that the Algeciras Crisis was sufficiently grave as to merit immediate action. There was also, perhaps, an element of political expediency in the recognition of an opportunity to assert Liberal-Imperialist influence in the shaping of foreign policy from the very outset. At any rate his later qualifications would indicate that he had sanctioned the Conversations directly as the result of pressure arising from the international crisis.

Thus the 'new men' had secured the necessary approval for their actions, with the result that on 16th January Repington, whose role Grey had found thoroughly distasteful, was quietly superseded by Grierson as the Conversations took on the cloak of official respectability - albeit with the underlined provisos that they be conducted 'without prejudice' to the freedom of action of either party, and upon a 'solely provisional and

44 - Monger, The End of Isolation, p. 330.

non-committal basis'. Nevertheless, to the old school, the Fisherites, to those concerned with Imperial Defence, it was unthinkable that the government should be thinking about committing England, and the Empire, to a military adventure upon the Continent.

On 19th January the Whitehall Gardens' Conference was convened for the last time. Owing to Fisher's action only Esher, Clarke, French and Grierson were present. Grierson confirmed the increasingly 'French' bent of the proceeding in noting that the ideal ports for disembarkation were Cherbourg and Boulogne.⁴⁵ It was also revealed that the French wanted the British to dispatch a token force to France ahead of the expeditionary force;⁴⁶ no doubt they felt this would commit England as soon as possible. In any case France rather than Belgium had come to dominate all of these deliberations:

After the transport of the two Army Corps across the Channel was completed the southern French ports could be given up, and Calais and Boulogne would become the over-sea bases of the British Force. If operations in Belgium become necessary the base would be changed to Antwerp.⁴⁷

And as further evidence, contrary to the French General Staff's response to Repington, it was understood by the Conference

. . . that in the event of a British force being employed on the French frontier, its status would be that of an independent body under the general control of the French Commander-in-Chief.⁴⁸

This latter statement was no doubt purposefully ambiguous in an effort to gloss over the French reply on this point to Colonel Repington.

These Conferences had become purely military, and, contrary to Lord Hankey's statement, they did not come to an end because of Ottley's withdrawal. Admiralty

45 - 'Notes of a Conference held at 2, Whitehall Gardens', 19 Jan. 1906. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 18/24*.

46 - 'Notes of a Conference held at 2, Whitehall Gardens', 19 Jan. 1906.

47 - 'Notes of a Conference held at 2, Whitehall Gardens', 19 Jan. 1906.

48 - 'Notes of a Conference held at 2, Whitehall Gardens', 19 Jan. 1906.

support was not required for the operations which were being discussed, for a blockade of the straits was a standard part of the Admiralty's containment policy even at this date. The fact that no further meetings were held must be attributed to the fact that the Conferences had achieved their goal : the strategic posture of Great Britain had been swung around to face the prospect of military involvement upon the Continent. The overwhelming concern with the North West Frontier had finally been laid to rest. Fisher's refusal to guarantee the safety of troop transport to Belgium until after the naval decision, had laid the way open for the soldiers to press for landings at French ports regardless of whether or not the troops were to be used in France rather than in Belgium. The military had broken up the old concept of 'offensive strategy' being based upon combined operations dependent upon the exercise of sea power. The 'new men' had established for themselves an independent entity as a military force designed for service upon the Continent, principally in France. The decision to disembark in France is evidence enough of the military rejection of any form of combined operation.

It becomes clear, therefore, that the decision to undertake the Conversations, was the decision not of the diplomats or of the politicians but of the soldiers. Grey had approved of the Staff Conversations because they represented a tangible example of his somewhat narrow conception of England's foreign policy in action. The Foreign Secretary was content to fool himself by hedging his approval with countless reservations, but nevertheless there was no one more content to have had his own unexpressed feelings pressed upon him with all the force of 'professional' authority.

It is extremely difficult, indeed it is impossible, to clearly determine the exact bent of the Staff Conversations during these early years. It has already been suggested that the Whitehall Gardens' Conferences had tended to lean towards operations in France in the event of a Franco-German war even though the participants had considered the violation of Belgian territory extremely likely in that event. Furthermore, it is true that Conversations were set up between the British Military Attaché in Brussels and General Ducarne, the Chief of the Belgian Army Staff. But with the cooling-off after the end of the Algeciras Crisis these talks soon petered out due largely to Belgian fears of adverse German reaction. Finally, it is also true that in submitting their questions to the French

General Staff the Conference had laid emphasis upon the necessity of the *cassus belli* of an initial violation for Belgian integrity by Germany. However, it would be well to point out that the questions had been formulated by Esher and Clarke who, no doubt, genuinely believed England could become involved upon the Continent in no other manner. But in any case, as has already been noted, the minutes of the Conferences reveal that all present seem to have adopted Grierson's belief that Belgian involvement was inevitable. Nevertheless, there was every suggestion in these proceedings that even if Belgian soil were violated the British contribution to the war might be carried out in France, and that come what may her troops would be disembarked at French ports. It would be reasonable, then, to assume, that even at this early date, the military, indeed even a statesman of Esher's stature, had adopted a decidedly 'French' attitude. This is, however, by no means to suggest that these men were necessarily aware of the implications of their proposals for British strategic planning as a whole.

As will be seen Esher, a confirmed 'Fisherite', regarded this proposed military operation upon the Continent as a mere 'sideshow' in itself. He had no conception that this proposal would in time come to completely upset England's defence posture. As a statesman Esher realised that if the Entente were to survive England was obliged to offer some tangible advantage to France. As with so many others Esher, as yet, failed to understand that British military involvement in Europe would effectively negate centuries of maritime strategy, and would jeopardise the entire concept of a national policy built upon sea power.

But, while Esher was to change his views in the years to come, others were already entertaining grave misgivings concerning the implications of this departure. Haldane refused to accept Grey's view that the Continental Strategy was directed solely towards the reinforcement of the Entente via tentative agreements of co-operation with France and the French General Staff; rather he took the view that the Continental Strategy had been shaped in order to give England a direct hand in the defence of the Channel ports and the safeguarding of the sacrosanct neutrality of Belgium.⁴⁹ Of course such action

49 - Haldane of Cloan, Viscount (Richard B.), An Autobiography, (London, 1929), p. 187. Haldane of Cloan, Viscount (Richard B.), Before The War, (London, 1920), p. 162.

would necessitate a considerable degree of planning and co-operation with the French General Staff, but, on the other hand, it did not of necessity follow that the Expeditionary Force would actually participate in French military operations. It was partly for this reason, and partly due to the press of internal business that Haldane permitted the Conversations to lag after the summer of 1906 when the imperatives raised by the Algeiras crisis had begun to recede, and following upon the departure of Grierson from the Directorate of Military Operations. Lyttleton had no interest in the Conversations and Grierson's successor, Lieutenant-General Sir John Spencer Ewart, was of much the same disposition as his chief. Ewart, who has since been described by Huguet as 'an officer of a timorous nature and little liking for responsibility' was not of that body of opinion within the Army that enthusiastically endorsed, the Continental Strategy.⁵⁰

An indication of the differing views of Haldane and Grey may be drawn from the latter's bitter opposition to his colleague's visit to Germany in the autumn of 1906. By a figment of his own imagination Grey felt that Haldane was deliberately going out of his way to snub the French. In a letter of 3rd September 1906 Grey wrote :

In hurricanes I believe there is always a calm spot at the centre. I can't say I enjoy whirlwinds ; being here alone I have however been able to see the ludicrous prospect of this one. It may alas ! have serious consequences ; we must wait & see. I want to preserve the Entente with France, but it isn't easy, and if it is broken up I must go. The French have of course taken this much too seriously and made a mountain out of it. I hope that Bourgeois has over-rated the effect it is likely to have on the French Press and Public Opinion; if so the incident will perhaps be forgotten.

Nevertheless I am glad to know that you are leaving Berlin tomorrow. I look forward to seeing you on the 15th.⁵¹

Grey's reference to French excesses is not in connection with the 'Entente' itself, but refers rather to Haldane's visit which happened to coincide with German celebrations

50 - Huguet, J., Britain And The War : A French Indictment, (London, 1928), p. 7.

51 - Grey to Haldane, 3 Sept. 1906. Haldane MSS, MS 5907.

commemorating Sedan. Grey's dissatisfaction with Haldane's attitude towards his 'Entente' policy is evident in a letter of October 1907 in which the Foreign Secretary demanded that the War Office refrain from sending the band of the Coldstream Guards to Germany lest this action jeopardise the 'Entente'.⁵² That the Foreign Secretary could have become so overwrought concerning so trivial a matter has been cited recently as evidence of Grey's inability to see beyond the bonds of the 'Entente' policy.⁵³

It would seem therefore that the recent claim that Haldane, machiavellian-like, plotted the commitment of the B.E.F. to France from the first would appear to be of dubious character.⁵⁴ The fact of the matter is that Haldane had regarded the Conversations, undertaken in January 1906, as an emergency measure designed to offset the threat posed by the Algeiras Crisis. The fact that neither Haldane, nor his closest adviser, Douglas Haig, pursued the Conversations further and that they were in fact permitted to lapse, is evidence enough that Haldane did not hold the 'Entente' in the same reverence as did Grey. Haldane did not regard the Conversations in themselves as forming an irrevocable step, and he seems, therefore, to have very quickly pushed them to the back of his mind as the international crisis died away and he girded himself to face the difficulties of establishing the Expeditionary Force, designed for service in India, the Empire, Belgium and, possibly, even France, together with the Territorial Force as a second line army for Home Defence.

And so it was that Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman had, in the words of Winston Churchill, at that time the Colonial Under-Secretary and a leading Radical :

. . . authorised, almost as the first act of what was supposed to be an era of Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform, the beginning of the military conventions between the British and

52 - Grey to Haldane, 4 Oct. 1907. Haldane MSS, MS 5907.

53 - Monger, The End of Isolation, p. 329.

54 - See : Guinn, P., British Strategy and Politics, 1914 - 1918, (Oxford, 1965), pp. 10, 13.

French General Staffs with a view to concerted action
in the event of war.⁵⁵

While, no doubt, Grey, and, to a lesser extent, Haldane, were enthusiastic, and inasmuch as Campbell-Bannerman had been willing to sanction the Conversations, the plain fact emerges that the military chiefs had been considering the advisability of such a strategy for a number of years before the Liberal Government assumed office. Further, it is apparent that the Conversations had been precipitated not by the ministers of the crown but rather by those very same men who had signalled the revolution in military organization. The essentials of the Continental Strategy, while sanctioned by the new Government, found their birthplace within the confines of independent military thought.

Here the Conversations and the Continental strategy must be left for the moment. Both were to become crucial again during the years after the naval crisis of 1909 and falling upon the appointment of Henry Wilson as Director of Military Operations in 1910. During the intervening years the Continental Strategy gradually seeped into the highest echelons of the War Office and the General Staff, and as will be seen this process of assimilation was to play an important role in the War Office's relations with the Committee of Imperial Defence. Nevertheless prior to 1910 the Continental Strategy was to make little further headway, and its development was left in the midst of the uncertainty of the deliberations of the Conferences which took place in Whitehall Gardens in December 1905 and January 1906. As Brigadier Sir John Dunlop has since noted :

For the moment however the full implication of the new policy was not grasped, nor was the situation as dangerous as it would become later. With General Grierson at the War Office a British force for the defence of the Northern Ports was a controllable factor, it was not until General Henry Wilson came to the War Office with his devotion to French doctrine and French leadership that the British Expeditionary Force became tied to a preconceived French Plan.⁵⁶

But the first Step had been taken.

55 - Churchill, W.S., The World Crisis, (New York, 1923), Vol. I, p. 27.

56 - Dunlop, J.K., The Development of the British Army, p. 246.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FISHER YEARS

Without a supreme Navy, whatever military arrangements we make, whether for foreign expeditions or Home Defence, must be utterly vain and futile.

The Hon. Winston S. Churchill,
House of Commons ; May 1901.

It's astounding to me, perfectly astounding, how the very best amongst us absolutely fail to realise the vast impending revolution in naval warfare and naval strategy that the submarine will accomplish !

Admiral Sir John Fisher to
Admiral William May ; April 1904.

Steam Navies have as yet made no history which can be quoted as decisive in its teaching.

Rear-Admiral Alfred T. Mahan ; 1905.

The essence of war is Violence.
Moderation in war is Imbecility.
Hit first, Hit hard and Hit ANYWHERE !

Admiral of the Fleet Sir John Fisher ; 1905.

One thing is certain : If we fail in maintaining our sea-power, it does not matter in the least where we succeed. Tariff Reform, Social Reform, all reforms are perfectly useless. As a Nation we shall have ceased to exist.

The Rt. Hon. Arthur James Balfour ; 1909.

I am very firmly convinced that you cannot improve upon Fisher for First Sea Lord.

William Earl Selborne to The
Rt. Hon. Arthur James Balfour ; May 1915.

At the beginning of the century the Admiralty was - Fisher.

Sir Archibald Hurd ; 1941.

DURING these last fleeting years of England's preeminence, in the midst of that sparkling galaxy of wit and excellence, Admiral Sir John Fisher stood apart from his fellow man - a glittering peacock, a bubbling volcano, an administrator of incomparable ability. Unfortunately, if he is remembered at all, Fisher is recalled as a man of vengeance and lust, of incompetence and rigidity, of violence and irresponsibility. That he is remembered in these terms provides evidence enough that his years at the Admiralty were indeed 'years of power'. The exercise of power seldom breeds admiration ; it always provokes dissent. Fisher is not recalled as a Naval hero cast in the shadow of Nelson, though in truth his contribution to the nation's survival was of no less importance than that of his illustrious predecessor. Some years ago a close friend, if a somewhat critical observer, noted in recalling the debt owed to Fisher by his countrymen :

Future generations will know little of what they owe to John Arbuthnot, Lord Fisher of Kilverstone. Among the collection of eye-arresting monuments in Westminster Abbey, there is none to perpetuate his memory. St. Paul's Cathedral, where Nelson was laid to rest, has as yet nothing to remind the visitor of all that Fisher did for the nation. I doubt if even there was a man like him - sailor, administrator, writer and speaker. He was a man of many friends, who would have done anything for him, and of many enemies, who never wearied from reviling him and his works. And yet he triumphed over all calumny and criticism.¹

When Fisher hauled down his flag, which was incidentally, the largest of its kind in the fleet, upon his departure from Portsmouth on Trafalgar Day 1904 to take up his

1 - Hurd, A.S., Who Goes There ?, (London, 1941), p. 59.

appointment as First Sea Lord, he suffered under no illusions concerning the nature of the task before him. His purpose was to give meaning to the service motto - 'facta non verba' - In pursuing his campaign for drastic reform and renewal from the vantage point of his new position. Fisher determined to exercise to the hilt the powers conferred upon him in order to propel the service from out of its 'sail and cannon-ball' mentality, from the lethargy of comfort and security so falsely provided by the long shadow of Trafalgar. Fisher well realised that his bed was not one of roses ; writing to Viscount Knollys, Private Secretary to King Edward, in August 1904 he had noted :

Vast changes are indispensable for fighting efficiency and for instant readiness for war. We have neither at present ! And we have got to be ruthless, relentless, and remorseless in our reform ! . . . I hope to reduce the Navy estimates by many millions with an increase of 30 per cent in fighting strength and instant readiness for war, but it will be a FIERCE fight ! and I may 'go under', but I think not.²

Of course, Fisher had his shortcomings, which will be discussed shortly, nevertheless, his deficiencies were greatly outweighed by his many qualities and his genius as a naval administrator.

While this is, indeed, 'Fisher's Chapter', it must nevertheless restrict itself to within the confines of two major considerations : Fisher's contribution to the evolution of strategic thought within the Navy during his years as First Sea Lord ; and the Admiralty as an institution within the framework of national defence . It would be both tedious and pointless to burrow into the details of the Fisher reforms. Some attention will, however, be paid to the consequences of these initiatives upon the Navy both as an institution and as an organ of the defence establishment. Besides the Fisher years, in most other respects, have formed the centrepiece for a continuing life-long study of the

2 - Fisher to Knollys, August 1904. Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Fear God and Dread Nought : The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. I, p. 327.

Royal Navy, from the late nineteenth century to the close of the Great War, by a most eminent contemporary naval historian.³

Fisher's strategic thought was firmly anchored upon two fundamental precepts : his adherence to the principles of the Blue Water School ; and his conviction that any 'offensive' British contribution to a war in Europe must lie within the scope of amphibious operations wherein the full exercise of sea power could best be reconciled with England's traditional reliance upon a small thoroughly trained military establishment. Throughout Fisher's rule at Admiralty House, and during his years behind Churchill, these fundamental precepts were never abandoned and the presuppositions upon which they were based remained viable. The Navy was retained as the country's first line of defence ; and the Army, for all its fantasy and its adherence to the Continental Strategy, remained nevertheless upon a scale wholly ill-suited for field operations in a European theatre.

For an island power naval strategy is marked by a reasonably concise differentiation between the defence and the offence. For such a navy the strategy of the offence encompasses those operations which are not directly concerned with the tasks of guarding against invasion and rendering the battle-fleet of the enemy inoperative. The offence includes, therefore, such undertakings as commerce warfare, blockade and amphibious operations in general. Fisher's defensive strategy while controversial was nevertheless a positive factor ; Sir John's plans for the destruction of the High Seas Fleet while disputed in terms of their efficacy have never been challenged for their veracity. The design for North Sea concentration, backed as it was by the great material innovations and administrative reforms, was demonstratively Fisher's strategy for the defence. The old sailor always kept before him the two essential tasks of the Navy : the defence of the United Kingdom and the destruction of the enemy fleet. While concentration, both in terms of the fleets themselves and of the vessels which they

3 - See : Works of Arthur J. Marder ; esp. From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow : The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904 - 1919, (London, 1961), Vol. I.

comprised, provoked and continues to provoke bitter discussion, it was, nevertheless, a policy of profound genius revealing the depth of Fisher's understanding of the fundamental needs of Imperial Defence, and his ability to harmonise these needs with the implications of the changing international position of his country. Writing during 1912, by which time the naval race had taken on a truly alarming aspect, Viscount Esher endorsed Fisher's foresight in noting with respect to the role of the Navy in the defence of the Empire as a whole :

The average Englishman all over the Empire has got to clearly understand that if the British Empire is to float on the British Navy, that Navy has got to be of immense size, concentrated in particular for the purpose of ensuring overwhelming superiority at the crucial point, and at the crucial moment, but distributed also over certain minor theatres of possible conflict.⁴

Perhaps Fisher would not have agreed with Esher's closing remark in view of the seriousness of the German menace, but nevertheless the spirit of Sir John's motivation was evident in Esher's statement. Of course, many bitterly attacked Fisher for an alleged disregard for the needs of Imperial defence as a whole ; but the Admiral fully realised that the concentration of the Naval resources of the Empire against Germany constituted the optimum form of overall defence. If his own countrymen were not wholly alive to the more positive aspects of Fisher's various fleet redistributions, the enemy was evidently more alert. A clipping from the Staatsburg Zeitung of 25th October 1906, which had been forwarded to the Admiralty by the Naval Attaché at Potsdam and sent on to Mr. Balfour, betrayed an obvious respect for Fisher that was lacking at home :

Very moderately now follows, under the idyllic title of Home Fleet, the concentration of the English Naval Forces against us. They do not call it the North Sea Fleet - that sounds so aggressive, and the Britons are friends of peace. All are giving of their best, so that everything may be formed on one spot.⁵

4 - Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), The Influence of King Edward, (London, 1915), p. 153.

5 - Extract from 'Staatsburger Zeitung', 25 Oct. 1906 ; Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49711.

It might well be added that this redistribution of October 1906, which had established the Home Fleet, that embryonic form of the Grand Fleet of August 1914, had been bitterly assailed as strategically unsound and many, including such moderates as Commander Dewar, attributed Fisher's motives to a despicable desire to reduce Beresford's influence and authority in stripping him and the Channel Fleet, of which he was Commander-in-Chief, not only of the latest matériel but also of the de facto supreme command at sea in wartime.⁶

Admiralty policy with respect to the 'Guerre de Course' closely adhered to the lines laid down by Mahan ; though by 1912 Fisher had come to regard such operations as the decisive factor in modern warfare. Official thought upon this matter had also been influenced by the widespread belief in the brevity of war in the twentieth century. Furthermore, despite rapid developments in undersea warfare towards the close of Fisher's rule, the Board, especially after 1910, refused to recognise this revolutionary instrument of war as anything more than a tool for coastal defence. By and large the members of the Board, excluding Sir John, tended to agree with the outdated opinions which Mahan had voiced over twenty years earlier :

The harassment and distress caused to a country by serious interference with its commerce will be conceded by all. It is doubtless a most important secondary operation of naval war, and is not likely to be abandoned till war itself shall cease ; but regarded as a primary and fundamental measure, sufficient in itself to crush an enemy, it is probably a delusion, and a most dangerous delusion, when presented in the fascinating garb of cheapness to the representatives of a people Only by military command of the sea by prolonged control of the strategic centres of commerce, can such an attack be fatal ; and such control can be wrung from a powerful navy only by fighting and overcoming it.⁷

6 - Dewar, K.G.B., The Navy From Within, (London, 1939), p. 100.

7 - Mahan, A.T., The Influence of Sea Power Upon History : 1660 - 1783, (New York, 1957), p. 481.

In such a frame of mind the Board tended to regard Fisher's warnings of the efficacy of massive commerce warfare in much the same light as his allied forebodings concerning the future of undersea warfare.

The concern here is, however, principally with Fisher's thoughts upon the strategy of the offence. Such a discussion must, for the most part, become enveloped in a fog of controversy and obscurity. No definitive study has been attempted on this matter ; it is unlikely that any such work will ever be produced because in essence it is to discuss the negative - only general conclusions concerning Fisher's offensive concepts can be arrived at with any certainty and their possible practical application may only be discussed in the broadest terms. But in examining such offensive-defensive devices as submarine boats and blockade policy definite conclusions may be drawn and many groundless accusations against Fisher laid to rest.

Throughout his life 'Jacky' Fisher's attitude towards strategic planning was dominated by a passionate devotion to the principles of the efficacy of surprise and, hence, to the paramount need for secrecy in order to retain the viability of that principle. This explains much of the obscurity and controversy which surrounds the Admiral's strategic thought. However, as has already been seen, Fisher had a keen mind when considering the strategy for the defence, no less may be said of his offensive concepts. The controversy over the lack of a naval war staff which raged towards the close of Fisher's rule and spilled over into Sir Arthur Wilson's time at the Admiralty has, in part at least, been regarded as tangible evidence of Fisher's lack of concern with strategic matters. In point of fact the whole issue was itself something of a fraud, a political gambit which while possessed of great merit in itself was used for very different ends.⁸ Fisher's secrecy, his refusal to discuss Admiralty strategic planning, provided the ideal opportunity for his critics to maintain that he was both reactionary and incompetent. They saw no war plans, they had noted the genuine criticism of men such as

8 - See : Appendix III, 'The Admiralty War Staff'.

Sir John Colomb, Spenser Wilkinson and Herbert Richmond concerning the lack of a properly organised naval staff similar to that so recently established in the Army. This is by no means to suggest that there was no need for a war staff; the events of 1914 - 1916 clearly demonstrated quite the reverse. But the very failure of the Churchill War Staff was indicative that the Admiralty had no idea of the proper use of such a staff. Fisher's antipathy towards the staff idea was seized upon, first, as ideal ground upon which to oppose him, a move that merely drove the Admiral into a more recalcitrant stand upon the matter, and later as the perfect excuse to get rid of him, as well as of his successor, Sir Arthur Wilson, to say nothing of the First Lord - Reginald McKenna. And behind it all, behind this pantomime of expressed ideal, lay the sinister presence of the Continental Strategy.

Secrecy bred confusion. But Fisher was not unappreciative of the importance of detailed strategic planning; he planned to meet the requirements both of offensive and defensive strategy. His refusal to divulge his plans for the offence must be attributed not only to the need for secrecy but also to Fisher's realisation that his thoughts upon amphibious operations were wholly at odds with the precepts of the Continental Strategy. It would be well to add that the whole issue of the lack of war plans and Fisher's secrecy did not become critical until after the 'Syndicate of Discontent' seized upon it following Beresford's forced retirement in May 1909. Viscount Esher, for example, noted in January 1906 following upon Fisher's refusal to co-operate with the Whitehall Gardens Conference which had blueprinted the Military Conversations :

Of course he is a creature of moods, and he also is very reticent about naval plans and rightly so. For them, no preparation is required. The Navy is always on a war footing, and a telegram can send a fleet to the other end of the earth. So why disclose ideas, if there are any.⁹

9 - Esher to M.V. Brett, 14 Jan. 1906. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, (London, 1934), Vol. II, p. 134.

Of course Esher fails here to distinguish between offensive and defensive planning. Nevertheless, his assertion has some merit in terms of strict naval planning for operations at sea, though none whatsoever in the case of combined amphibious undertakings where every care must be taken beforehand to ensure both accuracy and secrecy. Besides, quite aside from the Army's antipathy for combined operations, Fisher's assertion that the 'War Office leaked like a sieve' was not without some considerable measure of veracity.

At the heart of all of Fisher's offensive strategic thought lay the highly secret plan that he entertained for amphibious operations in the Baltic, a strategic concept which was probably never worked out in any detail and concerning which Fisher refused to divulge a single word. The Navy was, in reality, caught in a most unfortunate and awkward position. As the nation's first line of defence the Senior Service was largely expected to fulfill the dominant role in all wartime operations. It was a role that Fisher had every intention of executing knowing full well that the alternative was a drastic reduction in naval expenditure arising from the expense of creating a satisfactory substitute in the form of a full-scale conscript military establishment along Continental lines. Further Sir John was aware that in such an eventuality the Fleet would be so weakened that any chance of destroying the enemy fleet would be significantly reduced; to acquiesce was to risk the safety and future of the entire Empire. It was not enough for the Navy merely to defeat the enemy at sea and to drive his commerce from the trade routes; the Navy had also to spearhead the offensive contribution of the Empire in any given war effort. Of course, it need hardly be added that the new 'advanced' military thinkers, such as Henry Wilson, would have warmly welcomed any decision on the part of the Admiralty to abdicate from this latter responsibility. To have done so would have entailed a severe reduction in the Naval Estimates, a mortal blow to the prestige and morale of the service, and so serious a reduction in material and personnel that the Navy, and therefore the nation, would have found itself in a wholly untenable position in view of the menace of the High Seas Fleet. It was, therefore, inevitable that the Navy assume the additional burden of carrying the war to the homeland of the enemy. In short, the Navy, in seeking to

adequately fulfill the one role, namely defence, was forced, owing to the dictates of men and material, to assume the additional responsibility for the execution of the strategy of the offence. A strategy for which she had little enthusiasm realising that its demands jeopardized her obligation to conduct the defence of the entire Empire while fighting the more general war at sea.

Before becoming too deeply immersed in this discussion of Fisher's offensive strategic thought it would be worth while to glance at his attitude to such tools as the submarine boat and blockade policy. Sir John has been widely credited with an inability to realise that the new technology of modern warfare precluded the use of such offensive strategems as those involved in close blockade policy. Fisher has carelessly been identified with that same vintage of naval thought which formed the basis for the archaic plans for naval offensive operations which Sir Arthur Wilson presented to the Committee of Imperial Defence in August 1911. In point of fact Wilson did not reflect Fisher's views. The reverse is true. Sir John had pioneered the submarine boat in the Navy. As early as the late 1890's the looming significance of the under-sea boat had been apparent to him. During his tenure as Admiral-Commanding at Portsmouth, from 1902 until the autumn of 1904, Fisher had fostered the development of these new vessels committing them to the capable hands of Captain Reginald Bacon - who was later to gain infamy as a leading member of the 'Fishpond' and to distinguish himself with the Dover Patrol during the war. In October 1903, Fisher had produced a paper discussing 'The Effects of Submarine Boats', in which he had asserted :

As regards the Navy, it must revolutionize Naval Tactics for this simple reason - that the present battle formation of ships in single line presents a target of such length that the chances are altogether in favour of a Whitehead torpedo hitting from a distance of several miles. This applies specially to its use by the Submarine Boat

It affects the Army, because, imagine even one Submarine Boat with a flock of transports in sight loaded each with some two or three thousand troops !¹⁰

10 - Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. I, p. 282.

The Admiral was obviously not unaware of the effect that these new crafts would have not only upon the broader questions of the tactical organization of the Fleet, but also upon the continued significance of the 'Invasion Bogey'.

Sir John's grasp of the altered circumstances implicit in the rapidly changing technology of his profession dictated a reorientation in his fundamental outlook upon naval strategic thought, and his abandonment of the principles of close blockade. In fact it seems that, as early as 1902, the Board had all but abandoned such concepts in blockade tactics owing very largely to the threat of surface launched torpedoes, and, to a lesser extent, the still largely unrealised potential of the submarine boat - if only as a defensive weapon. Following upon the completion of the combined manoeuvres of the Channel and Mediterranean Fleets in 1902 the Board, which included Sir John as Second Sea Lord, had observed

. . . that the difficulty already recognised in maintaining the close blockade of a port furnished with torpedo-boats and destroyers, is fully corroborated even where the blockading force is in respect of cruisers and destroyers numerically far superior.¹¹

Balfour's Sub-Committee on Invasion of 1903 - 1904, which will be dealt with later, had relied heavily upon Fisher's views with respect to the potency of the submarine boat as a weapon eminently suited to the defence of the British Isles from invasion. Writing to Sir John early in January 1904, while the Sub-Committee was still deliberating, the Prime Minister noted :

It is unnecessary to tell you how heartily I am in sympathy with your observations on the relation between Submarines and Invasion : indeed, my Paper on Home Defence, which I think was shewn you, is largely based upon the considerations to which you refer.¹²

11 - Board of Admiralty conclusion on joint Fleet manoeuvres, September 1902.
Cited : Marder, A.J., The Anatomy of British Sea Power : 1880 - 1905,
(London, 1964), p. 369.

12 - Balfour to Fisher, 3 Jan. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.

Sir John, in his turn, fully supported the Prime Minister, the benefactor of the new Fisher spirit which had first been injected into the Navy as early as the summer of 1902, exclaiming to Sandars :

Yes. I thought the Prime Minister's Paper on Invasion simply splendid and it further fortifies me in the opinion I have consistently held of the inestimable benefit of a Civilian (as opposed to a technician or expert) being ever at the head of anything - the subject being treated always gets looked at by a civilian from an outside point of view and you get an unblased summing-up.¹³

It must, of course, be kept in mind that the 'Invasion Bogey' was intimately tied up with the whole dispute over the relative merits of 'naval' v's 'military' defence. Needless to say, Fisher was pleased that the Sub-Committee came down in favour of the Blue Water School. But the fact, nevertheless, remains that both the 'services' were primarily concerned with self-interest ; it just so happened that whereas the national interest coincided with the aspirations of the Senior Service, by the same token they were at odds with those of the new 'advanced' military figures.

The concern over the possibilities of invasion was very closely related to the debate over the efficacy of the close blockade. Nineteenth century-style blockade was merely the other side of the invasion coin. However, the matter of the continued effectiveness of the close blockade was settled 'once and for all' following upon the completion of the torpedo-craft manoeuvres which were conducted off Milford Haven in August 1904. The Commander-in-Chief of the torpedo-craft flotillas had concluded :

- (1) Battleships and cruisers are not safe within the radius of action of hostile torpedo craft, even though protected by a larger force of destroyers than is possible by their enemy.
- (2) Destroyers and torpedo-boats cannot be so effectively blockaded in their ports as to prevent them slipping out in one's and two's at night, and becoming a danger to their enemy.

13 - Fisher to Sandars, 3 Jan. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.

(3) The existence of submarines in a port makes a close blockade at night, even by destroyers, impossible, as these vessels are on dark nights practically invisible, even when on the surface, and could attack and sink blockading ships with little risk of discovery.¹⁴

The upshot of this type of thinking flowered by the close of 1907 with a firm rejection of the principles of close blockade on the part of the Admiralty. Blockade policy was to undergo a series of violent fluctuations during the next few years - especially during Sir Arthur Wilson's brief tenure as Fisher's successor. But it would be well to remember that in the course of an Admiralty Memorandum submitted to the Cabinet in March 1905 it had been noted :

Submarine boats may in a broad sense be looked on as extending the defence of a port enormously beyond the range of gunfire, and as linking the defences of ports along ranges of coast now locally undefended.¹⁵

As yet the full potential of the submarine boat had not become apparent to the Board. Many high-ranking officers lacked enthusiasm for what was widely regarded as the cowardly weapon of a weak power. Early troubles encountered by Bacon at Portsmouth coupled to Sir William White's rather frightening experiences had somewhat dampened the enthusiasm of any but Fisher and his closest advisers. But in spite of the setbacks the defensive value, at least, of the submarine boat was recognised by 'even the most bigoted of naval men' and this understanding played a fateful role in the rejection of the 'Invasion Bogey' and the abandonment of the close blockade as an instrument of war.¹⁶ With the passage of the years the Admiralty came increasingly to view the submarine as a reliable offensive weapon ; Fisher's appreciation was evident early-on with the introduction of the "D" Class type in the 1907-1908 Estimates. By the date of his retirement

14 - N.I.D. No. 754, December 1904. Cited : Marder, The Anatomy of British Sea Power, pp. 369 - 370.

15 - 'Submarine Boats', March 1905. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/75, No. 57.

16 - Kemp, P.K., H.M. Submarines, (London, 1952), p. 32.

on his sixty-ninth birthday in January 1910 Sir John had managed to give the Navy some sixty undersea boats some of which were obviously designed for 'offensive' purposes. Unfortunately the record of his successors was less enviable, and little enthusiasm was evinced in official circles for the further development of this new concept in naval warfare.

Viewed in the light of what has been said, there seems little likelihood that the detailed plans which have recently been published by the Head of the Naval Historical Branch of the Ministry of Defence, in happier days known as the Historical section of the Admiralty, are in fact any real indication of the true nature of Fisher's strategic thought.¹⁷ The editor of these papers, though on somewhat differing grounds, has tended towards much the same conclusion. It appears that these extensive plans, which dealt with the problems of conducting naval operations against the North Sea and Baltic coasts of the German Empire presupposing the establishment and maintenance of a close blockade, were drawn up at the Naval War College, Portsmouth, during the autumn of 1906. They were formulated by some of the leading members of the 'Fishpond' including Captain G.A. Ballard, himself a former Director of Naval Operations, Captain E.J.W. Slade, one time Commandant of Fisher's War College, Captain Maurice Hankey and, lastly, Julian Corbett, the eminent naval historian and a lecturer at the War College. It has been suggested that the 'plans' were in essence a smoke-screen, in fact something of a public relations promotion. In the first place the 'plans' were far too detailed denoting precisely how many ships were to be involved in given operations and going so far as to list each vessel by name. Such detail represented a complete departure from previous Admiralty planning experience. Further, it has been pointed out that the 'plans' were wholly at odds with the potential of Fisher's revolution in materiel wholly disregarding the defensive role of both the submarine boat and the mine. It might well be added that Sir John's resignation over

17 - See : Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher, ed. P.K. Kemp (Greenwich, 1964), Vol. II.

the issue of the dispatch of modern capital ships to the Dardanelles underlined both his refusal to sanction the commencement of amphibious operations before the enemy fleet had been destroyed, and his reluctance to expose his dreadnoughts to the onslaughts of both mine and torpedo in what was essentially an operation based upon the principles of close blockade. These so-called plans did not reflect current naval thinking as shaped by Fisher, and their very existence coupled to their wide advertisement constituted a complete negation of Sir John's oft-repeated insistence upon the necessity for secrecy and the importance of the element of surprise in warfare. Regardless, if these plans were genuine in their reflection of current strategic thought at the Admiralty, which is more than doubtful, their pertinence could not have long survived the revolution in matériel which was, in terms of both the 'Dreadnought' and the submarine boat, coming increasingly to bring its weight to bear upon strategic considerations.

Fisher's secrecy, his refusal to divulge his actual planning, and his deception in the divulgence of the so-called Portsmouth plans to various naval officers and members of the Cabinet, have all served only to befog his real attitude to the supreme question of offensive strategy - namely his estimation of the continued efficacy of the principles of close blockade. This ambiguity permitted many of his contemporaries to bitterly assail him with what are now known to be empty charges. His correspondence is littered with admonitions to his friends insisting that his enemies must not be torpedoed with the truth lest in the long run such publicity damage the national interest in the event of war. In view of Fisher's many secret statements both to the Cabinet and to his colleagues upon the implications of the development of the submarine boat with respect to the viability of the close blockade as an instrument of modern warfare, it may only be concluded that the ambiguity of a statement, such as the one that follows, was designed intentionally to offset both the accusations that his mind was devoid of all strategic planning as well as those of whom he suspected of having some knowledge of just as to what exactly his real strategy for the offence entailed. For example in late January 1908, at the height of his dispute with Beresford concerning the war plans for the Channel Fleet, Fisher wrote to Sir Edward Grey noting in part :

I enclose the 188 pages of War Plans. I think you will find Part I the finest bit of strategical exposition you ever read I have marked out the features of Sir Arthur Wilson's War Plan The lovely thing is, I gave these War Plans personally to Lord Charles Beresford nearly a year ago How can the Cabinet express any opinion on Sir Arthur Wilson's cardinal feature of 'sweeps' - in which I for one cannot express my confidence ? Are the Cabinet going to decide which is right - Sir A. Wilson who wants the British Battle Fleet far removed from the North Sea, or Lord Charles Beresford, who wants it there ?¹⁸

The main issue of Cabinet interference which Fisher goes on to discuss at length will be dealt with later ; but for the moment the salient points are : in the first place, that Fisher presents here the Portsmouth Committee plans as genuine Admiralty policy currently in force within the entire service ; and in the second place, by noting Wilson's temporary support for the principles of the questionable 'observational' blockade Sir John attempts to subtly indicate that he himself still favours the more traditional form of blockade. Now, aside from the fact that Fisher by his own admission would never have revealed his real plans to anyone, let alone to Grey whom Sir John knew to be in favour of the Continental Strategy, and in view of Fisher's troubles with Beresford and his motley collection of duchesses and 'beached' failures, it seems quite clear that the whole purpose of Fisher's unwonted wooing of the Foreign Secretary and other members of the Cabinet was by way of endeavouring to drum up support for his faltering position and to scuttle Beresford's efforts to cajole Asquith into undertaking an investigation of Admiralty policy spanning the previous four years. Sir John fully realised that regardless of the outcome of any such investigation, its very existence would so divide the service that he would have no choice but to 'go under'. Nevertheless Fisher was without doubt a man of principle and he regarded it as his paramount responsibility to forestall any crisis which might force his hand and lead to a direct confrontation between the War Office and the Admiralty : he knew that in such an event, given the rift within the service and the personal attacks upon himself, that the military policy had an excellent

18 - Fisher to Grey, 23 Jan. 1908. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, pp. 155 - 157.

chance of gaining the formal sanction of the Liberal-Imperialists within the Cabinet.¹⁹ Time proved Fisher to be correct.

Furthermore, Fisher's statements upon the impracticability of close blockade, on the one hand, and invasion, on the other, were so numerous that to suggest that he developed his strategic ideas upon lines so blatantly at odds with the implications of the new technology whose broader significance he had been the first to recognise is arrant nonsense bred upon a blinding hate for Fisher and 'Fisherism'. In writing to Mr. Balfour at the close of 1903 Sir John had clearly stated his undisputed variance with those who continued to advocate close in-shore operations ; discussing invasion and the value of the submarine boat in that connection he had noted :

. . . the development of the submarine boat has absolutely precluded the idea of a mass of transports approaching any position where the landing of troops is feasible. Only those who have seen a flotilla of submarine boats (as at Portsmouth) working out in the open sea can form the right conception of the revolution they have caused.²⁰

Statements concerning this 'revolution' appear throughout Fisher's letters and memoranda culminating, as they did, in his prophetic paper on the subject produced in June 1912 which drew even from Mr. Churchill the incredulous response that 'I do not believe that this would ever be done by a civilized power'. Asquith was so stunned at the blood-thirsty old Admiral's pronouncements to the effect that under-sea boats would be employed in the indiscriminate destruction of defenceless merchantmen, that he suppressed Fisher's memorandum from the Cabinet repeating his censorship early in 1914 when Sir John submitted an even more blood-curdling forecast of the destructive potential inherent in this new weapon. Even more significant were Fisher's remarks upon the outcome of the 1913 fleet manoeuvres which had been curtailed owing to the extensive 'losses' of surface vessels at the hands of submarine boats ; writing to Julian Corbett in November of that

19 - Fisher to Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, pp. 155, 159.

20 - Fisher to Balfour, November 1903 [?] . Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. III, p. 16.

year Lord Fisher had noted :

When I became First Sea Lord, everyone thought me a lunatic for developing the submarine, and I had to hide the money in the Estimates. In consequence NOW we have 3,000 trained submarine officers and men, and over 2 keels to 1 against Germany and MORE SO. It's wonderful what they did in these last manoeuvres.²¹

It may only be concluded that in drawing up the Portsmouth Committee 'plans', and in their subsequent submission to Grey and others, Fisher was effectively providing himself and his secret planning with an 'insurance policy', a policy directed against the criticism of Beresford and his 'Syndicate of Discontent'. Having waded through this miasma of contradiction and duplicity, having considered Sir John's mania for secrecy, and with the knowledge of the underlying principles which dictated his strategic thinking as revealed so amply in his papers and correspondence, it becomes evident that the verdict returned some years ago by the most eminent authority on the history of the Royal Navy during these crucial years must still hold true : that 'between 1904 and 1914 there was evolved the blockade strategy of the War, that of distant surveillance by the main fleet in well defended bases'.²²

But what of the Baltic project itself ? The scheme was never either fully revealed or planned in detail. The reasons have already been explained. Churchill considered the scheme in his frustrated desire to find an offensive role for the Navy : but the scheme was never examined by the much heralded War Staff and, besides, Churchill well realised, if a trifle late, that his actions with respect to the Continental Strategy had effectively dealt the Admiralty out of any offensive contribution to a British war effort in Europe. In its fundamentals, which were worked out by Corbett just before the War, Fisher's scheme called for a massive assault upon the Pomeranian

21 - Fisher to Corbett, 29 Nov. 1913. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, pp. 494 - 495.

22 - Marder, The Anatomy of British Sea Power, p. 370.

coast at its point closest to Berlin, together with the landing of masses of Russian troops if available.²³ Needless to say in rejecting the suggestion of Russia military conversations in the Spring of 1914 Grey made no mention of Fisher's Baltic aspirations ; it is doubtful as to whether Grey knew anything about them, and even if he did it takes little imagination to realise how unpalatable a view he would have taken at that juncture. Writing after the War Fisher freely admitted that the scheme was a rash and daring strategical concept. He realised that many vessels would fall victim to mines and submarines ; however, as Fisher pointed out, upon his return to the Admiralty in October 1914 he had specially ordered over 600 vessels to carry out this one plan, which, if successful would be well worth a high percentage of loss since they were constructed of the cheapest possible materials. Lord Beaverbrook noted some years ago with respect to Fisher's scheme :

It was impossible to say that the plan was impracticable, but it required a violent act of faith to believe in it and its consequences, involving immense preparations of quite new types of vessels.²⁴

Sir John had not preached of the tremendous potential of submarines, nor of the declining, though still important, value of capital ships, nor of the future of air power, all for nothing or without understanding the implications of his words for the future of the Navy. Besides, the Baltic Scheme, unlike the Portsmouth Committee 'plans' of 1906, did not of necessity call for the use of the main fleet. Though, in point of fact, it would be free for Baltic service, Fisher emphasized that it would not be used in the actual execution of amphibious operations.²⁵ But perhaps most important is the fact that

23 - See : Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Records, (London, 1919), Corbett's Baltic Paper, pp. 217 - 222.

24 - Beaverbrook, Baron (Max W.), Politicians and the War, 1914 - 1916, (London, 1960), p. 99.

25 - Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 359.

above all Fisher's Baltic Scheme, unlike the so-called 'plans' for operations off the German coast of 1906, depended entirely upon the initial successful outcome of a decisive action with the High Seas Fleet. Sir John had been irrevocably clear on the matter of this fundamental presupposition, upon which all offensive operations were dependent, from the very outset. Writing to Viscount Esher, upon learning of his appointment as Lord Walter Kerr's successor, Fisher had made this point with sparkling clarity :

There will be no time for anything ! War will come like the Day of Judgment ! Suddenly ! Unexpectedly ! Overwhelmingly ! . . .

The supreme feature of sea-war is its abrupt, its dramatic suddenness ! Fleets are always mobilized and ready for instant war ! We strike even before war is declared (at least we ought to), and remember (above all remembrances) that an initial naval disaster is irreparable, irretrievable, eternal ! ²⁶

Given this essential presupposition of an early and a decisive fleet action, given the fact that Fisher had calculated upon losing the greater part of an invasion fleet especially constructed for this one purpose, and given, above all, the necessity for offensive planning if the Navy were to maintain its decisive preponderance over the enemy in the event of a fleet action - an action upon which everything for the future of England and of the Empire depended - then the Baltic Scheme was not merely justifiable but in a curious way was fundamental to the security of the nation and of the Empire.

The Baltic Scheme lay, indeed, at the heart of Fisher's strategy for the offence. But it was never subjected to serious or meaningful scrutiny. The reasons for this failure have already been mentioned ; it is impossible, now, to say what relationship the scheme had to contemporary reality. The irony, which must have been apparent to Fisher, of the Cabinet's inability to choose between the 'military' policy, on the one hand, and the 'naval' policy, on the other, precluded any examination of the efficacy of Sir John's scheme. But to reveal the Scheme was to throw down the gauntlet to those

26 - Fisher to Esher, ca. 23 Apr. 1904. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. I, p. 310.

who supported the Continental Strategy. With Fisher at the helm no decision, no direct confrontation was possible, for the advocates of the Continental Strategy, while powerful, were easily matched by the persuasive power and influence of Sir John. When Fisher departed that decision, if it may be so termed, became a political and hence a practical possibility. Viewed in the long term the decision to go to France had been implicit since January 1906 ; but so long as Fisher retained the naval initiative that decision could not be made explicit.

But what of the Navy as an institution during these years ? It cannot be overlooked that Fisher's reforms and the methods that he was forced to employ in order to achieve his ends stirred up much controversy. Doubtless, in point of detail, many of the complaints of the 'Syndicate of Discontent' were in themselves quite reasonable ; but when set against the backcloth of the relative position of the Navy within the defence establishment they paled into selfish and pedantic sectionalism.

The root cause of the dissension which flourished in the service during the Fisher years was not the feud between the First Sea Lord and Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet, but rather the violent, indelicate, methods that Fisher was driven to adopt in order to make his reforms effective. Sir John had no reverence for the precedence of the Navy List, and his freely admitted 'favouritism' was based not upon the ingratiation of personality but rather the dictates of 'efficiency'. Given the terms of reference of those days, the men that Sir John gathered around him in the 'Fishpond' were all outstanding naval officers. Charles Ottley, John Jellicoe, Reginald Bacon, David Beatty and George Ballard - to mention but a few - were all hand-picked assistants. This ability to unerringly pick out the best of the available talent was one of the major ingredients in Sir John's success. None of them, despite the claims of the 'Syndicate of Discontent' were by any stretch of the imagination 'yes men'. Fisher had no place for those who opposed him, his work was too portentous and revolutionary to permit the luxury of dissent, with the result that many of the less influential supporters of 'Charlie B' soon found themselves high and dry on the beach.

The petty and dispicable conduct of the 'Syndicate of Discontent' very largely

negated whatever inherent validity their objections contained. The Fisher - Beresford feud has been chronicled well enough elsewhere.²⁷ It might, however, be worthwhile to examine the nature of the opposition to Sir John which emanated from some of the 'lesser lights' in the Beresford camp. The feud between the two Admirals provided many of those disgruntled by Fisher's regime with an easy and powerful rallying-point. Carlyon Bellairs, Doveton Sturdee and their following were little more than disreputable political hacks, misfits in the Fisher system. Notwithstanding, there were others in the service who, while opposing Sir John's reforms, managed to restrain themselves from the luxury of personal attacks - thus enabling themselves to stay afloat. The opposition of men such as (Vice-Admiral) Dewar and (Admiral Sir) Herbert Richmond, while increasingly vociferous, remained always within the bounds of a professional disagreement rather than extending itself into a personal feud.

It is amusing to note that Sturdee, the first war-time Chief of the Admiralty War Staff, which Beresford had championed for so long, distinguished himself in that position by his mediocrity. Richmond's opinion of Sturdee, whose career with the 'Syndicate' had been launched in the early Fisher years as Beresford's Flag Captain in the Channel Fleet, was hardly flattering :

Of Sturdee I hardly know what to think. He writes childish ideas in portentous language and appears to think himself a great tactician²⁸

Richmond had served on the War Staff under Sturdee prior to the war ; he has since recalled that Sturdee, in spite of his position, belonged to that breed of naval officer who viewed careful staff work as unnecessary and considered strategy to be the concern solely of the olympians who had achieved flag rank. Whereas Beresford had long admired Sturdee and in writing to Lieutenant-Commander Bellairs in February 1909 he had

27 - See : Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, Vol. I, pp. 76 - 104.

28 - Richmond, H.W., Portrait of an Admiral : Life and Letters of Sir Herbert Richmond, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952), p. 70.

enthusiastically noted :

. . . Captain (now Admiral) Sturdee . . . is one of the very best men in the Service²⁹

Of course, Sturdee somehow managed to survive Fisher's wrath which was such that Sir John placed him in command of the battle cruisers which he dispatched to avenge the loss of Cradock's Squadron at Coronel - a loss which was due largely to incompetent staff work ! True, Fisher was willing to go to any length to get Sturdee out of the Admiralty. Sturdee acquitted himself poorly at the Falklands in spite of the popular acclaim that was showered upon him on his return to England. This was hardly Fisher at his vindictive best.

Carlyon Bellairs had in the very early days been on friendly terms with Fisher, but clearly he came in time to feel that his star would prosper better under the wing of Lord Charles Beresford - especially in the event of his succeeding Fisher as First Sea Lord. Years later Beresford and the Syndicate were to take exception to the special powers and responsibilities that Fisher had defined for himself upon becoming First Sea Lord. Yet in April 1905 Beresford had had the gall to write to the Prime Minister exulting :

For the first time an order is given and printed that someone is responsible for 'Organization for War', this is or ought to be the primary reason for having an Admiralty at all I see that the duties now assigned to the First Sea Lord are on the lines that I laid down as imperatively necessary in the scheme for the foundation of a proper Intelligence Department at the Admiralty in 1887 It is a fine delight for me to see all the reforms I have advocated for so many years now being carried out Jack Fisher is rallying about and revelling in reforms and doing grand work for the State. What a lot of money you would have saved, and how much more efficient the Fleet would have been now, if you had listened to me and given me an opportunity all these years.³⁰

29 - Beresford to Bellairs, 12 Feb. 1909. Bellairs MSS, Letters : Private and Family.

30 - Beresford to Balfour, 27 Apr. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49713.

If this type of self-adulation and evident hypocrisy is distressing it becomes decidedly revolting when in December of the same year Beresford is found writing to Bellairs describing Fisher as a 'nincompoop' and claiming the support of the entire Service in his opposition to the First Sea Lord.³¹ Fisher had just been appointed as an additional Admiral of the Fleet on the Navy List, thus extending his active career.

With the passage of the years what small grain of validity there had been in the arguments of the Beresford 'School' was soon engulfed by a bitter unreasoning hatred for Fisher. Beresford's nauseating correspondence culminated in letters such as this one to Bellairs of late February 1917 :

As a matter of fact, Fisher is now getting £ 1500 a year at the Inventions Committee, where he never goes, and when he does, he sleeps all the time in an arm chair. The only way we can ever beat Fisherism is to remove from the minds of the people that he was a great administrator. That was rammed home into the heads of the people for seven years by the press, as you know. As a matter of fact, Fisher is mainly responsible for the war, as he never would protect the trade routes, and our present position of grave danger is entirely due to him.³²

In reality, the feud within the Navy became irreversible only with the Government's formal recognition of Beresford and his hangers-on in deciding to act on their demands for an enquiry into Fisher's administration. Viscount Esher was infuriated by the Government's weakness and writing to Mr. Balfour in mid-April 1909 he observed :

By all accounts the Government are contemplating some sort of 'enquiry' into the Admiralty.

It is inconceivable to me that they can be so foolish, and so weak.

The 'Admiralty' - unlike the old War Office - has always been homogeneous with the Government of the day.

31 - Beresford to Bellairs, 12 Dec. 1905. Bellairs MSS, Letters : Private and Family.

32 - Beresford to Bellairs, 24 Feb. 1917. Bellairs MSS, Letters : Private and Family.

An 'enquiry' into the Admiralty is an enquiry into the executive Government. At least, so it appears to me.

The 'Board' changes with the First Lord. It is not a body of permanent civil servants

As you know, I was strongly in favour, some time ago, of Jacky resigning on 21 October (5 years from his taking office) and of his warning the Government of his intention last January. This he did not do.

But now, in the face of attack, I have strongly urged him to wait till he is turned out by a file of marines. It is the only possible course, if he wishes to die a dignified death. ³³

No matter how favourable the findings of the Committee of Enquiry might have been, even if there had been no criticism of Fisher on the issue of the war staff, the fact remained that the Enquiry in formally recognising the Beresford clique precluded Fisher's further service at the Admiralty and signalled the end of Fisherism within the Navy. Esher, in spite of the effect which the enquiry had had upon him, was so upset as to peevishly write to Balfour upon its outcome :

It is concluded in his [Asquith's] usual cold judicial language, and as you will note contains no word of appreciation of the value of the naval reforms introduced by Selbourne which lie at the root of the policy which C.B. attacked.

I imagine Jacky will be hurt at the want of direct support given to him, and C.B. will be furious.

So I suppose the Report fulfills all 'political' requirements. ³⁴

Fisher departed and the Admiralty was effectively sterilised. But Sir John was to remain a potent factor as the brains behind Churchill when the latter became First Lord in the autumn of 1911. The bitter opposition which raged throughout the rest of Fisher's life was in essence an overwhelming tribute to the great and fateful changes which he had wrought upon Admiralty policy and naval thought as a whole. With the passage of the years the issues of pre-1914 England receded as minds dimmed and those who had

33 - Esher to Balfour, 13 Apr. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

34 - Esher to Balfour, 15 Aug. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

participated in these great events departed the stage of this life ; yet the Fisher controversy raged as vehemently as ever. Commander Bellairs prior to his death in 1955 had been preparing a manuscript for a work on Fisher's life and times. The book was never completed, but a rough text together with numerous notes scribbled down upon the spur of the moment has survived in his private papers. By way of emphasizing the smouldering bitterness of the rift which occurred within the Navy during these few crucial years of monumental reform perhaps this discussion may best be closed upon the note of the following acrid evaluation rendered by Bellairs more than twenty years after Fisher's death :

To Cagliostro and still more to Machiavelli much may be forgiven for they belonged to their age. Fisher emphatically did not. His rank brutality, deceitfulness and sensuality was of the worst Italian period and utterly alien to a profession renowned for a high code of character whatever might be said in derogation of its conservative instincts.

. . . .

He had a jungle mind with the single facet to the world that Fisher must subdue in order that Fisher might survive and all mankind, even his sovereign, must subserve Fisher and it was not the dictator's mind of a Mussolini adoring his Italy or of a Hitler with the passionate love for the ideal race but simply one that could cry after me the deluge.³⁵

And so it goes, on and on ; Bellairs writes of the old Admiral's 'vehemence', of 'his lusts for women, his zest for power', noting that Sir John was 'good socially and bare spiritually', while concluding with the delightful observation that Lord Fisher 'danced because there is so much sin mixed up in it'. This childish rancour would almost be amusing if it did not betray so deep and abiding a hatred. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that both Beresford and Bellairs, however misguided, came in time to firmly believe that Fisher was indeed the root of all evil. A belief that had disastrous consequences for the Navy and the nation.

35 - 'Notes on Fisher'. Bellairs MSS.

Some measure of the fatal consequences of the Anti-Fisher campaign may be drawn from the following letters written by Viscount Esher, the one at the height of Sir John's power when the Service rift was only beginning to show itself and the other upon 'Jacky's' tumble into enforced retirement. In a note to Fisher of 18th February 1906 Esher had observed :

The more I see of the working of the Admiralty the more I like it. The more I see of the working of the G.S. the less I like it. The French have not disclosed their plans ashore, and I don't blame them. I say nothing will induce you to disclose your plans to anyone, and you are right. In war you must take chances, and it is better to risk much than lose the enormous advantage of surprise.³⁶

The second, which speaks for itself in contrast to the letter of February 1906, was written to Balfour in late December 1909 :

There is a great deal of truth in Haldane's contention that the weak point in our national armour just now is, not the material or personnel of the Navy, but the Board of Admiralty, its want of modern ideas, and its inefficient organization.³⁷

Such was the impression which the feud had left upon so eminent and sympathetic an observer as Viscount Esher. In any case, there was an almost universal sentiment in favour of retiring Fisher, just as he had beached Beresford thus precipitating the enquiry, from active service and the institution of a period of calm within the Navy during which the breach could be healed. That story is not of immediate concern here. What is important is the fact that the rivalry coupled to the Government's vacillation and failure to support Fisher resulted in a fatal period of weakness at the Admiralty. A weakness which, as will be seen, was to manifest itself not only in the Navy's dealings with the Government as a whole but also in every aspect of naval thought and administration.

36 - Esher to Fisher, 18 Feb. 1906. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 145.

37 - Esher to Balfour, 24 Dec. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

Fisher must not be blamed for the fatal outcome of the feud. Whatever his faults his contribution to the nation as a whole, arising out of his far-reaching and monumental reforms which fundamentally altered the strategic, demographic and material aspects of the Navy, stood the test of time. A lesser man, a man respectful of empty prerogatives and obscurantist tradition, could not have accomplished that which Fisher achieved. Nothing short of a Fisher, with all his faults, would have sufficed in the monumental task of clearing out the old and bringing in the new. Without his faults, without his threats of 'turning wives into widows and homes into dunghill', there would have been no revolution in the material and strategic outlook of the Navy. In short Fisher possessed and exercised the 'brutality', as Bonar-Law termed it, necessary to administer effectively and efficiently.

Nevertheless this great period of 'unprecedented reform' was followed by the rule of weak men and empty ideas. What Esher so aptly described as 'political considerations' dictated the end of Fisherism within the Navy and the sacrifice of the Service to the requirements of political quietude. The beneficiaries of the decline in Naval prestige were the new so-called 'advanced' military thinkers. The demise of Fisher signalled the flowering of the Continental Strategy which imperceptibly moved into centre stage as the dominating calculation in the development of both a national and imperial defence policy.

CHAPTER FIVE

AN EXPERIMENT IN SUPREME COMMAND : THE EXPERIENCE OF THE COMMITTEE OF IMPERIAL DEFENCE

There was no co-ordination, no co-operation between the people in charge of land and sea war, and defence. It was obvious a civilian cabinet could form no judgement, and I had the idea, which was really original. I don't say that out of conceit, - I mean simply that the Defence Committee had no precedent. It started, and it has worked admirably from the very start.

The Rt. Hon. Arthur Balfour ; 1927.

The Politician will not commit himself. The Sailor ignores the Soldier and the Soldier thinks of battleships in terms of transports.

Viscount Esher ; 1910.

THE broad sweep of forces and events that have already been discussed must be drawn together in order once more to focus upon Mr. Balfour's Defence Committee. The growing realisation that war, and the preparation for war, could no longer be relegated to specific watertight compartments had very largely been offset by those inherent differences in overall approach which precluded effective inter-service co-operation and co-ordination. The story of the relations between the Admiralty and the War Office must be told very largely within the framework of the Committee of Imperial Defence. But it was a negative relationship in which the Committee fulfilled no more than a passive

role. The C.I.D. became a forum in which the two Services tended increasingly to oppose one another. It would be reasonable to suggest that both in the War Office and at the Admiralty there was a general acceptance of the principle that inter-service co-operation was desirable. However, all such efforts at co-operation became in short order attempts by each to dominate the other. Each Service endeavoured to subordinate the other to its own particular interpretation of the strategic needs of the Empire. The variance in their reading of those strategic needs was so wide that co-operation came of necessity to imply the twin concepts of domination, on the one hand, and subordination, upon the other. Of course, in reality the strategic needs of the nation and of the Empire could only be fulfilled adequately if the supremacy of the Navy received due recognition not only from the Government but also from the soldiers. For an island power such a consideration was not merely essential, it was, indeed, 'natural'. Unfortunately the so-called 'advanced' military thinkers, who were coming to dominate the 'New Army', did not agree. It has long been supposed that the Admiralty was at fault in refusing to exploit the Committee of Imperial Defence as a forum for co-operation with the War Office ; and that the War Office did all within its powers to facilitate the task of the Committee in drawing the two Services together. On the surface both of these assertions had assumed some considerable degree of validity, though the reverse, in fact, was true. The War Office in preaching the merit of co-operation through the medium of the C.I.D. had absolutely nothing to lose ; in 1903-1904 the position of the Army was such that it could only move forward. The 'new men' were seeking a positive role for their 'New Army', a role which they did not tumble upon until the advent of the Liberal Cabinet in the winter of 1905-1906. With the secret adoption of the Continental Strategy the Admiralty found its monopoly upon strategic considerations seriously challenged. The Navy, in short order, found itself fighting a holding rear-guard action, an action which was finally lost with the events of 1910 and 1911 that swiftly followed upon Fisher's departure. In essence the Admiralty had viewed the C.I.D. during those early days when no one had a kind word for the Army or the War Office as a mechanism whereby the Navy could ensure tight control over the nature of the military contribution to the defence of the Empire. However,

when the Army began to 'think for itself' and produced a new generation of professional soldiers, the Admiralty discovered to its chagrin that it had created a 'frankenstien'. The C.I.D. in offering itself as a potential forum for supreme planning now posed a very real threat to the continued supremacy of the Navy in all matters of defence policy. The Committee was controlled by ministers whose sympathy now lay very largely with the type of strategic policies towards which the more 'advanced' elements of the 'New Army' had already gravitated. Thus the Continental Strategy became an important factor in shaping the outlook of the leading political figures who controlled the Committee of Imperial Defence. The Admiralty, finding itself outmanoeuvred, became increasingly introspective and obstructive. As has already been seen the Navy had every reason to fear the adoption of any independent military policy ; supreme command and inter-service co-operation and co-ordination had been viewed by Selborne's Board in terms which implied Naval control over all strategic decisions. Mr. Balfour had made it absolutely clear that in all matters involving the security of England and of the Empire Naval considerations had to be placed before all else. But with the reorientation of England's international position after 1904, the advent of a group of outstanding ministers increasingly concerned with Continental affairs, and the rise of a new aggressive military faction all of this changed. The C.I.D. became a council largely dominated by ministers who had committed England to a military role upon the Continent. And yet the Committee did not itself become a proponent of the Continental Strategy, largely because it too had elements within it, above and beyond the Naval interests represented, which were not inclined towards the strategic policies that the Liberal-Imperialist faction embraced. In short, the Admiralty, finding itself outmanoeuvred and outnumbered became obstructive ; the War Office, not daring to speak openly of its full aspirations, made use of the Committee, as far as it dared without revealing its intentions completely, to block the Admiralty's efforts to dominate the defence posture of the nation and of the Empire. And so the Committee became the forum for the struggle between the 'navallists' and the 'militarists' - a struggle which manifested itself directly over such issues as invasion and compulsory service, and implicitly in the more fundamental disagreement over basic national strategy. This

clash of interests rendered the Committee impotent.

The prospects for inter-service co-operation and co-ordination, in the evolution of a national defence strategy consonant with Cabinet policy, had seemed encouraging during those days of intensive re-examination and re-organization of the defence structure which had followed upon the end of the War in South Africa. At the close of 1902 the then Secretary of State for War, St. John Brodrick, in the company of the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Selborne, had presented to Mr. Balfour a 'Memorandum on the Improvement of the Intellectual Equipment of the Services' in which the two Ministers had urged that some concrete steps be taken to satisfy the growing need for inter-service co-operation and co-ordination in the interests of Imperial defence. This concern together with the evident interest of both Services in the work of the Esher Committee must have been most gratifying to Mr. Balfour. This memorandum had formed the initial platform from which the Prime Minister launched the War Office Reconstruction Committee - and, hence, the Committee of Imperial Defence.

During the spring of 1904 both the Admiralty and the War Office had expressed to the Cabinet their enthusiastic support for the essentials of the Esher Committee's proposals as regards the C.I.D., and had enlarged upon their hopes that the Committee would provide a common meeting ground where the Services could ensure their 'continued' mutual co-operation upon all strategic matters.¹

However, from the very outset the Admiralty and the War Office had adopted widely differing views upon the role of the C.I.D. in the defence establishment. The Admiralty

1 - 'Memorandum on the Proposals of the War Office (Reconstruction) Committee in respect of the Committee of Imperial Defence', by the First Lord of the Admiralty the Earl of Selborne, 4 Mar. 1904. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/69, No. 38.

'Views of the Army Council with Respect to the Report of the War Office (Reconstruction) Committee', Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War H.O. Arnold-Forster, 28 May 1904. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/71, No. 72.

had tended towards the somewhat patronising attitude that the Committee was necessary in order to transmit the Naval strategic viewpoint to the War Office, thus enabling the Army to tailor its policies to fit those strategic needs. To a point the War Office had concurred with this view, although, quite naturally, the Army tended to take a somewhat more flattering view of the importance of its contribution. In short, during those early years, the War Office regarded the C.I.D., at best, as a mechanism whereby the Army would receive its fair share, however small, of the responsibility for the defence of the Empire. In the course of a memorandum to the Cabinet of May 1904 Arnold-Forster had clearly stated the War Office's views with regard to the significance of the C.I.D. for the Army :

Part 14, Section 1., of the Report deals with the Defence Committee. As the Committee is presided over by the Prime Minister, its constitution is not primarily a matter for the Army Council. The Council, however, hail with satisfaction the adoption of the proposals made by the Reconstruction Committee and believe that they will tend to facilitate the work of the War Office by making it more fully aware of the part which the Army is expected to play in time of war, and will also tend to produce even more effective co-operation than has hitherto existed between the two Services.²

The Admiralty's attitude was far more nonchalant ; the Navy assumed that its task was abundantly clear to all. The Board tended, rather, to look upon the Committee as a clearing house wherein the soldiers could not only be kept under surveillance but also informed of the role which the Admiralty, albeit in consultation with the C.I.D., had decided it would be necessary for the Army to fulfill. Writing to the Prime Minister in October 1903, at the outset of the great reforms, Fisher expressed his, and indeed very largely the Naval, expectation of the role the Defence Committee was to fill :

It has been put at the very forefront that the organization of the War Office is intimately associated with our Naval Strength

You cannot disassociate the British Army from the British Navy ! For instance, what would be the good of a British Army as big as that of Germany if the Navy were insufficient to keep command of the sea ? . . .

2 - 'Views of the Army Council with Respect to the Report of the War Office (Reconstruction) Committee', 28 May 1904.

What does this reasoning lead us to ? - Answer :-
 That Naval and Military requirements must be considered together.
 It must be One Service, and not two great Departments fighting
 independently with the Treasury to see what they can get, and the
 Treasury saying if we give so much more to one we must take it off
 the other ! We therefore are led irresistibly to the conclusion with
 which we started that the War Office must be reorganized on such
 lines as will ensure most intimate joint Naval and Military action ;
 and the natural question that arises is - can this imperative
 requirement be met by any other method than a single Cabinet
 chief as in Austria ? Can the Cabinet Committee of Defence be
 relied on to perform this function ? Will it not mean the triumph
 of the ablest representatives and not of the most necessitous Service ?
 "Facta non Verba" is the motto of the Navy - it is feared they
 would lose in wordy warfare !³

It would seem that Sir John's misgivings were placed in temporary abeyance during the coming months as the C.I.D. emerged as a mechanism of 'ensuring most intimate joint Naval and Military action'. However, this discrepancy in approach between the War Office and the Admiralty was most clearly defined during those early days over the matter of entering the C.I.D. and its membership in the 'Lists' of the two Services. Strictly speaking such action was contrary to Balfour's conception of the Committee as having only one permanent member - namely the Prime Minister. Regardless, it is an interesting commentary upon the War Office's faith in the efficacy of the C.I.D. that it sought to include the Committee on the Army List. Clarke, writing to Mr. Balfour on this matter in late September 1904, does not seem to have been unduly concerned over the constitutional issue despite his association with the Esher Committee :

I send also a proof page intended to be the reference to the Committee of Defence in the Army List, and to follow that detailing the Staff of the Inspector General of the Forces. I have replied that I would like your wishes in regard to this reference.

I have ascertained from the Admiralty that Lord Selborne decided that the Committee should not be referred to in the Navy

3 - Fisher to Balfour, 'A Brief Precis of the Principal Considerations that Must Influence Our Future Naval and Military Policy', 19 Oct. 1903.
 Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.

List. In this case it seems undesirable that it should appear in the Army List, which might help to develop an idea of special connection with the War Office.⁴

It must be remembered that Clarke was, himself, a soldier and had, no doubt, a considerable degree of sympathy for the Army's search to find a meaningful place for itself in the defence establishment. Perhaps the C.I.D. might be the path that led to such an abode. Time was to prove the soldiers to be correct. But in 1904 the shoe was on the other foot, and the next day, in the course of a letter to the Prime Minister, Selborne expressed in no uncertain terms his disapproval of the War Office's move :

You may like to know that the Admiralty have just received a letter from the War Office, dated 3rd September, in which occurs the following paragraph :

'The composition of the Committee of Imperial
'Defence has not hitherto been shown in the
'Navy or Army List, but it is a matter of
'consideration whether, now that a permanent
'Secretariat has been added, it should
'not be inserted. In the Council's opinion
'its inclusion is desirable, and they would
'propose, so far as the Army Lists
'are concerned, to show the Committee after
'the Department of the Inspector General
'of the Forces. The Members of the Committee
'as distinct from the Members of the
'Secretariat, would be shown by their official
'designations only.

This may be right or wrong, but as it is distinctly contrary to what you settled I thought you ought to be told at once.⁵

Selborne clearly disliked what he regarded as an attempt by the War Office to inflate its own importance by increasing that of the Committee.

By the same token virtually every initiative taken by the Defence Committee during those early years was at the prompting of the Admiralty - excluding, of course, the

4 - Clarke to Balfour, 27 Sept. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49700.

5 - Selborne to Balfour, 28 Sept. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49708.

question of the defence of the North West Frontier. The War Office was in no position to initiate even the most general of principles for not only was the Army universally regarded as a delinquent requiring the steadying influence of the C.I.D. to shape its behaviour, but also it lacked any overall strategic purpose of its own from which to originate any meaningful proposals advantageous to itself. During those early years the 'new men' had not yet come to the fore in the War Office, and the Army did not possess that overall strategic purpose so necessary if its aspirations were to be shaped and channeled constructively. Of course, in Naval eyes the Army presented a very poor spectacle. Fisher's experiences on the Esher Committee had not exactly been calculated to improve his opinion of his opposites across Whitehall. Writing to Viscount Esher in November 1903, on his appointment to the War Office Reconstruction Committee, Sir John had observed :

The military system is rotten to the very core ! You want to begin ab ovo ! The best of the Generals are even worse than the subalterns, because they are more hardened sinners !⁶

His work on the Esher Committee did nothing to soften Fisher's views, indeed his experiences during those months served only to confirm his view that all 'Generals are asses'.⁷ It took more than the reorganization of the War Office to erase the time honoured traditions which prejudiced the nation in favour of the Navy. Besides the very presence of Fisher, and indeed Esher, on the War Office Reconstruction Committee had left much of the country with the impression that the Navy had been called in to redress the deficiencies within the Army. This air of military inferiority had been imparted almost universally ; even Clarke in writing to Haldane in February 1905

6 - Fisher to Esher, ca. 7 Nov. 1903. Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Fear God and Dread Nought : The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. I, p. 290.

7 - Fisher to Balfour, 'Submarines', April 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.

had noted :

You have said that you would vote 50,000£ a year to anyone who would do for the Army what Fisher has done for the Navy.

I am ready to do this and much more - for much more is required.

And I don't want 50,000£ a year.

As you will know, it is an easy thing to strike 125 ships from the Navy List. Ships do not write to newspapers to air their grievances.

What is needed by our military forces is infinitely larger in scope and enormously more difficult in execution than anything Fisher has done or will have to do at the Admiralty.⁸

For the moment Clarke's flagrant misuse of his position must be overlooked ; the point emerges clearly enough that the task of Army reform was viewed as being inversely proportional to the somewhat tattered prestige of the military.

From the outset the Admiralty had sought to exploit the C.I.D. as a mechanism whereby War Office policy could be shaped to marry with Naval strategic thought. Writing to Viscount Esher in November 1903 Fisher had stressed the role of the Army as an adjunct to the Navy in the execution of combined operations :

. . . What I venture to emphasize is this : We cannot reform the Army Administration until it is laid down what the Administration is going to administer ! . . . Again, I say, the Regular Army (as distinguished from the Home Army and the Indian Army) should be regarded as a projectile to be fired by the Navy ! The Navy embarks it and lands it where it can do most mischief ! . . . Consequently, instead of our military manoeuvres being on Salisbury Plain and its vicinity (ineffectually aping the vast Continental Armies !), we should be employing ourselves in joint naval and military manoeuvres, embarking 50,000 men at Portsmouth and landing them at Milford Haven or Bantry Bay !⁹

8 - Clarke to Haldane, 6 Feb. 1905. Haldane MSS, MS 5906.

9 - Fisher to Esher, 19 Nov. 1903. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. I, p. 291.

Writing to Esher in March of the following year Fisher once again urged the need for practical experience in amphibious operations :

Just back from the English Channel and very enthusiastic !
We really must arrange to get the British Army to sea somehow
or other ! . . .

But what I am writing about is - you must embark an
Army Corps every year and give them sea-training.¹⁰

The War Office attitude was, as yet, still somewhat subservient as evinced by Arnold-Forster's report on the "Year's work at the War Office" which he submitted to the Cabinet early in 1905. In part the Secretary of State for War had noted at that time in looking back over 1904 :

I considered it part of my duty to enforce the principles adopted by the Committee of Defence, and to render the co-operation between the Army and the Navy closer than ever before. In the pursuance of this object joint Naval and Military manoeuvres were instituted for the first time. A force of all arms was transported by sea from Southampton to the coast of Essex, under the convoy of a squadron of H.M. ships, and a landing on the coast was effected with the aid of the Navy. The operations proved very instructive, and the results have been embodied in a full report. In order that full advantage may be taken of the lessons afforded by the manoeuvres, a joint Military and Naval Committee has been appointed to study the various problems which arose in connection with the landing and embarkation.¹¹

This type of undertaking was a world apart from the strategic thought that underlay the Continental Strategy.

Some measure of the favourable aspect of naval opinion with regard to the C.I.D. during those early years may be gleaned from the following letter which Lord Walter Kerr

10 - Fisher to Esher, 10 Mar. 1904. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. I, pp. 304 - 305.

11 - 'Summary of the Year's Work at the War Office', Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War, 31 Jan. 1905. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/74, No. 16.

wrote to Sir George Clarke upon his retirement as First Sea Lord in October 1904 :

I sever my association with the Defence Committee with very great regret. It has been to me most interesting and instructive work and it is not likely to be less so in the future I shall not cease to take the greatest interest in its work so far as it is publically divulged. I am very thankful that I was on the Committee long enough to see it properly established with yourself to conduct it. ¹²

Fisher was by no means peculiar in his support for the Committee, and when he stepped into Kerr's shoes on Trafalgar Day he inherited a Board already sympathetic to his views upon the matter.

The first significant attempt to exploit the C.I.D. as a forum for inter-Service co-operation and co-ordination came in the summer of 1905. The move was prompted by the Moroccan crisis which, for the first time, had raised the possibility of England's involvement in a war upon the Continent. The nature of the military response has already been discussed at some length. Fisher had no intention of being caught out by the adoption of any independent military policy. The proposal to fully exploit the C.I.D. as a forum for co-operation and co-ordination had originated at the Admiralty and was designed clearly to draw the War Office into line with Naval strategic thought. Fisher forwarded the Admiralty's proposals privately to Mr. Balfour urging the proper development of the C.I.D. into a viable co-ordinating body :

It would be of great advantage if schemes for various joint naval and military expeditions were to be prepared under the direction of the Prime Minister by the Naval and Military members of the C.I.D., and it would be advisable that the Secretary of the C.I.D. should be associated with them. This Sub-Committee, with the sanction of the Prime Minister, would call to their counsels such officers as were necessary : thus, in case of war between Germany and France and England combined, for the scheme of an expeditionary force against Schleswing - Holstein,

12 - Kerr to Clarke, 19 Oct. 1904. Sydenham of Coombe, Baron (George C.), My Working Life, (London, 1927), p. 176.

the Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet and presumably the General Officer in command at Aldershot would be on the Sub-Committee.¹³

It is of note that an attached Admiralty Paper entitled 'British Intervention in the Event of France Being Suddenly Attacked by Germany' assumed that any such amphibious operations pre-supposed the destruction of the enemy Fleet.¹⁴ A letter from Clarke to the Prime Minister of early July 1905 makes it clear not only that Fisher's proposals for such a Sub-Committee had been of the utmost importance in the decision to present such a proposal to the C.I.D., but that the War Office had played no significant part in these initial discussions :

I enclose :-

A. The agenda for Thursday's meeting in which I have placed first the proposal for a permanent Sub.-Ctee. to consider joint naval and military operations. The need for such a body becomes more and more pressing. There are many places in existence both at the Admiralty & W. Office which require to be co-ordinated.

B. A suggestion as to a reference for the Sub.-Ctee. I have drawn this up in conjunction with Sir J. Fisher.

C. Sir J. Fisher's views as to the composition of the Ctee.

I think would make a useful body. It would bring in two youngish officers Captain Ballard R.N. & Colonel Callwell, R.A. The latter has written two books on allied subjects, which prove him to be a student and a sound thinker.¹⁵

At the 76th meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence on 20th July 1905 the Prime Minister, following upon Fisher's urgings, proposed the establishment of the first

13 - Fisher to Balfour, 'Admiralty Paper', summer 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49711.

14 - Fisher to Balfour, 'British Intervention in the Event of France Being Suddenly Attacked by Germany', Admiralty Memorandum, summer 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49711.

15 - Clarke to Balfour, 11 July 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49701.

permanent sub-committee of the C.I.D. to 'Consider and Prepare Schemes for Combined Naval and Military Operations'. In part the minutes note that Mr. Balfour explained :

While it was unquestionably one of the functions of the Committee of Imperial Defence to see that preparations were made to meet certain eventualities, the limited time that members are able to place at its disposal disqualified the Committee as a whole from working out such schemes in necessary detail. Although the War Office and Admiralty have worked out in concert plans for expeditions directed against foreign possessions of strategic importance, he believed that more was required in order that the Admiralty and War Office should know exactly what would be required of them on the outbreak of war, and that no time should be lost in taking executive action. To enable this to be done the Admiralty and the General Staff ought in peace time to be brought into the closest communication for this purpose ; and it was important that machinery should be provided not only to frame schemes, but to subject them to constant review, in order that they might always be in harmony with the conditions of the moment.¹⁶

At the following meeting on 26th July these proposals for the establishment of a Sub-Committee to examine possible combined operations in the event of war were adopted with the following terms of reference :

The object of the Sub-Committee is to decide upon the practicability of various plans for combined naval and military action in certain contingencies, and to work out these plans in detail, so that when the occasion arrives for giving executive effect to them, no time may be lost.¹⁷

Translated into Naval terms the use to which this Sub-Committee was to be put was forcefully summed by Fisher in the course of a letter to Sandars of October 1905 :

I am very hot on this Committee for as I told Esher its the only engine capable of drawing the Army out of its Quagmire "of one man waiting on another !" You will see how silently it will

16 - 'Minutes of the 76th Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence', 20 July 1905. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/1.

17 - 'Minutes of the 77th Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence', 26 July 1905. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/1.

work a revolution in the War Office '. They will be forced to be to be ready, forced to get on, and forced to co-operate and finally forced to be efficient '.¹⁸

In the course of an enclosed paper, entitled 'Explanatory Memorandum as to the Objects and Procedures of the Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. Formed and Presided over by the Prime Minister', Sir John reminded Mr. Balfour's Private Secretary :

In preparing this statement the main point was to be borne in mind - often emphasised by the Prime Minister himself - that under no circumstances was it contemplated that Great Britain could or would undertake single-handed a great military continental war, and that every project for offensive hostilities was to be subsidiary to the action of the Fleet, such as the occupation of isolated colonial possessions of the enemy, or the assistance of an ally by threatening descent on the hostile coast, or otherwise effecting a diversion on his behalf.¹⁹

It would appear that Fisher had been upset and alarmed by the suggestions that had begun to emanate from some of the 'new men' that in the event of England becoming involved in a war upon the Continent a direct military response would be necessitated.

There is no evidence that this first permanent Sub-committee of the C.I.D. was ever convened. Lord Hankey has stated that 'Balfour's sub-committee never took shape'.²⁰ With the change of government of a few months later nothing more was heard of the committee. No report was ever filed with the C.I.D. Secretariat, and of all the Sub-committees spawned by the C.I.D. prior to the war that on 'Combined Naval and Military Operations' alone has left no record of its proceedings amongst the C.I.D. Papers. Nothing more was heard of Admiralty-War Office co-operation via the medium of the C.I.D. until Viscount Esher proposed another similar, though more broadly based, Sub-committee at the close of 1909.

18 - Fisher to Sandars, 10 Oct. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49711.

19 - Fisher to Sandars, 'The Elaboration of Combined Naval and Military Preparation for War', 10 Oct. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49711.

20 - Hankey, Baron (Maurice P.), The Supreme Command, (London, 1961), Vol. I, p. 62.

The demise of Mr. Balfour's Sub-Committee, at a time when the lack of such a body was becoming increasingly apparent owing to the prospect of involvement in a European war, is mute testament to the fact that the Admiralty was beginning to suspect that it had over-played its hand. No doubt any suspicions that Fisher might have harboured were confirmed at his discovery of the trend of events during the Conferences in Whitehall Gardens convened by Esher and Clarke over the Christmas of 1905 - 1906. At any rate, it is clear that Fisher had no enthusiasm for the Conferences which, as has been seen, he boycotted following his discovery of their leanings towards an independent role for the Army. As Lord Hankey has noted the proceedings had much in common with the type of work expected of the formal Sub-Committee of July 1905. Hankey's facts on this point were, at best, second-hand, but nevertheless even to suggest such a similarity is explanation enough for Fisher's apparent change of heart²¹. Indeed, given the tremendous divergence in strategic thought, which developed between the two Services following upon the adoption of the independent military policy, such a formal sub-committee would have served only to exacerbate those differences and, in time, keeping in mind the inclinations of the Liberal-Imperialist faction, to ensure the adoption of the military policy. The very existence of such a sub-committee would have forced the Government to choose between the 'navalists' and the 'militarists' - a choice it refused to take, and one which, indeed, never was squarely faced prior to August 1914. Further, such a sub-committee would have forced the Admiralty to reveal its strategic planning, in the hopes of offsetting the Continental Strategy, so as to win the official approval of the C.I.D. for the naval policy; whereas the Army in such a clash with the Navy could, as yet, not be sure of the sanction of the C.I.D. for the military policy. Above all the Liberal-Imperialists feared any open discussion of these various strategic alternatives lest the Liberal Party's recently won unity be split apart once again with fatal results for the Government.²¹ Thus it was clearly to the advantage of all concerned to ignore the demise

21 - For a brief survey of the various shadings of Liberal views on foreign policy, see : Monger, G., The End of Isolation : British Foreign Policy, 1900 - 1907, (London, 1963), pp. 257 - 261.

of Balfour's Sub-Committee on joint planning. There is no more telling commentary upon the change in the Admiralty's attitude towards the C.I.D. than the fact that in the summer of 1905 it had suggested the formation of an Army-Navy sub-committee of the C.I.D. thus revealing a confidence in the naval position which was visibly to be rendered wholly unjustifiable only six months later. Henceforth the C.I.D. became the forum for the squabble between the 'navalists' and the 'militarists'. The bright hopes of 1904 had been dashed.

The advent of the Liberal Government marked little change in the relations between the War Office and the Committee of Imperial Defence which remained on the whole cordial and without overt friction. With Haldane in Whitehall, the War Office had at its head an enthusiastic disciple of the C.I.D. as an organ for defence co-ordination. The accession of Haldane had been welcomed by Sir George Clarke, who nurtured great hopes for the development of the Army under the new Secretary of State for War. As early as February 1905 Clarke had written to Haldane alluding to a possible future in the War Office :

You will, I know forgive me for saying that in matters bearing on national defence a Liberal Government would not - on taking office - command great confidence. The numbers of people who would welcome an immediate change if they felt assured on this point is very large

Am I not right in thinking that success at the W.O. may very probably be the crux of the next govt. At least success there would be a supreme advantage to [one] .²²

Haldane's action in preserving the C.I.D. confirmed Clarke's goodwill and generally things got off to a fine start under the new Government.

However, while relations with the Committee were no doubt cordial they were, unfortunately, far from frank. The influence of the 'new men' in turning the War Office towards the Continental Strategy had opened up a gulf between the Army and the C.I.D.

22 - Clarke to Haldane, 6 Feb. 1905. Haldane MSS, MS 5906.

Clarke, of course, had played a major role in the events of December and January and was fully aware of the concrete foundation upon which the Independent military policy stood - namely the Staff Conversations. For the reasons which have already been discussed it was not possible for the Foreign or War Offices to reveal the Conversations to the Committee of Imperial Defence. And so while it shortly became common knowledge in the Committee that the War Office was toying with thoughts of direct military involvement in the event of a war in Europe, and inasmuch as the views of the 'new men' had begun to percolate down to the members of the C.I.D., such considerations, nevertheless, remained, as far as the Committee was concerned, upon no more than a purely hypothetical basis. Thus the War Office was frequently driven to adopt a tone which must otherwise have been ranked as blatant insincerity.

Throughout the various C.I.D. enquiries into such matters as invasion and the varied needs of Imperial defence prior to 1909, the War Office's plans for direct participation in the event of a European war were never submitted, still less was any intimation given of the Staff Conversations. Lord Hankey, whose somewhat questionable authority dates from his appointment in February 1908 as Naval Assistant Secretary to Sir Charles Ottley, has confirmed this conclusion which has been drawn from a study of the Papers of the Committee of Imperial Defence.²³ This blockage in communication between the War Office and the C.I.D. resulted in a continuing concern on the Committee with military involvement elsewhere than upon the Continent. Thus Lord Morley, the Secretary of State for India, chaired a sub-committee on Indian Defence recommending the provision of an expeditionary force of 100,000 men to be dispatched to the North West Frontier in the event of war. A memorandum drawn up by the Secretariat in late June 1908 contained the following notation :

At the 98th Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence on
30th May, 1907, the principle was accepted that this country

23 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, p. 63.

should maintain a military organisation capable of despatching 100,000 men to India during the first year of war, and that the Indian Government should make preparations to receive the number of reinforcements specified in the evidence given by Sir Beauchamp Duff before the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence which reported in May 1907.²⁴

Duff was Adjutant-General to Kitchener, at that time Commander-in-Chief in India. This concern, in effect, provided the Expeditionary Force with an official camouflage - though, in fact, the War Office's increasing pre-occupation with the prospects of war in Europe was widely known though the details of its planning remained secret.²⁵ This artificial standard drove the Committee as a whole to view the problems of the North West Frontier as more pressing than those of the Continent - officially at least. Thus Mr. Balfour, who was unaware of these developments in the War and Foreign Offices, noted in his statement before the Sub-Committee on Invasion in May 1908 :

. . . the trend of events has been to give the Germans some advantages in respect of invasion which were never possessed by the French, and if we were seriously involved with some other great naval and maritime Power, and felt ourselves obliged to denude ourselves of any large portion of our military force, I should feel that we were in a more perilous position than we have been for some generations.²⁶

In view of the firm Japanese Alliance, Mr. Balfour was, of course, referring to the event of a German attack while the British Army was involved with Russia in India. The Report of this Sub-Committee on Invasion, which was chaired by Mr. Asquith, was submitted to the C.I.D. in late October 1908. In considering the eventuality of an invasion attempt while the Expeditionary Force was abroad the Sub-Committee had automatically assumed that its only conceivable employment lay in bolstering the Indian

24 - 'Reinforcements and Drafts Required to be Despatched to India During the First Year of a War with Russia', 2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W., 24 June 1908. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 6/4/1/101D.

25 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, pp. 63-64.

26 - 'Statement Made By Mr. A.J. Balfour Before the Sub-Committee on Invasion Friday, 29th May, 1908', 2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W., 29 May 1908. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 3/2/1/43A.

Army on the North West Frontier. At the close of the Report under the heading 'Final Conclusions' it was observed :

That in the event of our being engaged in a war on the frontier of India which required 100,000 regular troops to be sent from the United Kingdom during the first year, the new organization of the Army at Home will secure that there will be left in this country during the first six months a sufficient number of regular and other troops to deal with a force of 70,000 men.²⁷

There was no suggestion whatsoever in the Report of the possibility of the Expeditionary Force being dispatched to the Continent ; and yet it would be well to point out that among the signatures affixed to the Report were those of Grey, Haldane, Lyttleton, Nicholson, French and Ewart.

It must not be thought that these men were insincere, or that they did not genuinely believe that it was necessary to prepare for a clash with Russia on the North West Frontier. But, on the other hand, neither may it be assumed that they had not devoted much thought to the possibility of military involvement upon the Continent. On the contrary, they had, all of them, first hand knowledge not only of the reorientation in military thought but also of the Staff Conversations.

During those early years of Liberal rule little progress was made in the pursuit of the Staff Conversations. Huguet has claimed that he never once met Ewart in connection with the Conversations, who had succeeded Grierson as Director of Military Operations in July 1906.²⁸ Nevertheless, it appears that one year later, in July 1907, following upon Haldane's reforms the initial agreement with the French General Staff to provide two Army Corps, four Cavalry Brigades and two Brigades of Mounted Infantry was revised.²⁹

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- 27 - 'Report of a Sub-Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister to Reconsider the Question of Oversea Attack', 2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W., 22 Oct. 1908. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 3/2/1/44A.
- 28 - Huguet, J., Britain and the War : A French Indictment, (London, 1928), p. 7.
- 29 - 'War Office Memorandum on Action Taken since 1906', by General Sir William N. Nicholson, C.I.G.S., 6 Nov. 1911. British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898 - 1914, ed. C.P. Gooch & H. Temperley (London, 1928), Vol. III, No. 221 (b).

Under the terms of this revision it was agreed that the British Army would provide one Cavalry Division and six Infantry Divisions. However, as the result of the findings of the Invasion Sub-Committee enquiry of 1907 - 1908, which had established the six months - 70,000 men margin, the French were advised of a further revision reducing the Infantry immediately available to four divisions. Clearly then, while doubtless no detailed joint staff planning was undertaken, it would be mistaken to assume that no steps were taken to further the Conversations after July 1906. The influence of the 'new men' was rapidly spreading throughout the Army as was evidenced by the large number of officers who participated in unofficial staff tours in Northern France and Belgium during those years.³⁰ The opinion of the Army General Staff upon the nature of a future Franco-German war remained unchanged during those years from that first expressed in late September 1905. A War Office minute of January 1907 substantially reflected the views which the Staff had put forward some fifteen months earlier :

. . . the General Staff . . . after careful consideration of the circumstances, are strongly of opinion that whether Germany in a war with France violates Belgian territory or whether she does not, our wisest course will be not to commit ourselves to independent operations in that country but to land in France ; to support the French left rather than the Belgian right. ³¹

It is interesting to note that while in essence this opinion reflected the view presented to the C.I.D. in 1905, here, in an internal War Office minute, direct mention is now made of possible British involvement. This is a clear reflection of the ascendancy of the 'new men' which had become evident upon the conclusion of the Whitehall Gardens' Conferences. No formal submission to this effect was made to the C.I.D., and, indeed, in the sense that the view once again was expressed that Belgium would not necessarily

30 - Tyler, J.E., The British Army and the Continent, 1904 - 1914, (London, 1938), p. 69.

31 - 'War with Germany in Defence of Belgian Neutrality', W.O., Jan. 1907. Cited : Guinn, P., British Strategy and Politics, 1914 to 1918, (Oxford, 1965), p. 14.

be violated, the opinion of the Staff remained essentially the same as that of September 1905. The additional notation concerning the possible use of the Expeditionary Force arose as a direct result of the Conversations. This survey of the General Staff, though still differing with the expression of opinion of the Whitehall Gardens' Conferences on the matter of the violation of Belgian neutrality, had enabled Lyttleton's Staff to acquiesce to the Conversations since both, admittedly officially for different reasons, judged initial operations in Belgium to be ill-advised. This 'French' frame of mind became all the more reasonable in view of the Foreign Office's leanings towards direct aid to France even in the event of Germany violating Belgium - leanings which were in no way dictated by strategic considerations. Whereas the General Staff adhered to the opinion that Belgian neutrality would not necessarily be violated, and that therefore any plans for participation in a Franco-German war should not be based upon the necessary 'cassus belli' of Belgium. The Whitehall Gardens' Conferences, on the other hand, while viewing Belgian involvement as inevitable did not consider it advisable for the Expeditionary Force to undertake operations in Belgium from the outset. Thus all concerned, the General Staff, the 'new men' and the Foreign Office, were quite happy with the 'French' flavour of the Conversations.

But none of this was brought to the attention of the C.I.D. until the Christmas of 1908. Late in October of that year Asquith, according to Hankey on Ottley's suggestion, established a sub-committee 'to Consider the Military Needs of the Empire'. This ad-hoc sub-committee of the C.I.D. had been preceded by two similar such bodies, one of which has already been discussed, to study the 'military requirements of the Empire as affected by India and Egypt'. This new sub-committee was, therefore, charged to consider :

- (a.) Any circumstances not already reviewed by the Sub-Committee in which the British Army might be called upon to operate either alone or with other Powers.
- (b.) The nature and extent of the demands that such operations would make upon our naval and military forces as at present constituted.³²

32 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', (Terms of Reference, October 22, 1908), 2, Whitehall Gardens, 24 July 1909. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 4/3/1/109B.

In practical terms this boiled down to an examination of the nature of England's likely role in a Continental war against Germany, and specifically the form of a possible military contribution. In the preamble to the final Report of this sub-committee it was noted :

Further investigation into the possible theatres of war for the army was . . . desirable in order to give to the War Office such indication as to the general policy of His Majesty's Government with regard to the employment of a British military force on the Continent of Europe, as would enable the General Staff to concentrate their attention only on such plans as they might be called upon to put into operation.³³

At the outset of the enquiry Asquith, who had taken the chair himself,³⁴ requested the Foreign Office, which interestingly enough was represented at so important an investigation by Sir Charles Hardinge, the Permanent Under-Secretary, rather than by Grey himself, to draw up a list of possible areas of conflict upon the Continent. Referring once again to the preamble of the Report it is interesting to note this comment :

The countries selected by the Foreign Office as being those to which, either owing to British foreign policy or on account of Treaty obligations, it might be necessary to send a military force were France, Belgium, Holland, and Denmark.³⁵

That France should have been placed first upon this list, whether by the Foreign Office or the Sub-Committee, was instructive of the Francophile spirit that had permeated both the Foreign and War Offices, and illustrative of the general attitude prevailing at the time of the enquiry. As the Report made clear such a war could be occasioned only by

33 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 24 July 1909, p. 1. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 4/3/1/109G.

34 - The other members of the Sub-Committee were : Lord Crewe, Sir C. Hardinge, Mr. McKenna, Sir J. Fisher, Rear-Admiral Slade (succeeded by Rear-Admiral Bethell on becoming D.N.I. in March 1909), Lord Esher, Mr. Haldane, Sir J. French, Sir W. Nicholson, and Major-General Ewart with Sir C. Ottley as Secretary.

35 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p. 1.

aggression on the part of Germany, and yet in these initial remarks no attempt was made to link the possibilities of military aid to the question of Belgian neutrality.

The attitude within the Foreign Office had been largely shaped by the ever growing anti-German faction headed by Sir Eyre Crowe with the support of Grey. Sir Charles Hardinge's presence on the Sub-Committee is of note in that, while alive to the German threat upon the seas, he was, unlike Grey and Crowe, not consumed with the Secretary of State's monolithic concept of an Anglo-French alliance designed to offset the possibilities of Germany upsetting the balance of power in Europe. Crowe's famous codification of this new alignment in England's foreign policy, which had been set forth for the Cabinet in a memorandum of 1 January 1907, had contained the following observation :

When the signature of the Algeciras Act brought to a close the first chapter of the conflict respecting Morocco, the Anglo-French entente had acquired a different significance from that which it had at the moment of its inception . . . now there had emerged an element of common resistance to outside dictation and aggression, a unity of special interests tending to develop into active co-operation against a third Power.³⁶

This attitude on the part of the Foreign Office, coupled to Grey's support of the Conversations, served only to encourage the Continental inclinations of the 'new men' in the Army. Aside from the lack of interest exhibited by Lyttleton and Ewart, the Conversations were not pursued with notable enthusiasm in the face of comparative French disinterest owing to the Foreign Secretary's fears lest a seemingly over-zealous and unwonted interest in committing England to France militarily risk the rejection of the 'Entente' policy at home. However, the naval crisis of 1909 was required to even begin to loosen these shackles. Grey's negative interpretation of every German move, together

36 - 'Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany', Foreign Office, 1 Jan. 1907, p. 10. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/86, No. 1.

with his deep commitment to the 'Entente', must have been of immense encouragement to the soldiers. That Grey had become the captive of his own parochialism becomes readily apparent from the following excerpt taken from a memorandum submitted to the Cabinet in the autumn of 1909 at a time when relations with Belgium had become so strained, concerning the manner in which Brussels was administering the recently annexed Congo, that the possibility of using force had been raised ; Grey was most upset at such a prospect, and noted to his colleagues :

From the point of view of general policy, I regret exceedingly that this question should have arisen. We do not wish to quarrel with Belgium. We shall get neither sympathy nor support from any Power except the United States, and I fear that the sympathy of even the United States will not go so far as to help us by action. We cannot expect France to help us, for she cannot afford to quarrel with Belgium, and throw her into the arms of Germany, which would vastly increase the difficulty of defending the French frontier in the case of a German attack. So delicate and difficult is the position of France vis-à-vis Germany in this respect that I should not think it fair to ask her to compromise herself, by giving us active support, if Germany came forward as the champion of Belgium.³⁷

The corollary being that Anglo-French relations would become strained and the 'Entente' placed in grave jeopardy. To Grey and the Foreign Office such a situation was intolerable, especially in view of the recent naval crisis. However unimportant and insignificant England's military capability might have seemed in French eyes, nevertheless the adoption of the Continental Strategy was for France the only truly tangible advantage offered by the 'Entente'.

However, the 'new men' were dismayed by the Foreign Office's caution ; but, as they ascended the ladder of the military hierarchy their actions began to precipitate matters. Robertson best summed up the views of his fellow officers on this inactivity in

37 - 'Memorandum', discussing the possibilities of using force against the Belgians, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 19 Oct. 1909, p.2. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/101, No. 142.

recalling after the War :

We had to face the fact that, whereas our foreign policy had gradually assumed a continental character, our military preparations had remained insular and almost parochial.³⁸

Of course, Robertson felt this to be no less true in 1914 ; nevertheless with the accession of Sir William Nicholson as Chief of the General Staff in 1908 events began to move.

Nicholson had been associated with the C.I.D. from its earliest when as Director of Military Intelligence he had given Mr. Balfour's Committee his enthusiastic support.³⁹

It has been suggested that Nicholson was very much under the influence of Henry Wilson, supporting many of Wilson's ideas including his advocacy both of compulsory service and the Continental Strategy. Regardless, Nicholson was not only a firm believer in the role that the C.I.D. had to play in defence co-ordination, but he also regarded the Continental Strategy as central to all British military thought. It was Nicholson who first revealed the details of the Continental Strategy to the C.I.D. ; Mr. Asquith's Sub-Committee enquiring into the 'Military Needs of the Empire' had provided him with the necessary forum.

Various possible ways and means by which England could aid France in a war against Germany were examined by Asquith's Sub-Committee ; this particular investigation formed the heart and soul of the Committee's deliberations. The old General Staff Memorandum of September 1905 was disinterred and quoted in the final Report in order to justify the Committee's refusal to regard the violation of Belgian neutrality as the necessary 'cassus belli'. It was noted in Section I of the Report :

The decision of the question of whether Great Britain should intervene on behalf of France cannot, in our opinion, be left to turn on the mere point of violation of Belgian neutrality. We are strengthened in this conclusion by the opinion expressed by the General Staff as follows : "It is considered generally unlikely that Belgium will form part of the

38 - Robertson, W.R., Soldiers and Statesmen, (London, 1926), Vol. I, p. 45.

39 - Johnson, F.A., Defence By Committee : The British Committee of Imperial Defence, 1885 - 1959, (London, 1960), p. 54.

theatre of war during the first operations, as the prospective military advantages to be gained by advancing through that country do not seem to afford sufficient justification for such a serious step as the violation of the neutrality of Belgium, with its almost inevitable consequent political complications. It undoubtedly appears quite possible, however, that the tide of battle might bring about such a state of affairs as to make it almost imperative for one of the belligerents (more especially Germany) to disregard Belgium's neutrality".⁴⁰

This reference to the opinion of the General Staff was in fact a verbatim extract from the Memorandum of September 1905. The hand of the Foreign Office is readily observed underlying this attitude, for as the Report was careful to point out :

We were informed by the Foreign Office that : "In the event of Germany provoking hostilities with France, the question of armed intervention by Great Britain is one which would have to be decided by the Cabinet ; but the decision would be more easily arrived at if German aggression had entailed a violation of the neutrality of Belgium, which Great Britain has guaranteed to maintain".⁴¹

The Report then proceeded to reject out of hand any suggestion that assistance to France should take the form of general naval support, noting :

We do not . . . consider that such pressure as could be exerted by means of naval force alone would be felt sufficiently soon to save France in the event of that country being attacked in overwhelming force. We therefore recognise the possibility that Great Britain's success at sea might only cause greater pressure to be brought to bear on France on land, and the latter country might have to make terms with Germany which would not be less stringent owing to the losses suffered by her opponent at sea.⁴²

Having disposed of the 'navalist' viewpoint the Report went on to demolish a compromise proposed by Viscount Esher between the naval argument which the Sub-Committee had

40 - 'Report on the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p. 1.

41 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p.1.

42 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p.2.

rejected and the military solution which was becoming increasingly apparent as the logical corollary to their objections. Esher proposed the adoption of the naval viewpoint, leavened however by the dispatch of a token force of six mounted brigades totalling some 12,000 men. Esher, it must be remembered, was well aware of the fact that the French General Staff regarded the entire Expeditionary Force as possessed of little more than a moral support value in any case. Needless to say, the 'new men' were not at all taken with this suggestion as is evidenced in the Report by a synopsis of both Sir John French's and the General Staff's objections to such a scheme :

Neither Sir John French nor the General Staff were in agreement with Lord Esher's suggestion. Their objections to sending a mounted force such as he had proposed were chiefly of a technical nature, since they did not consider such a force as homogeneous or capable of useful military action. The General Staff are of opinion that command of the sea would not necessarily influence the immediate issue of a great land struggle, and might not be of use to the French at the time that it was required. They further consider that a military entente between Great Britain and France can only be of value so long as it rests upon an understanding that, in the event of a war in which both are involved alike on land and at sea, the whole of the available naval and military strength of the two countries will be brought to bear at the decisive point.⁴³

Here, surely, was the influence of the Foreign Office at its most obvious. For here the view, which had prompted Grey to accept the efficacy of the Staff Conversations, was openly and clearly stated. This extract from the Report, with its use of such terms as 'a military entente', must be returned to in due course.

Having rejected the 'navalist' arguments the Report turned to consider the proposals for direct military involvement which had been put forward by the Chief of the General Staff and the Director of Military Operations. On 3 December 1908 Nicholson had laid before the Enquiry the scheme which had been worked out following upon the Whitehall

43 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p. 3.

Gardens' Conferences together with the subsequent alterations which had since been effected.⁴⁴ Nicholson's defensive Memorandum of 6 November 1911 was not altogether trustworthy, containing a number of grave errors with respect to the nature of the development both of the Continental Strategy and the Staff Conversations prior to his succeeding Lyttleton as Chief of the General Staff. In discussing the proposals of the War Office, the Report noted :

Their proposal would involve the dispatch to France of an army of four divisions and a cavalry division, amounting in all to about 110,000 men. In view of a recent decision of the Committee of Imperial Defence that, in the event of a war in which the regular army is dispatched for service abroad, two divisions shall be retained in this country until such time as the Territorial Force may be considered fit to take the field, the above force is the maximum that it would be prudent for Great Britain to dispatch on the outbreak of war.⁴⁵

It was this proposal which clearly found favour with the Sub-Committee as is evidenced by the final Report ; however, the decision as to whether or not the Continental Strategy was to be firmly adopted as government policy was postponed. The reason for this failure to emulate the earlier decisive action taken with respect to the defence of India and the invasion question lay, in part at least, in the vociferous opposition to the military viewpoint put forward by Fisher with the full support of the First Lord, Reginald McKenna. Fisher's major counterproposal had lain in his advocacy of the decisiveness of commerce warfare - another point upon which he failed to agree with Mahan. However, the Sub-Committee had gone even further, noting in its final Report :

Various schemes for the employment of the British force were considered by the Committee. It was pointed out that no relief could be given to the armies of France by any threat by the British army to make a descent on the coast

44 - See : 'War Office Memorandum on Action Taken Since 1906', by General Sir William N. Nicholson, C.I.G.S., 6 Nov. 1911. British Documents, (London, 1932), Vol. VII, No. 639.

45 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p. 3.

of Germany, since the latter Power has ample troops both for watching its own coasts and for an attack on France, and those detailed on the former service would not in any case be used for active operations. It was further pointed out that the Belgian army is weak, and would be unable effectively to resist the violation of the neutrality of Belgium by Germany ; and since the British force could not be concentrated and ready to take the field until twenty days after the order to mobilize had been given, that force could be more effectively used as a reinforcement to the French left than in co-operation with what would probably be a broken or dispirited army.⁴⁶

Thus all of Fisher's hopes for amphibious operations, and the whole question of sending the Expeditionary Force to Belgium, essentially as an extension of the fleet, were scuttled in one fell swoop. Though, at the close of its deliberations on the nature of possible military aid to France the Sub-Committee did throw out a sop on the issue of Belgium which served, in fact, only to underline the 'French' flavour of these proceedings :

The plan to which preference is given by the General Staff is therefore one in which the British force shall be concentrated in the rear on the left of the French army, primarily as a reserve. The possibility of its being called upon to cover Antwerp has not however been lost sight of, and plans will also be worked out for landings in Belgium with a view to this operation.⁴⁷

Not only was this view at variance with those of the General Staff and of the Whitehall Gardens' Conferences, but in fact it was at issue with the whole tenor of the Report as has already been shown. No such planning was ever evolved. Fisher was not blind to the direction in which the Sub-committee was moving ; in writing to Captain Thomas Crease, his war time Naval Assistant as First Sea Lord, in mid-April 1919 Sir John gleefully noted :

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- 46 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, pp. 3 - 4.
- 47 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p. 4.

. . . Lord Esher tells me he remembers a furious meeting on December 3, 1908, of the Committee of Imperial Defence, of which he is going to send me a resume from his notes, when I had a row with the Soldiers headed by Field-Marshal Nicholson and Sir John French as to their wanting to land in France. Of course if our Expeditionary Force, with the Fleet supporting it, had gone to Antwerp . . . then the Germans could not have gone on to Paris ! and the Navy would not have been called 'a subsidiary Service' . . . in the House of Commons ! On the other hand, the Soldiers would not have been made Viscounts and Field-M Marshals.⁴⁸

Fisher's outburst served to drag the inter-service disagreement over the Continental Strategy into the open, resulting in Asquith's hasty adjournment of the meeting !

The Sub-Committee then proceeded to make a series of minor excursions enquiring into possible aid to Holland and Denmark in the event of German invasion. In noting that aid would be useless to the Dutch unless they were willing to co-operate in the defence of their country the Report concluded :

. . . the General Staff should work out plans in such detail as may be practicable, in order that we may be prepared to assist the Dutch in the manner indicated by the General Staff⁴⁹

On the recommendation of the General Staff similar proposals for the assistance of the Danes were rejected by the Sub-Committee in view of the difficulties of the amphibious operations which would be necessary, the proximity of Germany to Denmark and the corresponding distance from the British Isles.⁵⁰ Put in somewhat cruder terms, the General Staff wanted no part in any undertaking involving amphibious warfare, an undertaking which wholly negated the fundamental desire for military independence

48 - Fisher to Crease, 19 Apr. 1919. Fisher to Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. III, p. 579.

49 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p.5.

50 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p. 5.

upon which the genesis of the Continental Strategy had been built.

While it is true that the Sub-Committee had refused to decisively choose between the 'navalists' and the 'militarists' on the issue of aiding France in the event of war, nevertheless its members did conclude in their Report :

- (a) The Committee, in the first place, desire to observe that in the event of an attack on France by Germany, the expediency of sending a military force abroad, or of relying on naval means only, is a matter of policy which can only be determined when the occasion arises by the Government of the day.
- (b) In view, however, of the possibility of a decision by the Cabinet to use military force, the Committee have examined the plans of the General Staff, and are of opinion that, in the initial stages of a war between France and Germany, in which the Government decided to assist France, the plan to which preference is given by the General Staff is a valuable one, and the General Staff should accordingly work out all the necessary details.⁵¹

The influence of the Foreign Office in guiding Asquith's Sub-Committee towards favouring the Continental Strategy was once again readily apparent as evidenced in the final Report :

We have heard from the Foreign Office that the French are anxious that Great Britain should be able to afford them substantial military assistance, and that such assistance, if granted at the immediate outbreak of war, would be of immense moral value to them.⁵²

The conclusions of the Sub-Committee were later presented by Nicholson in the course of his Memorandum of November 1911 to justify the subsequent enlargement of the Staff Conversations which took place following Henry Wilson's appointment to the Operations Directorate in the late summer of 1910.⁵³ While innocently discussing

51 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p. 4.

52 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 24 July 1909, p. 3.

53 - 'War Office Memorandum on Action Taken Since 1906', British Documents, Vol. VII, No. 639.

the Conversations, Nicholson was very careful to omit the fact that they had actually never been revealed to the C.I.D. as a whole. The very failure of this Sub-Committee Report of July 1909 to make any direct reference to the Staff talks is proof enough that they were regarded as a 'touchy' subject. Part (a) of the above quoted conclusion read from the vantage point of hindsight would indicate a reference to the hypothetical nature of the Staff Conversations ; but read without that knowledge it appears simply as an innocent reference designed to ensure the Government's freedom of choice between the proposals of the 'navalists' and the 'militarists'. Further it is now known that this phraseology concerning freedom of action was generally used in impressing the hypothetical nature of the talks upon the French Government. More important was the Report's reference to a 'military entente' which could only indicate that some form of military arrangement had been added to the diplomatic 'entente' of 1904. Once again viewed with the advantage of hindsight this becomes readily apparent. That the members of Sub-Committee had deliberately suppressed their knowledge of the Staff Conversations becomes even more apparent when their veiled references in the final Report are linked to the evidence given by Hardinge before the Sub-Committee on 3 December 1908 ; making a direct reference to the Conversations the Permanent Under-Secretary had noted in passing :

. . . the only grounds upon which the French could base any hopes of military assistance were the semi-official conversations which had taken place between the French Military Attaché and our General Staff.⁵⁴

This extract from the minutes of the Sub-Committee's first meeting must upset the belief that Asquith was unacquainted with the existence of the Staff arrangements prior to August 1911 - unless, as is possible, he had dozed off during the hearings¹. A situation

54 - Cited : Mackintosh J.P., 'The Role of the Committee of Imperial Defence Before 1914', The English Historical Review, 1962, Vol. LXXVII, p. 497.

which was hardly likely in view of Fisher's explosion which occurred at the same meeting . Regardless, it was this revelation by Hardinge which could possibly explain Grey's absence from a Sub-Committee upon which the Foreign Secretary ought normally to have played a dominant role. This deliberate withholding of the knowledge of the Conversations from the C.I.D. as a whole itself explains much of the reason why Asquith took no decision on the central question of choosing between the naval and military policies. Any such decision would not only have provoked the bitter enmity between the Services, but, perforce, it would have led to the revelation of the Staff Conversations to the entire C.I.D. and no doubt in time, owing to the resultant internal crisis, to the Cabinet itself. Asquith's great reluctance to bring on such a crisis is readily understandable in view of the only too obviously papered-over cracks in his Government's solidarity and unity of purpose.

Thus matters stood in the summer of 1909. No decision had been taken on the most important issue of national defence before the country. The Government was paralysed, and its Liberal Imperialist faction frustrated and disappointed with the inaction of the Prime Minister's Defence Committee. Mr. Asquith, driven increasingly to compromise to the satisfaction of neither side, was in no position to exercise the influence of the C.I.D. in the manner which Mr. Balfour had envisaged. The War Office seeing it had the sympathy but not the support of the Committee was unable to make any constructive use of what was supposed to be the supreme organ for defence planning. Dissatisfied, feeling that his great work at the War Office was being frittered away while the C.I.D. sat numbed and unable to act decisively, Mr. Haldane began to cast around for a more effective organ of supreme command. He discovered the Defence Ministry.

In turning towards the naval aspect of this discussion one is struck, as with everything else dealing with the Navy, by Sir John Fisher's monopoly of the Admiralty's relations with the Committee of Imperial Defence during these years. From the outset those relations had been somewhat querulous. The relative position of the two Services with respect to the C.I.D. has already been discussed ; however, quite apart from the

distance created by the fundamental disagreement over basic strategic posture which had begun to develop towards the close of 1905, Fisher was further estranged by Sir George Clarke's conduct both as Secretary to the Committee and as a disciple of the Continental Strategy. But this had not always been the case ; writing to Sandars back in those days when the Navy's pre-eminence was still unchallenged Fisher had exulted :

You have exactly hit off the situation ! Also I think you are right about the Permanent Secretary. Now about Clarke and this is very specially private the one place in the whole wide world he is specially born for is Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Defence Committee at £5,000 a year (he's worth it !).⁵⁵

Fisher had expressed these same sentiments in the course of a letter to Viscount Esher written at a time when the Reconstruction Committee was working at 'full steam' on its proposals for a revamped Defence Committee :

There is one place and one place only for Clarke, and I entreat you to support this through thick and thin, and that is 'Permanent Secretary for Organisation'. These are his own words to me as the object of his ambition, because he himself feels his own special fitness He would be the head of the permanent staff of the Defence Committee⁵⁶

But if Clarke was one of 'those d - d professional soldiers' for whom Fisher had nothing but praise at this juncture, then here also must be found the key to their subsequent estrangement. Quite apart from the fact that Clarke was to flagrantly abuse his position as Secretary, it must be remembered that both as a soldier and a reformer he was unlikely to be content for long with the support role assigned to the Army by the Board of Admiralty. Besides, whatever Fisher's passing sentiments may have been, the

55 - Fisher to Sandars, 10 Nov. 1903. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.

56 - Fisher to Esher, 7 Dec. 1903. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. I, pp. 292 - 293.

fact remains nevertheless that he had a fundamental lack of confidence in the military mind, preferring always the naval species as was evidenced by this extract from a letter to Esher of late May 1904 :

What a providential thing it is that you are at hand to watch over things ! 'The Lord bless you and preserve you ! ' Ottley is coming to see me directly he can. He will keep Clarke right. In reality, Ottley is superior to Clarke and will be an immense success. ⁵⁷

Of course, what Fisher implied here was that Ottley, who up to this point had served as Assistant Director of Naval Intelligence, and who had been one of Fisher's chosen few while Sir John had sat on the Board as Second Sea Lord, was to be inserted into the Secretariat of the C.I.D. in order to make sure that the Committee kept its station not straying into the lanes of the Admiralty's freedom of executive action. Some measure of Ottley's reputation and stature may be gleaned from this letter from the First Lord to the Prime Minister of mid-May 1904 which, in view of later correspondence, clearly referred to Ottley :

For £500 I can give you a commander and will of course pick out the best man I can. Lord Walter is rather disturbed : he hoped the salary would enable us to send you a Captain and we had a first rate man in view ; but I presume you have deliberately adopted a scale which would exclude Captain's rank ? ⁵⁸

Backed by Fisher, Kerr and Selborne, Captain Ottley's star was on the ascent and being a man of means he was not deterred by the marginal salary. Furthermore, as Selborne noted in a letter of mid-May 1904 to Sandars, such an appointment was ideally suited to Ottley since he lacked the necessary sea-duty in order to get on much further at the Admiralty ; and going to sea was out of the question since, as Selborne put it, he 'suffers from sea-sickness so badly now that he has had to give it up' ⁵⁹. And so on

57 - Fisher to Esher, 26 May 1904. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. I, p. 317.

58 - Selborne to Balfour, 12 May 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49707.

59 - Selborne to Sandars, 19 May 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49707.

17th May 1904 Selborne, firmly lodging the Admiralty's foot in the door of the C.I.D. Secretariat, wrote to Mr. Balfour :

I have much pleasure in recommending Captain Charles Langdale Ottley M.V.O. as Naval Assistant Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence. He is at present Naval Attaché in Paris and he is the man who I should before all others select for the post. The pay, £ 500 p.a. inclusive, is inadequate for a Captain & therefore I do not consider the post one to which under ordinary circumstances a Captain could be appointed.

But Captain Ottley has private means, he is very keen to obtain the appointment for the sake of the interest of the work, & he has volunteered to accept the salary of £500 and ask for nothing more:

Under these circumstances I unhesitatingly recommend him to you. 60

Such was the support received by Ottley in taking up his new appointment in June 1904.

However, Ottley's fortunes were such that when Fisher became First Sea Lord in October 1904 he pressed hard to get Ottley back as his Director of Naval Intelligence. It would seem that this campaign by Fisher marked the beginnings of the more superficial troubles which were in time to give way to a deep cleavage on fundamentals between C.I.D., the War Office and the Admiralty. Writing to Mr. Balfour on this matter in mid-November 1904 Clarke had noted :

I understand that Lord Selborne had spoken to you about the withdrawal of Captain Ottley to become D.N.I. next year. He will be a great loss because he has much varied experience & he possesses exactly the kind of mind which is needed. If, however, the best interests of the country are served by his translation there can be no question of its wisdom.

But the circumstances are peculiar. Captain Ottley has no further sea career. The post of D.N.I. has hitherto been held always by officers who would later command our fleets. Three years, in this post, constitute one of the most valuable experiences that an Admiral can have had. Is it not a pity to waste this experience on one who can never command a fleet ?

I feel sure that this view will appeal to many officers of the Navy, who also will think that the D.N.I. 'ship should not be held by a captain who has never had a sea-going command. ⁶¹

This type of blatant interference which went far beyond mere advice was not only wholly uncalled for and damaging to the office of the Secretary of the Committee, but it was indeed downright unconstitutional. Needless to say Clarke's objections soon found their way back via that universal 'father confessor' Mr. Balfour, to Fisher confirming the Admiral's suspicions that Clarke was overstepping his role and endeavouring to drive the C.I.D. into a position of executive authority.

Sir John adopted a negative outlook on all such actions and his withdrawal of Ottley was, perhaps, a measure of the poor view he took of the Committee's attempts to expand beyond the bounds of its advising capacity, a capacity which Fisher had envisaged as a tool for keeping a tight grip on the soldiers. Selborne made the Admiralty's attitude towards Clarke's behaviour absolutely clear in a letter to the Prime Minister of late November 1904 :

To you I say that I have appointed Ottley to be D.N.I. for the reason that I believe it to be quite the best appointment I can make. Of course I have neglected the candidates Clarke puts forward and a great many others too.

Clarke is quite entitled to lament the loss of Ottley - He is not entitled to criticise my appointments at the Admiralty. I resent his interference and I beg he will mind his own business. ⁶²

Here, indeed was the nub of the matter ; and Selborne's unusually forceful choice of words underlined how seriously the Board disapproved of Clarke's attempts to extend the influence of the C.I.D. to within the Admiralty. Of course, in Fisher's eyes 'interference' was 'constituted' by any attempt on the part of the Committee to wield any influence whatsoever contrary to the wishes of his Board. At best Fisher regarded the C.I.D. as no more than a clearing house from which diplomatic and naval policy could be disseminated to the War Office and the other departments of state. And the

61 - Clarke to Balfour, 18 Nov. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49700.

62 - Selborne to Balfour, 22 Nov. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49708.

strategic corollary to that policy, as far as the Admiralty was concerned, was itself a foregone conclusion.

Viscount Esher's position in this row which was developing between his two former colleagues, was somewhat ambiguous. His strong views on the necessity of naval supremacy and the freedom of action of the Admiralty have already been noted ; nevertheless he was, by this juncture, beginning to lean towards Haldane's later proposal for the establishment of a Ministry of Defence. This divergence in Esher's attitude must be attributed largely to his belief in the importance of the Fleet, while at the same time feeling the necessity of reinforcing the 'Entente' and set against his broader desire for fully co-ordinated defence planning. Writing to the Prime Minister in mid-September 1905 Esher had reflected his concern for this struggle between the Admiralty and the Secretariat which was by now beginning to make itself felt quite sharply :

I am sure that in future all questions of organization both for the Navy and the Army will have to be the work of the Def. Cttee. Administration will take all the time of the Admiralty and the Army Council.

Jack Fisher would kick at this notion at present - but he will come round to it.

Two years ago as C.-in-C. at Portsmouth he snapped his fingers at the 'Board of Admiralty' and urged every C.-in-C. to do likewise.

Now he pipes a very different tune, the dear old thing.⁶³

Indeed, the 'dear old thing' was becoming increasingly petulant with what he regarded as Clarke's insubordinate perversion of the whole purpose of the Defence Committee. In reality, Clarke's appointment as Secretary had been a mistake from the outset ; not only did he lack the finesse and tact which was to be associated with his successors, but as a senior civil-servant, and a founding-father of the Committee, Clarke considered that he had the necessary prestige to lead, rather than merely to encourage, the

63 - Esher to Balfour, 10 - 17 (?) Sept. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

development of the C.I.D. towards those broader goals which he espoused. Doubtless, with the passage of the years Clarke's hopes were to find fruition, but the process of that evolution required over twenty years of patient and unspectacular advances which taken together formed a major development in the executive organs of supreme command. Had Clarke adopted a more self-effacing and moderate outlook, it is possible that viable defence by committee might have become a reality somewhat sooner. The Fisher-Clarke feud was merely symptomatic of Clarke's overall attitude, which clearly was not compatible with the requirements of his very delicate office.

Clarke's criticism of Fisher's Navy went far beyond his disapproval of its strategic organization ; his tactlessness led him to interfere in such matters as internal reform and administrative organization. A letter to the Prime Minister of late November 1905 reveals the manner in which Clarke managed to create problems both for himself and the entire Committee ; objections which were, in any case, of little concern for the higher direction of war and served only to hamper the development of the C.I.D. for no good reason :

The idea of combining the executive naval officer & the naval engineer in one man is, I am convinced, most dangerous. Two most exacting professions cannot be thus combined, & the idea violates all modern practice when specialization in scientific thinking is becoming more and more rigorous.

I wrote a strong letter from Australia to Lord Selborne on this subject, & the arguments in his reply were easy to refute.⁶⁴

The context of Clarke's objections, surprising in themselves coming as they did from a technical services officer, are of no immediate concern here ; though, in fact, the so-called 'Selborne Scheme' first introduced by Fisher as Second Sea Lord in 1902 proved to be one of the truly outstanding 'Fisher Reforms' which, with modifications,

64 - Clarke to Balfour, 25 Nov. 1905. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

has survived as the basis of all officer training in the Royal Navy down to the present day. But Clarke's whole tone may instructively be compared with the tact which marked Lord Hankey's years at the C.I.D. and in the Cabinet Secretariat. Hankey's tremendous 'staying-power' and ubiquitous influence must very largely be attributed to his scrupulous avoidance of direct criticism of those who controlled the levers of power. A letter to Mr. Balfour of late December 1914 revealed a wholly different tone from that adopted so freely by Clarke :

I had twenty minutes talk with Lord Fisher this morning. He is as keen as ever on mining the enemy's coast, but he says that his Chief of Staff and the First Lord are so strongly opposed to it that he can do nothing. He wants me to write something on the subject. But, although I am as strongly convinced as he is of the importance of mining, and can, I believe, make an overwhelming case for it, I find it rather a delicate matter to intervene in so domestic an Admiralty question. ⁶⁵

It might well be added that emerging as he had from relative obscurity to head the Secretariat as Ottley's Successor in February 1912, Hankey had no illusions concerning his place, a realisation which enabled him during those early years to develop a tact which was to keep him entrenched behind the scene in the 'halls of power' for over twenty years.

However, the Fisher-Clarke feud did not really begin to raise steam until after the conclusion of the Christmas 1905 Conferences in Whitehall Gardens. Clarke's role in these talks which had led to the Staff Conversations clearly placed him at daggers-drawn with the Admiral. It is interesting to note that the so-called 'Naval Conversations' were never followed up by the Foreign Office as were the talks with the French General Staff. Writing to Bertie in mid-January 1906 Grey had noted that 'it appears that Fisher has long ago taken the French Naval Attaché in hand and no doubt he has all naval plans well prepared'. ⁶⁶ Although, writing to Haldane on 8th January urging

65 - Hankey to Balfour, 29 Dec. 1914. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49703.

66 - Grey to Bertie, 15 Jan. 1906. British Documents, Vol. III, No. 216.

him to consider plans for possible military involvement upon the Cabinet, the Foreign Secretary had observed :

A situation might arise [soon] in which popular feeling might compel the Govt. to go to the help of France & you might suddenly be asked what you could do.

Fisher says he is ready, by which I take it he means that his ships are so placed that he can drive the German fleet off the sea into shelter at any time.⁶⁷

Which comment not only assumed that there would be no fleet action but also that naval staff talks were unnecessary. This aspect of Grey's thought during those early days of his administration and of the Conversations, provides a revealing insight of the essentially 'military' light in which he regarded both the Entente and the nature of Germany's menace to the hegemony of Europe and the future security of England and of the Empire. Grey never enquired further into the state and progress of the 'Naval Conversations', which had, in fact, never proceeded beyond a single meeting between Fisher and the French Naval Attaché, Mercier de Lostende, which had been highlighted by a series of inconsequential platitudes revealing Fisher's distaste for any serious joint planning with the 'Ministere de la Maritime'.⁶⁸

Fisher's estrangement from the Defence Committee following upon the events of early 1906 has already been discussed at length elsewhere in the study. However, Clarke's close association with these developments, and his freely expressed annoyance at Fisher's intransigence, served not only to further separate the Admiralty and the C.I.D. but, also, to further exacerbate the personal feud. Writing to Esher very early in the new year Clarke had peevishly noted that Fisher had

. . . no ideas except that of smashing the German fleet and thought that the co-operation of the French Fleet was not required except that French submarines should co-operate from Dunkirk with ours All this is quite wrong.⁶⁹

67 - Grey to Haldane, 8 Jan. 1906. Haldane MSS, MS 5907.

68 - Monger, The End of Isolation, p. 245.

69 - Clarke to Esher, 2 Jan. 1906. Cited : Monger, The End of Isolation, p. 244.

Needless to say Clarke's attitude was readily apparent to Fisher and was made all the more so when he attempted to go over Sir John's head in appealing against the policy of non co-operation to the First Lord, the second Baron Tweedmouth ; however, this move proved unfruitful, prompting Clarke to bitterly note after the War :

Lord Tweedmouth was not in good health and was unlikely to mitigate the crude schemes which Sir John Fisher was constantly evolving.⁷⁰

Here, as has already been seen, Esher and Clarke parted at the cross-roads thus ensuring Clarke's deepening bitterness and eventual retirement from the Secretariat.

Thereafter Fisher's attitude towards the Defence Committee deteriorated rapidly with Clarke's personal antagonism blocking all efforts to ameliorate the increasingly strained relations. Writing to Tweedmouth early in July 1906 Sir John poured his heart out concerning Clarke's interference, betraying his fears that the C.I.D. was becoming too powerful and that it had embarked upon a conspiracy with the War Office to usurp the traditional power and influence of the Board of Admiralty in matters involving the security of England and of the Empire :

On reflection I think the most objectionable feature of the Treasury Memorandum (which, if not written by Sir George Clarke, is inspired by him) is the suggestion it contains to transfer the responsibility of the Admiralty to the Committee of Imperial Defence in regard to the highly technical and purely professional question of comparative naval strength into which enter highly complex questions of detail, and I don't see how the Board of Admiralty could possibly acquiesce in this abdication of their functions. It's entirely another matter for the Cabinet to settle matters of high policy and give their directions to the Board of Admiralty accordingly, but the Committee of Defence is in no way constituted to settle either matters of policy or departmental questions of relative naval and military strength.

Unfortunately, every Secretary for War has brought his departmental business to the Defence Committee as the only way of subduing his departmental opposition, but you have a united Board of Admiralty who are prepared to go any length you like in your support, and I am perfectly sure they will all unite against any reference to the Committee of Imperial Defence.⁷¹

70 - Sydenham of Coombe, My Working Life, p. 189.

71 - Fisher to Tweedmouth, 9 July 1906. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 83.

Of course, Fisher was wrong. But given the context of his times, the threat from across the sea, the desires of the 'new men', the re-orientation towards the Continent, and the basic threat on the home front to the continual supremacy of British sea power, Fisher's attitude was at least understandable, even perhaps, justifiable.

Fisher's solution to this impasse which had developed between the Admiralty and the Committee of Imperial Defence was frankly, if somewhat brutally, summed-up when he served notice to Tweedmouth that 'the sooner we send Clarke to die of yellow fever as governor of some West Indian island, the better ! ' But, of course, Fisher's concept of a 'solution' implied the necessity of drawing the teeth of the Committee, of rendering it impotent. Clarke's ideas were perhaps somewhat premature and the manner in which he expressed them was, no doubt, tactless ; but, nevertheless, in essence much of what he said and proposed was both true and in time to be proved correct.

During the late summer of 1906 Fisher embarked upon a determined campaign to get rid of Clarke ; writing to Esher in mid-August he made his intentions clear while at the same time promising at least to remain on speaking terms with the C.I.D. :

. . . grieved of course still about Clarke not going, but I promise you to make the best of it . . . part of my disappointment is that Ottley would be so very excellent in Clarke's place - a great loss to me personally at the Admiralty, but he is THE man for that place and, thank God, in the Navy we have literally scores to choose from to take Ottley's place.⁷²

Fisher's apparent change of heart, albeit very thinly veiled, had been brought about by the King's displeasure with his handling of relations with the Defence Committee.

However, Esher was not to be fooled and writing dolefully to his son early in September 1906 he noted :

. . . Fisher has promised to be good, and to come back to the Defence Committee. The King took him to task and for the present he has buried the hatchet. Clarke and he, however, are bound to fall out again, and especially as Clarke is all agog against the 'Dreadnought'.⁷³

72 - Fisher to Esher, 19 Aug. 1906. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. 11, p. 133.

73 - Esher to M.V. Brett, 3 Sept. 1906. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, ed. M.V. Brett (London, 1934), Vol. II, p. 179.

Esher's forecast was not far off the mark ; although the 'cassus belli' of the next round in the feud was provided not by the Dreadnought controversy, but, rather, arose as the result of a C.I.D. investigation into the strategic feasibility of forcing the Dardanelles. The C.I.D. findings were based upon a General Staff appreciation which, together with the observations of the Directorate of Naval Intelligence, was submitted to the Secretariat just before Christmas 1906. The Staff appreciation, which had been based upon findings made by Sir John French during the preceeding summer stated in part :

. . . it must be taken for granted that, if ever an attempt to force the Dardanelles is made, the work will have to be undertaken by a Joint Naval and Military expedition having for its object the capture of the Gallipoli Peninsula and the destruction of the forts which at present deny entrance to and exit from these waters⁷⁴

Ottley finding himself largely in agreement with these views had made use of the opportunity to press the 'navalist' argument even in this limited sphere :

The Director of Naval Intelligence is generally in agreement with the General Staff Memorandum, and fully concurs as to the great risks involved in a joint naval and military enterprise against the Gallipoli Peninsula

In order to facilitate a task of this arduous and difficult nature, the first necessity is, in the opinion of the Director of Naval Intelligence, to frequently practise joint naval and military manoeuvres such as the rapid throwing on shore of a military force in the presence of an enemy, under cover of the guns of the fleet.⁷⁵

However Clarke did not agree and backed by Sir Charles Hardinge and Lord Cromer he maintained that the Straits could indeed be seized by a naval force upon its own initiative

74 - 'The Possibility of a Joint Naval and Military Attack Upon the Dardanelles', Memorandum by the General Staff, 19 Dec. 1906. C.I.D. Papers, 20 Dec. 1906, Cab. 4/2/9 2B.

75 - 'The Possibility of a Joint Naval and Military Attack Upon the Dardanelles', Remarks of the D.N.I. on the General Staff Memorandum. C.I.D. Papers, 20 Dec. 1906, Cab. 4/2/9 2B.

without military assistance. This blatant opposition constituted both a flagrant abuse of the office of the Secretary to the C.I.D. and a direct attack upon the competency of the First Sea Lord and his assistants. Esher's change of heart with respect to Clarke was becoming increasingly apparent to Fisher who was pleased with his notation of early September 1906 that 'there is not a word in the Dardanelles paper with which I disagree'.⁷⁶ Earlier that summer Fisher had made his stand on the question of the Dardanelles in writing to the First Lord :

The forcing of the Dardanelles is, in the first place a military operation, as sketched out in Ottley's paper herewith, and with the altered conditions of German supervision and German handling of the Dardanelles defences, and German mines and German torpedoes, I agree with Sir John French that we cannot now repeat Sir Geoffrey Hornby's passage of the Dardanelles, and even if we get passage, there is the getting back⁷⁷

As a captain Fisher had sailed the Dardanelles with Admiral Hornby in 1878 ; in 1906, Sir John not only recognised the tactical and strategic implications of the torpedo whose praises he had sung for over thirty years, but forecast the role that Germany might play in denying the Straits to the Royal Navy ; and in 1915 he was to bitterly oppose the Dardanelles adventure which was to prove such an awful miscalculation. However, Sir George Clarke did not agree.

Clarke's interference in wholly internal Admiralty affairs - especially the building programme - infuriated Fisher. Clarke's voice joining the chorus of criticism about the alleged lack of naval plans was also annoying. But his opposition to the design and strategic precociousness of the 'Dreadnought' was, for Fisher, the last straw. Clarke's behaviour had been inexcusable at the best of times - but in attacking the 'Dreadnought' he courted disaster. While no doubt the 'Syndicate of Discontent' had glibly classified the 'Dreadnought' with the submarine as another of 'Fisher's Toys' , it

76 - Esher to Fisher, 5 Sept. 1906. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 181.

77 - Fisher to Tweedmouth, 27 July 1906. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 84.

was too much for Sir John to have to face the opposition of the C.I.D. as well. Esher fully supported Fisher's stand on this matter from the outset, as this letter of early September 1906 illustrated :

. . . It is no affair of Clarke's. That question must be left to the Admiralty. The Defence Committee might just as well take up a new type of Field Gun. In point of fact Clarke did meddle with that question too.⁷⁸

But in trying to turn Campbell-Bannerman against Fisher and his new heavy ship building programme, Clarke sealed his fate. In the spring of 1907 Clarke was 'sent to rot' - not quite in the West Indies, but to Bombay - as Fisher had been urging for some time.

However, before he was made aware of this change in his fortunes Clarke had written to Mr. Balfour in early April 1907 noting :

I have been spending a little time on board ship looking into naval matters. There is from want of organization in the Navy, & there are tendencies at work, which will go very far towards undermining the efficiency of the Fleet. If changes are not made, the German menace will, within a few years, become really serious, in spite of our numerical superiority of ships.⁷⁹

Such categorical criticism of one of the great departments of state was inexcusable even in advising the Prime Minister, but for the Secretary of the C.I.D. to be found writing in such a tone to the Leader of the Opposition was itself astounding. Clarke was not informed of his posting to India until mid-July, and writing to Mr. Balfour a month earlier he had summed up his indiscretions in a nutshell :

The hopeless muddle to which our naval forces in home waters have been reduced, if combined with military chaos, would make one most anxious.⁸⁰

Clearly Clarke was unable to see that he had placed himself in an untenable position as the result of his oft-expressed opposition to Fisher and his naval policies. Even had

78 - Esher to M.V. Brett, 3 Sept. 1906. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 179.

79 - Clarke to Balfour, 6 Apr. 1907. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

80 - Clarke to Balfour, 20 June 1907. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49702.

Clarke been right, it was not his place to 'take sides' publically or to so freely offer his advice in such a tactless manner.

With Clarke's departure and replacement by Ottley as Secretary normalcy was restored to the relations between the Admiralty and the C.I.D. However, if relations were once more cordial they never achieved again the frankness that had marked the very early days of the Defence Committee. In engineering Ottley's appointment Fisher's clear purpose had been to ensure that the Committee was kept clear of all explosive issues, lest by some miscalculation the independent military policy might receive the endorsement of the C.I.D. It seems clear that Fisher had sought to use Ottley in order to sterilise the Defence Committee ; however, Ottley, who was not the accomplished politician that Sir John had been forced to become, refused to allow sectional interests to divert him from his duties. Fisher's hopes did not materialise due largely to Ottley's scrupulous neutrality and to the tremendous pressure which was increasingly being placed upon the Committee by the soldiers and diplomats.

All semblance of co-operation between the Admiralty and the C.I.D. disappeared during the late summer and autumn of 1907. Fisher's refusal to co-operate with Lord Morley's sub-committee on Indian defence and Mr. Asquith's Invasion committee, had stemmed from his central fear that such enquiries posed a threat to the continuance of the Navy's supremacy in the defence establishment. Writing to Fisher late in August 1907 Viscount Esher had exploded with anger at the Admiral's foolishness in refusing to co-operate with the C.I.D. in reopening the invasion issue :

What on earth do you mean by maintaining a paper written by Balfour for the Defence Committee is 'purely an Admiralty business' ? and talking of an 'irresponsible sub-committee' ?

(a) Mr. Balfour's original memorandum was a Defence Committee Paper, and his speech in the House of Commons was based upon it, and not upon any Admiralty decision.

(b) The Committee of Imperial Defence, of which the Prime Minister is the chief, and its sub-committees, if appointed by the Prime Minister, are every bit as 'responsible' as the Board of Admiralty, of which the First Sea Lord is the Chief.⁸¹

81 - Esher to Fisher, 29 Aug. 1907. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 247.

However, Campbell-Bannerman refused to put up with such nonsense and at Haldane's urging he ordered Fisher to adopt a more co-operative attitude. This action served only to alienate Fisher who while going through the motions was by now beginning to see the C.I.D. in a somewhat less attractive light. Nevertheless, for the moment the spark remained and writing to Ottley in late January 1908, during the Invasion Enquiry, Sir John cunningly sought to persuade him to move the Committee in favour of the Navy :

We have got to safeguard Balfour and justify previous decisions of the Defence Committee or its great authority will be shaken, but whether $1\frac{1}{2}$ tons a man or 3 tons a man, the mass of transports is in either case great, and such a huge target when at sea as could not escape us.⁸²

Of course, Fisher's alarm was unfounded ; conscription was not seen as the solution to the Invasion score as advocated by Lord Roberts and the more dubious members of the National Service League. Balfour's earlier findings were confirmed by the Asquith sub-committee enquiry with only a few minor modifications.

Nevertheless the support and co-operation of the early days was no more. The C.I.D. became a thorn in the Admiralty's side, a thorn which the Navy did its best to ignore ; but it was not to be ignored. Esher in a Journal entry of late November 1907 concerning the first meeting of the Invasion Sub-Committee had pretty well summed up Fisher's attitude :

Fisher was full of wrath. I said to him that he was fond of quoting Mahan's famous passage about Nelson's storm - tossed ships, upon which the Grand Army had never looked, which stood between it and the dominion of the world ; and it should remind him that the Defence Committee, upon which he wished he had never looked, stood between him and a Royal Commission to enquire into the state of the Navy.⁸³

However, in time the Committee was indeed to undertake such an enquiry, and in so doing damned Fisher irrevocably.

82 - Fisher to Ottley, 28 Jan. 1908. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 160.

83 - Journal, 27 Nov. 1907. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 263.

CHAPTER SIX

INVASION AND COMPULSION : THE SCHOOLS AND THE POLITICS OF DEFENCE

Great Britain's battles must be fought and won on the enemy's territory and against an army raised and maintained on the modern National principle.

Spenser Wilkinson,
'Britain at Bay' ; 1909.

. . . many words will have to be spoken, many votes voted, and perhaps many blows struck before the British people will submit to such an abridgement of their liberties, or such a drag upon their commerce. It will be time to make such sacrifices, when the English Channel has run dry.

Winston Churchill,
'The Story of the Malakand Field Force' ; 1898.

THROUGHOUT the years down to August 1914 the invasion question played an important, stabilizing and, yet, controversial role within the defence establishment. The interest which was evinced early on by the Defence Committee in the problem was to please the 'new men' in detracting somewhat from the responsibilities of the Senior Service, but in later years, as the Continental Strategy took on a more definite form, invasion was to prove as much an embarrassment to the Army as it had been to the Navy. It was then that the Navy, partly out of genuine concern and partly due to its political instinct,

reversed itself in supporting the military arguments of a few years earlier calling for the retention of forces which otherwise the Army would now have preferred to devote to the Continental Strategy. Thus the invasion issue was as it were an outward manifestation and reflection of the more general struggle within the defence establishment. The C.I.D. never wavered during these changes of heart within the two Services and thus in many respects the invasion enquiries revealed the Defence Committee at its best. Invasion as a problem of national defence was the only aspect of policy which the Defence Committee was to consider in its entirety. Nevertheless, in treating the problem in a self-contained vacuum, in failing to relate it to the other great issues of national defence, the C.I.D. was ultimately to fail in its more general responsibilities very largely because these other problems, notably the Continental Strategy, had in themselves not been accorded the necessary careful consideration.

The great debate over invasion had long been one of the hardy perennials of the defence establishment, painstakingly cultivated each time the international situation threatened to boil over. Without exception the various 'scares' aroused serious apprehensions quite without relation to any actual possibilities of success they could have ever hoped to enjoy. Traditionally, of course, France had loomed as the most likely Power to attempt an invasion of England. Hence the great fortified ports on the south coast. However, during the decade or so before the Great War Germany came increasingly, indeed exclusively, to replace France as the most obvious perpetrator of a 'bolt from the blue'. In a country whose government and people exhibited a singular lack of concern for such matters as international relations and defence policy, it was the threat of invasion which alone was capable of sparking the national interest and encouraging popular debate.

However, the war which raged between the supporters of the two schools became much more intense generating a truly acrimonious debate during these years prior to 1914. Underlying this sudden increase in the tempo of unrest lay a new questioning of the continuing ability of the Navy to safeguard the shores of England from the scourge of foreign invasion. In essence, there lay three fundamental causes behind these doubts : first, there was the fear engendered in the hearts of many by the rising tides of sea power in every major

country on the globe - through more especially by the steady growth of the High Seas Fleet ; secondly, in spite of Fisher's great reforms and innovations which had placed the Royal Navy at its apogee of material power, many were disheartened by the Beresford feud causing them to lose confidence in the continued ability of the Navy ; and, finally, there was a sincere doubt on the part of a number of distinguished soldiers - especially Lord Roberts - concerning the continued efficacy of naval defence. This latter doubt, coupled to the growth of interest in Continental warfare among the younger officers, led many to support Roberts' campaign for National Service - though in fact much of his backing came from those 'new men' who were seeking a conscript force for universal use. There were, of course, other lesser causes - notably (Admiral) Sir Reginald Custance's stand that a proper home defence army would release the Navy for operations further afield ; as a leading figure in the 'Syndicate' Custance's doctrine of the 'manacled fleet' became another well-honed barb with which to prod Fisher.

The protection of herself and of her Empire from direct foreign incursion was the most pressing and, indeed, the most readily apparent of England's defence needs. Mr. Balfour, a 'Blue Water' man to the core, had readily understood the necessity of clearing up this matter from the start. Writing after the War, of the early enquiries of the Committee of Imperial Defence, Balfour noted :

We began on the particular subject - the defence of these Islands¹

In February 1903 the Prime Minister had set the C.I.D. as a whole to work upon the invasion question - just two months after the reconstitution of the old Defence Committee of the Cabinet. This investigation into the oldest of the 'bogies' was continued intermittently throughout 1903, sharing the honours with the North West Frontier, culminating in a Draft-Report submitted to the Committee by Balfour himself in mid-November.² This, the first of three such enquiries which were to be conducted before

1 - Cited : Dugdale, B.E., Arthur James Balfour, First Earl of Balfour, (London, 1936), Vol. I, p. 365.

2 - 'Draft Report on the Possibility of Serious Invasion : Home Defence', Arthur James Balfour, 11 Nov. 1903. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 3/1/18A.

the War, had been undertaken on the presupposition that France remained the most obvious potential aggressor, and hence the probable invader. In the course of the enquiry the two schools had presented their respective arguments, which were to alter very little in future years and as such will be dealt with in discussing the subsequent Invasion enquiries of 1907 - 1908 and 1913 - 1914. Balfour's conclusions clearly favoured the naval point of view which, of course, earned him the enthusiastic support both of Fisher at Portsmouth and Selborne in Whitehall.³ Speaking in the House in the spring of 1905 Mr. Balfour had noted with respect to the outcome of this enquiry :

We have not gone into generalities about the command of the sea or the superiority of our Fleet, or this difficulty or that difficulty ; we have endeavoured to picture to ourselves a clear issue which is very unfavourable to this country, and have shown at least to our satisfaction that on that hypothesis, unfavourable as it is, serious invasion of these islands is not an eventuality which we need seriously consider.⁴

However, the enquiry of 1903 had in many respects been unsatisfactory particularly in terms of any long-range appreciation of the invasion question. In viewing France as the aggressor, the Committee had been thinking very largely in terms of a colonial war involving England in war with Russia on the North West Frontier arising out of a Franco-British conflict invoking the terms of the Dual Alliance. This preoccupation with Indian defence matters had led to the ineluctable conclusion that in the event of war the strength of the Army would be required for service in India, that the war would be fought upon the frontiers of the Empire and not in Europe, and, finally, that in any case the Navy was strong enough to defend the British Isles from direct assault.

Field-Marshal Lord Roberts was, however, profoundly dissatisfied with what he regarded as Balfour's prejudiced conclusions, and his attitude had most emphatically not been sweetened by the peremptory treatment he had received at the hands of the Esher Committee.

3 - See : Balfour to Fisher, 3 Jan. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.
Fisher to Sandars, 3 Jan. 1904. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49710.

4 - The Parliamentary Debates (Authorised Edition), Vol. 146, 4th Ser.,
11 May 1905, Cols. 76 - 77.

Towards the close of 1905, by which time Arnold-Forster had wholly estranged not only the soldiers but also his colleagues in the Government, Roberts raised the invasion issue once again pressing on Balfour the urgent need for a national service home defence army. Once again his pleas on behalf of the 'bolt from the blue school' met with no success and at the 81st meeting of the Defence Committee, late in November 1905, Roberts tendered his resignation so as to be free to openly campaign for his cause before the country.⁵

And so commenced a decade of agitation largely sponsored by the National Service League which, while never attaining direct success, did much to condition the country and its people to the concept of coercion. The League, founded by Leopold Amery in mid 1905,⁶ and headed in its later years by Lord Roberts, undertook an extensive propaganda programme flooding the country with pamphlets, dispatching speakers to every nook and cranny in the country, while Roberts himself, the centre of all the attraction, stumped the length and breadth of Britain on an exhaustive schedule of 'one-night-stands' in spite of his advanced age.

Coercion as an extremely contentious political issue in the England of pre-War Europe had two distinct and very different aims. There was, in the first place, the official platform of the League demanding a minimal period of military training be imposed upon all men between eighteen and twenty-four years of age so as to prepare and train a home defence army. And, secondly, there was a strong movement within the league and among its supporters and sympathisers for the adoption of a Continental style national conscript army upon a full-time non-restricted, basis.

Increasingly with the passage of the years the invasion bogey was coming to provide the supporters of the League with a respectable base from which they could press for the

5 - 'Minutes of the 81st Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence',
25 Nov. 1905. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/1.

6 - Amery, L.S., My Political Life, (London, 1953), Vol. I, p. 214.

adoption of a universal conscript principle. This somewhat clandestine development was by no means remarkable in that most of the 'new men' fully understood that in universal service lay the solution to the nightmare of finding a method of imparting military capability to the Continental Strategy. Lord Fisher, on the one hand, and Lord Kitchener, on the other, had never ceased to underline the obvious - namely that the Expeditionary Force was as nothing compared to the armies of the Great Powers, and its annihilation would pass unnoticed in the more general bloodbath of a full-scale military action. Early in September 1911 Esher noted in his journal of the 23rd August meeting of the Defence Committee :

The strange thing is that Kitchener was asked to attend and refused. He sent word to Haldane that he was sure the Germans would beat the French, and he would have no part in any decision which the Ministers might think fit to take. That if they imagined he was going to command an Army in France, he would see them damned first.⁷

By way of underlining this active concern with the nature of the wars of the future or indeed England's ability to fight once again the campaigns of the past, the following extract from a speech made by a novice M.P. on the occasion of the debate on St. John Brodrick's Army Estimates for 1901 - 1902 is of some relevance :

Sir, it is against this Army increase that I protest, first in the interests of economy, secondly in the interests of the Fleet. I complain of the increase in Regular soldiers, and particularly of the three army corps which are to be kept ready for expeditionary purposes. I contend that they ought to be reduced by two army corps, on the ground that one is quite enough to fight savages, and three are not enough even to begin to fight Europeans. A European war cannot be anything but a cruel heartrendering struggle, which, if we are ever to enjoy the bitter fruits of victory must demand, perhaps for several years, the whole manhood of the nation, the entire suspension of peaceful industries and the concentrating to one end of every vital energy in the community. I have frequently been astonished since I have been in this

7 - Journal, 6 Sept. 1911. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, ed. Oliver Viscount Esher (London, 1938), Vol. III, p. 58.

House to hear with what composure and how glibly Members, and even Ministers, talk of a European war. I will not expatiate on the horrors of war, but there has been a great change which the House should not omit to notice. In former days, when wars arose from individual causes, from the policy of a Minister or the passion of a King, when they were fought by small regular armies of professional soldiers, and when their course was retarded by the difficulties of communication and supply, it was possible to limit the liabilities of the combatants. But now when mighty populations are impelled on each other, each individual severally embittered and inflamed - when the resources of science and civilization sweep away everything that might mitigate their fury, a European war can only end in the ruin of the vanquished and the scarcely less fatal commercial dislocation and exhaustion of the conquerors. Democracy is more vindictive than Cabinets. The wars of peoples will be more terrible than those of kings.⁸

Clearly then there were a number of responsible figures who entertained serious misgivings concerning the future both of warfare and military involvement upon the Continent. A few years earlier Churchill, in his first book, had observed :

We have for some years adopted the 'short service system'. It is a continental system. It has many disadvantages. Troops raised under it suffer from youth, want of training and lack of regimental associations. But on the Continent it has one paramount recommendation : it provides enormous numbers. The active army is merely a machine for manufacturing soldiers quickly, and passing them into the reserves, to be stored until they are wanted. European nations deal with soldiers only in masses. Great armies of men, not necessarily of high standard of courage and training, but armed with deadly weapons, are directed against one another, under varying strategical conditions. Before they can rebound thousands are slaughtered and a great battle has been won or lost. The average courage of the two nations may perhaps have been decided. The essence of the continental system, is its gigantic scale.

We have adopted this system in all respects but one, and that the vital one. We have got the poor quality, without the great quantity.

8 - The Parliamentary Debates (Authorised Edition), Vol. 93, 4th Ser., 13 May 1901, Cols. 1571 - 1572 .

We have by the short service system, increased our numbers a little, and decreased our standard a good deal. The reason that this system, which is so well adapted to continental requirements, confers no advantage on us is obvious. Our army is recruited by a voluntary system. Short service and conscription are inseparable. For this reason many stern soldiers advocate conscription

Without conscription we cannot have great numbers. It should therefore be our endeavour to have those we possess of the best quality ; and our situation and needs enforce this view. Our soldiers are not required to operate in great masses, but very often to fight hand to hand. These campaigns are not fought in temperate climates, and civilized countries. They are sent beyond the seas to Africa or the Indian frontier⁹

Churchill had, of course, a political and a family tradition to safeguard ; but, nevertheless, his concern and Kitchener's obstinacy revealed a degree of unrest and foreboding in the implications of the Continental Strategy which must not be overlooked.

Kitchener had the good sense and the grace not to press the issue after August 1911 realising full well that the temper of England, especially an England governed by a Liberal Ministry, was as unsympathetic as he was himself to the acceptance of coercion as a national necessity. Kitchener viewed military adventures upon the Continent as foolhardy and detrimental to the broader responsibilities of the Army in Imperial defence. However, others, notably Henry Wilson, did not agree with Kitchener and pushed hard for universal military service hiding, as they did, behind the respectable facade of the National Service League. On the one hand, Wilson's behaviour in this respect was a disservice to Haldane and Seely, but on the other, it revealed his concern over the Continental Strategy's military capacity - though his continued support for that strategy in the face of the failure to secure universal conscription was a disgraceful testament to the manner in which he permitted his 'political' goals to override his professional responsibilities and good sense.

9 - Churchill, W.S., The Story of the Malakand Field Force : An Episode of Frontier War, (London, 1898), pp. 295 - 297).

The strategic posture of England and the Empire underwent a dramatic change with the advent of the 'Entente' policy, the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War and the rising menace of Germany both within Europe and on the seas. This reorientation in England's international position was completed in the late summer of 1907 with the conclusion of the colonial agreements which taken together formed a partial Anglo-Russian reconciliation along the lines of the 'Entente'. These events led Roberts to press for a reopening of the invasion question. In the company of Repington, Sir Samuel Scott and Lord Lovat, Roberts approached Balfour in an effort to secure a political base for their activities. However, Balfour, not to be trapped, decided to pass on their arguments to Campbell-Banneman in order to have the matter re-examined by a further Defence Committee Enquiry. In the course of a memorandum, which he later discussed before Mr. Asquith's Sub-Committee on Invasion, Balfour made it quite plain that he regarded the efforts of Roberts' clique as a direct attack upon his previous stand on the matter and that they had sought his recantation so as to bolster the cause of national service.¹⁰ However, Balfour neatly side-stepped the issue noting as he recalled in his memorandum :

But I expressed my willingness to forward the new facts to the Committee of Imperial Defence, and I was confident that they would reexamine the problem impartially.¹¹

Thus Roberts had failed in his bid to draw Balfour away from the impartial non-political attitude which he had declared to be his position in considering Haldane's Army Reforms.

This second invasion enquiry undertaken by the C.I.D. was delegated to a powerful sub-committee, chaired by Mr. Asquith,¹² which was appointed in November 1907,

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- 10 - 'Statement Made by Mr. A.J. Balfour before the Sub-Committee on Invasion, Friday, 29th May, 1908', 29 May 1908. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 3/2/1/43A, p. 3.
- 11 - 'Statement Made by Mr. A.J. Balfour before the Sub-Committee on Invasion', 29 May 1908, p. 3.
- 12 - The other members of the Sub-Committee : Lloyd George, Grey, Tweedmouth, McKenna, Haldane, Crewe, Esher, Fisher, Slade, Lyttleton, Nicholson, French, Ewart, and Ottley as Secretary.

although no official action appears to have been taken on the Committee at this date. Fisher, himself a member, was very far from pleased and, as has been seen, attempted to obstruct the work of the Committee. Taking unkind advantage of Balfour's temporary indisposition, Fisher wrote to this star witness of the Enquiry late in November 1907 lamenting :

I am sorry to hear that you have a chill but it struck me as a fine chance of sending on some papers. We've got the Invasion Bogey In hand which I thought you had laid at rest forever. I hope we shall smash it completely this time.¹³

Fisher's hopes were, however, only to be partially fulfilled - a fact which hardly served to endear him to the Committee or vice-versa.

Lord Roberts, with the support and counsel of Colonel Repington, presented the revised view of the 'bolt-from-the-blue' faction in view of the altered international position. Roberts, who had sense enough not to totally alienate the members of Asquith's Committee in suggesting that the fleet could in fact be destroyed, concentrated his arguments upon the possibility of an attempted invasion at a time when the fleet might either be caught off-guard or else have been lured away by an enemy diversion. Roberts and Repington maintained that Germany was capable of obtaining temporary command of the sea for a period of sufficient length so as to allow the disembarkation of upwards of 200,000 enemy soldiers upon the shores of England. Balfour, however, did not agree ; and in the course of his statement, before the Sub-Committee Enquiry, of late May 1908 he observed that the 'bolt-from-the-blue' argument depended upon 'what I may call a double surprise', and noted :

It turns upon an act of deliberate treachery directed against the fleet, immediately followed by a surprise invasion in the region of the Firth of Forth, or the northern parts of this island. I observe that some of the Admiralty witnesses seem to think that the attack on our fleet by treachery, in time of profound and unclouded peace, is so atrocious an outrage on the comity of nations and the practice of civilized warfare that we may put

13 - Fisher to Balfour, 29 Nov. 1907. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49712.

it out of account. I am afraid I cannot accept that view. I do not think any nation would do it gladly or with a light heart, but I am certainly not convinced that if the Germans saw that such a violation of the usages of civilized countries made the difference between failure and success they would adopt it without hesitation, though possibly with reluctance ; and if they did adopt it, and it was successful, I do not believe that the horror of the civilized world, however loudly it might be expressed, would be of the smallest value to the inhabitants of these islands.¹⁴

Fisher was certainly of much the same kidney as Balfour ; writing to Viscount Esher back in April 1904 he had enunciated his own doctrine of the exercise of sea power :

The supreme feature of sea-war is its abrupt, its dramatic suddenness ! Fleets are always mobilized and ready for instant war ! We strike even before war is declared (at least we ought to), and remember (above all remembrances) that an initial naval disaster is irreparable, irretrievable, eternal !¹⁵

Repington, who had closely observed the course of the Russo-Japanese War, noted in his testimony that in spite of the Russian Fleet the Japanese had been able to successfully carry out a number of extensive amphibious operations. However, in view of the hopeless disarray of the Russian ships and the baleful ineptitude of their officers and ratings, this was not altogether a realistic appreciation ; a fact which Mahan had no doubt taken into account in observing that 'Steam navies have as yet made no history which can be quoted as decisive in its teaching'. Fisher was quick to note that the Intelligence Directorate of the Admiralty would easily note the assemblage of the vast numbers of transports necessary to land an effective invasion force,¹⁶ and added that despite Repington's mesmerization with recent events in the Far East the technological development of under-sea warfare had rendered plans for close in-shore operations unrealistic, and that therefore in the event of the diversion of the battle fleet the outcome would

14 - 'Statement Made by Mr. A.J. Balfour before the Sub-Committee on Invasion', 29 May 1908, p. 5.

15 - Fisher to Esher, ca. 23 Apr. 1904. Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Fear God and Dread Nought : The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. I, p. 310.

16 - The success achieved by 'Room 40' during the War was to bear out this confidence.

by no means be catastrophic. Further, Fisher argued, that even in the unlikely event of a secret concentration of shipping and the successful diversion of the fleet the Admiralty's wireless facilities would enable the immediate recall of its ships, adding that a diversion would not only weaken the transports' escorts but would be met by a force proportional to the threat posed.¹⁷ There was, of course, the further consideration raised by the 'blue water' adherents in pointing out that it was not sufficient merely to gain temporary command of the sea if an invasion force was to be sustained successfully upon enemy soil. Continuing with his analysis of the Roberts-Repington representation Mr. Balfour noted :

. . . Colonel Repington's plan requires the Germans not only to risk their 150,000 men, which they might be ready to do, but to risk the whole of their fleet I do not believe that in time of profound peace the Germans would think of risking not only their men but their fleet in what every sailor would regard as an almost impossible attempt. I gather from the evidence given before, and the papers submitted to, the Sub-Committee what is indeed obvious to the lay mind, that for an inferior fleet to station itself in the narrow waters of the Channel in close proximity to the ports where British submarines and British torpedo craft, to say nothing of British ships of battle and British cruisers, are to be found in overwhelming numbers, would be an absolutely suicidal operation ; and I should doubt whether any German Admiral could be induced to do it. If he did it seems to me that he would do much more than risk - he would ensure the destruction of - his fleet, and he certainly would not ensure the absence of our ships, whether stationed in the Channel or in the Thames, from the place selected for disembarkation in time to deal effectively with the invading army.¹⁸

Balfour then proceeded to outline the impossibility of the degree of secrecy upon which Repington's plan was based. In summing up his views Balfour concluded upon a note which was to radically alter the earlier decision of the Defence Committee and which was

17 - See : Hankey, Baron (Maurice P.), The Supreme Command, (London, 1961), Vol. I, pp. 66 - 68.
Marder, A.J., From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, (London, 1961), Vol. I, pp. 350 - 351 .

18 - 'Statement Made by Mr. A.J. Balfour before the Sub-Committee on Invasion', 29 May 1908, p. 6.

also to cause much difficulty in the future :

. . . Colonel Repington's plan in time of peace is one which is very unlikely to be adopted by the Germans, and has no chance whatever of success if it was adopted. But, on the other hand, the trend of events has been to give the Germans some advantages in respect of invasion which were never possessed by the French, and if we were seriously involved with some other great naval and maritime Power, and felt ourselves obliged to denude ourselves of any large portion of our military force, I should feel that we were in a more perilous position than we have been for some generations.¹⁹

Unfortunately none of these arguments had taken into consideration the implications of Fisher's fleet redistributions, underlined by the First Sea Lord on the Sub-Committee, which were in time to remove the battle fleet from the Channel entirely.

The Enquiry came to a close in the autumn of 1908 issuing its Report to the Defence Committee late in October. Supporting Balfour's representations the Report noted :

The Committee consider that the possibility of a surprise attack being made upon this country during normal diplomatic relations is not sufficiently remote to be ignored. They agree with Mr. Balfour that if the German Government believed that the adoption of such a plan made the difference between failure and success it is conceivable that they might resort to it.²⁰

The Committee also recognised Fisher's redistribution policy, where both Repington and Balfour had failed to do so, in noting :

. . . the strength of our fleets in Home waters is sufficient to safeguard us against any contingency that may be considered reasonably probable, and that the scheme of redistribution of the fleet which is now in progress is gradually having the effect of placing more of our ships in the North Sea and thereby rendering our position still more secure.²¹

19 - 'Statement Made by Mr. A.J. Balfour before the Sub-Committee on Invasion', 29 May 1908, p. 7.

20 - 'Report of a Sub-Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister to Reconsider the Question of Oversea Attack', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 22 Oct. 1908. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 3/2/1/44A, p. 4.

21 - 'Report of a Sub-Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister to Reconsider the Question of Oversea Attack', 22 Oct. 1908, p. 5.

In rejecting 'the plan of attack suggested by Lord Roberts' as being 'not a feasible one' the Committee based its view on a refusal to accept the fundamental presupposition that Germany could exercise the necessary command of the sea. In disposing of Lord Roberts' plan the Report observed :

The Committee do not believe that Germany could be isolated for the requisite number of hours from the whole of the civilized world. They consider that this is not under modern conditions a possible operation, and that the very attempt to stop communications would destroy secrecy in a country which is getting more and more commercially connected with every corner of the world, at a time when every corner of the world is in telegraphic communication, wireless and otherwise with London.

The Committee consider that Lord Roberts' plan does not sufficiently allow for the difficulties and delays that are inseparable from the handling of a large convoy of transports which have never been previously manoeuvred together. They are of opinion that whatever the German battle fleet did in the throat of the Channel, the time required to concentrate and then cross the North Sea, makes it incredible that we should be unable to seek out and successfully attack the transports.²²

Needless to say these remarks served to wholly alienate Roberts and his following ; however, the Committee succeeded also in annoying Fisher by insisting that in time of war

. . . there will be left in this country during the first six months a sufficient number of regular and other troops to deal with a force of 70,000.²³

This figure of 70,000 being considered the minimum number 'as will make it impossible for him to evade our fleets'. The corollary to which was that a force of our 70,000 men could be dealt with at sea whereas one of fewer than the stipulated figure if not destroyed at sea could be met and matched on land by two divisions of the Regular

22 - 'Report of a Sub-Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister to Reconsider the Question of Oversea Attack', 22 Oct. 1908, p. 7.

23 - 'Report of a Sub-Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister to Reconsider the the Question of Oversea Attack', 22 Oct. 1908, p. 9.

Army with the assistance of the territorials. Haldane was very largely content with these conclusions which had closely adhered to the proposals set forth in Balfour's Memorandum of the previous May ; writing to Balfour, shortly after his hearing by the Sub-Committee, Haldane had noted his satisfaction :

Your evidence before the C.I.D. Sub-committee was most helpful. I think that the Army and the Navy are likely to agree in accepting what you said as a basis on which they can agree²⁴

In the course of a letter to Esher written a few days prior to his hearing before the Sub-Committee Balfour had stressed his concern over the necessity of the retention of a capable military force to safeguard against invasion :

The only possible criticisms I have . . . are (a) saying that 'the Army is not required for Home Defence', though true, as you mean it, is according to my views, rather too absolute. We certainly do not require anything like our present force for home defence ; but a Home Army is, as we all admit, essential if only to compel an enemy, if it intends to invade, to invade in force.²⁵

Roberts, dissatisfied with this outcome, determined to press the issue unless the findings of the Sub-Committee were published. Repington, who enjoyed playing both sides of the fence,²⁶ wrote to Haldane in mid-November 1908 noting :

I regret to say that the three noble Lords Roberts, Milner, and Lovat, are not satisfied with the focus of your letter which they read differently from my interpretation and make out that the position will remain much as it was before, if their reading is correct.

Lord Roberts, consequently, is writing to Lord Crewe to-day to say that if the latter will state definitely that we have to be prepared to meet an invasion by 50,000 to 100,000 men, he, Lord R., will abandon the debate. I had to come away before

24 - Haldane to Balfour, 7 June 1908. Haldane MSS, MS.5908.

25 - Balfour to Esher, 23 May 1908, Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 314.

26 - See : Fisher to H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, 16 Oct. 1907. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 147.

the final draft was made, but I think that is the general purport. It is the best I could do. I do not know whether the government will grant this request. All I feel sure of is that if the govt. do not see their way to make such a statement the debate will come off²⁷

However, the Defence Committee was not to be blackmailed, Roberts made his speech directly implicating Germany on 23rd November and the campaign for National Service intensified.²⁸

Many of the 'new men', including both Wilson and Nicholson, viewed Haldane's reforms as a concrete step towards the day when the electorate would be prepared to sanction a conscript army as the basis for the entire military establishment. In many cases this attitude was openly expressed leading those opposed to such ill-considered opinions to view the National Service League with an even more jaundiced eye than it deserved. Roberts himself, who had at first turned down the Presidency of the league,²⁹ fearing the broader aspirations of such backers as Leopold Amery, had, following upon the Agadir crisis, been moved sufficiently to feel his way towards favouring the development of military establishment based upon the Continental principles of coercion and mass. In the course of a speech at Manchester delivered in late October 1912 Roberts hinted broadly at this reorientation in his thinking :

If this Empire is to keep abreast of the rapid and tremendous developments amongst the world-Powers around us, something more is necessary, and the necessity increases with every year, almost with every month. It is the necessity for an Army strong enough to ensure the mobility of our Navy, and strong enough also to make our strength felt on the mainland of Europe, should we ever appear there as the armed ally of another Power, as we were on the the verge of doing last autumn.³⁰

27 - Repington to Haldane, 20 Nov. 1908. Haldane MSS, MS 5908.

28 - The Parliamentary Debates (Authorised Edition), Vol. 196, 4th Ser., 23 Nov. 1908, Cols. 1683, 1685.

29 - Ropp, T., 'Conscription in Great Britain, 1904 - 1914 : A Failure in Civil-Military Communication ?', Military Affairs, Vol. XX, Summer, 1956, p. 71.

30 - Roberts of Kandahar, Earl (Frederick S.), Lord Roberts' Message to the Nation, (London, 1912), p. 10.

Nevertheless, to the public at large the interest in the National Service campaign lay very largely in the curiosity engendered in seeing this grand old gentleman, a hero decorated with the nation's supreme battle honour in spite of his Field-Marshal's baton, and easily the most respected military figure in contemporary England.

Roberts and his following failed to comprehend the efficacy of the Navy's stand on invasion very largely because they neither understood nor recognised the essential factors which governed the exercise of sea power. Regardless of the number of first line troops that the War Office might be able to mass for the protection of England from invasion, the Grand Fleet, as it finally evolved in August 1914, would be forced to remain at its station in the upper reaches of the North Sea so long as the High Seas Fleet remained in being, and without their battle fleet the Germans, as everyone admitted, could entertain no hopes for the invasion of the British Isles. Roberts completely failed to understand that the vital stake at issue was not the successful enemy invasion of England, but rather the loss of the initiative at sea to that enemy. For once the sovereignty of those waters, through which passed England's lifelines to the outside world, had fallen into alien and unfriendly hands, the war at sea had been lost and England defeated - utterly. As Fisher put it so often 'its not invasion we have to fear, its STARVATION'.

In view of the advanced state of naval preparedness and the technological developments which favoured the defender at sea - the military at great cost were to learn a similar lesson upon the land - the invasion question was in fact a redundant 'bogey'. The retention of the two divisions was in fact wholly unnecessary and as will be seen, was to occasion a series of unseemly contradictions of policy both in the War Office and at the Admiralty. Fisher was fond of quoting St. Vincent's remark that their retention was designed 'to allay the fears of the old women of both series'. Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, one of the Navy's outstanding junior officers prior to the War, has recalled :

Invasion, though feared by some, was never an actual danger in view of the British superiority at sea ; but the fear led to the retention of numbers of troops in England even as late as the third year of the war.³¹

31 - Richmond, H.W., Statesmen and Sea Power, (Oxford, 1946), p. 283.

Responsible opinion in Germany before the War was wholly in agreement with Fisher, Richmond and the 'blue-water' school in general.³²

Indeed, a handful of officers in German military circles did freely advocate the invasion of England. However, it was a view at variance with the Kaiser's opinion and his long enduring Anglophile conduct to say nothing of the opposition of the Great General Staff. Those who pressed forward such plans very shortly fell from favour as, for example, when in 1905 General von der Goltz was passed over as the most likely successor to Schlieffen for this reason. In any case, few general officers believed that the problems of successful invasion were surmountable. The most senior responsible officers, in concert with their opposites in Whitehall, supported the 'blue-water' views upon invasion. In both cases invasion was regarded as a realistic strategic principle by the younger men. The Great General Staff understood, whereas von der Goltz and his followers such as von Edelsheim did not, that the essence of successful combined amphibious operations lay in gaining and holding the initiative at sea. To achieve so fundamental a precondition necessitated even heavier, indeed vastly more extensive, expenditure upon the Navy at the inevitable expense of the land forces. The German generals already considered that much too much of the defence budget was being frittered away upon what Mr. Churchill so succinctly, if a trifle undiplomatically, described as the luxury of the fleet. The generals, quite correctly, did not consider that the dubious advantage to be achieved in the unlikely event of victory in what was essentially a non-strategic theatre, was worth the sacrifice of the military backbone which was indeed the *raison d'être* of the German Empire. It was, in short, Fisher's argument.³³

Opinion in the country was almost totally opposed to Roberts' campaign. Prosperity, social reform and the continuing confidence of the general public in the Navy accounted

32 - See : Vagts, A., Landing Operations, (Harrisburg, Pa., 1952), p. 471.

33 - See : Edelsheim, F. von, Operations Upon the Sea (1901), (New York, 1914), Vagts, Landing Operations, pp. 469 - 492.

largely for the failure of his efforts to move the people. Writing in 1912, Mr. Balfour explained, in a somewhat thin and laboured argument, his deep opposition to conscription as the basis for the military establishment :

. . . whatever else we must have a voluntary army. You cannot raise soldiers by conscription, and then send them to tropical countries on the other side of the world, and if we ever come to conscription one of the most serious dangers will be its effect on voluntary enlistment.³⁴

It is a commentary on the true nature of the interest of those who backed Lord Roberts that Balfour had found it necessary to refute arguments advocating coercion for the Army as a whole. Writing in 1910 Esher had betrayed his fears for the continued expertise and professionalism of the Army if it were subjected to conscription.³⁵ His growing opposition to the Continental Strategy and its implications had led Esher to openly voice his lack of confidence in the military capacity of the Expeditionary Force as the heart of the Entente policy and he had urged Asquith to reject the 'militarist' lobby in favour of the nation's traditional reliance upon sea power and amphibious operations.³⁶ Sir Edward Grey, caught up in his refusal to accept the implications of the 'Entente' policy, put forth the view that not only would the transitional period of the change over to conscription provide Germany with an opportunity to strike at France while the British military establishment was in a state of chaos, but that such a step would be interpreted, and not without justification, in Potsdam as blatantly aggressive in character.³⁷ Viscount Haldane, a firm 'navalist' on matters of invasion, opposed coercion both on political and economic grounds ; however, he was realist enough to admit that such a measure might well become necessary in the event of involvement in

34 - Cited : Dugdale, Arthur James Balfour, Vol. II, p. 79.

35 - Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), To-Day and To-Morrow, (London, 1910), pp. 29 - 34.

36 - Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), The Influence of King Edward and Essays on Other Subjects, (London, 1915), p. 192.

37 - Grey of Fallodon, Viscount (Edward), Twenty-Five Years, 1892 - 1916, (Toronto, 1925), Vol. II, p. 56.

a major war in Europe.³⁸ None of these leading figures of pre-War England had any sympathy with the official platform of the National Service League, realising as they did the significance of the exercise of sea power and the profound necessity of retaining that initiative for their country. As the young Winston Churchill had told the House some years earlier :

Without a supreme Navy, whatever military arrangements we may make, whether for foreign expeditious or home defence, must be utterly vain and futile Sir, the superiority of the Navy is vital to our national existence. That has been said before. No one will deny that or thank me for repeating the obvious. Yet this tremendous Army expenditure directly challenges the principle, and so those who advocate it are false to the principle they so loudly proclaim. For the main reason that enables us to maintain the finest Navy in the world is that whereas every European Power has to support a vast Army first of all, we in this fortunate, happy island, relieved by our insular position of a double burden, may turn our undivided efforts and attention to the Fleet. Why should we sacrifice a game in which we are sure to win to play a game in which we are bound to lose ?³⁹

The members of the Cabinet and of the Government, regardless of their political shading, whether Little Englander or Liberal-Imperialist, were all aware of their dependence upon the sea and of the ultimate importance of a strong and healthy naval establishment. Naval expenditure during their administration of 'peace, retrenchment and reform' had risen by over twenty millions to the £51,550,000 set forth in the 1914 - 1915 Estimates.⁴⁰ In rising to meet the great 'defensive' requirements of the nation these political legatees of Bright and Cobden felt all the more justified in rejecting the odious concepts of National Service and overseas conscription, and in judging the financial burdens involved

38 - Haldane of Cloan, Viscount (Richard B.), An Autobiography, (London, 1929), p. 195. Haldane of Cloan, Viscount (Richard B.), Before the War, (London, 1920), p. 168.

39 - The Parliamentary Debates (Authorised Edition), Vol. 93, 4th Ser., 13 May 1901, Col. 1574.

40 - 'Statement of the First Lord of the Admiralty Explanatory of the Estimates, 1914 - 1915', Cd. 7302, 1914, p. 9.

as reprehensible not only to the taxpaying public but also to their far-reaching programmes of social equalization and improvement.

At the War Office both Nicholson and Wilson were 'conscriptionists' ; however, a study conducted for Haldane by the C.I.G.S. in 1910 confirmed the fear expressed by many that coercion was impractical for the Regular Army if for no other reason than the chaos which such a reorganisation would entail.⁴¹ A War Office Memorandum of early November 1910, presumably prepared by Wilson and Nicholson contained at least a hint of the General Staff's dissatisfaction with the stipulation that two divisions be retained at home during the first six months of war so as to off-set any temptation for the enemy to attempt invasion during the mobilization and training of the Territorial Force - a stipulation which the War Office as a whole had welcomed two years before. This change in attitude on the part of the General Staff reflected the growing importance of the Army in the Defence Establishment and heralded its efforts to have this restraint upon the Continental Strategy removed during the summer of 1911. In their Memorandum of November 1911 the General Staff had observed :

So long . . . as our naval supremacy is assured against any reasonably probable combination of Powers, Invasion is impracticable.

At the same time, however, it is considered by His Majesty's Government that an Army for Home Defence ought to be sufficient in numbers and organization to compel an enemy who contemplates invasion to come with so substantial a force as will make it impossible for him to evade our fleets.⁴²

41 - Maurice, F., Haldane, (London, 1937), Vol. 1, p. 270.

42 - 'Memorandum on the Principles Governing the Defence of the United Kingdom', Submitted by the Army Council for Approval, The General Staff - 4 Oct. 1910. C.I.D. Papers, 2, Whitehall Gardens, 3 Nov. 1910, Cab. 3/2/1/48A, p. 4.

This reference to the opinion of 'His Majesty's Government' would certainly seem to suggest that while the General Staff concurred it did not necessarily agree ; in view of later events such an interpretation would appear at least to have some validity. The degree of common ground between the War Office and the Admiralty in opposing Roberts' campaign was readily apparent in an Admiralty Memorandum of late 1910 prepared for the use of the War Office in refuting the claims of the National Service League. At the conclusion of the Paper the Admiralty had noted in observing the tremendous risks that the enemy commander-in-chief would have to undertake in attempting an invasion of the British Isles :

Taking all these facts into consideration, he would probably decide as the Admiralty have done, that an invasion on even the moderate scale of 70,000 men is practically impossible.⁴³

Although it must be added that at precisely this moment when Henry Wilson was turning the General Staff away from the two division stipulation, Arthur Wilson, at the Admiralty, was in the process of reversing Admiralty policy realising that it played into the hands of the advocates of the Continental Strategy. During the Churchill years, the Admiralty, though subordinated to the Continental Strategy, was to develop Arthur Wilson's policy into a genuine reservation concerning the invasion problem partly in view of the, albeit questionable, outcome of the 1912 and 1913 manoeuvres. It is also probable that following upon Agadir with the mounting tension throughout Europe, and the growing hysteria concerning defence preparations generally, that those trends were reflected by these new doubts within the Navy. Churchill himself was to radically alter his earlier 'economist' outlook on the invasion problem ; in the course of a Cabinet Memorandum on 'British Military Needs' of June 1908 - while the Invasion Sub-Committee was sitting - he had maintained :

It should . . . be remembered that if it be necessary at any time to send an expeditionary force out of the country, the

43 - 'Notes Supplied by the Admiralty for the Use of the War Office in the Debate that was to have taken place In November, 1910, in the House of Lords on a Motion by Lord Roberts', Cd. 5539, 1911.

mobilization of a portion of the fleet, and the increased vigilance which would naturally be exercised by the Admiralty, ought vastly to minimize, if not effectively to remove, all danger of a 'bolt from the blue'.⁴⁴

However, when burdened with the 'Power of Admiralty', and surrounded by lesser men than Fisher, the Radical turned Imperialist recanted and in the course of a further Cabinet Memorandum drawn up in the summer of 1913 - just prior to the naval manoeuvres, with the assistance of the First Sea Lord and the Chief of the Admiralty War Staff, the First Lord noted :

We fear that unless this adequate military force is maintained in Great Britain, Naval operations will be greatly hampered and complicated We therefore hold that at all times the military force retained in the British Islands should not fall below the strength necessary to deal with a concentrated invasion of 70,000 men.⁴⁵

In the course of an earlier survey in April 1913 of England's general naval position Churchill had explicitly voiced the Admiralty's refusal to guarantee against invasion regardless of where the fleet happened to be :

If we . . . survey the situation as it may be from the outbreak of hostilities, we must contemplate the following possibilities : first, that on, or immediately before, the outbreak of war a sudden attempt is made to land a force, which may amount to 20,000 men, at some point or points on the British coast, with a view to preventing a British army being sent to the Continent ; secondly that after the war has been declared, the Germans will assemble a large number of suitable transports at Hamburg, Emden, Wilhelmshaven, or Kiel . . . that they may in the course of a month

44 - 'A Note upon British Military Needs', by the Rt. Hon. W.S. Churchill, 27 June 1908. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/94, No. 89.

45 - 'Untitled Admiralty Paper on Oversea Attack', by W.S. Churchill, H.R.H. Prince Louis of Battenburg - First Sea Lord, and Sir Henry Jackson - Chief of the Naval War Staff, 25 June 1913. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/116, No. 43.

find opportunities of accumulating on British soil upwards of 70,000 or 80,000 men, and maintain all the time the menace of a still larger number ; that they will use their battle fleet in conjunction with some movements of transports so as to take advantage of the fact that the emergence of the German battle fleet would produce an immediate British naval concentration with consequent denudation in other quarters ; and that a variety of combinations exist which it would be open to the Germans to adopt for executing the above design.⁴⁶

This novel argument of invasion by Increment would suggest that Churchill's concern over the invasion question was really quite genuine, a concern which the ostensible results of the 1912 and 1913 fleet manoeuvres did little to assuage.

The 1912 manoeuvres, which with those of 1913 will be discussed in due course, so alarmed the 'bolt-from-the-blue' school, and so disturbed Churchill, in spite of the absurd conditions under which they had been conducted, that the whole issue of invasion was once again referred to the Defence Committee early in 1913. The matter had been briefly raised during the 121st meeting on 7th January 1913, following upon which the Secretariat had formulated the following terms of reference :

. . . to consider whether any new factors have arisen which necessitate a reconsideration, and, if so, in what respect of the conclusions on the question of invasion approved by the Committee of Imperial Defence at the 100th meeting held on 22nd October, 1908.⁴⁷

These terms were discussed and apparently approved at the following session of the Committee early in February. This, the 122nd meeting, was typical of the manner in which Asquith suffocated and choked the C.I.D. by overloading its membership.⁴⁸ On this occasion no fewer than twenty-five personages - excluding the Secretary -

46 - 'Admiralty Notes', 14 Apr. 1913. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/115, No. 23, pp. 5 - 6.

47 - 'Standing Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence : Attack on the British Isles from Oversea', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 15 Apr. 1914. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 3/2/5/62A.

48 - 'Minutes of 122nd Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence', 6 Feb. 1913. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/3/2.

attended.⁴⁹ It might well be added that in spite of this unwieldy number several of the more 'regular' members, notably Grey and Lloyd-George, were not included.

In discussing the terms of reference for this Enquiry Churchill noted :

. . . he understood that it was not intended to challenge the general conclusions arrived at in 1908. The general basis had not altered from the point of view of the Admiralty.⁵⁰

In other words the Admiralty wanted the Enquiry in order both to formally consider the results of the 1912 and, as it turned out, the 1913 manoeuvres as well as to refute the suggestions emanating from the Directorate of Military Operations that the Navy was solely responsible for Home Defence and that it was essential that the entire Expeditionary Force be dispatched to France upon the outbreak of war. While Repington suggested that this new Enquiry was designed to remove the two division stipulation, it seems quite clear that the opposite was in fact the case.⁵¹ However neither Esher nor Asquith had much sympathy with this move and,⁵² indeed, it seems that Asquith's action had very largely been prompted by the increasing agitation of the National Service league and his personal dislike of the Continental Strategy. Characteristically non-committal Asquith had merely noted in discussing the terms of reference for the Enquiry at the 122nd meeting :

. . . it would be convenient if the Admiralty and the War Office would prepare for the use of the Standing Sub-Committee memoranda reviewing the changes in conditions which had taken

49 - Aside from Asquith, the following were present : Morley, Harcourt, Churchill, Battenburg, Jellicoe, Jackson, Samuel (Postmaster-General), King (Secretary to the Post Office), Nicolson, Colonel J. Allen (Defence Minister of New Zealand), Crowe, Fisher, Haldane, McKenna, Crewe, Seely, Henderson (Director of Military Training), Buxton (President of the Board of Trade), Runciman (President of the Board of Agriculture), Smith (Permanent Secretary to the Board of Trade), Chalmers (Permanent Secretary to the Treasury), Guillemand (Chairman of the Board of Customs and Excise), Esher and A.K. Wilson.

50 - 'Minutes of 122nd Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence', 6 Feb. 1913, p.18.

51 - Journal, 14 Feb. 1913. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol.III, p. 118.

52 - Esher to Asquith, 25 June 1913. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. III, pp.124 - 125.

place since the enquiry which was held in 1908.⁵³

The official War Office stand on Invasion remained unchanged under Seely now that Haldane had passed on to the Woolsock. Wilson, who regarded Seely as 'damned Incompetent', had been unable to convert the political leadership of Asquith's Government, which he so despised, to his viewpoint. Seely's only comment upon the establishment of this new Enquiry was that the War Office

. . . knew generally that many of the naval factors had been modified since 1908, but that they did not know what the Admiralty considered their cumulative effect to be. Without such knowledge it was difficult for them to say anything new on the subject.⁵⁴

Regardless, the Enquiry proceeded with both the Admiralty and the War Office presenting somewhat confused cases each being well aware of the possible ramifications of their arguments. Henry Wilson was aware of the abhorrence with which many viewed the Continental Strategy and had therefore to play his hand carefully in placing the burden of Home Defence upon the Admiralty lest such arguments persuade the Committee to deflate the importance of the Army and lead in turn to a serious questioning of the Continental Strategy. He had always to keep in mind the manner in which the 1908 decision had helped to raise the Army's position within the Defence Establishment. The Admiralty, on the other hand, while entertaining serious doubts on the whole question of Home Defence and invasion had no desire to see the Army usurp the traditional role of the Senior Service.⁵⁵ The outcome of the 1913 naval manoeuvres further confused the Admiralty's resolution on its ability to deal effectively with an enemy initiative against the east coast.

Regardless, by the autumn of 1913 the bulk of the work of the Enquiry had been completed and, greatly to the Admiralty's satisfaction, the decision of 1907 - 1908

53 - 'Minutes of 122nd Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence', 6 Feb. 1913, p. 18.

54 - 'Minutes of 122nd Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence', 6 Feb. 1913, p. 18.

55 - Esher to Asquith, 25 June 1913. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. III, pp. 124 - 125.

received, virtually unaltered, the 'initial obstat' of the C.I.D. Writing to Esher early in October Haldane expressed his concurrence with the projected findings of the Enquiry noting :

Asquith has shown me confidentially a first sketch of our our Invasion Committee Report. It seemed to be as good as could be. No nonsense in it.⁵⁶

In mid-April 1914 the formal Report of the Sub-Committee was lodged with the Secretariat containing the unanimous findings of its members. The only substantial alteration effected on the 1907 - 1908 findings was the addition of a paragraph specifically noting :

. . . the Territorial Force, which according to the existing mobilization scheme provides the bulk of the Home Defence army, was never intended to be, and is not sufficiently trained when first mobilized to secure conditions 3 and 4 and requires the support of regular troops until such time as it is fit to take the field. In the earlier stages of a war, if the interests of Home Defence only are considered it is undesirable to leave less than the equivalent of two divisions of regular troops in this country. ⁵⁷

In the Report's final section entitled 'Summary of Recommendations' this stipulation concerning the retention of two divisions, which had not been specifically stated in the 1907 - 1908 Report although it had been assumed in the Report of the Sub-Committee on the 'Military Needs of the Empire' of July 1909,⁵⁸ was stated even more emphatically :

The military Home Defence Scheme should be based on the assumption that, in the event of the despatch of an Expeditionary Force overseas, the equivalent of two divisions

56 - Haldane to Esher, 13 Oct. 1913. Haldane MSS, MS 5910.

57 - 'Attack on the British Isles from Oversea', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 15 Apr. 1914, p. 25.

58 - 'Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Military Needs of the Empire', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 24 July 1909. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 4/3/1/109B .

of regular troops will be retained in the United Kingdom⁵⁹

On the whole the decision to uphold the earlier findings of the Committee was wise - though in reality the decision had been prompted more by the jumbled politics of the defence establishment than by genuine strategic considerations. Even Fisher was pleased noting in a letter to the Prime Minister of early May 1914 :

I fully concur in 62-A, which confirms the decision we reached on the 22nd October, 1908, that invasion is impracticable so long as our naval supremacy is assured against any reasonable probable combination of Powers. If we permanently lose command of the sea, then whatever may be the strength and organization of the Home Force the subjection of the country is inevitable.⁶⁰

As an aside, it is interesting to note that in fact Fisher's reference to the 'inevitable subjection of the country' which had appeared in the 1908 Report had now been altered to read 'the position of the country would be desperate'.⁶¹

And so ended the series of pre-War investigations conducted by the Committee of Imperial Defence into the invasion question. In many respects these enquiries had represented the Defence Committee at its best. Firm and sensible decisions had been taken on each occasion. National Service had been rejected as the foundation around which to organize an effective system of Home Defence. These sub-committees had not considered the question of conscription for the Regular Army ; however, it is a sad commentary upon the lack of cohesion in defence policy that the full implications of the Continental Strategy had never been appreciated ; for had such an appreciation been realised, resulting in a recommendation that the Regular Army be based upon the principles of coercion and mass, it would have sharply contrasted with the findings of

59 - 'Attack on the British Isles from Oversea', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 15 Apr. 1914, p. 25.

60 - Fisher to Asquith, Early May 1914. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 504.

61 - 'Attack on the British Isles from Oversea', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 15 Apr. 1914, p. 25.

the 1908 and 1914 enquiries, all of which had baldly stated that 'If we permanently lose command of the sea, whatever may be the strength and organization of the Home Force, the position of the country would be desperate (the subjection of the country to the enemy is inevitable)'. The possible advantages of a National Service force for Home Defence, let alone a foreign service conscript army, were far, very far, outweighed by the appalling spectre of the inevitable results consequent upon any reduction in the strength of the Royal Navy and the resolution of England's belief in sea power.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PIVOT OF DECISION

Comparatively, the Navy is vital and the Army a plaything !
It is not invasion we have to fear ; its starvation !. The sense
of proportion is being lost sight of by the Public. The Army is
a plutocracy and rules society. The Navy is poor and democratic.

Admiral of the Fleet
Lord Fisher of Kilverstone ; March 1910.

Meantime, in these years of preparation, Wilson in England,
promoted to the key part of Director of Military Operations at
the War Office, was working out plans in the minutest detail -
plans which made the British Army an appendage of the French,
and which were so elaborately organised that any alternative
course was hardly possible when war came. His arrangements
were in 1914 to become a rope round Britain's neck that could
not be loosened. The tightness of these ties was only realised
by other soldiers, and her statesmen, when the emergency came.

Captain B.H. Liddell Hart ; 1965 .

LORD Fisher's enforced retirement from the Board of Admiralty late in January 1910 had
been intended to remove not only one of the major stumbling blocks in the way of the
effectiveness of the Committee of Imperial Defence, but also to lay the way open for a
definite expansion and solidification of the Continental Strategy. Many responsible
figures had regarded Fisher's departure as essential for the internal stability of the Navy.

Asquith's recent committee of enquiry had formally registered the Beresford feud as a major public scandal ; further, as Viscount Esher noted at the time, regardless of its outcome the enquiry was itself a direct reflection upon the integrity of the Government.¹ However, others, notably Haldane and Esher, had recognised that Fisher's removal held far deeper implications for the future of national defence as a whole. Both Haldane, and to a lesser extent Esher, believed that the whole future of integrated defence planning turned upon the resignation of Fisher. It is clear that, following upon the indecisive outcome of the 'Sub-Committee on the Military Needs of the Empire' which had reported in mid-July 1909, both Esher and Haldane had come to realise that the Defence Committee had ground to a halt, deadlocked over basic defence principles, and that the Admiralty's attitude was largely to blame for this situation. Haldane was very much alive to the political differences and personal animosities on the Committee which were also in no small way responsible for its lack of decisiveness, whereas Esher adopted the narrower view coming in time to believe that with Fisher safely retired the C.I.D. would once again be able to move forward. Haldane's diagnosis was far more realistic.

Both Esher and Haldane insisted upon a new Board of Admiralty willing to co-operate with the General Staff and the Army Council for a common purpose in placing the British Army safely upon the Continent. Co-operation with the French Army and committal to the heart of a European campaign were issues which neither gave much thought to in the face of the Admiralty's refusal to co-operate upon the most elementary related logistical problems. It would be quite wrong to suppose that either Esher or Haldane desired to commit England to fighting the wars of France, or that they wished to see the Army replace the Navy as the arbiter of the country's defence posture. On the contrary, both were sincere adherents of the 'Blue Water School', and, indeed, both regarded the B.E.F. as an expeditionary force rather than an army. In time Esher came to understand the full implications of the Continental Strategy realising that its successful execution involved not a handful of troops such as provided by the Expeditionary Force,

1 - Esher to Balfour, 13 Apr. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

but rather a vast conscript army. During the four years preceding the War Esher was to constantly reiterate his theme : either Great Britain decides to adopt the principles of compulsion in order to provide the necessary military capability implicit in the Continental Strategy, or else she abandon that alien strategy embracing in its favour her traditional reliance upon the efficacy of sea power and combined operations. As Esher so clearly underlined, there was no folly comparable to the adoption of a strategic principle at variance with one's capability. If compulsion was viewed as economically and politically unfeasible, then, Esher argued, the Government must adopt a strategic principle in concert with the country's immense capability upon the oceans. Writing in 1912 Viscount Esher had summed up all of these considerations in observing :

The B.E.F.'s basis is an ineradicable belief in the sea, and in the sea, and in sea power, as the only weapon that Great Britain can safely and effectively employ for the purposes of defence.²

Esher understood that the despatch of the B.E.F. to France involved a military commitment far deeper than all but a very few had realised. In short, the Entente had turned the Expeditionary Force into an embryonic army. And yet the B.E.F. remained nothing more than an expeditionary force throughout these years in spite of the growth and eventual adoption of the Continental Strategy. In truth the Government never really took a firm decision on the matter of direct military involvement in Europe. For a strategic decision divorced from any appreciation of tactical capability is a decision divorced from reality, and is, in reality, not a decision.

Throughout his years of Liberal Cabinet life Haldane had remained a convinced supporter of the 'Blue Water School'. Mindful of his political life, and appreciative of the importance of sea power, Haldane consistently opposed all demands for compulsion both for Home Defence and overseas expeditions. His belief in sea power was so

2 - Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), The Influence of King Edward and Essays on Other Subjects, (London, 1915), p. 158.

fundamental that he failed to appreciate the full implications of the Continental Strategy, and he was never able to understand precisely at what Henry Wilson was driving. Wilson was a prominent advocate of compulsion for, unlike his more short-sighted colleagues, he knew that the B.E.F. was incapable of fulfilling the true implications of the Continental Strategy. However, Wilson was able to reconcile this insight with his conscience in believing that when war came it would be short and sharp, that the role of the B.E.F. would be restricted to bolstering morale, and that when peace came the existence of a British Army in being would be a tremendous political advantage - not only to the politicians but perhaps also for the soldiers.

Haldane had been largely instrumental in precipitating the Beresford Enquiry's criticism of Fisher for the lack of an operational planning division at the Admiralty.³ This bogey, which was to prove so politically advantageous over the course of the next two years,⁴ enabled Haldane to convince Esher of the necessity for Fisher's departure. As has already been seen, Haldane's skillful manipulation of the War Staff issue had indeed turned Esher against Fisher. However, as Fisher left office in the midst of a storm of 'Calculated lies . . . as thick . . . as the leaves in Valambrosa',⁵ Haldane did not overestimate the fruits of his victory. He was very much alive to the fact that the Defence Committee was crippled equally by the lack of unity and stability within the Government. Therefore, as has been seen,⁶ Haldane began to canvass his ideas on the creation of a Defence Ministry designed to remove all but the most profound strategic decisions, and squabbles, from out of the range of the gaze of his pacifist and 'Little Englander' colleagues in the Cabinet and on the Defence Committee. Fisher, who remained cool towards

3 - Marder, A.J., From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, (London, 1961), Vol. I, p. 205.

4 - See Appendix III, 'The Admiralty War Staff'.

5 - Fisher to Balfour, 2 Nov. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49712.

6 - See above page 15.

Haldane for the rest of his life, delighted in deriding this idea and took much pleasure in accusing 'Napoleon B' of harbouring demented visions of grandeur.⁷ Nevertheless, Fisher genuinely feared Haldane's proposal, realising that whereas the Defence Committee could be rendered impotent by the clever exploitation of its inherent weaknesses and divisions, a Defence Ministry would usurp all executive power from the Board of Admiralty.

Viscount Esher, while sympathetic towards Haldane, had no desire to abandon the principles of defence by committee without further effort. Esher, who had an understandable and indeed justifiable distrust of the Liberals on matters of defence, seems to have clung to the committee principle in the belief that Mr. Balfour would shortly be returned to office on the heels of the Constitutional crisis.⁸ In any case Haldane's proposals were ill-received, not least by Asquith, many sharing Fisher's suspicion that the Secretary of State for War was attempting to arrogate to himself executive powers which no one, not even the Prime Minister, had hitherto possessed. Esher remained a firm exponent of the committee principle as a mechanism whereby the Prime Minister could be so briefed as to become in effect his own minister of defence. Writing to Mr. Balfour in the late summer of 1910, when the prospects for the immediate demise of Asquith's Government were bright, Esher had noted :

. . . the Prime Minister should be the 'Minister of Defence' for only he can co-ordinate all the departments concerned in the immense business of providing for the defence of the Empire.⁹

These views had prompted Esher late in 1909 to propose the revival of Mr. Balfour's defunct co-ordination sub-committee set up during the summer of 1905. He felt that such a sub-committee, if convened on a regular and frequent basis, could be used to impose the unity of purpose which had hitherto been so lacking in the defence establishment. With

7 - See : Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.) *Fear God and Dread Nought : The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. II, pp. 278, 309, 375 - 376.

8 - Esher to Balfour, 31 Dec. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

9 - Esher to Balfour, 16 Aug. 1910. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

Fisher himself 'on the beach' such a proposal seemed to have a good chance of implementation. Writing to Mr. Balfour late in December 1909 Esher had expressed his hopes on this matter :

I told you that we were trying to get a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence appointed to sit weekly and work out the details of decisions already settled by the full committee. This work is most essential, as the ability to carry out suddenly the settled plans of the executive Government, based upon the Committee of Imperial Defence reports, depends upon the details being understood and jointly worked out by the Army and the Admiralty.¹⁰

However, Esher had already discovered the most vociferous opposition to this mildest of proposals from the one quarter which he had expected to be quiescent - the chastened Board of Admiralty.

Fisher had been created Baron Kilverstone on the occasion of the King's birthday early in November 1909. With Fisher's approval McKenna had proposed that Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson be appointed to fill his post as First Sea Lord. Wilson had recommended himself both to Fisher and McKenna as the officer most likely to achieve success in healing the rift which the feud had opened up within the fleet, and yet also as a man unlikely to tamper with 'Fisher's Navy'. In short he was seen as an ideal compromise caretaker candidate. Wilson had, besides, a fine naval reputation ; Sir Almeric Fitzroy, the Clerk of the Privy Council, extravagantly cast him as 'the greatest naval figure since Nelson'.¹¹ The frequently repeated claim that Fisher and Wilson were as close as two pins, and that Wilson's activities as First Sea Lord merely reflected Fisher's policies, does not stand up either in terms of the facts, which have already been presented here, concerning Fisher's strategic thought, or in considering Sir John's true relations with Wilson after his retirement early in 1910. Writing to McKenna, who was to remain very close to Fisher during the succeeding two years, just

10 - Esher to Balfour, 24 Dec. 1909. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, ed. M.V. Brett (London, 1934), Vol. II, p. 428.

11 - Fitzroy, A.W., Memoirs, (London, 1925), Vol. II, p. 422.

the day before he was raised to the peerage, Sir John had noted with respect to Wilson's proposed appointment :

I wasn't sweet on it at first, as Wilson is such a stonewall. However, you made a good point, which converted me, in saying that for two years a stonewall was desirable.¹²

Early agreement over Wilson's appointment was soon shattered as it was discovered in short order that the new First Sea Lord was even more obdurate than Fisher had been during his worst days. Before the year was out Esher had discovered that Wilson intended to perpetuate his predecessor's opposition to the C.I.D.¹³ Writing to Balfour at the close of 1909 Esher had noted :

Francis K [Knollys] says he doesn't know whether it is Fisher who influences Wilson, or Wilson Fisher, but it is evident that they have agreed to shut down as much as possible on the work of the Defence Committee.¹⁴

This criticism was a trifle hard on Fisher, though in substance Esher was quite correct about Wilson. The new First Sea Lord, who had effectively taken over at the Admiralty by mid-December, made it clear from the outset that he would have even less to do with the Defence Committee than had Fisher - refusing even to humour it as his predecessor had done so from time to time. Writing again to Mr. Balfour on Christmas Eve Esher had spoken his mind on the prospects of the effects of Wilson's attitude upon his efforts to revivify the Defence Committee :

Haldane . . . and the W.O. warmly approve. So does E. Grey - so does Asquith. So did McKenna. But Wilson, who is at the Admiralty now every day has objected and cannot see that the Committee of Imperial Defence has anything to do with the general planning of naval and military operations except in certain contingencies. He maintains that these are matters which should be left to the Chief of the General Staff and the First Sea Lord to discuss and arrange between themselves.

12 - Fisher to McKenna, 8 Nov. 1909. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 217.

13 - Esher to Balfour, 24 Dec. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

14 - Esher to Balfour, 31 Dec. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

This of course is putting the clock back some years. If Asquith acquiesced in this view, it would strike a very severe blow to the Committee of Imperial Defence. It would certainly strengthen Haldane's plan for a 'Minister of Defence' who should control both services.¹⁵

In point of fact Asquith did not acquiesce, but then neither did he act on Esher's proposals for strengthening the C.I.D. in order to increase its influence over the Services. As usual Asquith was forced by the instability of his Government, the opposition of the Admiralty, and his own personal disinterest, to do nothing. Balfour who shared Esher's disappointment in Wilson, in a letter of late December 1909 expressed his support for his colleague's efforts to bolster the tottering influence of the Defence Committee :

From what I have heard of Wilson his attitude does not greatly surprise me : but it is certainly unfortunate. Of course there are certain technical details of joint naval and military operations which must be worked out by the Admiralty and the General Staff. But the Prime Minister and the C.I.D. must surely have some security that the plans agreed to in principle can be immediately carried into execution.¹⁶

It is interesting to note that already Fisher had begun to mellow in his attitude towards the C.I.D. - in direct contrast with Wilson's hardening. Writing to Esher in mid-December 1909 Fisher had surprisingly noted :

Ottley saw me about your Technical Committee and I gave it con amore to McKenna, who is warmly with you, but kindly never let this out, as I am absolutely sure that he is right to express no opinion till Wilson joins him. I have no idea of Wilson's line on it. No one will get round him.¹⁷

In part this sudden reversal of opinion by Fisher may be explained by the fact that having been 'kicked out', as he put it, Fisher determined to use his seat on the C.I.D. as a

15 - Esher to Balfour, 24 Dec. 1909. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. II, p. 428.

16 - Balfour to Esher, 28 Dec. 1909. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

17 - Fisher to Esher, 14 Dec. 1909. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, pp. 283 - 284.

platform from which he hoped to influence both Admiralty policy as well as the more profound questions of national defence. Deprived of the power of office, and excluded from the central halls of government, Fisher had already begun to see the 'Auleric Council', as he had been fond of calling the C.I.D., in a somewhat more favourable light. Lord Fisher, who regarded all that Haldane recommended with not a little suspicion, also realised that Wilson's obdurate attitude towards the Defence Committee could well lead to disaster. Writing to Ottley from his retirement at Kilverstone in Norfolk early in 1910 Fisher pointed out :

Wilson won't see that the Defence Committee is a 'guiding' power and England's 'All in all' if properly worked. His policy of leaving the Defence Committee severely alone would kill it and bring in the Minister of Defence he so dreads ! The bulwark against Haldane's ambition is the Defence Committee. The only Minister of Defence is the Prime Minister, and the only way he can exercise that power, with his multitudinous work, is by having a secretariat such as is provided by the Defence Committee. George Clarke saw that, but wanted to put on the Prime Minister's clothes, and so got booted out ! 18

This was a very different Fisher ; nevertheless, his motivation was other than that of concern for the integrity of the principles of the committee system. Writing to Esher a month or so later Fisher made it clear that he still viewed the C.I.D. as little more than a necessary minimum :

. . . Asquith obviously does not see the fallacy of Wilson's reasoning, which as you very accurately observed would kill the Defence Committee as a whole in its GUIDING, but not in its administrative or executive power, which are non-existent and inimical to its existence. But its 'GUIDING' power is England's 'all-in-all', if only its sufficiency and efficiency could be digested ! 19

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- 18 - Fisher to Ottley, 25 Feb. 1910. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, pp. 209 - 210.
- 19 - Fisher to Esher, 24 Mar. 1910. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, pp. 315 - 316.

Stripped of all this verbiage Fisher's message was really simplicity itself ; and writing to Alfred Gardiner, editor of the 'Daily News' which had frequently done battle on behalf of Fisher and 'Fisherism', early in the following year he betrayed his real interest in the Defence Committee :

Secret. I am more powerful now in the Committee of Defence than when I was First Sea Lord. I had masters then, now I have none and I have a platform.²⁰

The old Admiral had not turned over a new leaf.

However, Wilson was firmly in the saddle and the Government, faced with the Constitutional Crisis and a renewed onslaught by the 'economists', was unable and unwilling to effect the changes which Haldane and Esher had earlier demanded. The year 1910 was one of stagnation in the Committee which busied itself with matters of Imperial defence carefully avoiding all issues involving fundamental strategic decisions. Indeed, the most contentious issue touched upon throughout this twelve-month period was the establishment of a small committee in late March under the auspices of one of the three permanent sub-committees of the C.I.D. to 'enquire into the question of the Oversea Transport of Reinforcements in time of war'. In spite of the findings of the 1909 Sub-committee and the clear leanings towards the Continental Strategy on the part of many on the Defence Committee, Asquith charged the members to conduct their investigations within the following terms of reference :

The routes which should be followed in time of war or emergency by reinforcements proceeding from the United Kingdom or self-governing Colonies to India, Egypt, or other destinations, and the nature of the protection to be afforded them during the voyage.²¹

Once again India was proving a useful substitute for the real problems of national defence facing the Committee. The Sub-Committee did indeed consider the possibilities of involvement in a war with Germany but was careful not to mention the problem of aid to

20 - Fisher to Gardiner, 19 Jan. 1911. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 351.

21 - 'Report of the Standing Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence Appointed to Enquire into the Question of the Oversea Transport of Reinforcements in Time of War', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 16 June 1910. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 4/3/1/116B.

France in its Report submitted to the C.I.D. in mid-June. Furthermore in considering such a war the Report made no mention of requiring troops for use in Northern France, but, as the following extract from that Report reveals, India had once again been stipulated as the possible theatre of hostilities :

In order to obtain a ruling as to whether any definite guarantee of safety could be given, the Sub-Committee requested the Admiralty to inform them, as a test case, whether, in the event of a war between Great Britain and a combination of Germany and Austria, troops could be safely transported from the self-governing Dominions to (say) India or the Mediterranean area.²²

This elaborate over-playing of the Indian defence problem had gone so far as to become quite ludicrous ! Regardless of these absurd stipulations the Admiralty clearly displayed its displeasure with these activities of the C.I.D. Replying to this query on behalf of his superiors Admiral Bethell coldly observed :

I am commanded by their Lordships to state that when the positions of the German and Austrian ships are known approximately, as they probably would be when war is imminent or actually in progress, an opinion could easily be given as to the amount of risk incurred in transporting troops from any particular self-governing Dominion to India, Egypt, or Cyprus, but without this information no opinion their Lordships could give would be of any value.²³

Unfortunately, Wilson was noted for his inability to see the amusing side of any set of circumstances. Clearly he was not willing to humour the Defence Committee or to act out the charade. Wilson lacked Fisher's zest for playing with his opponents. It is interesting that this sub-committee was chaired by Viscount Esher, and had been no doubt, regarded

22 - 'Report of the Standing Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence Appointed to Enquire into the Question of the Oversea Transport of Reinforcements in Time of War', 16 June 1910, p.5.

23 - 'Report of the Standing Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence Appointed to Enquire into the Question of the Oversea Transport of Reinforcements in Time of War', 16 June 1910, p. 5.

by him as at least a step in the right direction. Much more interesting is the fact that Fisher and French were also members of the committee.²⁴ As with most other events on the Defence Committee's calendar for that year this Sub-committee was itself an exercise in the inane - and its members were not unaware of this fact. Regardless, the cold blast delivered at this juncture by the Admiralty seems to have effectively blocked off all further discussion on inter-Service co-operation at Whitehall Gardens for the remainder of the year. And the continuing squabble over the necessity of keeping troops in England to guard against invasion, which at this time the War Office supported and the Admiralty opposed, did not serve to improve Wilson's already tattered relations with the Defence Committee.

Wilson's decision to 'close down' on the Defence Committee was in the long run to have extremely serious consequences both for himself and the Service. For the First Sea Lord's action merely postponed the solution to the problem posed by the lack of inter-Service co-operation ensuring that the solution, when it came, would be far more drastic. However, Wilson's tinkering with the fundamental principles of Fisher's strategic organization was of no less significance and itself contributed in large measure to the eclipse of the Navy within the defence establishment during those last few years before the war.

Without doubt Sir Arthur Wilson was an outstanding deck officer with a fine, if somewhat overrated, reputation. During his tenure as First Sea Lord his scrupulous fairness and devotion did much to heal the rift within the Service. But as a naval administrator he was a disaster ; and his failure at the Admiralty was in time to be reflected throughout the fleet. Wilson's failings as a naval administrator and his inability to deal with his political chiefs gave rise to a severe estrangement between the Government and his Board. But, perhaps more significantly, his technical ignorance, his lack of

24 - The membership was as follows : Esher (Chairman), Hardinge, Fisher, Bethell (D.N.I.), Ewart and French with Ottley as Secretary.

sympathy for the changes wrought upon naval architecture and tactics by science and technology, resulted in a period of reaction and backwardness at the Admiralty. Wilson had never approved of Fisher's great materiel reforms - still less of the tactical revolution which they had imposed upon naval thought. As Sir John had noted in writing to Arnold White, the naval journalist, in late April 1906 Wilson is 'deadly opposed to me and my views'.²⁵ However, unlike Beresford, Wilson did not bear any grudge against Fisher and therefore refrained from participation in the great feud which so divided the service during Sir John's years as First Sea Lord. Wilson, again unlike Fisher, had a closed mind subscribing to the view that flag-rank alone qualified an officer to consider the 'higher' aspects of naval warfare. Writing to Mr. Balfour late in September 1910 Esher deprecated the efforts of Wilson's regime upon the Admiralty noting :

Haldane - who is not a Fisherite by any means - was lamenting yesterday the change that has come over the Board of Admiralty. No doubt the 'service' may have benefitted, but the doors of the Admiralty are closed to all new ideas and new developments.²⁶

Here Esher had placed his finger at once both upon the benefit and the injury of Wilson's regime upon the Navy as a whole.

Perhaps Wilson's most notable retrogression lay in his distrust and lack of respect for the submarine boat. He regarded these vessels together with their weapons as 'underhand and unfair' very largely discounting their value. Wilson, like Fisher, was a great one for secrecy, and as far as the former First Sea Lord knew his successor was as much, and more so, against the principles of close blockade as he was himself. Indeed, Wilson had gone so far early in 1908 as to propose the removal of the Battle Fleet from the North Sea altogether thus placing it outside the range of enemy submarines and torpedo craft.²⁷

25 - Fisher to White, 26 Apr. 1906. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 81.

26 - Esher to Balfour, Sept. 1910. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. III, p. 25.

27 - Fisher to Grey, 23 Jan. 1908. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, pp. 155 - 157.

However, this seems to have been one of Wilson's many passing moods, with the result that on becoming First Sea Lord his basic disbelief in the efficacy of under-sea boats led him to revive the now long dormant strategy of the close blockade of the Heligoland Bight. That this move was no mere ruse is evident in view of his cessation of the submarine programme, his behaviour before the 114th meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and his substitution of a wholly different strategic atmosphere at the Admiralty. This departure from the strategic outlook of Fisher's Board was evident to Captain (afterwards Admiral) Mark Kerr, one of Fisher's 'chosen few', upon his return to the Admiralty as Prince Louis of Battenberg's Private Secretary upon the latter's appointment as First Sea Lord :

On arrival [at the Admiralty] he [Battenberg] told me that the War Plan against Germany . . . had been superceded by one that was plain suicide, and which paraded our battle fleets in two separate squadrons up and down the North Sea off the German ports and exits, regardless of the fact that submarines, destroyers, mines, and aircraft had come into being as offensive weapons.²⁸

In this light it is readily understandable as to why Wilson did not encourage the submarine programme. Fisher made much of the failure of his successors, including Churchill, to appreciate the offensive-defensive potential of the submarine. Writing to Jellicoe early in January 1911, shortly before his departure for the Continent both for a holiday and as a means of tactfully disassociating himself from Wilson's policies, Fisher had noted :

. . . the gravity of the case lies in the hard fact that hardly anyone but yourself . . . clearly realises the immense alteration both in tactics and strategy which the development of the submarine now causes. I am quite sure A.K. Wilson don't realise it, from our conversation together when he was last at Kilverstone.²⁹

28 - Kerr, M., Prince Louis of Battenberg, Admiral of the Fleet, (London, 1934), p. 239.

29 - Fisher to Jellicoe, 10 Jan. 1911. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 349.

In the second of his two volumes of reflections on his life and times Lord Fisher recalled that when he had left the Admiralty in 1910 the Navy possessed some sixty-one submarines, but that by his return in 1914 the under-sea service had dwindled to fifty-three vessels.³⁰ In fact Fisher was not altogether correct in his figures, there being sixty in 1910 and sixty-four in 1914,³¹ though the essence of his remarks cannot be denied.

Consonant with his revival of the close blockade Wilson adopted a set of plans for combined operations directed against the Kiel Canal and the estuary of the Elbe which closely reflected the Portsmouth Committee's 'plans for circulation' of late 1906. Wilson was, of course, a confirmed supporter of the 'Blue Water' principles and his views on the general rules for the conduct of land forces in time of war were in concert with virtually all responsible naval opinion ; early in 1910 he stated :

The primary object in a war with a great maritime power, from a Naval point of view, must be the destruction of her fleet, and Naval opinion on any proposed action by the Army must be mainly determined by the extent to which it helps or hinders that object.³²

However, in establishing a close blockade as the guideline for all naval operations designed to draw the enemy's battle fleet into decisive action, Wilson courted the piecemeal annihilation of his own fleet at the hands of the enemy's auxiliary submarine and surface torpedo craft. In particular he risked the loss of his fleet support vessels which were to be involved in a close off-shore blockade while the battle fleet, unprotected, ranged itself in the open sea providing an ideal target for submarine commanders and under-water mine-layers. Wilson's failure to act on Haldane's demands for the establishment of a truly effective operational planning staff at the Admiralty led early in 1910 to a series of articles in 'The Times' by Sir James Thursfield, the Naval correspondent. There had

30 - Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Records, (London, 1919), pp. 180, 186.

31 - Kemp, P.K., H.M. Submarines, (London, 1952), pp. 31, 37.

32 - Bradford, E.E., Life of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Arthur Knyvet Wilson, (London, 1923), p. 235.

been some considerable debate as to whether it would be wise to publish Thursfield's views which had been written the previous autumn. Ottley, in particular, deprecated their publication feeling that such criticism would only strengthen Wilson's opposition. Late in December 1909 Ottley wrote to Haldane counselling caution and admonishing him for encouraging Douglas Haig's memorandum on the formation of a Naval War Staff :

I have read these articles and agree in the main with all that has been said : indeed I may say that in conversation with Thursfield I have made no secret of my own strong views on the question. But, as to the expediency of publishing these articles I am by no means so clear. I dread any appearance of a seeming desire to coup, criticise or coerce the Admiralty, or to put them in a corner, with a white sheet and a candle. The Board are still smarting under what they conceive to have been an undeserved criticism (in the last para : of the Beresford Enquiry Report). They are in a hyper-sensitive mood, and from something that I heard at the Admiralty a few days ago, I am afraid that they did not at all relish the 'Naval War College' paper prepared by a military officer, of which you now so kindly send me a copy.³³

Thursfield articles did all the damage which Ottley had forecast and more so. Wilson seized the opportunity to write a memorandum in defence of his stand against the establishment of a war staff and, at the same time, made use of the occasion to advance his plans for a Naval offensive while denigrating the Continental Strategy :

It is certain that if a British force is landed on French soil to assist the French Army, it cannot be withdrawn without great damage to our pride and national honour, and the tendency will be to make increasing sacrifices in men and material to support it.

Hence if a force is once landed on French soil the Navy can expect to get very little, if any, support from the Army in carrying out its main objective, and joint action of any kind against the enemy will become impossible. The Navy will also have the responsibility of preventing raids, and the panics arising therefrom thrown on it in an increasing degree.

During the progress of a war many places on the coast may acquire an importance quite unforeseen in peace, and will require additional protection.

33 - Ottley to Haldane, 11 Dec. 1909. Haldane MSS, MS 5908.

Places where destroyers may find it convenient to anchor while waiting for orders, open ports which it is found advisable to turn into temporary bases, anchorages where merchant ships have taken temporary refuge in consequence of reports, true or false, that an enemy's cruiser is at large, may all require protection. These and many other causes will create demands for troops on the coasts which it is probable there would be great difficulty in meeting with practically the whole Regular army out of the country.³⁴

Here Wilson stated for the first time an argument which was very shortly to become fundamental to the Admiralty's inherent objections to the Continental Strategy. Hitherto the Navy had always opposed the view that the fleet alone could not ensure the defence of the British Isles and that it required to be augmented by the provision of an army for Home Defence. The Admiralty had long regarded this argument as the first step towards conscription which in due course, it was feared, would lead to the adoption of a Continental style mass army for use overseas. The 1907-1908 Invasion Sub-Committee Enquiry, as has been seen, had successfully skirted this issue in recommending the retention at home of two divisions of the B.E.F. during the early stages of a war. This decision had pleased neither party particularly; however, it had established, on the one hand, the principle that Home Defence was at least in part the responsibility of the War Office, and, on the other, that coercion was not considered as a suitable means of providing an effective military force for the protection of the British Isles against invasion. Wilson was now insisting that the Navy was not capable of meeting the requirements of Home Defence unless the entire Expeditionary Force be retained at home to be used, as soon as the situation had clarified, for combined operations at the Admiralty's discretion. It is of note, however, that Wilson, in the preface of the second edition of Ian Hamilton's short book refuting the arguments of Roberts and the National Service League, had stated that coastal destroyer flotillas could easily deal with any invasion force even if the battle fleet were absent. Interestingly enough he suggested that the

34 - Cited : Bradford, Wilson, pp. 235 - 236.

submarine boat, which had originally been designed for coastal defence, might not be equal to the task.³⁵ However, Wilson was willing to admit that possibly the submarine did have some contribution to make to coastal defence ; Sir George Clarke recalls Wilson observing to him some time in 1910 :

. . . even supposing that by some extraordinary chance the transports were able to reach our coasts, their presence must be known when they arrive there, and long before half the troops can be landed the transports would be sunk by submarines and destroyers which are stationed along the coast for that purpose.³⁶

Regardless, Wilson's statement was a neat reversal of policy ; a reversal which the War Office, in the person of the 'other Wilson', was shortly to imitate in maintaining that Fisher's old insistence upon the ability of the Navy to safeguard the British Isles from invasion unassisted was indeed correct, and that therefore the entire Expeditionary Force, all six infantry divisions, must be immediately despatched to the Continent upon mobilisation.

Having said all of this, Wilson then proceeded to outline his plans for amphibious operations based upon the principle of a close blockade designed to harass the enemy by land and eventually to draw his battle fleet into a decisive engagement at sea. Having demanded the Expeditionary Force be retained to meet the needs of Home Defence, and having in any case dismissed the Continental Strategy as logistically unfeasible, Wilson expanded upon his plans for amphibious operations :

The alternative to this scheme the Continental Strategy is joint action by the Army and the Navy with the one main object in view, the destruction of the enemy's fleet, both Naval and Mercantile.

Schemes of this nature were considered and discarded on the ground that no relief could be given the Armies of France by any threat by the British Army to make a descent on the coast of

35 - See : Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, Vol. I, p. 351.

36 - Cited : Sydenham of Coombe, Baron (George C.), My Working Life, (London, 1927), p.183.

Germany, since the latter power has ample troops both for watching its own coasts and for an attack on France, and those detailed to the former service would not in any case be used for active operations.

This statement requires consideration. The principal coast fortifications are manned by the Naval Artillery, and these would, no doubt, be kept fully manned. Other fortifications, such as Borkum, Sylt, and the land forts round Wilhelmshaven, Swinemunde, Dantzic, etc., would be manned by Fort Artillerymen, but the numbers allotted to this is not known.

Our information as to the numbers of the field army that would be really kept on a war footing on the coast is very uncertain. There is a vast difference between an army that can be mobilized if required, and one that is actually kept on a war footing and complete in every detail. It is certain that enemy industry will be suffering from want of men, and it is not likely that they will keep more men mobilised on the coast than appears necessary for safety. It would be interesting to know how many men of the 9th Army Corps, for example, which is believed to be allotted to the North Coast, are either employed or in some way connected with the great ship-building firms, and the effect of their absence on these industries.

If our Army is once committed to action with the French they will know that they have nothing to fear, and the Coast Army can be used, either as Reserves for the Main Army or return to their occupation as required. To keep these men mobilised would of itself be a blow to the resources of Germany.

If the Army decides to act with the Navy, one division embarked in transports, and acting with the Navy, would keep the whole Coast Army, whatever its strength, on the move, and compel them to keep it fully supplied with transport and stores, and above all with skilled officers who they would very much prefer to employ with the main army.

Wilhelmshaven, Bremerhaven, Cuxhaven, and the Kiel Canal can all be threatened by a military force, acting in conjunction with the Navy in a way that could not be ignored by the enemy, since if not defended by a really efficient and mobile field army in addition to their garrisons, any of them could be captured, and even if no actual success is gained, the mere fact of keeping this field army in motion must tend to exhaust their resources.³⁷

Interestingly enough Wilson did not at this time submit these proposals and arguments to the Defence Committee for consideration. Quite apart from his more general boycott of the

37 - Cited : Bradford, Wilson, pp. 237 - 238.

C.I.D., no doubt Wilson was not unaware of the manner in which they were likely to be received. This memorandum was, however, to reappear, as a C.I.D. Paper, in August 1911 supposedly 'in response' to a plea from the Directorate of Military Operations for the firm adoption of the Continental Strategy.³⁸ Sir Arthur was to receive a rather rude awakening.

Neither time, nor the elementary necessity of first destroying the enemy's fleet if close in-shore operations, let alone blockade were to be undertaken, deterred Wilson. As late as August 1914 Wilson was advocating the close blockade of the north German coast; writing to his former Chief of Staff, Admiral Sir Edward Bradford, shortly after the outbreak of war, Wilson revealed his continuing faith in the efficacy of close blockade from both the military and naval viewpoint :

Mines and submarine attacks are the main risks to be feared. The risks of the former depend on the success of the minesweepers in sweeping a channel for the fleet to go in by, and the latter, though a very real danger, can be reduced by a screen of destroyers looking out for periscopes with instructions to ram directly they see them, and the ships could have their nets out as soon as they reach their stations for bombardment.³⁹

It might well be added that these remarks had been prompted by Churchill's proposals for a close blockade of the Heligoland Bight in order to cover the passage of the Expeditionary Force to France. The First Lord had a penchant for making political hay out of technical issues which he seldom understood. Fortunately Wilson and 'Winston' were blocked by the weight of senior professional opinion both at the Admiralty and throughout the fleet - flag officers who owed their present positions to Fisher and 'Fisherism'. As a case in point, Jellicoe, writing to Admiral Sir Frederick Hamilton,

38 - 'The Military Aspects of the Continental Problem', Remarks by the Admiralty on Proposal (B) of the Memorandum by the General Staff (130-B), 2, Whitehall Gardens, 21 Aug. 1911. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 4/3/2/131B.

39 - Wilson to Bradford, 19 Aug. 1914. Bradford, Wilson, p. 240.

noted in May 1915:

Sir A.K. Wilson made the most ludicrous proposals early in the war and we all doubted his sanity. I despair when I think of the uses to which the Grand Fleet may be put . . . I know that Sir A.K.W. is no match at all for a politician, even were his own views sound. The least appeal placed on the scare of duty will cause him to agree to anything. He never asserted himself as 1st S.L. even with McKenna. He certainly won't with W.C. He will never consult with the other S.L.'s. All this I knew from 2 years with him on the Board. I am really in despair, and I know quite well that every flag officer will be the same, Bradford more than anyone. Sir A.K. was never a strategist - a brilliant handler of fleets but nothing more. We all used to pray that war would never come while he commanded the Channel Fleet.⁴⁰

Fortunately for the Navy and the nation Wilson declined to serve at the Admiralty under anyone but Churchill.⁴¹ 'Winston' had, however, departed.

Happily for England Wilson's strategic thought and planning was to be discredited and rejected in the course of the 'reformation' at the Admiralty which followed upon the 114th meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence in August 1911. Wilson's dated outlook on strategic questions was, however, largely instrumental in precipitating the semi-official adoption of the Continental Strategy by the Defence Committee. The First Sea Lord's strategic thought was so plainly ill-suited and without reference to technical capability that the C.I.D. was no longer able to play the 'militarists' off against the 'navalists'; Wilson was an isolated figure and his views were accepted neither within the Service or in the defence establishment as a whole. And yet strangely Wilson remained a highly respected naval advisor retaining considerable influence at the Admiralty until his retirement a month or so before the Armistice. But for his personal disinclination Wilson, viewed always as a man of integrity, would have succeeded Fisher as First Sea Lord following the crisis of May 1915. Asquith, who was never one to

40 - Jellicoe to Hamilton, 19 May 1915. Cited : Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, Vol. II, p. 282.

41 - Fisher to Jellicoe, 21 May 1915. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. III, p. 244.

become unduly concerned with defence matters, had by this juncture of the war lost much of this self confidence and will power ; writing to Mr. Balfour, the new First Lord, late in May 1915 Asquith noted :

Fisher deserted his post, without leave or warning, at a time when the stress of war, and the appearance of the German War Fleet in the North Sea, made it his imperative duty to remain at his duties : at any rate until a successor was duly appointed. Strictly speaking he ought to be shot : in any case it is a crime which ought not to be condoned, and still less to be rewarded.

The suggestion that Sir A. Wilson should become 1st Sea Lord, with Jackson as an additional Lord, to be his [aide] and possible successor, seems to me to be not a bad one.⁴²

Prior to his appointment the Earl of Selborne, one of the finest First Lords in recent history and an old friend, had written to Balfour urging :

I am firmly convinced that you cannot improve upon Fisher for First Sea Lord.

Wilson I am sure would fail there-disastrously. You cannot take Jellicoe away from the Grand Fleet. The only possible men that I can see on the list are Lambton and Jackson, very different men but each with qualities. But neither up to Fisher.⁴³

Again in a second letter of the same date Selborne urged Balfour to disregard Fisher's outburst in the form of the famous ultimatum to Asquith in which, among other things, Lord Fisher had demanded effective equality with Kitchener and a pledge that Balfour would not be made First Lord ; nevertheless Selborne was not shaken in his faith writing :

I have just heard that Fisher made an ass of himself this morning and wrote a quite indefensible letter to Asquith and that Asquith practically sacked him there and then.

What unimaginable folly of Fisher ! . . . I feel so sure that Fisher is the best available that I am very anxious he should not become barred. Wilson would be really disastrous.⁴⁴

42 - Asquith to Balfour, May 1915. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49692.

43 - Selborne to Balfour, 19 May 1915. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49708.

44 - Selborne to Balfour, 19 May 1915. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49708, folio 28.

The following day Selborne wrote once again in his efforts to ensure Wilson's exclusion from the Board :

Wilson is a very bad administrator. I never did a better day's work in my life than when I removed him from the Admiralty where he was an utter failure, and a mischievous failure too, to command at sea where he was really great.

That I know - -

This I do not know, but I have heard it from so many senior naval officers since the war began, including Fisher himself, that I cannot help believing there is truth in it.

They all say that he is a dangerous adviser now, that having always been obstinate in his old age he refuses to recognise how much matters have changed in the last ten years, that nothing will induce him to admit that the submarine is a grave danger to all ships of war, and that he has been constantly urging that Jellicoe should be ordered to attack the forts of Heligoland with the Grand Fleet, which seems to me stark staring madness.⁴⁵

In reply Balfour, whose appointment was still in the air, noted :

I am sorry you take so low a view of Wilson. I am afraid from all I hear that he is a poor administrator. Do you think he would be a poor adviser on what is, after all, the most important matter during the war, namely naval strategy ? I have heard very alarming accounts of his wild advice when we were on the verge of war with Germany in 1911.⁴⁶

Wilson, however, refused to serve under anyone other than Churchill - perhaps he felt his schemes had at least some chance with 'Winston' and he no doubt recalled the sympathy which the First Lord had evinced for his ideas a few months earlier - and so the crisis died away. But both Selborne's and Balfour's observations were interesting in terms of the overall impact of Wilson's days at the Admiralty, before the war, upon the Service and those closely connected with it. Wilson's conduct at the Admiralty laid the way open for the final consolidation of the Continental Strategy and the subordination of the Navy to the dictates of the military planners. The stolid weakness of Wilson was to be followed by the strength and vigour of Churchill. Under Winston Churchill, though

45 - Selborne to Balfour, 20 May 1915. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49708.

46 - Balfour to Selborne, 20 May 1915. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49708.

eventually in spite of him, the principles of an offensive strategy founded upon sea power were to receive their death knell.

During these early months of Sir Arthur Wilson's regime of reaction at the Admiralty the War Office had remained relatively somnolent and inactive. Haldane himself during the early part of 1910 had been deeply immersed in the Constitutional Crisis and, following upon the accession of George V which had placed the House of Lords problem in abeyance, he had had to face a concentrated onslaught from the National Service League directed against the Territorial Force - still an extremely tenuous body. Thus the Secretary of State for War had no time to consider the broader questions of national defence policy and supreme command which had been so pressing a few months earlier. Sir William Nicholson and Sir John Ewart, as has already been seen, were not altogether enthused with strategic questions and in the midst of the attack on the Territorials had little incentive either to move forward with the Continental Strategy or to precipitate a crisis with the Admiralty over the issue of a co-ordinated national defence policy. As has been seen, the Admiralty's boycott of the Committee of Imperial Defence had resulted in the elimination of all discussion of controversial issues - especially those involving the higher organization of defence planning. There was, in fact, an uncanny aura of inaction and stagnation in view of the events of a few months earlier which, it had seemed, were bound to precipitate the crisis in the defence establishment that alone could impose some semblance of order and unity of purpose upon the Services.

However, while Haldane was no doubt too busy to take serious action on the broader questions of national defence, he clearly maintained a proper perspective on events, giving considerable thought to the future. Writing to Viscount Esher in the spring of 1910 Haldane had noted :

I have arranged with French and Nicholson this morning about making K. [Kitchener] Inspector Gen. of the Overseas Forces. French quite agrees. I have also got some way about Wilson for D.M.O. ⁴⁷

47 - Haldane to Esher, 18 Apr. 1910. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

Haldane regarded Major-General Henry Wilson as an outstanding officer and a true representative of the 'new army'. In Henry Wilson both Haldane and Esher had found a soldier deeply committed to the Continental Strategy and very much alive to the menace posed by Germany to the peace of all Europe. His appointment to the Staff College had proved an unqualified success and a sound vindication for the support both of Haldane and Esher which had been forthcoming when Lyttleton had sought to block his appointment. Wilson's visits to France and his newly cemented friendship with the French General Staff through Foch were no doubt factors of considerable importance in his appointment. To assume that Haldane had pressed for Wilson, as Director of Military Operations, in ignorance of his strong views on the necessity of giving France direct military support in the event of a war with Germany, would be untenable. What was probably not known, indeed it could not have been known at the time, was that Wilson in due course was to cultivate a blind devotion to the cause of France. This devotion was to deepen the degree of England's commitment to France - but it was not responsible for turning the Entente into a military alliance. That had already been accomplished. The initiation, early in 1906, and continuation, under Wilson, of the Staff Conversations had most certainly tied the honour of England to France's international position. The depth of Wilson's personal involvement, his blindness to the folly of France's soldiers, and his refusal to assert British interests were without doubt most unfortunate and irresponsible actions on his part. It is possible that had Wilson been more objective, and had he insisted upon the full divulgence of French military planning that the whole policy of the Continental Strategy might have been reconsidered by the Cabinet. This was Wilson's mis-conduct; he did not commit England's honour to France, but he refused to take the opportunity of re-evaluating that commitment and possibly of rejecting it while the opportunity still existed. This Wilson did not do; and his inaction substantially intensified the degree of England's commitment to the preservation of the integrity of France.

However, this 'personal' side of Wilson's character could not have been known in the late summer of 1910. Wilson's anti-German attitude was common throughout both the Army and the Navy and was most certainly not cause for comment. Wully Robertson,

who succeeded Wilson at Camberley, has recalled this general flavour within the Army and noted that as Commandant he made it his business to instil the 'German fact' deeply into the minds of his charges.⁴⁸

Of course, Henry Wilson was a consummate politician. There can be no doubt that Wilson, as with so many of the 'new men', harboured a bitter jealousy of the Navy and its prominent place within the defence establishment. Apparently he had once valued the fleet at precisely five hundred soldiers.⁴⁹ Certainly Wilson was blinded by his professional self-centredness to the peculiar strategic needs of England as a great maritime Empire spread out across the entire globe. His uncompromising belief in the Continental Strategy, based upon France, centred around his appreciation of the essential features of the Schlieffen Plan; and yet, while disapproving of French strategic and tactical conceptions, he was careful never to press his views too forcefully. Wilson's devotion to France, his insistence upon the development of an independent military strategy as the only method of liberating the Army from the dominance of the Navy, led him to press for direct military involvement upon the Continent regardless of the circumstances or possible consequences. As far as the French General Staff was concerned the Metz-Epinal line was the most suitable front along which their absurd belief in the offensive at all costs could be best put to effect. The offensive as a strategy, or rather a 'non-strategy', based upon the will of the common soldier for victory, dictated in practice a preponderance of strength upon the right wing of the French armies. Wilson recognised this folly, but rather than demand a revision in strategic deployment as the price for British participation he preferred to look the other way. It has even been suggested that this weakness on the French left convinced Wilson of the vital importance

48 - Robertson, W.R., From Private to Field-Marshal, (London, 1921), p. 178.

49 - See : Tyler, J. E., The British Army and the Continent, 1904 - 1914, (London, 1938), p. 99.

of sending the B.E.F. to north-western France.⁵⁰ As far as the French were concerned the whole area from Maubeuge to Arras would lie far to the north of the main theatre of conflict in the event of war. In short they looked upon the B.E.F. as a tool solely of propanganda and diplomatic value, with the possibility of its use as a reserve army. It was indeed a token force commanding little 'military' attention or respect. Wilson behaved, and was therefore so treated, as an eager suppliant anxious to be given a role in the grand design for victory. Wilson's attitude arose from a combination of personal instability and professional ambition based upon a wholly 'military' appreciation of England's international position. But nevertheless the seed of Wilson's actions had been planted and nourished by his political chiefs following upon their underwriting of the Continental Strategy as initiated by the soldiers at the Whitehall Gardens' Conferences.

Henry Wilson took up his appointment as Director of Military Operations at the War Office early in August 1910. Some measure of his general outlook, and his positive, if a trifle alarming, attitude towards England's military needs, may be gleaned from this entry in his Diary concerning a visit to the British Embassy in Paris shortly after his appointment :

There is much that I will change here, and, I suppose, in the other Military Attachés. They appear to me to be dealing with details and peace, and not with war.⁵¹

Wilson had come to the War Office charged with developing the Continental Strategy in concert with the French General Staff. On arrival he soon discovered that no concrete arrangements existed for the mobilization and transport of the Expeditionary Force to France.

50 - See : Collier, I.B., Brasshat : A Biography of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, (London, 1961), p. 104.

51 - Diary, Autumn 1910. Wilson, H., Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson : His Life and Diaries, ed. Charles E. Callwell, (London, 1927), Vol. I, p. 86.

This he set out to remedy completing all but the arrangements for naval support prior to August 1911. This process together with Wilson's frequent visits to France and his long consultations with Huguet received the firm backing both of Haldane and Grey as the following extract from Wilson's diary of late January 1911 clearly indicates :

Haldane asked me to lunch at 28 Q.A. [Queen Anne's] Gate. No one else there I told him exactly what I thought of the state we were in, and I said it was disgraceful and could be and should be remedied at once. He said that Nick had already been to him about the railways and that he (Haldane) had seen Grey, and Grey agreed we could go to the railway companies. This is good On the Whole I was satisfied and feel I have done a good day's work. I don't think Haldane is told the truth by the Council and my impetuosity and determination to get something done, coupled with very plain speaking, carried the day. Nous verrons. This is only the beginning. ⁵²

Here, at the beginning, Wilson must be left to be returned to in discussing Agadir and afterwards.

Towards the close of 1910, in spite of the renewal of the Constitutional Crisis though perhaps because of it, both Esher and Haldane turned once again to consider the matter of supreme command. With the advent of Wilson at the War Office concern over the Admiralty's non-co-operation had intensified. Writing to Mr. Balfour in mid-August Esher had noted :

Still, in spite of all that has happened since 1904, Ministers and Sea Lords, etc., cannot get the idea out of their heads that you can fight a great war in water-tight compartments ⁵³

In October of 1910 Asquith in failing to persuade Haldane to accept the seals of the India Office was made aware of the Secretary of State's desire to go to the Admiralty in order to institute an operational planning division and generally to bring the Admiralty into co-operation with the rest of the Defence Establishment. ⁵⁴ It appears that Haldane was endeavouring to create a wholly unofficial quasi-Defence Ministry in seeking to get

52 - Diary, 11 Jan. 1911. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 92.

53 - Esher to Balfour, 16 Aug. 1910. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719 .

54 - Maurice, F.B., Haldane, (London, 1937), Vol. I, p. 276.

himself transferred to the Admiralty. However, faced with another election and the whole bitter debate over the Parliament Bill, the 'economist' attacks against McKenna, which had raised the possibility of a vacancy at the Admiralty, faded away and Haldane's opportunity had, for the moment, receded. Nevertheless, late in January 1911, at the 108th meeting, Haldane, with Esher's support, was able to inch his way forward succeeding in persuading the Committee of Imperial Defence to establish a Sub-committee for the 'co-ordination of departmental action on the outbreak of war'.⁵⁵ This was a far cry both from Haldane's Defence Ministry and Esher's proposed Sub-committee for inter-departmental co-operation. Contrary to Esher's hopes, Lord Hankey has recalled that the Sub-Committee was very seldom convened delegating much of its work to the Secretariat,⁵⁶ which in time was to produce the War Book. This new Sub-committee, like those which had preceded it, devoted its labours and energies to the multiferous trivia involved in the preparation for war. Its accomplishments, limited as they were, proved to be most useful when put into operation upon the outlook of war in August 1914. But, nevertheless, the Co-ordination Sub-Committee was itself a prime example of the manner in which the C.I.D. managed so often to deftly skirt the great unresolved questions of fundamental defence posture. Of course, Arthur Wilson refused his co-operation even here,⁵⁷ with the result that when the crisis of the late summer of 1911 finally precipitated decisive action with respect to those unresolved fundamental issues the Admiralty's position was exceptionally weak.

However, for the moment that final decision hung in the balance. With the passage of each day Arthur Wilson rendered the Admiralty's claim to sole responsibility for the formulation of all defensive-offensive strategic planning increasingly untenable.

55 - 'Minutes of 108th Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence', 26 Jan. 1911. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/2/2.

56 - Hankey, Baron (Maurice P.), The Supreme Command, 1914 - 1918, (London, 1920), Vol. I, p. 119.

57 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, pp. 120 - 121.

Henry Wilson's operational control at the War Office was, as he put it, 'breaking up' the indolent ways of Nicholson and Ewart and bringing closer the day when a final decision on basic national defence posture could no longer be postponed. Asquith more than ever was unable to act on these matters - even had he wanted to. It seems clear that Haldane had been pressing hard for a major overhaul of the Board of Admiralty; however, in view of the 'push' of the Unionists and the 'pull' of the 'economists' Asquith dared take no action lest such an internal crisis spread to his Cabinet which had already been seriously weakened in the country by the disappointing outcome of the two general elections of 1910. But events were moving very fast, the War Office was consolidating its position of strength while Arthur Wilson's administration at the Admiralty was increasingly courting opposition - not least from within the Navy itself. But nothing could, or would, move Asquith unless the consequences of inaction loomed heavier and blacker than the consequences of decision. Asquith did not move; however, events did. The tacit decision of the summer of 1909, submerged and blurred by the Constitutional Crisis and the renewed obstruction of the Admiralty, was to be endorsed and acted upon during the summer of Agadir. Once again a crisis in the affairs of Europe was to consolidate and clarify a trend in England's national defence policy which had been apparent for some years.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ACHIEVEMENT

In the years preceeding the war of 1914 - 1918 military opinion in England fell completely under the domination of French strategists and the amphibious form of warfare came under a cloud. The doctrine of 'concentration at the decisive point' was carried to the extreme. Not a single British soldier other than those needed in garrisons would ever serve elsewhere than in France Upon this rock of opposition to diversionary action by amphibian means the Dardanelles expedition was wrecked Every principle that had governed the old strategists in the use of the forces of the country and of the tacticians who employed them was reversed. Continental campaigns took the place of amphibion operations.

Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond ; 1941 .

THE sighting of the Imperial Ensign of the Reichsmarine off the sleepy little port of Agadir, just south of Cap Rhir on the Moroccan coast, early in July 1911 was, with the passage of time, both to cohere and consolidate those trends in England's foreign and defence policies which had been cast upon the streets of Tangier and forged in such unlikely places as the German Consulate at Casablanca. The Agadir Crisis, as it came to be known, offered a respite to Mr. Asquith's colleagues from the domestic stresses and strains in which they had been so deeply and so bitterly involved since the bringing down of the Budget in the spring of 1909. This new episode in North Africa was to bring on a crisis in Anglo-French relations, to gravely threaten the Entente seriously alarming Grey and his staff at the Foreign Office, to reaffirm, ultimately, the treaty of friendship

with France at the same time deepening and enlarging England's military and diplomatic commitment to the cause of that country, and, as an unexpected bonus, to forestall a threatened general railway strike. For Viscount Haldane, as he had now become, the crisis provided the long awaited opportunity to discredit the Board of Admiralty and the necessary leverage with which to demand more realistic practical measures to ensure some modicum of effective inter-Service co-operation and co-ordination. For Henry Wilson the crisis presented a turning point in the evolution of the Continental Strategy enabling him to intensify arrangements with the French General Staff and to persuade his political chiefs to secure some definite action on the Defence Committee with regard to basic defence policy.

Late in July 1911, on the eve of Lloyd George's celebrated speech at The Mansion House on the 21st, Wilson journeyed to Paris in order to conclude his arrangements with General Dubail, the Chief of the General Staff, for the concentration of the Expeditionary Force in northern France. In a joint memorandum of 20th July it was agreed, subject always to the sanction of the government of the day, that the entire B.E.F. was to be deployed in a line centred upon Cambrai running north to Arras and south to St. Quentin.¹ Such an arrangement would seem to have been in keeping with Wilson's concern over the possibilities of a major German incursion north of the Meuse.² However, in view of what Wilson was later to tell the C.I.D. this projected deployment of the B.E.F. deserves closer attention. Wilson's visit to Paris had been preceded only by a matter of hours by the dismissal of the French Commander-in-Chief designate, General Michel. Michel's strategic outlook had been wholly at variance with that of

1 - 'Memorandum of Meeting Held on July 20, 1911, Between General Dubail and General Wilson', War Office, 21 Aug. 1911. British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898 - 1914, ed. G.P. Gooch and H. Temperley (London, 1932), Vol. VII, No. 640.

2 - See : Collier, I.B., Brasshat : A Biography of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, (London, 1961), p. 116.

Dubail, Grandmaison and Foch. These latter, representing the cream of the fast rising 'offensive' school, had engineered Michel's dismissal in order to make way for the adoption of their strategic views on the role of the French Armies in the 'coming' war with Germany. Michel's plan of operations had been based upon his balanced appreciation of the strategy most likely to be adopted by his opposites in Germany. Michel, therefore, had planned to deploy the bulk of his forces, some 500,000 men, along a fifty mile front centred upon Valenciennes extending north to Lille on the extreme north-east frontier of France.³ In essence General Michel had planned to sit tight on this line awaiting, with his fresh troops, arrival of the German forces, exhausted, over-stretched and disorganised having marched across the breadth of Belgium. On the basis of such a plan the British concentration around Cambrai, roughly forty miles behind the front lines of the main French Armies, would have taken the form of an emergency reserve.⁴ Such an arrangement was in keeping both with Wilson's concern over possible German operations in Belgium and with the French view that the British presence was largely of moral value having a marginal, and indeed unreliable, military potential. However, with Michel's demise the strategic conceptions of the 'offensive' school came to the fore as expressed in the new Field Regulations issued in the spring of 1912 :

The teachings of the past have borne their fruit. The French Army, reviving its old traditions, no longer admits for the conduct of operations any other law than the offensive.⁵

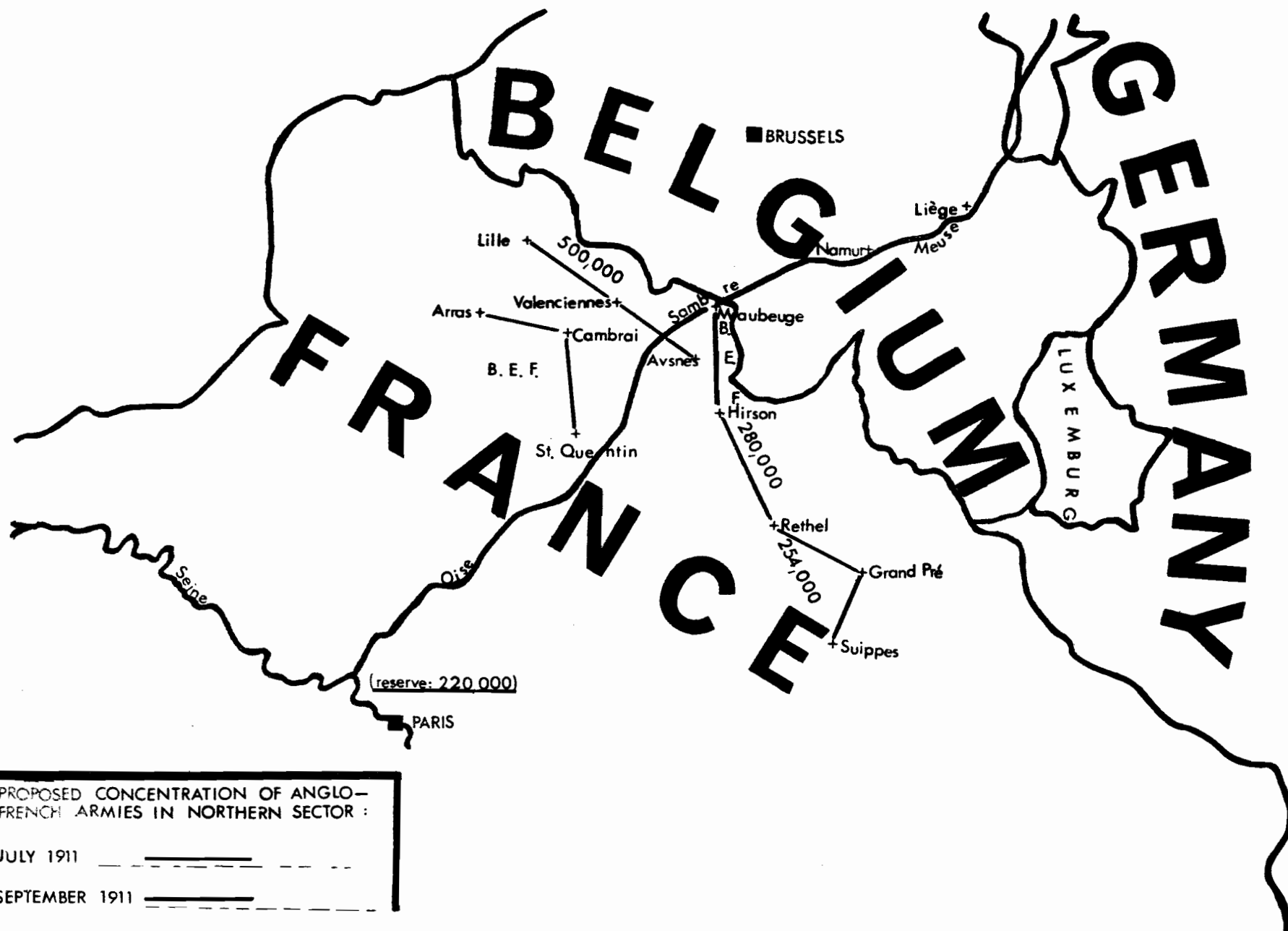
Or, as Sir Basil Liddell Hart was to put it somewhat more succinctly years later, 'the strategy of the bull had replaced that of the matador'.⁶

3 - Fuller, J.F.C., The Decisive Battles of the Western World, Vol. III, 'From the American Civil War to the End of the Second World War', (London, 1956), p. 189.

4 - See map, page 215 .

5 - Cited : Watt. R.M., Dare Call it Treason, (New York, 1963), p. 29.

6 - Liddell Hart, B.H., Foch : Man of Orleans, (London, 1931), p. 64.



It is not possible to categorically state that the agreement of 20th July was actually drawn up on the basis of Michel's strategic thought, although, as will shortly be seen, the evidence to support such a view, while not wholly conclusive, points very clearly to such a consideration including, as it does, not only Wilson's words on the matter but also the fact that the 'offensive' strategy had not yet been worked out in detail - though when this task was completed in the autumn of 1911 the concentration area of the B.E.F. was changed being moved further south and east.

However, it is certain that by 12th August Wilson had been made aware of the 'alterations' in the 'official' opinion in French military circles to the effect that it was now considered highly improbable that Germany would violate Belgian soil north of the Meuse.⁷ To return to the map, it is clear that the British concentration around Cambrai was not only very far to the west of the theatre of operations, as envisaged by the new 'offensive' school, but also, being north of the Oise-Sambre-Meuse line, was deployed more obviously for operations on or near the Belgian frontier NORTH of the river complex - clearly not in keeping with the views of the new French school. Furthermore, since it is clear that by 12th August Wilson knew that the French planners no longer considered operations north of the Meuse to be even likely, it is of note that neither in his Memorandum of the 12th, nor in his 'lecture' before the Defence Committee eleven days later, did the D.M.O. mention the precise area for the proposed concentration of the Expeditionary Force. However, perhaps of most significance was the fact that early in the autumn of Agadir, as the French Staff began to evolve the details of what was to become known as Plan XVII, the Expeditionary Force was re-assigned a concentration area closer to the frontier which was clearly intended for operations SOUTH of the Meuse being positioned below the Oise-Sambre-Meuse river complex. This new front stretched from

7 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', Memorandum by the General Staff, 12th and 13th August 1911. C.I.D. Papers, 15 Aug. 1911, Cab. 4/3/2/130B.

Maubeuge in the north to Hirson in the south.⁸ Such a position reflected the French Staff's opinion that the German movement would not only be confined to the south of the Meuse but would also be relatively light except in the extreme south of Belgium ; further, in view of the justified refusal of the French to rely on the presence of the Expeditionary Force, and their feelings that in any case it had little military potential, such a deployment on the extreme left flank essentially well to the north of the anticipated theatre of conflict was only to be expected. However, Wilson was not acquainted with the details of the new deployment until well after the meeting of 23rd August. Wilson received his first detailed briefing on these changes from Huguot early the following September ; in a diary entry of the 9th Wilson noted :

He told me where the French G.S. want us to go This is the first time I have been told.⁹

At the end of the month Wilson journeyed to Paris once again in order to receive a 'full briefing' from Joffre and his Chief of Staff, de Castelnau. In his diary entry for the day of the meeting Wilson observed that 'I never spent a more interesting morning', but added that 'some of their calculations are different to mine', namely, as he noted, the French view that no German operations were to be expected north of the Meuse.¹⁰

Wilson was clearly unsure of himself in handling various queries concerning possible operations north of the Meuse, which had been raised by some of 'those ignorant men' on the Defence Committee. It is clear that Wilson had, by this date, been made aware that with Michel's dismissal the French military did not consider operations in northern Belgium to be probable in the event of a German advance through that country. However, it is equally clear, not least from Wilson's own evidence, that the D.M.O. could not have been in a position to know the exact nature of the new concentration to be assigned to the B.E.F. under Plan XVII. This explains Wilson's confused statements in answering

8 - See : Tyler, J.E., The British Army and the Continent, 1904 - 1914, (London, 1938), pp. 123 - 124.

9 - Diary, 9 Sept. 1911. Wilson, H.H., The Life and Diaries of Sir Henry Wilson, ed. C.E. Callwell (London, 1927), Vol. I, p.103.

10 - Diary, 29 Sept. 1911. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 105.

questions concerning operations north of the Meuse which hitherto he had taken for granted, and his failure to volunteer information on the exact area of concentration for the Expeditionary Force. Continually stressing the opinion that the French did not consider operations north of Maubeuge where the Sambre cut across the Franco-Belgian Frontier Wilson, pressed on the matter of railway time-tables by the Home Secretary, did mention that the concentration would be in 'the neighbourhood of Maubeuge'.¹¹ Now this clearly was not in keeping with the terms of the 20th July agreement, and it is known that the French Staff did not work out the dispositions under Plan XVII in sufficient detail to reassign the concentration area for the B.E.F. until the autumn of 1911. Wilson's reference to Maubeuge was, therefore, clearly based upon his estimate of where the new French strategic directives were likely to base the B.E.F. It must be remembered that Maubeuge, situated as it was on the Sambre, was regarded as the terminal point of operations in the north just as Belfort was so regarded in the south. So Wilson simply used it loosely calculating that the Expeditionary Force would be concentrated under the new plans on the extreme left flank of the French Armies. It might be added that had Wilson known the details of the new concentration, which was in fact impossible, their divulgence on 23rd August could have served only to strengthen his case. Poor Wilson, faced with the C.I.D. session he had so long awaited, clearly was determined not to show a weak face at so crucial a meeting, and, therefore, he hastily improvised upon the details of the 20th July agreement in order both to bring his ideas and the true area of British concentration into line with the reorientation in French thinking. Above all Wilson was determined not to let the opportunity for the official adoption of the Continental Strategy by the Defence Committee as presented on 23rd August, to slip through his fingers. What emerges from these events is the fact that

11 - 'Committee of Imperial Defence : Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', 2, Whitehall Gardens, 11 Sept. 1911. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/2/2. p. 7.

Wilson, in order to achieve his wider aspirations, had not only been forced to sacrifice his views on possible movements to the north of the Meuse but also was to allow himself, in the course of the next few months, to be lulled by vague French promises of providing heavy military forces to cover possible German operations in southern Belgium. Writing to Grey late in August Sir Francis Bertie enclosed a report made by Colonel W.E. Fairholme, the British Military Attaché in Paris, on a meeting he had had with Joffre, who had replaced Michel, on the 24th - the day after the Defence Committee session. It is clear from Fairholme's report that the British concentration had not been fixed, indeed he writes of Joffre mentioning Douai as a possible concentration point! But even more significant were Fairholme's remarks to the effect that whereas Joffre had not yet made up his mind, or rather had it made up for him by de Castelnau and Grandmaison, about Belgium, he was convinced that the Germans had to invade Alsace-Lorraine in force for it was potently clear that if the French Armies won these provinces their populations would rise to support the French cause. Therefore, Joffre said, the main French effort would have to lie to the south. Fairholme, who clearly approved of the new French offensive spirit,¹² rounded off this report in noting, with a straight face, that Michel's projected manoeuvres in northern France had been cancelled owing to an outbreak of foot and mouth disease.¹³ As it turned out Plan XVII, of which it must be assumed for Wilson's sake that he knew very little, placed the northernmost French Army, Lanrezac's Fifth, far to the south of Maubeuge centred behind Verdun with headquarters at Reims on the Aisne. A recent biographer of Wilson has, in his defence, gone so far as to maintain that the Director of Military Operations was wholly misinformed by the French General Staff concerning the true emphasis which had been placed upon operations to the south of Verdun,¹⁴ where four of the five French Armies of August 1914 were to be massed, by Plan XVII.

12 - Bertie to Grey, 8 Sept. 1911; encl. Fairholme to Bertie 7 Sept. 1911.
British Documents, Vol. VII, No. 644.

13 - Bertie to Grey, 25 Aug. 1911; encl. Fairholme to Bertie, 24 Aug. 1911.
British Documents, Vol. VII, No. 641.

14 - Collier, Brasshat, pp. 116, 123 - 124.

This excursion into the alterations in the areas of concentration for the Expeditionary Force has been necessary in order to underline Wilson's lack of candour with himself during these crucial weeks, and the personal rather than professional nature of his dealings with the French. As will be seen two of England's most celebrated of amateur strategists were to differ with Wilson's views during the Defence Committee meeting of 23rd August - views over which Wilson himself clearly was of two minds, and views which at that time had been hastily improvised after the signature of the 20th July agreement in Paris. That agreement had been based upon a concentration at Cambrai and yet Wilson spoke vaguely on 23rd August of a railhead in 'the neighbourhood of Maubeuge'. Clearly the 20th July meeting must have been based on Michel's plans and the subsequent changes in the concentration of the Expeditionary Force - not completed until September 1911 - had been hastily improvised by Wilson in accordance with the reversal of French military opinion which had as yet been unable to supply him with the necessary revised details - hence the omission of any such information from the General Staff Memorandum of 12th - 13th August and Wilson's reticence on the matter before the Defence Committee ten days later. In short Wilson had signed the agreement of 20th July upon the basis of a strategic concept wholly at variance with the appreciation which he presented to the Defence Committee one month later. These events are to be kept in mind in considering the broader issue of the outcome of Agadir upon the development of a sound national defence policy based upon a viable organ of supreme command.

The international crisis had, by early August, assumed a most threatening aspect prompting Viscount Haldane to take the lead in ensuring a close liaison between those who shaped and directed the Entente policy and those who were responsible for giving that policy strategic reality and technical capability in the event of war. With this thought in mind Haldane organized a lunch to get these officials together for 9th August, the day before the Parliament Bill was to receive its third reading in the Lords. His guests on this occasion were Grey, Eyre Crowe and Henry Wilson. The absence of Sir William Nicholson was perhaps a commentary upon his rather passive attitude towards his duties as Chief of the Imperial General Staff. The truth of the matter was that the Directorate of Military Operations retained the initiative on all strategic questions, and

under Henry Wilson the Directorate had branched out into virtually every department in his quest to get action upon the implementation of the decisions arising out of the joint staff arrangements. Wilson, never one to be lured by Haldane's table - probably the best in London, recorded his rather poor impressions of the meal in his diary :

After a long and, I believe, ineffectual talk, the chief points I made were three : First, that we must join the French. Second, that we must mobilise the same day as the French. Third, that we must send all six divisions. These were agreed to, but with no great heartiness. Eyre Crowe advanced proposals to send the Territorials. No officers, no transport, no mobility, no compulsion to go, no discipline, obsolete guns, no horses, etc. ! Even Haldane said it wouldn't do. I was profoundly dissatisfied with the grasp of the situation possessed by Grey and Haldane.¹⁵

Nevertheless encouraged by the renewed interest in the Continental Strategy, and hopeful of the prospects of a decision being taken at last, Wilson got down to work, with Nicholson's approval and probably on Haldane's instigation, drafting a detailed memorandum for the Defence Committee on the efficacy of the Continental Strategy to which he appended an appendix, under his own signature, emphasising the absolute necessity of sending the Expeditionary Force to France if the French Armies were to prevail and underlining the utmost importance of getting it across the Channel and into the field without the slightest delay.¹⁶

It must be assumed that the part of this War Office Memorandum which appeared under Nicholson's signature was at least inspired, if not actually written, by Wilson. For the C.I.G.S. was, of course, dependent upon the Director of Military operation for his information and, in any case, the views expressed, for example on the question of the extent of the probable violation of Belgium, were so patently in keeping with the views of the French 'offensive' school that they could only have been transmitted by Wilson. It was common practice for the D.M.O. to draw up memoranda on strategic matters which

15 - Diary, 9 Aug. 1911. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 99.

16 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', 12th August 1911, Appendix, p. 5.

were to be issued under the signature of the C.I.G.S. Besides, in this case the views expressed in Wilson's appendix were generally reflected in the body of the Memorandum itself. As has already been seen, the C.I.G.S., due partly to the nature of his dual office and partly also to the actual weakness of the pre-War Chiefs of the General Staff, had not taken over the actual overall direction of military planning. In the course of a priceless memorandum of November 1911 Nicholson went to great lengths to point out that he had had absolutely nothing to do with the development of the Continental Strategy having left this matter entirely in the hands of the Directorate of Military Operations.¹⁷

The Wilson-Nicholson Memorandum of 12th - 13th August went to great pains to emphasise the current military belief that sea power and its exercise had absolutely no offensive value. Therefore, they argued, in view of the unfortunately limited size of England's military establishment - both Wilson and Nicholson were, of course, in favour of compulsory service - it was essential to aid France promptly before Germany could bring the decisive advantage of her weight of numbers to bear :

. . . it must be pointed out that, though England possesses a powerful navy, the military force that she has immediately available for continental intervention is comparatively small ; and as sea power exercises only an indirect influence on land operations on a large scale, England can only assist France to a very limited extent in promptly resisting a German invasion. Thus, for example, Trafalgar gave us unquestioned command of the sea, but that victory did not prevent Napoleon from pursuing his course of conquest in Central Europe, though it rendered England safe from invasion.¹⁸

The nature of these details are irrelevant here, though this blindness of Wilson towards the role of sea power in history has since prompted Sir Basil Liddell Hart to comment :

17 - 'War Office Memorandum on Action Taken since 1906', by General Sir William N. Nicholson, C.I.G.S., 6 Nov. 1911. British Documents, Vol. VII, No. 639.

18 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', Memorandum by the General Staff, 13 Aug. 1911, p. 1.

It is deplorable that the holder of the post in the War Office most directly concerned with strategic problems should have ignored the influence of sea-power and the part played by economic and political factors in the history of his country's wars.¹⁹

In his Appendix to the Memorandum Wilson, underlining the urgency of aiding France upon mobilization, observed :

The very marked superiority in German numbers cannot be brought into play at the commencement of the campaign, and it is this difficulty on the German side which enhances the value of our 6 divisions and cavalry division.²⁰

This theme constantly reasserted itself throughout the Paper concluding with Wilson's exhortation :

The date and hour of mobilization . . . rests with His Majesty's Government, but it is essential that the Secretary of State for War should be fully aware of the difference it will make to the course of the campaign whether we mobilize early or late. It is scarcely too much to say that the difference may be that of victory or defeat.²¹

Wilson's appreciation - based on French military opinion - of Russia's contribution during the crucial opening weeks of war was wholly negative. He underlined that the belief in Russia's inability to bring immediate pressure to bear in the east would serve only to intensify the strength of the German pressure upon France. In this connection Wilson noted :

It is probable that Russia would try and assist her ally France by active operations, and it is possible that she might cause Germany a certain amount of inconvenience by trying to overrun East Prussia with the masses of cavalry (about 450 squadrons) which she keeps in European Russia ; but Russia would not have a

19 - Liddell Hart, Foch, p. 62.

20 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', 12 Aug. 1911, Appendix, p. 5.

21 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', 12 Aug. 1911, Appendix, p. 5.

serious force in Poland until about the 28th or 30th day of mobilization, and then she could probably only put 40 mobile divisions in the field.²²

Towards the close of his remarks Wilson elaborated upon this theme somewhat more fully and emphatically :

The intervention of Russia does not materially affect the French position on the French and German frontier, at all events during the early days of the war. It is probable that Russia might increase her divisions by the 60th day of mobilization, by which time Germany might find it necessary to move troops from her western to her eastern frontier.²³

Wilson's appreciation was doubtless logical and reasonable ; however, as with so many other things Wilson was hidebound by the accepted French military appreciation of the matter. In fact these appreciations turned out to be wrong, for Rennenkampf's First Army Corps actually crossed into East Prussia on 17th August 1914 achieving almost immediately a victory over Mackensen's Army Corps. And, of course, rightly or wrongly, before the close of August Moltke had detached two army corps and a cavalry division from his Second and Third Armies on the extreme right wing of his forces in the west. The whys and wherefores of these actions by both the Russian and the German Staffs are of no concern here but merely underline Wilson's straight-jacketed mind which had become so subservient to the pronouncements of his French colleagues that it never occurred to him that even if they were correct the unexpected, the ability of friend and foe to transgress the 'rules', had always to be considered, to be carefully weighed in any strategic calculation.

In calling for the immediate dispatch of all six infantry divisions, rather than the four decided upon by the C.I.D. in the summer of 1909 as the result of the 1907 - 1908

22 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', 12 Aug. 1911, Appendix, p. 5.

23 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', 12 Aug. 1911, Appendix, p. 6.

Invasion Sub-Committee Enquiry, this Memorandum sounded an altogether new note reflecting the recent agreement between Dubail and Wilson. It is interesting that, in discussing possible additional military aid, Nicholson had noted :

. . . should the struggle be prolonged, and should His Majesty's Government be prepared to employ native troops in Europe, I see no reason why 2 or 3 divisions, with perhaps 1 or 2 cavalry brigades, should not be spared from India as a reinforcement to the French Army.²⁴

Here, in talking of reinforcing the French Army rather than the Expeditionary Force, Nicholson once again revealed that the insistence of the General Staff upon an 'independent' British military participation was little more than a sop to the politicians. Further references to the possibility of a protracted conflict occurred throughout the Memorandum including at least a hint at war time conscription in the preamble where Nicholson had spoken of 'the military force . . . immediately available for continental intervention' as being 'comparatively small'. Either way, whether the war was to be short or long and drawn-out, the soldiers covered themselves, excusing their failure to veto the Continental Strategy on the grounds of technical incapability. In fact early in September 1911 Wilson recorded a meeting with Lloyd George in his diary, noting :

I asked him if he would give us conscription, and he said that, although he was entirely in favour of a ballot, yet he dare not say so until war broke out, which I told him was too late.²⁵

Too late or not, it was a glaring commentary on Wilson's double standard of thinking.

Lastly, in discussing this Memorandum, it is necessary to examine Wilson's detailed appreciation of the mobilization timetable as contained in his Appendix. Underlining what has already been said, Wilson noted :

France . . . can place 34 divisions at or near the line Belfort on the right to Maubeuge on the left on the 9th day of mobilization.²⁶

24 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', Memorandum by the General Staff, 13 Aug. 1911, p. 2.

25 - Diary, 11 Sept. 1911. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 103.

26 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', 12 Aug. 1911, Appendix, p. 4.

Belfort - Maubeuge had clearly superseded the Lille-Avesnes, Hirson-Rethel and Montmédy-Belfort lines as arranged in descending order of importance by General Michel. Throughout his Paper Wilson refers constantly to the 'frontier from Belfort to Maubeuge'. In discussing the possibility of German operations north of the Meuse, north of the terminal point of the French line at Maubeuge, Wilson revealed something of his former fears and betrayed the source of his subsequent efforts to persuade the Belgians to actively oppose the German invader in the north so as to discourage him from any thoughts of crossing the Liege-Namur line :

The Belgians, who might tolerate the passage of German troops through their territory south of the Meuse, would in all probability fight the Germans if the latter crossed to the left bank and moved on Brussels. Moreover, to advance à cheval of the River Meuse is a somewhat risky operation, and the fort of Huy and the fortress of Namur add considerably to the difficulties.²⁷

Wilson, as has already been seen, offered no information as regards the British concentration for, as yet, the Director of Military Operations did not know the details of the new dispositions. Finally, coming down to earth and back to the problems of administrative chaos Nicholson concluded the substance of the Memorandum with a plea for Admiralty co-operation, noting :

As regards the naval aspect of the problem, what we ask from a military point of view is that it shall be possible safely to transport troops and supplies across the Channel . . . and that the Navy will protect the United Kingdom from organized invasion from the sea. If that cannot be done the scheme falls to the ground.²⁸

This General Staff Memorandum was submitted to the Secretariat in Whitehall Gardens on 15th August. Haldane's interest was apparent for in his diary entry for that day Wilson noted :

27 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', 12 Aug. 1911, Appendix, p. 5.

28 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', Memorandum by the General Staff, 13 Aug. 1911, p. 2.

Haldane sent for me early this morning. I found Nick in the room. Haldane said he had had a useful dinner last night of Asquith, McKenna, Grey and Churchill. He had told these ignorant men something of war, with the result that Asquith arranged for a small special meeting of the C.I.D. for to-morrow week. Haldane and Nick came down to my room and I showed them my map. This was a revelation. Later on, Winston Churchill also came over to my room, and Haldane came a second time also Nick and Ottley. Winston had put in a ridiculous and fantastic paper on a war on the French and German frontier, which I was able to demolish. I believe he is in close touch with Kitchener and French, neither of whom knows anything at all about the subject. Still, some good was done this day.²⁹

Churchill's 'ridiculous paper' had been completed two days earlier on the 13th, seemingly on the basis of the General Staff and Admiralty Papers here under discussion. The Home Secretary, no doubt blushing over his sudden interest in the affairs of the 'Ministry for Slaughter' was careful to note from the outset :

The following notes have been written on the assumption that the issue set forth at (a) on p. x of the Report of the Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. on the Military Needs of the Empire, 1909, has been considered by the Government, and that a decision has been arrived at to employ a British military force on the continent of Europe. It does not prejudice that decision in any way.³⁰

In itself this opening remark constituted almost an explicit criticism of Wilson and his attitude towards the Continental Strategy as outlined in the General Staff Memorandum. Wilson's reaction to Churchill's Paper was understandable in that it assumed the French would not be so foolish as to throw away their advantages in communication and supply by adopting the offensive.

The French have therefore, at the beginning of the war, no option but to remain on the defensive, both upon their own fortress line and behind the Belgian frontier; and the choice of the day when

29 - Diary, 15 Aug. 1911. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 99.

30 - 'Military Aspects of the Continental Problem', Memorandum by Mr. Churchill, 13 Aug. 1911. C.I.D. Papers, 4/3/2/132B.

the first main collision will commence rests with the Germans, who must be credited with the wisdom of choosing the best possible day, and cannot be forced into decisive action against their will, except by some reckless and unjustifiable move on the part of the French.³¹

Churchill had then proceeded to forecast that French military weakness would become evident in the face of the German advance and that therefore

The balance of probability is that by the twentieth day the French armies will have been driven from the line of the Meuse and will be falling back on Paris and the south. All plans based upon the opposite assumption ask too much of fortune.³²

Therefore, Churchill proposed, the only sound method of defeating the German Army was by attrition and exhaustion as its lines were lengthened until by the fortieth day its forces would be so extended that the opportunity to counter-attack should then be seized and at that moment the entire Expeditionary Force together with 130,000 Indian Army and Territorial Force troops should be thrown against the Germans in helping the French to turn the tide. The needs of Home Defence, he argued, could be met by conscripting a force of half a million men which if necessary could be sent overseas with Parliament's permission. This, he wrote, was a far more sensible line of action than that proposed by the General Staff which he envisaged as dispatching England's military resources to be 'frittered into action piecemeal'. The Home Secretary concluded this altogether damning survey of Wilson's plans in observing with respect to his own proposals that 'no lesser steps would seem adequate to the scale of events'. In view of the close similarity between Churchill's appreciation and Michel's plans, their vehement rejection by Wilson illustrated once again his barometric reaction to the changes of French military opinion.

The Admiralty's formal response to the General Staff Memorandum was lodged with the Secretariat of the Defence Committee on 21st August ;³³ this Paper had, as has already

31 - 'Military Aspects of the Continental Problem', Memorandum by Mr. Churchill, 13 Aug. 1911, p. 2.

32 - 'Military Aspects of the Continental Problem', Memorandum by Mr. Churchill, 13 Aug. 1911, p. 2.

33 - 'The Military Aspect of the Continental Problem', Remarks by the Admiralty on Proposal (B) of the Memorandum by the General Staff (130-B), 2, Whitehall Gardens, 21 Aug. 1911. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 4/3/2/131B.

been noted, been in existence ever since the early attacks upon Sir Arthur Wilson's Board dating from early in 1910.³⁴ Indeed, Churchill had had the benefit of its use in drawing up his Memorandum of 13th August.³⁵ Needless to say the Admiralty took an extremely frosty view of the General Staff plans ; in merely submitting an old Admiralty Paper, which made no attempt to cope with the War Office's queries concerning transportation for the Expeditionary Force and Home Defence, the First Sea Lord openly betrayed his disinclination to discuss such matters either with the War Office or the Defence Committee.

And so from the magnificence of Haldane's excellent table and outstanding cellar, and in the face of a further serious threat to the continued peace and prosperity the country, the Committee of Imperial Defence was summoned into an extraordinary secret session at the offices of the Secretariat in Whitehall Gardens on the morning of 23rd August 1911. This session marked the 114th meeting of the Committee and Asquith's sixteenth in the chair since becoming Prime Minister - comment enough upon his true concern over defence issues. Just a few days earlier the Commons had, on rising, passed an Official Secrets Bill through its second and third readings without debate owing to the grave nature of the international situation. Lloyd George, a sudden convert whose Radical hackles had apparently been raised by the highhandedness of Kiderlen-Wachter, had managed only on the day before to bring the management and union representatives together thus averting the threatened national railway strike.

Before discussing the proceedings of this somewhat overrated 114th session of the Defence Committee it is necessary first to examine Asquith's invitation list. The Prime Minister, ever mindful of the deep divisions within his Cabinet, and Viscount Haldane, aware of the necessity of revealing the details of Anglo-French military planning at this meeting if any decision or even tacit recommendation in favour of the Continental Strategy

34 - See above : pp. 197 - 201.

35 - See : 'Military Aspects of the Continental Problem', Memorandum by Mr. Churchill, 13 Aug. 1911.

was to be adopted, were both meticulously careful to strike off the names of the Pacifist and Little Englander members who regularly attended. These, namely Viscount Morley, Mr. Louis Harcourt and the Earl of Crewe, were therefore not invited to this secret session, and neither was Viscount Esher who had, by this juncture, begun to publically express his doubts concerning the wisdom of a military commitment within Europe and whose influence at court was still considerable. However Hankey, painting his idyllic picture of defence by committee, has maintained that the absence of these four 'regular' members of the Defence Committee was no doubt due to their being away from London taking advantage of the unusually warm summer weather.

On calling the 114th meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence to order on the morning of 23rd August in the old first floor room at 2, Whitehall Gardens, which Disraeli is said to have used for Cabinets, Asquith found at the table with him a very select group of ministers and professional advisers : Lloyd George, Grey, Churchill, McKenna, Sir Arthur Wilson, Rear-Admiral the Hon. Alexander E. Bethell - D.N.I., Haldane, Nicholson, Henry Wilson, General Sir John French - Inspector-General of the Forces, and Ottley as Secretary ; Major-General Sir Archibald Murray - Director of Military Training, 'also attended'.³⁶ The presence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer was essential to any such discussion ; however, Lloyd George's attendance was doubly significant in view of his recent pose in the classic cast of the outraged self-righteous Radical invoking the memory of the best (or worst) of England's liberal tradition in foreign policy. On the other hand, Churchill's presence does deserve somewhat closer attention - especially in view of subsequent events. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the character which underlay and shaped this remarkable man - a character second only in contemporary to England perhaps to the colour of Jacky Fisher - yet it was Churchill's character and emotion which held the key to his change of heart. More will be said of Churchill in due course, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that following

36 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 1.

upon Fisher's removal from the Admiralty Haldane's correspondence had become quite intimate with his colleague at the Home Office. In fact writing to Edward Goulding, afterwards 1st Baron Wargrave and one of Fisher's major cohorts in the Commons, early in 1910, the old Admiral had obliquely referred to the unholy alliance between the 'economists' and Haldane in the latter's quest to gain control of the Admiralty and establish some form of a Defence Ministry :

Don't mention this, but McKenna himself has told me last Sunday that Lloyd George, Winston, and Haldane (the new Trinity) are bent on kicking him out³⁷

However, more immediately, Churchill's hackles had been raised by the Agadir Crisis, and as he has recorded :

I now began to make an intensive study of the military position in Europe. I read everything with which I was supplied. I spent many hours in argument and discussion. The Secretary of State for War told his officers to tell me everything I wanted to know.³⁸

In fact it now seems clear that Haldane had picked out his precocious colleague, already 'well known' in military circles for his impetuous fracas with Lord Kitchener, as the most suitable member of Asquith's altogether unsuitable Cabinet to succeed him at the War Office on his own translation to the Admiralty replacing McKenna. As early as August 1910 Viscount Esher, writing to Mr. Balfour, had, in humourously noting Haldane's tactics in passing unscathed across the Exchequer, observed :

Haldane came over on Sunday for the day from Cloan. He has been staying with L. George, and they went together to the Welsh Manoeuvres.

By 'this device' old Haldane seems to have got out of him all the money he wants for next year.

Haldane talks of leaving the W.O. should the Government survive the next session, and going to the Local Government

37 - Fisher to Goulding, 15 Jan. 1910. Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Fear God and Dread Nought : The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. II, p. 285.

38 - Churchill, W.S., The World Crisis, (New York, 1923), Vol. I, pp. 49 - 50.

Board to deal with the 'poor law'.

He thinks that Winston would be his successor at the W.O. and Burns go to the Home Office.

But he seems very doubtful as to whether the fort will be able to stand either the shock of a settlement by the Conference, or that of its breakdown.

Then his fear is that George Wyndham, or whoever you send to the War Office may begin tinkering with the organization of the Army.

I told him I felt sure there was no fear of that, and that you would concentrate all 'Defence Schemes' in your own hands, and that your First Lord of the Admiralty and Secretary of State for War would be instruments of your policy and not its masters.

That this was the true [purpose] of the Committee of Imperial Defence, i.e. that the Prime Minister should be the 'Minister of Defence' for only he can co-ordinate all the departments concerned in the immense business of providing for the defence of the Empire.³⁹

Doubtless Haldane failed to disclose his aspirations with respect to the Admiralty knowing Esher's suspicions concerning his desires to expand his personal power over the defence establishment. Regardless, Haldane soon pushed the Local Government Board to the back of his mind, turning down also an offer of the India Office informing Asquith at the time of his desire to go to the Admiralty.

The Prime Minister commenced the proceedings of the 114th meeting with a brief restatement of the findings of the 1908 - 1909 Sub-Committee Enquiry on the 'Military Needs of the Empire' informing his listeners that

. . . he had called the Committee together as the European situation was not altogether clear, and it was possible that it might become necessary for the question of giving armed support to the French to be considered.⁴⁰

Referring to the General Staff Memorandum, discussed above, Asquith noted that the important points which now differed from the situation in July 1909 were

. . . that we should mobilise and dispatch the whole of our available regular army of six divisions and a cavalry division immediately upon the outbreak of war, mobilising upon the same

39 - Esher to Balfour, 16 Aug. 1910. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

40 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 1.

day as the French and the Germans. It was further suggested that additional reinforcements, consisting of two or three divisions of British and native troops might be drawn from India, and possibly the seventh division from the Mediterranean and South Africa.

Lastly the General Staff asked from the Admiralty an assurance that the Expeditionary Force could be safely transported across the Channel and from the other directions indicated in their paper, and that the Navy will protect the United Kingdom from organised invasion from the sea.

As regards these last two points, the Admiralty Memorandum . . . did not give a categorical reply.⁴¹

This latter point was, of course, the crux of the matter and explained the real purpose of the meeting - to decide the basis of national defence policy in its broadest aspect, and not, as Sir William Nicholson later claimed, merely to reexamine the earlier Defence Committee decision that two divisions of the Expeditionary Force were to be retained for Home Defence during the early months of a war. Though, admittedly, in view of Wilson's committal - it was nothing less - of all six divisions at his secret meeting with Dubail of 20th July, this was itself an important matter. Nevertheless, in the course of his Memorandum of early November 1911 Nicholson was to note with a perfectly straight face :

In April last, when the recurrence of tension between France and Germany seemed not improbable, the possibility of at once dispatching six instead of four Divisions besides the Cavalry Division came under consideration, and revised tables for the larger force with accelerated dates of mobilisation were worked out It was recognised by the General Staff that the alternative scheme would have to be referred to the Committee of Imperial Defence for consideration and it was submitted to the Committee of Imperial Defence on 23rd August last, the Prime Minister presiding and Sir Edward Grey, Mr. Lloyd George, Lord Haldane, Mr. McKenna, Mr. Winston Churchill and the First Sea Lord being present with other members. At the meeting doubt was expressed

41 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 2.

by some of those present as to the prudence of adopting the alternative scheme, more particularly in connection with our requirements of home defence, but no conclusion was arrived at.⁴²

True, no decision was arrived at - but then this discussion consumed only a fraction of the session, at which much else more was discussed than Nicholson would have one to believe.

Asquith's somewhat cryptic comment upon the failure of the Admiralty to respond either to the General Staff's request for transport and naval protection on the Channel crossing, or to the requested guarantee that the Navy would assume the responsibility for Home Defence, had underlined the nonchalance and, indeed, the disdain with which Sir Arthur Wilson had treated this whole affair - so perfectly illustrated by his submission of an old Admiralty Paper. However, Sir Arthur was certainly by no means evasive in his response to Asquith's verbal comments, noting :

. . . the reply of the Admiralty to the first question was that the Navy could spare no men, no officers, and no ships to assist the Army. The whole force at the disposal of the Admiralty would be absorbed in keeping the enemy within the North Sea. Ordinarily the Navy would furnish transport officers and protecting ships. These could not be furnished in these circumstances. The Channel would, however, be covered by the main operations, and provided the French protected the transports within their own harbours, the Admiralty could give the required guarantee as to the safety of the expedition.⁴³

However, on Nicholson's response that the protection thus afforded was sufficient assuming, of course, 'the ungrudging assistance' of the Transport Department of the Admiralty, McKenna interrupted with the terse observation that such an arrangement was all very well but that

42 - 'War Office Memorandum on Action Taken since 1906', by General Sir William N. Nicholson, C.I.G.S., 6 Nov. 1911. British Documents, Vol. VII, No. 639.

43 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p.2.

. . . that assistance could not be given during the first week of war. The whole efforts of the Admiralty would be absorbed in mobilising the Navy, and the Transport Department especially would be fully occupied in taking up Fleet Auxiliaries.⁴⁴

Nicholson retorted suggesting that if the Admiralty would study the events of the Russo-Japanese War they would observe that the Japanese had surrendered the whole matter of transport at sea to the military authorities, who had carried through these operations 'without difficulty'. Bethell supported McKenna on the time issue whereupon the First Lord apparently quite casually informed the assembled company that 'he heard of this scheme now for the first time'. So Nicholson then proceeded to point out for McKenna's erudition that

. . . in accordance with the conclusion arrived at by the Sub-Committee as set out in paragraph 20 (b) of their report dated the 24th July, 1909 (C.I.D. Paper 109-B), the General Staff had worked at the details of the scheme with the Departments of the Admiralty concerned. The Director of Naval Intelligence had laid down that to ensure the safety of the transports their courses must lie west of a line drawn from Dungeness to Cap Gris Nez. The sea transport of the force had been worked out with the Director of Transports in detail day by day.⁴⁵

Whereupon the First Sea Lord joined the First Lord in observing that

. . . the scheme had not been brought to his notice. He had understood that a scheme for dispatching the expeditionary force had been mooted, but that it had been abandoned.⁴⁶

It is, perhaps, understandable that Sir Arthur Wilson would not have been informed of these developments by his subordinates whom, in any case, he treated with a lordly disdain - as has already been mentioned with reference to Jellicoe who had served upon Wilson's Board until the previous December as Third Sea Lord and Controller. No less remarkable was the state of relations between Wilson and McKenna who remained a

44 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 2.

45 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 2.

46 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 3.

confirmed 'Fisherite' in every respect.⁴⁷ This inconsistency and confusion was in fact a microcosm of the appalling state of affairs throughout the defence establishment, of the right hand not knowing what the left was doing - or undoing - which had so concerned Balfour, Esher and Haldane.

Bringing his colleagues back to the point under discussion Asquith observed that as long ago as the 1908 - 1909 Sub Committee the War Office had laid singular stress upon the time element and that he was 'surprised', in view of the short duration of the Channel crossing and the fact that France would be a friendly shore, 'that the Admiralty were not prepared to guarantee the safety of the transports'. In response to this criticism from the Prime Minister McKenna retreated informing the Committee that

. . . the First Sea Lord would examine into the questions raised⁴⁸
He regretted that there should have been any misunderstanding.

Lord Hankey has fairly accurately refought this opening skirmish of the 23rd August session recalling in his memoirs :

. . . a deplorable impression was created in the minds of the
Prime Minister and those of his colleagues who were not immediate
parties to the controversy.⁴⁹

Clearly then the first round in Haldane's bid to gain Asquith's support and backing for his proposed transfer to the Admiralty had gone in the Secretary of State for War's favour directly to the detriment of Sir Arthur Wilson, McKenna and the entire system - let alone the strategic thought - currently prevailing at Admiralty House.

Passing over the problem of invasion the Prime Minister proceeded directly 'to ask the Committee to consider the desirability of carrying out the operations proposed by the General Staff' calling upon the Director of Military Operations to take the floor.

47 - See : Marder, A.J., From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, Vol. I, 'The Road to War, 1904 - 1914', (London, 1961), p. 213.

48 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 3.

49 - Hankey, Baron (Maurice P.), The Supreme Command, (London, 1961), Vol. I, p. 70.

Henry Wilson's delivery was, as both Hankey and Churchill have recalled, both forceful and striking leading Haldane to write to the General shortly after the meeting telling him :

You did admirably to-day. Lucid and real grip, your exposition made a real impression.⁵⁰

Wilson's lecture before the C.I.D., differing little as it did from his General Staff Memorandum of a few days earlier, requires little additional comment. Churchill's account erred upon the side of generosity in recalling that the D.M.O. offered no opinion as to whether or not the Germans might possibly violate Belgium north of the Meuse, being content merely to admit that this was an imponderable, or, as Churchill put it, it was 'the only part of the German plan which could not be foreseen'.⁵¹

However, in fact replying to the Home Secretary's query concerning possible German movements north of the Meuse Wilson had actually stated :

. . . to do this the Germans must either infringe the neutrality of Holland or take Liège. This fortress was strong, but normally its garrison was very weak - 700 to 1,000 men - which was quite inadequate to defend it. It was possible, therefore, that the Germans might take it by a coup de main. But they could not hope to capture Huy or Namur or Antwerp in the same way. That portion of their force advancing along the left bank, that is north, of the Meuse would accordingly have to guard its right against the fortress of Antwerp, and if it had entered Belgium through Dutch territory without having captured Liège, it would have to mask that fortress, while in its further advance it would be separated from its main body by the fort of Huy, the fortress of Namur and by the River Meuse. This would be dangerous. Moreover, although the Belgians would possibly be content to protest against the violation of their southern provinces, they would most certainly fight if the Germans were to invade northern Belgium as well. The Belgian field army would number 80,000 men.

On the whole front the broad result was that although the Germans could deploy 84 divisions against the French 66 and the

50 - Haldane to Wilson, 23 Aug. 1911. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 100.

51 - Churchill, The World Crisis, Vol. I, p. 54 .

garrisons of their frontier fortresses, the Germans could not concentrate their superior force against any one point. Our 6 divisions would therefore be a material factor in the decision. Their material value, however, was far less than their moral value, which was perhaps as great as an addition of more than double their number of French troops to the French Army would be. This view was shared by the French General Staff.⁵²

Obviously Wilson was now leaning towards the revised French appreciation of which, as yet, he had not managed to convince himself, any more than he had been able to reconcile himself to the strategic views of the 'offensive' school. In response to Churchill's unrelenting pressure on this matter of operations to the north of the Meuse Wilson stated even more emphatically that

. . . the march through Northern Belgium was a dangerous operation, and would require so many men to mask the Belgian Army and the Belgian fortresses that if the figures were carefully examined, it would be found that in present circumstances no advantage and a good deal of risk would accrue to the Germans by taking this course.⁵³

However, at this juncture Sir John French put his oar in, noting :

. . . he had always understood that the object which the German General Staff had in view when they decided to fortify Metz, was to enable them to send larger forces through Belgium to turn the French left. The war garrison of Metz was 70,000, and there were 51,000 men there in peace. Any French advance would now have to be made between Metz and Strasburg, and would no longer be worth while attempting.⁵⁴

Such heretical deviation from what had so recently been enthroned as orthodox French military thought contained the germ of Sir John French's subsequent efforts to return to the Belgian military orientation which had now been so long abandoned. These remarks would also explain why Wilson had suspected that Churchill was being 'primed' by French,

52 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 5.

53 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', pp. 5 - 6.

54 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 6.

who 'knows nothing about the subject' .⁵⁵

Regardless, both Churchill and McKenna expressed their approval of French's commentary upon Wilson's appreciation, and the Home Secretary pressed home his own views, discussed above, counselling retreat so as to draw the enemy out and exhaust him. On questioning Wilson more closely on the matter of German operations north of the Meuse Viscount Haldane was informed that

. . . the country between Lille and Maubeuge was similar to the country round Birmingham. It was also worth noticing that there was not a single good road - there were roads - in the difficult piece of country between Givet and Mézières, so that troops moving north of this district would be separated from those moving south of it.⁵⁶

Lloyd George, who supported Wilson's strong reservations concerning operations north of the Meuse, now turned the discussion to the Director of Military Operations' appreciation of the sequence of events that would ensue in the event of the French being driven back and forced to withdraw. Wilson, somewhat nonplussed at being questioned on plans for a French retreat which was in itself unthinkable, struggled in his reply, noting :

. . . it depended upon so many unknown factors that it was very difficult to prophesy what course the French might take, and he had no knowledge of what the views of the French General Staff on the subject were. One thing he thought was fairly certain, and that was that the French Field Army would not retire towards Paris, but would base itself upon the richer southern provinces, leaving Paris to be defended by its own garrison of 250,000 men. As to the Germans, they would not invest Paris till they had disposed of the French Field Army. The garrison of Paris was immobile. The other French fortresses were only intended to break up the German advance. When the French Field Army was destroyed, the rest must follow, and France would be conquered.⁵⁷

55 - Diary, 15 Aug. 1911. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 99.

56 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 6.

57 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', pp. 6 - 7 .

The First Sea Lord thereupon interjected observing that in such an eventuality his fears of logistical dislocation were certain to be realised. Nicholson dissented stating that he anticipated no 'serious difficulty' and that the plans had been drawn up in the greatest detail.

Asquith, an accomplished committee chairman adroit at keeping tempers from flaring up, swiftly moved his colleagues on to a consideration of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the French and German Armies. Henry Wilson, wholly in character, remarked that 'he would prefer to command a French Army rather than a German one'. Sir John French thereupon observed that the French lacked the confidence of the German soldiers and were without a single national rallying point such as provided by the person of the Kaiser. Considering developments in French military circles since the Dreyfus affair French's comment was not without some considerable cogency. Haldane added, as was only to be expected, that in his experience 'the German Army was a perfect machine'.

However, not to be fobbed off by Asquith, Churchill reverted to his questioning on the matter of the role of the Expeditionary Force in the event of the French Armies being forced to retreat ; interestingly, Churchill continued to phrase all of his remarks on the assumption of a German advance to the north of Maubeuge. Wilson, who had clearly not even considered the matter of retreat, said that he thought that perhaps the B.E.F. in that event might return to its initial supply base at Amiens. This brought the trend of the discussion back to the problem of Belgian violation north of the Meuse, leading McKenna to note :

. . . he did not think the Germans would hesitate to infringe Dutch neutrality as well as Belgian, if respect for it was inconvenient to their military operations.⁵⁸

However, commenting upon Henry Wilson's rebuttal, Grey informed his colleagues :

58 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 8.

. . . a threat to blockade Antwerp in the event of the Belgians allowing the Germans to infringe their neutrality unopposed might influence them to resist.⁵⁹

Sir Arthur Wilson expressed his agreement with the views of the Foreign Secretary ; however, before further comment was forthcoming Churchill, ever persistent, had returned to the matter of the proposed line of retreat for the Anglo-French forces in the event of severe German pressure, and, more especially, what did the General Staff envisage as the probable movements of the Expeditionary Force in such circumstances. Again Wilson's reply revealed the total lack of thought given to the question of retreat, indeed to the whole question of an alternative strategy even in this limited sphere ; he merely noted :

. . . the unknown factors were so numerous that a certain reply could not be given. But we ought, undoubtedly, to retain touch with the French left.⁶⁰

French disagreed, very properly insisting upon the importance of ensuring that the left flank of the Expeditionary Force be kept in constant touch with the Navy at all events. Churchill, in expressing his agreement with French's views and his rejection of those of Wilson, drew the pointed repartee from Nicholson 'that similar operations had often fallen to our lot before - for instance, under Marlborough' . This was really striking rather low ; however, mention of Marlborough probably led McKenna to play devil's advocate in stating that 'In his view if a British force were sent at all, it should be placed under French Command', and therefore any discussion of what line of action the Expeditionary Force was to adopt in retreat was really quite immaterial. Churchill 'disserted emphatically', feeling :

In his view, in the circumstances contemplated, our proper course would be to withdraw west of Paris, where we should count for more than we should in the south.⁶¹

59 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 8.

60 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 8.

61 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 8.

Henry Wilson, no doubt despairing of this most amateurish of the amateurs, disagreed with the Home Secretary, saying that the Germans 'could hardly fail' to surround so small a force. McKenna, hoping no doubt to exploit this disagreement to the advantage of the Admiralty, expressed his agreement with General Wilson's viewpoint rejecting Churchill's assertion that the B.E.F. could retreat to the sea. Lloyd George, a curious bedfellow for the General, as has been seen, supported the D.M.O. rejecting French's admonition that it was better to risk being cut off from the French left than to jeopardise the Expeditionary Force's communications with the sea, adding that in any case 'war could not be waged without risks'. Of course, Lloyd George seized upon this typically careless remark and echoing his struggles with the soldiers of later years pointed out that there were risks and there were risks. Nicholson threw in his weight at this juncture noting :

. . . it was hardly possible to contemplate that immediately upon a retreat taking place, we should sever our connection with the French. We would be obliged to conform generally to the French movements.⁶²

Whereupon French attempted to smooth the ruffled feathers on all sides observing :

. . . he did not understand why it should be assumed that a gap between our Army, retiring along its own communications, and the French Army must inevitably occur. The French line of retreat might well lie more to the west than we had so far assumed.⁶³

This entire discussion was, in short, an exercise in the inane - no one knew what the French General Staff proposed to do in such an 'unlikely' event. However, not to be put off, Lloyd George noted 'that the point was, what course we were to pursue if the French did retreat southwards'. Wilson, realising the dangerous waters into which the discussion had devolved, finally admitted that 'he did not pretend to know what the

62 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 9.

63 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 9.

intention of the French General Staff might be' ; whereupon Churchill essentially suggested that it was his business as D.M.O. to know these things and 'suggested that it might be desirable to discuss the question with the French General Staff'. However, McKenna suggested that such action might have undesirable repercussions, and Grey, doubtless envisaging a threat to his 'military entente' quickly came to McKenna's support and sought to turn the discussion away from this somewhat delicate matter, which if pressed too far could possibly have led to an over-extension and reaction against the Entente policy :

In any case, he thought that the first matter to settle was whether proposed action in the first phase of the campaign was practicable, and whether it was likely to achieve valuable results. He enquired when the first general action was calculated to take place.⁶⁴

McKenna queried as to whether it was a matter of the French not being willing to fight without the support of the Expeditionary Force. Again, no doubt seeing another dangerous line of argument opening up, Grey cut in noting :

. . . we must postulate that the French intended to fight. The point was whether our intervention would make the difference between defeat and victory.⁶⁵

Needless to say this raised an extremely touchy and contentious point leading Asquith to cut off the discussion observing :

. . . the point which the Cabinet would have to decide was what we were going to do if we resolved to commit ourselves to the support [of] the French against German attack.⁶⁶

Taking up the Prime Minister's cue Haldane suggested that 'the Committee were now acquainted with the probable effect of our military intervention'. However, Lloyd George was not content to leave matters at that point and, disregarding Asquith and Haldane,

64 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 9.

65 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 9.

66 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 9.

he questioned General Wilson querying his appreciation of the probable shape and nature of Russian assistance. After some lengthy discussion along these lines Lloyd George raised the possibilities of transporting Russian troops to France. On being informed by the First Sea Lord of the impossibility of the Baltic passage, the Home Secretary suggested that the Dardanelles route might offer a viable alternative. However, Asquith interjected that in his view 'the passage of the Dardanelles was an insuperable difficulty'. Grey supported the Prime Minister noting 'the Turks were in close relations with the Germans, and we certainly could not force the Dardanelles in these circumstances'. On this rather dismal and prophetic note, Asquith adjourned the Committee for lunch, having managed to guide the proceedings along without undue friction deftly keeping the discussion away from the broader and more contentious questions of underlying policy. Lord Hankey has recalled this morning's session noting :

. . . there was no doubt that Henry Wilson had made a profound impression, which I am the more ready to admit because he had entirely failed to carry conviction in my mind.⁶⁷

On reassembling for the afternoon session Haldane questioned Sir Arthur Wilson on the crucial question as to whether or not the Admiralty was prepared to undertake the safe transport of the Expeditionary Force to France within the time anticipated by the General Staff. Probable to Haldane's surprise and no doubt to his chagrin the Admiral amicably observed

. . . that he had not enquired into the matter, but he thought that the Admiralty could carry out this service without serious difficulty.⁶⁸

Asquith then called upon the First Sea Lord stating that 'the Committee would now like to hear the views of the Admiralty'. Wilson's exposition constituted in effect a simple restatement of the old 1910 Admiralty Memorandum, to which he added a brief preamble

67 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, p. 80.

68 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 10.

stating that whereas the Navy could provide a firm guarantee against invasion no such promise could be made with respect to raids, taking into account the consequent public concern which would tie the Navy to the east coast in the event of the absence of all regular troops from the country. Having dealt with the General Staff proposals in this summary fashion, Wilson proceeded to open his statement with the observation that

The policy of the Admiralty on the outbreak of war with Germany would be to blockade the whole of the German North Sea Coast. The important portions of this were the estuaries of the Elbe, Weser and Jade.⁶⁹

So saying, the First Sea Lord then proceeded to detail his views on the type of operations envisaged by the Admiralty but revealed no actual war plans. Having completed his statement of close blockade Wilson then outlined his plans for a floating armada comprising at least a portion of the troops of the Expeditionary Force, which was to be paraded up and down the North Sea Coast, landing occasionally to threaten and possibly to seize various German strong points, including the Kiel Canal and Wilhelmshaven. The C.I.G.S. at once launched into the First Sea Lord reminding his colleague of the tremendous danger posed to troop transports from torpedo attack citing Sir Arthur's own Appendix in Ian Hamilton's recent book attacking the National Service League in which, as has been seen, Wilson had discounted the credibility of an invasion of England owing to the efficacy of surface and undersea torpedo defence. However, Wilson brushed his cogent remark aside in stating that the circumstances of his plans were not the same as 'we should have command of the sea'. Changing his tack somewhat, and with French's support, Nicholson observed that the efficiency of the German railway system would render any troop investment of a point on the coast untenable. However, while agreeing with their point concerning German troop movements Wilson asserted that the guns of the battle fleet would support and sustain forces which had been thrown ashore. Churchill,

69 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 11 .

seizing upon his assertion, expressed his dissent noting :

. . . that would appear to involve keeping the Fleet very close to the shore and would expose the ships to the fire of shore guns and torpedo attack.⁷⁰

And, from the military point of view, Nicholson cuttingly remarked :

The truth was that this class of operation, possibly had some value a century ago, when land communications were indifferent, but now, when they were excellent, they were doomed to failure. Wherever we threatened to land the Germans could concentrate superior force. None of these places, so far as he could understand, had any essential importance for the naval operations. As to the fire of the guns of the Fleet, he thought its effect was overrated. It was difficult enough for field artillery, who were trained and armed for the purpose, to give support to other troops just where and when it was useful, the ships would find it hard to discriminate, even between friend and foe.⁷¹

Drawing the First Sea Lord out still further, on what was apparently already an occasion when tempers had flared, Churchill observed :

. . . if the troops landed were dependent upon the guns of the Fleet, the Fleet would be tied to those troops.⁷²

In response Churchill drew the damning reply from Wilson that

. . . the ships would in any case be tied to the coast by the necessity for blockading it.⁷³

Nicholson again referred his colleagues to the Admiralty statement pointing out that large numbers of men were required for amphibious siege operations as evidenced by the Japanese experience at Port Arthur ; French added that a prolonged period at sea would have adverse effects upon the condition of the transport horses ! It is interesting that whereas Fisher's Baltic project had depended entirely upon a prior decisive action at sea between the two battle fleets, Wilson now openly stated that all subsequent

70 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 12.

71 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', pp. 12 - 13 .

72 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 13.

73 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 13.

operations, including 'a successful Fleet action', were subject to 'these operations in the North Sea'. As Nicholson had suggested Wilson was indeed somewhat dated in his thinking. Haldane said that such operations on the North Sea coast would neither hinder the Germans nor help us. Churchill questioned the advisability of employing the battle fleet in 'these narrow waters' and expressed his doubt in the wisdom of Wilson's plans to seize Heligoland describing them at best as involving 'a very difficult and costly operation'. Realising that the entire discussion of amphibious operations was wholly at variance with the General Staff opinion Nicholson interrupted asking :

. . . if the Admiralty would continue to press that view even if the General Staff expressed their considered opinion that the military operations in which it was proposed to employ this division [of the B.E.F., as requested by A.K. Wilson] were madness.⁷⁴

Whereupon Grey tactfully threw his support to Nicholson while endeavouring to conceal his anxiety and concern over the threat posed by the Admiralty proposals to the preservation of the Entente policy.

. . . the problem which they had to solve was how to employ the Army so as to inflict the greatest possible amount of damage upon the Germans. So far as he could judge, the combined operations outlined were not essential to naval success, and the struggle on land would be the decisive one.⁷⁵

This statement revealed how deeply Grey was committed to the 'military entente', for he refused now even to allow that military operations could be successful in any but the main theatre of conflict. With the First Sea Lord clearly on the defensive, Churchill pressed home the advantage asking :

74 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 13.

75 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 14.

. . . whether the very close blockade outlined and the landing of troops, with the consequent risking of ships in narrow waters and against forts was essential to our strategy.⁷⁶

In reply Wilson defended his strategic policy stating :

. . . all the experience of recent manoeuvres showed that close blockade was necessary. Any other policy would require a greatly increased number of destroyers. The safety of our Fleet depended upon preventing the German destroyers from getting out. He would add that the intention of the Admiralty to order this close blockade was one which it was absolutely essential to keep secret. It was not even known to the Fleet. The occupation of the places he had indicated would enable our destroyers to lie near to the shore.⁷⁷

It might just be added that in 1914 German plans for breaking down the strength of the Royal Navy were based upon intelligence of this so-called secret, whose tenets had, fortunately, passed out of fashion at the Admiralty by that time. The discussion then wound its way through various other detailed military criticisms of Admiral Wilson's proposals ; however, Churchill was soon pressing the blockade issue once again leading the First Sea Lord, in explaining the necessity of close observation so as to keep enemy vessels at anchor, to state :

. . . if destroyers knew the position of a Fleet accurately they were almost certain to meet with success at night. If a destroyer got within 3,000 yards of a battle-ship at night it could sink it.⁷⁸

To which Nicholson shot back :

. . . the creeks and islands all along this coast were so numerous that it seemed to him that nothing short of the occupation of the whole coast line by our troops would be of much service.⁷⁹

Besides, the corollary to Wilson's argument was that enemy torpedo craft could easily dispatch a fleet engaged in close blockade.

76 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 14.

77 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 14.

78 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 14.

79 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 14.

Keeping the Committee to the business of the day, Asquith asked the First Sea Lord to state the Admiralty's objections to the proposals presented earlier by the D.M.O. on behalf of the General Staff. Summing up his earlier statements, Wilson observed :

. . . the Admiralty felt confident that troops would be required to second the efforts of the Navy, and also he did not know whether the number of troops which would remain in the United Kingdom after the departure of the 6 divisions was sufficient to insure that raids would be immediately overwhelmed. Moreover, in addition to the points already to be held on the east coast, others such as Great Yarmouth, Blyth, and Grimsby might be found to require military protection when war broke out.⁸⁰

McKenna, heartily supporting his chief adviser, expanded upon his previous criticism of the General Staff timetables noting :

. . . the absence of the British Army from this country would, undoubtedly, have a great moral effect upon the English people, and there would be a great danger of interference with the freedom of action of the Fleet. There was no real danger of invasion, but many well known officers and others had declared repeatedly throughout the country that we were not safe from invasion and there was, therefore, considerable risk of panic on the outbreak of war. That would result in great pressure being brought to bear upon the Government to tie the Fleet to the defence of our coast. The moral effect upon the English people would be so serious as to be disastrous. In addition the strain upon the Admiralty of having to provide the sea transport required by the Army immediately upon the outbreak of war would, assuredly, hamper the initial operations of the Navy.⁸¹

Noting that the invasion issue had once again been raised, Asquith cogently remarked that it was not a question to be bickered over, but, rather, was to be considered in terms of 'whether they were to depart from the conclusion come to in 1908'. Haldane, apparently unwilling to involve himself in the controversy, merely stated the size of the non-regular force available for Home Defence expressing no opinion as to whether or not the two

80 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 15.

81 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 15.

infantry divisions of the Expeditionary Force should be retained at home during the early months of a war. French, on the other hand, without hesitation stressed his disagreement with the conclusion reached in 1908, noting :

. . . the Territorial Force had made considerable progress in efficiency since 1908, and he considered that they would be able to deal with any attack which the Admiralty considered probable, certainly within a month of their embodiment.⁸²

McKenna, aware of the increasing tenuousness of the Admiralty's position, seized upon French's concluding qualification and called up the arguments of the National Service League to bolster his cause, commenting

. . . that eminent Army officers expressed publicly a contrary opinion, moreover they were now discussing the proposal to denude the country of regular troops in the first week of war.⁸³

Lloyd George again threw his weight behind the Generals, while Haldane made use of the opportunity to hawk the Territorials without actually committing himself either way on the matter of the retention of the two infantry divisions for Home Defence, in fact replying to McKenna he stated that 'he had no wish to withdraw' from his earlier opposition to any downward revision of the hitherto accepted opinion that an enemy might be able to land as many as 70,000 troops 'upon these shores'. Churchill, adopting the Admiralty argument that invasion was not possible, 'enquired why the Admiralty thought that there was so much danger from raids in view of the very close blockade which it was prepared to maintain'. Commenting on Wilson's reply that there was a danger that the High Seas Fleet might manage to effect a temporary break out, Churchill noted that such a development was, he thought, 'exactly what our Navy most desired'. At this point Sir Archibald Murray joined the Committee and in response to Haldane's questioning he stated that the Territorial Force was quite up to dealing with the raids envisaged by the First Sea Lord. However, Sir Arthur objected feeling that the Director of Military

82 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 15.

83 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 15.

Training was taking too sanguine a view of the state of preparedness of the Territorials, while McKenna reiterated that

. . . if the assumption that our military plans for Home Defence must be based upon the possibility of invasion by an enemy not exceeding in strength 70,000 still held good, it would surely be most unwise to give the people of this country such cause for alarm that the measurements of the Fleet would be paralysed.⁸⁴

On further questioning McKenna stated that such a development might prevent a movement of the Fleet to the Channel via the Irish Sea should the Admiralty deem such a step necessary. It would seem that the First Lord and First Sea Lord were in the unfortunate position of having to contrive a case upon the spur of the moment. Haldane, refuting these arguments, referred once again to the Appendix by the First Sea Lord in Sir Ian Hamilton's recent book. But again McKenna dissented arguing that the quotations Haldane had read to the Committee did not cover the matter of raids as against concerted invasion. Nicholson seized upon the excerpts read by Haldane to point out that the First Sea Lord's views on the impossibility of the invasion of England

. . . constituted an adequate criticism of the Admiralty's proposals to land troops upon the German North Sea coast. While there was far greater certainty of our troops being overwhelmed by superior force should they succeed in effecting a landing.⁸⁵

Asquith, perhaps in an effort to avert the looming threat of an open clash between the First Sea Lord and the C.I.G.S., turned the discussion away from the direct context of Home Defence back towards the Continent asking General Wilson what 'the least force' was 'with which we could hope to intervene on the Continent effectively'. Wilson replied

. . . that the view of the General Staff was that our whole available strength should be concentrated at the decisive point, and that point they believed to be on the French frontier. The

84 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 16.

85 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 17.

moral effect of sending 5 divisions would no doubt be almost as great as the dispatch of six.⁸⁶

Again, there was no mention of the actual areas of concentration for the Expeditionary Force. Nicholson added 'that from the military point of view it would be better to send 4 divisions than none'. However, French and Murray - perhaps alarmed by Nicholson's somewhat passionate remark - did not voice their agreement but instead continued to press for the immediate dispatch of the entire B.E.F. on the outbreak of war. Forced into this corner McKenna openly and bluntly disagreed both with the soldiers and his Cabinet colleagues on the Committee, objecting

. . . most strongly to the denudation of the country of all regular troops in the early days.⁸⁷

Now, for the first time, Haldane took a firm and explicit stand upon this issue noting

. . . that in his view, if we had nothing to fear but small raids, the risk of denuding the country of regular troops could be taken.⁸⁸

Coming as it did, at the very end of this important meeting, Haldane's statement would seem to lend support to the view that he had 'staged' this decisive session in order to discredit the Admiralty in the eyes of his Cabinet colleagues.

There was no more to be said on the matter, with Haldane's remark both sides had shot their bolts and very clearly they were fundamentally at odds with one another. To all intents and purposes Haldane's statement brought the meeting to a close ; no more was said on the invasion question as Asquith at once turned the discussion towards a consideration of the problems likely to be encountered in transporting Indian and Colonial troops to the European theatre. The First Sea Lord noted that transport via Suez was out of the question owing - significantly enough - to his desire to bring 'the Mediterranean Fleet

86 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 17.

87 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 17.

88 - 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911', p. 17.

to home waters'. Nicholson expressed his strongest disapproval of such a policy noting that a voyage via the Cape would entail a 'consequent loss of condition . . . upon horses and mules'. 'But', Admiral Wilson added, the C.I.G.S. was overlooking the fact that regardless even the Cape route 'would involve the withdrawal of a great many ships from the trade routes' so as to provide the necessary transport and protection. No doubt realising that this discussion was serving only to further exacerbate matters, and that even here there was no common ground for agreement, Asquith wisely decided to call a halt and adjourned the meeting.

Lord Hankey has recalled, and the minutes of the meeting confirm, that no decision was arrived at and no resolution adopted upon any of the issues that had been raised. However, before turning to discuss the developments which followed upon this meeting, some additional comment upon the course of these hearings of the General Staff and Admiralty strategies for national defence would be useful. Most striking was Asquith's unruffled reception of the fact that the General Staff had undertaken joint preparations with the French ; this would, at the very least, indicate that the Prime Minister, contrary to his own later statements and the more generally accepted view,⁸⁹ was in fact in possession of prior knowledge concerning the Staff Conversations - indeed that he had not been dozing during Hardinge's statement before the 1908 - 1909 Sub-Committee on the 'Military Needs of the Empire'. The complete lack of intercourse between the First Lord and the First Sea Lord, which had been revealed early on in the meeting, was also striking and indicative of the secretive nature and narrow outlook of Wilson's regime at the Admiralty ; Fisher, always one to pick the brains of junior officers, had grown to trust and confide in McKenna in spite of an initial coolness during the latter's early days as Tweedmouth's successor - a succession which was in no way smoothed by the new First Lord's reputation as a ranking 'economist'. McKenna, as has been noted, found Wilson to be 'difficult' and, like Fisher, appears to have adopted

89 - See : Jenkins, R., Asquith, (London, 1964), p. 243.

a 'hands off' attitude, so as not to stimulate fresh controversy within the Service, while patiently awaiting the Admiral's retirement which would become mandatory in March of the following year (1912). The strength and earnestness of Lloyd George's support for the Generals and their Continental Strategy was also notable, stemming in part, perhaps, from his dislike of McKenna and their recent bitter squabble over the 1911 - 1912 Naval Estimates - though, as has already been discussed, the Chancellor of the Exchequer most certainly had deeper motives. Grey's strong support for General Wilson's argument, again, was symptomatic of his fears for the continuance of the Entente policy which had already been challenged once during that summer of Agadir. Churchill's role in criticising both the General Staff and Admiralty proposals was interesting, indicating, perhaps, his early tendencies towards 'amateur strategy', his healthy refusal to bow down before the 'ineluctable' opinion of professional advisers, and his complete immersion in the fascinating problems of reconciling policy, intention and strategic and technical capability. In fact, the Home Secretary may be said to have dominated the meeting leading his Cabinet colleagues in cross examining the Service representatives on the Committee. Sir Arthur Wilson's failure to disclose any detailed plans contrasted markedly with the proposals, and the method of their presentation, put forward by the Director of Military Operations ; indeed, quite apart from the strategic principles involved, this contrast probably did much to prejudice the Admiralty's case in the eyes of the Committee. It is an interesting aside upon the First Sea Lord's administration to note that whereas General Wilson presented the case for the General Staff, Admiral Bethell, his opposite at the Admiralty, made no contribution whatsoever to these proceedings apart from his comments at the opening of the meeting on the transport question ; once again the First Sea Lord had revealed his absolute refusal to delegate authority or to permit his advisers to think for themselves and the benefit of the Service as a whole. To Fisher secrecy was merely the means to an end, he had no hesitation in seeking advice, and by no stretch of the imagination could he have been described as narrow-minded. Clearly Fisher was rather 'shallow' on strategic matters, but, nevertheless, he fully appreciated the technical implications of his great material

Innovations upon the broader questions of naval strategy. His failure to translate these insights into a unified strategic policy was, as has been seen, dictated only in part by his much advertised, and widely exaggerated, adherence to the need for secrecy in such matters. Wilson on the other hand was, as has already been discussed at some length, a somewhat stolid sailor prone to a monolithic and inflexible committal to principle. Finally some additional attention must be drawn to Haldane's silence during the meeting and his refusal to commit himself openly to the General Staff proposals until the very close of these proceedings. No doubt 'our philosophical friend', as Campbell-Bannerman had been fond of calling him, had sat and 'purred' content to leave the Generals to do energetic battle on behalf of the War Office. It is of note that the attack upon the Admiralty was left very largely to Nicholson who, interestingly enough, was due to retire as C.I.G.S. early in the following year. To speculate further, it is of some note that Sir John French, who had kept his remarks to a minimum - indeed he had opposed some aspects of the Continental Strategy, had already been selected as Nicholson's successor. Placing these observations in the framework of Haldane's desire to go to the Admiralty, and coupling them to his non-committal attitude during the meeting, there would appear to be some not inconsiderable merit in the view that Haldane, anticipating Asquith's later objections, had meticulously endeavoured on 23rd August not to estrange the Senior Service by indulging in personal attacks, and had refused to show his hand on policy until the last minute feeling by that juncture that the Admiralty had sufficiently discredited itself in the eyes of his colleagues.

Before leaving this discussion of the proceedings of the 114th meeting of the Defence Committee it is to be noted that whereas the 1908 - 1909 Sub-Committee on the 'Military Needs of the Empire' had charged the War Office with the development of plans for operations not only in France but also in Belgium and Holland, no attention had been given to these latter cases and no question had been raised concerning them on 23rd August. Mr. Asquith's opening comments during the meeting had been drawn up in the official minutes upon the title 'Action to be Taken in the Event of Intervention in a European War'

but no mention had been made of military operations other than in France. In effect, as has already been seen, the 1908 - 1909 Sub-Committee had discarded the eventuality of operations in Belgium. Earlier, in April 1911, Ottley had raised the question as to whether the fortifications which the Dutch were proposing to build overlooking the Scheldt at Flushing might not prejudice possible British military aid to Antwerp in the event of war. However, in his memorandum, Ottley did note :

It is hardly conceivable that in present circumstances, we are likely to be called on alone to aid the Belgians in preservation of the integrity of their country. Should that be the case, we should, of course, be confined to Belgian ports as landing places ; but, in the more probable contingency of our acting in co-operation with France, alternative landing places would be open to us, and might even be preferable on broad military strategical grounds.⁹⁰

Of course the latter view was, indeed, the case. Although it was never explicitly stated that in no circumstances in the event of a Franco-German war would the Expeditionary Force be dispatched to Belgium, nevertheless, the implication was certainly present in 1909 and very clearly so in 1911. As it was, apparently on the basis of earlier Admiralty objections, the Committee at its 110th meeting, early in May 1911, confirmed Ottley's prognostication noting that 'the fortification of Flushing does not affect British interests materially'.⁹¹ Although the Belgian question was to be raised once again before the War, there can be little doubt that in reality both the Foreign Office and the General Staff had written off direct military intervention in Belgium as a serious possibility at the very latest by the spring of 1911 .

No 'decision' had been taken. In truth none was necessary for such decisions as had been taken had been implicit as far back as 1906 and more recently since the 1908 - 1909 Sub-Committee Enquiry - as Grey well knew. The Admiralty had made an ass of itself.

90 - 'Dutch Coast Defences', Note by the Secretary, 2, Whitehall Gardens, 3 Apr. 1911. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 4/3/2/125B, p. 2.

91 - 'Committee of Imperial Defence : Minutes of the 110th Meeting, May 4, 1911', C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/2/2.

Profoundly impressed with the thoroughness of the General Staff proposals, and lacking any constructive alternative, the Ministers had no choice but to accept the Generals' plans as the basis for the country's national defence policy. Regardless of his private misgivings, Asquith's actions, following the adjournment of the meeting, made it clear that the Prime Minister had finally 'decided' to face and to accept the fait accompli perpetrated so many years earlier by the soldiers and since sustained by the Foreign Office. The crisis in England's foreign and defence policies, together with the shattering of the unity of the Cabinet, which could well have occurred had Fisher remained as First Sea Lord and been able to put the case, a far sounder case, for the Navy on 23rd August, is explanation enough as to why the old Admiral had been 'kicked out'. Haldane had finally achieved what he has sought for the past two years to attain. With Fisher gone, and now with naval strategic thought thoroughly discredited, the Power of Admiralty seemed within his grasp. Asquith, no less, would have been appalled at the prospect of an open clash between Fisher and Haldane, a clash ostensibly over strategy but in reality concerned with the much broader issue of effective supreme command; indeed, had Fisher remained at the Admiralty or even in a position to directly influence naval policy it is more than doubtful that the 114th meeting could, or would, ever have been held. As it was, fortunately for Haldane, Fisher was not only in fundamental disagreement with Admiral Wilson's strategic views but, because of this disagreement, the old Admiral had exiled himself to the Continent. As far as Asquith was concerned, if a decision was absolutely necessary on defence policy, which he doubted, that decision had to be subordinated to the unity of his Cabinet, and the strenuous opposition of any section of the defence establishment - opposition around which the Radical element could rally - had to be eliminated. Sir Arthur Wilson was, as has been seen, not at all popular in the Fleet and his departure, which was in any case imminent, could be accomplished with little difficulty or popular opposition. Thus Asquith's overriding political concern - which must neither be minimized nor unduly censured - tallied with Haldane's insistence upon a unified defence policy. And so with the invaluable aid of the diplomats, and benefitting from Haldane's fundamental belief in the need for a viable supreme command, the soldiers had, in the summer of Agadir, achieved the goal

upon which they had gazed with a singular fixity of purpose since the demise of the Unionist Government six years before.

Wasting no time and taking advantage of the effect of these events upon Asquith's mind, Haldane

. . . intimated to the Prime Minister that he would not continue to be responsible for the War Office unless a Board of Admiralty was called into being which would work in full harmony with the War Office plans, and would begin the organization of a proper Naval War Staff.⁹²

Once more the war staff issue - while no doubt professionally valid in itself - was proving a useful political lever in Haldane's quest for a unified supreme command. Asquith, having no alternative but to express his agreement with Haldane's analysis of the state of affairs at the Admiralty, wrote to the Secretary of State for War shortly after the C.I.D. session of 23rd August, noting :

Sir A. Wilson's 'plan' can only be described as puerile, and I have dismissed it at once as wholly impracticable.

The impression left on me, after consideration of the whole discussion, is (1) that, in principle, the General Staff scheme is the only alternative but (2) that it should be limited in the first instance to the despatch of 4 divisions.⁹³

That Asquith entertained serious misgivings concerning the wisdom of the Continental Strategy is apparent even here ; in speaking of the 'only alternative' he revealed the classic quandry of the statesman caught between the 'ineluctable' oracular pronouncements of his professional 'advisers'. Without further ado, Haldane, reverting back to his suggestion of the previous October, now proposed that his experience and success at the War Office suited him ideally for the position of First Lord of the Admiralty.⁹⁴ Asquith,

92 - Churchill, The World Crisis, Vol. I, p. 56.

93 - Asquith to Haldane, 31 Aug. 1911. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

94 - Haldane of Cloan, Viscount (Richard B.), An Autobiography, (London, 1929), p. 230.

however, was not altogether enamoured of this proposal officially objecting on the grounds that such a development would constitute an overt indication of the Government's lack of confidence in the Senior Service, and a grave blow to the already depleted prestige of the Admiralty. It might be added that Asquith was, perhaps, unwilling to permit Haldane to establish what for all practical purposes would be a *de facto* Ministry of Defence thereby appropriating to himself wholly new powers hitherto unexercised even by the Prime Minister. Besides, close at hand was Churchill exercising every art of persuasion so as to attain for himself the 'Power of Admiralty', as this most recent Radical was fond of terming it, which he now so coveted. As Esher put it in the course of a letter to Sandars, following upon Churchill's appointment to succeed McKenna, of late October :

Winston has been intriguing for months to get to the Admiralty. He wants to institute great reform there This will be highly beneficial, for the Admiralty is in a rotten state.⁹⁵

Esher was to become one of the new First Lord's most ardent supporters. It is not within the scope of this work to attempt to explain why Churchill, a Radical in the 'worst' Liberal tradition, had suddenly assumed station in the van of the Liberal-Imperialist forces - a background which in itself no doubt influenced Asquith's choice. It might, however, at least be suggested that the underlying factor behind Churchill's change of heart was at once both very shallow and yet profound ; Lady Violet Bonham Carter's observations upon Churchill's frame of mind during his years at the Admiralty contain, perhaps, the key to his character and the germ of his conversion :

He felt to the quick the traditional glamour of his new office, the romance of sea power, the part that it had played in our island history, the conviction that it was today the keystone of our safety and survival. He revelled in its technology and enjoyed its symbols - White Ensigns, anchors, even the turtles which had now become his perquisite and gave a new significance to turtle soup.⁹⁶

95 - Esher to Sandars, 25 Oct. 1911. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

96 - Bonham Carter, V., Winston Churchill As I Knew Him, (London, 1965), p. 239.

Or, as another observer wrote some years ago Winston Churchill at the Admiralty was 'the happiest man in England'.⁹⁷ In fact, as with so much else involving this remarkable man - a man so very similar to Fisher, he was driven by his emotions, engulfed by the colourful, and made prisoner by the 'idea'. Churchill the Radical had, indeed, contracted a 'very active' virus of the disease of Empire.

However, Asquith, never one to move without careful consideration of the ramifications of his proposed line of action, sat tight refusing to commit himself for over six weeks. Early in September he retreated to Archerfield, his 'Shangri-La' in Scotland, to ponder the difficulties of reconciling the remaining Radicals in his Cabinet with the pressure building up from Haldane and the whole problem of the Continental Strategy. Revealing something of his trend of thought, he wrote to Haldane early in September noting :

The arguments as put in the W.O. letters are, of course, conclusive as against Sir A.W.'s Scheme. I hope, however, that we may not have again to consider the contingency.

J.M. [John Morley] has confidentially been told of the meeting of the Sub-Committee; I wonder by whom? He is quite the most impossible colleague that can [plague] a Cabinet.⁹⁸

It would seem that Asquith, in his reference to a Sub-Committee, was already endeavouring to concoct a story to cover up the secret and select session of 23rd August. Further, it is clear that the Prime Minister had viewed the meeting as a necessary evil brought on by the international crisis, which, now on the wane, led him to hope that the whole matter might once again be dropped. Nevertheless, pressing his advantage, Haldane bombarded the Prime Minister with chapter and verse concerning the Admiralty's sins, and writing in late September he underlined the problems of dealing with the Senior Service in any manner other than by making full use of the cudgels provided by the

97 - MacGregor Dawson, R., Winston Churchill At The Admiralty, 1911 - 1915, (Toronto, 1940), p. 13.

98 - Asquith to Haldane, 9 Sept. 1911. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

outcome of the 114th meeting :

I have shown Nicholson McKenna's letter privately and I enclose his observations on it.

You will see from them that when the C.I.D. met on Aug. 23rd we had good reason to believe that the transport programme of the Admiralty was almost complete and it was a surprise to us here to know that the principle was in doubt, and that we might not be able to get our troops across without delay. When no answer came to our letter of 25th Aug. we were dismayed. You will see how full and prolonged had been the previous communications. The answer had now reached us but only on 20th September.

We have certainly not delayed by changes, the material modifications having been notified by the General Staff in May. On August 12th we did notify our desire to use part of Boulogne in addition to Rouen and Havre and Admiral Groome accepted the readjustment without demur.

Anyhow it is all right now, and the difficulty is over, and the Admiralty have been very helpful.⁹⁹

It seems clear, however, that Churchill has been quite correct in stating that Asquith had already definitely made up his mind on summoning the two rivals to Archerfield late in September.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, Haldane, at least, remained unprivileged by any knowledge of the Prime Minister's intended course of action. For on 2nd October Haldane, now back at Cloan - Asquith was at Balmoral - wrote a lengthy letter to Grey in which he continued to seek his support ; this letter is worth quoting 'in extenso' for it reveals Haldane's anxiety, the depth - which he later denied - of his desire to go to the Admiralty, the manner in which the war staff issue was utilised as a political crutch, and most important his concern for the absolute necessity of a unified and intelligent direction of defence policy as a whole :

My dear Edward,

I have not told you of my visit to Archerfield, and the discussion about the Navy. I went there to meet Winston.

99 - Haldane to Asquith, 28 Sept. 1911. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

100 - See : Churchill, The World Crisis, Vol. I, p. 66.

I saw Asquith first and he said that Winston was immensely keen to go himself to the Admiralty. I said that so far as I was concerned, the prospect of moving my house, and of the yacht, were distasteful. But it was not a question of his or my likings. It was the gravest issue the Govt. had in front - a problem more urgent than that of any social reform, and the only real point was how the existing situation could be changed. Germany had studied our naval psychology, and the old Fisher cry of 'seek out and destroy the enemy's fleet ; this is the objective of the British Navy and has been ever since the Seven Years War and before it' . This cry had been heard by Germany who was meeting it with the Kiel Canal and by other highly scientific methods. What was needed [was] a new objective for the Navy here, if it was to be really effective. The Admiralty, which was very conservative, must have a better intellectual basis. To build up an adequate War Staff was a very difficult thing. If the Admirals were hostile they could make it an affair of mere words. The essence of such a scheme was the spirit and earnestness in taking thought of the heads. Such a state of things could not be brought about by driving these powerful Admirals, but only, more Socratio, by gentle leading. This I had found from my experience of working out such a Staff at the War Office, a far easier task. At first the new General Staff had been unreal and it was only as we all got permeated by the spirit, in the course of our studies of foreign Army Organization and of our own defects, that it became an affair of spirit and not of letter. Now the Admirals could only be led if the person who was entrusted with the task had knowledge and experience of this special problem - unless much delay and at least temporary error was to be faced.

I certainly should have been merely groping had I been called on to attempt it without 5 years of training. Would Winston be better off ! It was not only the War Staff but the War College and the system of Naval Staff training that had to be dealt with. I did not need to tell him - Asquith - that whatever decision he came to I would do my best wherever I was, and personally I did not ask for any change. But to me the problem in front was one of the utmost gravity. Germany would now concentrate on the naval situation between her and ourselves. I felt that, for more reasons than one, I could help here - I brushed aside all notion of the Lord Chancellorship, which Asquith referred to in passing. The interest of the state was the only thing that mattered. He asked me to see Winston first alone and then with him, and to put all this to Winston. I did so without mincing matters. Winston was very good - reasoned that if he went there he would work closely with me at the War Office, in the spirit of his father who had always

said that there ought to be a common administration. I felt, however, that, full of energy and imagination as he is, he does not know his problem or the vast field of thought that has to be covered. Moreover, though I did not say this to him, I felt that it was only a year since he had been doing his best to cut down McKenna's Estimates, and that the Admirals would receive the news of his advent with dismay. For they would think, wrongly or rightly, that as soon as the financial pinch begins to come, eighteen months from now, he would want to cut down. He is too apt to act first and think afterwards - though of his energy and courage one cannot speak too highly.

Asquith has taken the whole matter into consideration - that a change must be made is clear. I do not think it is vanity that makes me wish to leap into the gulf. It is the desire to make use of what I have learned in the last five years. I believe I can lead and persuade the Admirals and that I have a better chance of success than he will get. If so it is not a question of this person or that - the situation is too grave, and in case Asquith consults you I want you to know what I think. It would be better if W. does not wish to leave the Home Office for the War Office that McKenna should simply exchange with me. But the best would be, I am pretty sure that W. should go to the War Office - I shall be in London about Thursday of next week.

Ever yours,
H. of C.¹⁰¹

In reply a few days later, Grey indicated his support for his old friend adding that in any case Asquith was still in Scotland and had not consulted him upon the matter.¹⁰² However, Asquith, faced by Morley's opposition to the Continental policy which he managed to assuage only after lengthy conferences with Grey and two full Cabinets,¹⁰³ was determined on his course of action feeling that Churchill would not only pose less of a threat to his own power, but that his appointment would be more acceptable both to the Admirals and to the Radicals. Writing, therefore, to Haldane on 10th October

101 - Haldane to Grey, 2 Oct. 1911. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

102 - Grey to Haldane, 5 Oct. 1911. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

103 - See : Jenkins, Asquith, pp. 244 - 245.

the Prime Minister rejected his petition :

I have thought much of the things which we discussed at our last talk, and I went carefully over the ground at Balmoral with Knollys and the King. They certainly agree as to the need for a change at the Admiralty.

The idea of your removal there was naturally very attractive to me, and (as you will readily believe) all my personal prepossessions were and are in its favour. The main and (in the long run) deciding factor with me, in a different sense, had been the absolute necessity of keeping the First Lord in the H. of Commons. We shall have to encounter there our own Little Navy men, the experts, such as they are, of the official opposition, and, as our plans develop, the spokesman of the discontented Admirals and the old class of naval specialists. The position can, I am convinced, only be held by a Minister who can speak with full authority, not merely as the head of the department, but as the person financially responsible for the new policy.

It is with very great reluctance that I have been driven to this conclusion, but I know that I can trust you to give not only co-operation but much needful inspiration and guidance to Churchill in a task for which he has many of, but by no means all, the required qualifications.¹⁰⁴

Having no choice but to accept the inevitable, Haldane made it his business to take up Asquith's invitation to counsel Churchill and, indeed, he was to be instrumental in shaping several of the new First Lord's reforms at the Admiralty. Esher was somewhat alarmed at this course of events, upset by the triumph of the Continental Strategy, and dismayed at the manner in which the Haldane - Churchill tandem threatened to supercede the functions of the Defence Committee. Nevertheless he was able to take some comfort in Asquith's indecision which he had so often despaired of in the past. Writing to his son, Maurice Brett, early in October 1911, just prior to Churchill's appointment, he noted :

The Prime Minister came to my room this morning
His views would astonish dear old Pussy [Haldane] and the General Staff. If they, as they do, think that their strategic plan would be feasible, they are highly mistaken.¹⁰⁵

104 - Asquith to Haldane, 10 Oct. 1911. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

105 - Esher to M.V. Brett, 4 Oct. 1911. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, ed. Oliver Viscount Esher (London, 1938), Vol. III, p. 60.

However, in his journal entry for the same date Esher had underlined the causes behind his own estrangement from his colleagues on the Defence Committee, and in particular he criticised Asquith's chronic inability to grasp the significance of the trend of events which had been forced upon him during the past few months :

. . . we talked about the General Staff scheme of landing an army in France. The Prime Minister is opposed to this plan. He will not hear of the despatch of more than four Divisions. He has told Haldane so.

But, I reminded him that the mere fact of the War Office plan having been worked out in detail with the French General Staff (which is the case) has certainly committed us to fight, whether the Cabinet likes it or not, and that the combined plan of the two General Staffs holds the field. It is certainly an extraordinary thing that our officers should have been permitted to arrange all the details, trains, landing, concentration, etc., when the Cabinet have never been consulted.¹⁰⁶

Again, writing to Grey early in September, Asquith had prevaricated, noting :

Conversations such as that between Gen. Joffre and Col. Fairholme seem to me rather dangerous ; especially the part which refers to possible British assistance. The French ought not to be encouraged, in present circumstances, to make their plans on any assumptions of this kind.¹⁰⁷

Seemingly Asquith was incapable of bringing himself to face the implications of his decisions, or to understand that the intricate pre-planning of modern war forbade the postponement of decision, pre-planning which, unless rigorously supervised and co-ordinated from above, held within itself the potential of prejudicing that decision and rendering it meaningless. In reality Asquith's 'decisions' were not decisions in the accepted meaning of that word but merely formal recognitions of trends reversible only at the cost of Cabinet solidarity. Unlike Balfour, Asquith lacked the authority,

106 - Journal, 4 Oct. 1911. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. III, p. 61.

107 - Asquith to Grey, 5 Sept. 1911. Grey of Fallodon, Viscount (Edward), Twenty-Five Years, (Toronto, 1925), Vol. I, p. 95.

drive and originality to be at the bottom of and to control the great movements of his age ; as Haldane has recalled, Asquith was not a thoughtful innovator but rather an accomplished organizer. Asquith, as it were, stage-managed the great forces of his times which were to so profoundly shape the future of England ; he played his difficult role by ear conscious always of the weakness of his own position and of the internal stresses and strains of his Cabinet. The breakdown in political control lay not so much with Asquith's character, although he was a weak man, but rather with his bitterly divided Party and his own inability to appreciate the urgency of the pressing problems of defence which to him appeared unimportant, annoying and of little significance. Asquith's fault was one of ignorance, not of indecision. Henceforth the problems of defence co-ordination were to be greatly minimised, however, this achievement had been exacted at the price of a strategic posture quite without relation to the nation's physical and technical capability.

CHAPTER NINE

AFTERMATH

I have always noticed that whenever a Radical takes to Imperialism he catches it in a very acute form.

Churchill, House of Commons ;
May 1901.

For the moment Great Britain has ceased to be a free agent, and has parted with the guardianship of her own soul. Her honour is pledged to France and Russia, although there may be no written parchment or attested treaty.

Viscount Esher; 1912.

Winston Churchill is a public danger to the Empire.

Admiral Sir John Jellicoe,
H.M.S. Iron Duke ; May 1915.

WINSTON Churchill arrived at the Admiralty on 25th October 1911 charged with taking the Admirals in hand, of ensuing close co-operation with the War Office in the development of the Continental Strategy, and the institution of an operational planning body for the Senior Service. Before the year was out he had dropped Wilson from his board replacing him with a suitably pliant Admiral - Sir Francis Bridgeman. Churchill's translation to the Admiralty was not as remarkable as has been widely assumed. Of course his appointment had taken place under very special circumstances ; McKenna, his predecessor as First Lord, had also hailed from the Radical benches and moreover had

built himself a fine reputation at the Treasury as an 'economist'. However, Fisher's magnetism had converted McKenna into a staunch 'navalist' leading him frequently to do battle on behalf of the Service during his years as First Lord. The same could, perhaps, be said of Churchill who was in many respects a replica of Fisher whom he had first met at Biarritz in April 1907. Churchill had been deeply influenced during those early days of contact with Fisher, days which were to provide the basis for their later collaboration. It must be remembered that, however successful, Churchill remained extremely impressionable, and if anyone may be said to have moulded his strategic thought or to have fired his imagination with the power and majesty of the sea, that man was Fisher.

Churchill's impatience to get down to work dismayed both Asquith and Haldane who better appreciated the difficulties that lay ahead and, above all, the need to tread lightly in dealing with the Admirals. A few days after being informed of his appointment on 10th October, over a week before he assumed his new responsibilities, Churchill had apparently been bombarding the Prime Minister with memoranda on the establishment of a war staff and the other changes he contemplated for the Admiralty. Churchill's headlong rush occasioned Asquith to note in writing to Haldane :

I have returned Winston's papers with red-marked criticisms in the margin and have told him (1) that he must proceed in co-operation with yourself and Ottley and (2) that there is no necessity to bring his changes into operation at so early a date as 1st Jan.¹

Regardless, Churchill pushed ahead heaving Wilson and most of his Board over the side in establishing the Admiralty War Staff on 8th January 1912.²

Almost as his first act upon arrival at Admiralty Arch Churchill took up his pen and wrote to Fisher begging the old Admiral to descend from his lofty pedestal to become his

1 - Asquith to Haldane, 14 Oct. 1911. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

2 - See : Appendix III, 'The Admiralty War Staff'.

personal adviser at the Admiralty. Lord Fisher had discreetly exiled himself to the Continent during the winter of 1911 to await Wilson's mandatory retirement due in March 1912. This decision had no doubt been the result, in part at least, of the fact that his seventieth birthday had been marked 'by a greater mass of telegrams and letters than when in the full swing of fighting life'.³ Fisher had felt his position was untenable in view of his refusal to interfere with Wilson's administration in spite of his strong deprecation of the manner in which his successor was handling matters at the Admiralty. However, Lord Fisher, as his voluminous correspondence reveals, kept fully in touch with events, knowing, for example, of the secret Defence Committee session of 23rd August before it had even been held.⁴ Of course his special intimacy with the McKennas was a particularly valuable fount of information - though by no means his only source. Basking in the famous resort centres of the Continent, including Bad Nauheim, Lucerne and Venice, and hiding himself away in his 'find' at Pallanza 'Jacky' renewed himself and replenished his energies. However, after some ten months of relative inactivity, the old Admiral was pleased indeed to receive the homage and petition of the new First Lord which caught up with him at Lucerne late in October :

I want to see you very much. When am I to have this pleasure ?
You have but to indicate your convenience and I will await you
at the Admiralty.⁵

Secretly Fisher crossed over to England and spent an invigorating weekend with Churchill. So impressed was Churchill with the old Admiral that he was almost driven to beg Fisher to return to Whitehall as First Sea Lord.⁶ However, Jacky, had no desire to play second

3 - Fisher to White, 28 Jan. 1911. Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Fear God and Dread Nought : The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. II, p. 300.

4 - See : Fisher to McKenna, 20 Aug. 1911. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 380.

5 - Churchill to Fisher, 25 Oct. 1911. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 301.

6 - See : Churchill, W.S., The World Crisis, (New York, 1923), Vol. I, p. 77.

fiddle to Churchill realising only too well that his own position had been seriously weakened in the country. Besides, Churchill's advocacy of laying the feud finally to rest by creating Beresford an additional Admiral of the Fleet on the retired list stood between them.⁷ Fisher journeyed back to the fleshpots and between his astounding feats of endurance on the dance floor he established a vast flow of correspondence with Churchill dealing with every aspect of naval affairs. Churchill recalled these letters after the War noting :

All were dashed off red hot as they left his mind, his strong pen galloping along in the wake of the imperious thought.⁸

These letters provided the basis for Churchill's matériel innovations, his key personnel appointments, Fisher's dire warnings on the potential of submarine warfare and directed the return of Sir John's 'observational' blockade. Fisher even had advice to offer on the functions of the War Staff. However, these were merely the details of Churchill's administration at the Admiralty and they will, therefore, not be discussed further. The Churchill years before the war were remarkable largely for the strategic and organisational changes wrought at the Admiralty thus bringing the Senior Service into closer co-operation and harmony with the Army and its Continental Strategy - a strategy which now boasted the seal of approval - however grudgingly - of the government.

Whatever may be said of Churchill's later addiction to the amphibious form of warfare, the fact cannot be escaped that the First Lord put nothing in the way of closer co-operation with the War Office. On the other hand, his activities in this direction were most emphatically not remarkable for their zeal. Nevertheless Sir Arthur Wilson's concepts of an offensive - defensive strategy for England of close blockade went over the side with the rest of the Board. No attempt was made to replace the loss and the Navy was to

7 - See : Memorandum by Sandars on a conversation with Esher, 9 Nov. 1911. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

8 - Churchill, The World Crisis, Vol. I, p. 77.

be without any offensive strategy for three and one half years. Fortunately for England the Liberal Cabinet was unable to bring itself to make the Continental Strategy into a viable practical principle truly capable of the role which it sought to fulfill, with the result that no attack was launched upon the Naval Estimates which were further helped by the additional Navy Law of 1912.

However, this new era of co-operation and sweet reasonableness became a threat to the continued life of the Defence Committee which Haldane, for one, seems to have written off by this juncture as an experiment in failure. Esher, perhaps more than anyone but Balfour, was very much alive to the dangers of rule by personality as well as the importance of including all affected organs of government in the councils of co-ordination. Viscount Esher proposed, therefore, that the Co-ordination Sub-Committee of the previous January be transformed into a Permanent Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence. In the course of a memorandum in support of this proposal Esher noted in part :

It is a matter . . . for the serious consideration of the Prime Minister whether it would not strengthen the defensive forces of the Empire very materially were he to allow it to be understood that the Sub-Committee on Co-ordination should in future be constituted a Standing Sub-Committee, with instructions to meet regularly once a month during the sitting of Parliament. This Sub-Committee might very advantageously be presided over alternately by the First Lord of the Admiralty and the Secretary of State for War. Among its functions might be that of ascertaining from the heads of the public Departments present, or their representatives, information as to how and when previous recommendations of the Committee have been dealt with by the Departments concerned.⁹

9 - 'Proposal for the Appointment of a Co-ordination Sub-Committee to be a Standing Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence', Memorandum by Lord Esher, 7 Dec. 1911. C.I.D. Papers, 12 Dec. 1911, Cab. 18/24*, p. 2.

Of course by this juncture Esher had become a convinced opponent of the Continental Strategy as his exclusion on 23rd August so clearly underlined. Writing to Fisher in April 1912 he noted :

I think the defence scheme of the General Staff of the Army grotesque. I am sure that their projects last August were wild in the extreme.¹⁰

However, Ottley, whose retirement was already in the air by November 1911, was not exactly keen on Esher's proposals noting :

Rome was not built in a day. We cannot make up these large areas of work in the course of a single session of Parliament. I deprecate too rapid a forcing of the pace, but I agree with you that our preparations here go forward without rest, if without haste.¹¹

However, Hankey was on the surface not quite so jealous of the prerogatives of the Secretariat and in the course of the following year the Co-ordination Committee achieved permanent status under his tutelage. Nevertheless, as has already been seen, it seldom convened leaving the bulk of the work involved in the preparation of the War Book to the Secretariat, and never, therefore, had the opportunity to branch out into the broader issues of interdepartmental co-operation and co-ordination.

Early on the morning of Tuesday 4th June 1912 Viscount Haldane received the following letter from the Lord Chancellor :

My dear Haldane,

Will you do me a great favour : to come round to this house as soon as you can and see me - this morning. I can not explain why I take this liberty - but I shall be truly grateful if you will be so kind as to come. It is very important.

Yours very sincerely,

(Sgd.) Loreburn.¹²

10 - Esher to Fisher, 20 Apr. 1912. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, ed. Oliver Viscount Esher (London, 1938), Vol. III, p. 88.

11 - 'Proposal for the Appointment of a Co-ordination Sub-Committee', 12 Dec. 1911, p. 4.

12 - Loreburn to Haldane, 4 June 1912. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

Haldane's departure from the War Office for the Woolsack, which he had so long coveted, signalled that he had completed his task, commenced in 1905, to his satisfaction. The Army had been rebuilt upon firm foundations and the War Office possessed, as it had not before, a strategic *raison d'être*. Haldane's exquisite ability was marked on his departure by the advent of mediocrity at the War Office - which was probably all to the good. Colonel Seely, an old friend of Churchill's from their backbench days, was a rather colourless individual and as Repington noted in writing to Haldane late in the autumn of 1912 :

I like your successor personally and get on with him, but
he does nothing and carries no guns¹³

Later in the same letter, having deprecated Lord Roberts' and Henry Wilson's campaign against the Territorials in their efforts to establish the principle of compulsion, Repington noted :

I personally think that an Army Order should be published warning officers against deprecating our armed forces in the press, in very firm Wellingtonian terms. In no other country is the license permitted that we allow It is all part of a game to destroy the voluntary system, and it is more than high time to put a stop to it whether the ultimate object of the game is in itself desirable or not. I feel sure that great harm is being done to discipline, numbers, and efficiency by the present campaign which has a purely destructive tendency for you know well what years must elapse before we could substitute any other military system even if we desired to do so.

It would be useless for me to talk to Seely, but the situation is so serious that I think you should ask the Prime Minister to intervene with a firm hand to put matters to rights.¹⁴

13 - Repington to Haldane, 27 Nov. 1912. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

14 - Repington to Haldane, 27 Nov. 1912. Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

It was a great tribute to Haldane's work at the War Office that it took both a war and a 'god, slightly gone to seed perhaps',¹⁵ to tear down his new structure for the Army.

Nevertheless Seely was appreciative of the fundamental necessity for inter-Service co-operation and co-ordination. Together with Churchill he set up an unofficial committee termed the 'High Level Bridge' consisting of themselves and their two chief professional advisers to supervise the general work of co-ordination.¹⁶ It functioned well enough owing to the elimination of continuous overt friction between the Services. Hankey, having already it seems developed his taste as a committee man, grafted himself onto this ad hoc body so as to safeguard the interests of the Defence Committee and its Secretariat. In spite of long delays over the completion of the shipping arrangements, which were not concluded until the spring of 1914, this committee was responsible for the institution and guidance of all inter-Service co-operation and the establishment of the Slade-Wortly transport committee.¹⁷

This is not to say, of course, that the War Office and the Admiralty were without differences. There was, for example, the almost hilarious debate between the Services over the question of building a Channel Tunnel. Stretching from late 1913 to as late as the 128th meeting of the C.I.D. in mid-July 1914, the controversy raged over the semantics of a 'destructible - indestructible' tunnel - needless to say these wasted energies came to nothing.¹⁸

15 - Osbert Sitwell ; cited : Magnus, P., Kitchener : Portrait of an Imperialist, (London, 1958), p. 276.

16 - See : Seely, J.E., Adventure, (London, 1930), p. 140.

17 - See : Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 150.

18 - See : 'Strategical Aspects of the Channel Tunnel', Admiralty Memorandum, January 1907 ; C.I.D. Papers, 23 Apr. 1914, Cab. 3/2/5/68A. 'The Strategical Aspects of the Channel Tunnel : Summary of the Naval, Military, and Strategical Reasons for and against the Tunnel', Report by the Secretariat of the C.I.D., 7 May 1914 ; C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 3/2/5/70A. 'Channel Tunnel', Memorandum by Field-Marshal Lord Nicholson, 19 May 1914 ; C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 3/2/5/74A. 'Committee of Imperial Defence, Channel Tunnel', Memorandum by Co. the Rt. Hon. J.E.B. Seely, 1 July 1914 ; C.I.D. Papers, 2 July 1914, Cab. 3/2/5/76A. 'Committee of Imperial Defence, Minutes of the 128th Meeting, July 14, 1914', The Channel Tunnel ; C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/3/3.

Again, there was the hotly disrupted disagreement between the two Services over the Admiralty's decision to withdraw from the Mediterranean which occurred during the spring and summer of 1912.¹⁹ Although, of course, the Admiralty was forced to partially capitulate on this occasion giving rise to Churchill's active courting of Mr. Borden in the interests of an 'imperial squadron' of dreadnoughts, nevertheless Fisher returned to the Defence Committee from his exile to explain, as he knew no one else could, the fundamental precepts of British naval policy. The soldiers had led the attack in insisting that both Malta and Egypt would be left open to invasion if the Mediterranean Fleet were withdrawn. The soldiers endeavoured to exploit this chink in the Navy's defensive armour in order to press ahead for a firm alliance with France - ostensibly to safeguard British interests in the Mediterranean but in reality to so confirm the military agreements as to render compulsion inevitable. This largely explains the increase in the tempo of the activities of the National Service League during 1912. Henry Wilson, for example, noted in his diary early in May :

Haldane sent for me this morning to discuss the question of our naval retirement from the Mediterranean. I advocated an alliance with France for the specific case of German aggression, but he is opposed to it because he sees it would probably mean conscription.²⁰

Early in July 1912 the Defence Committee took the whole matter into consideration at one of its rare full sessions. Fisher, who had just returned from Switzerland, made his views abundantly clear to the Committee observing :

19 - See : 'Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War on the Effect of the Loss of Sea Power in the Mediterranean on British Military Strategy', 9 May 1912 ; Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/110, No. 68. 'The Naval Situation in the Mediterranean', Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty, 15 Jan. 1912 ; Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/111, No. 76. Statement by the Rt. Hon. Reginald McKenna on the Naval Situation in the Mediterranean, 24 June 1912 ; Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/111, No. 79. 'The Naval Situation', Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty, 25 June 1912 ; Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/111, No. 80. Memorandum on the Naval Situation in the Mediterranean by Reginald McKenna, 3 July 1912 ; Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/111, No. 86. Churchill to Haldane, 6 May 1912 ; Haldane MSS, MS 5909. Haldane to Grey, 10 June 1912 ; Haldane MSS, MS 5909.

20 - Diary, 6 May 1912. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 112.

. . . the first necessity was certainly of victory in the North Sea. Ever since 1904, when Lord Selborne was at the Admiralty, there had been a gradual reduction of our force in the Mediterranean. He had no doubt that the Admiralty had all the facts, and he agreed with the views expressed by the First Lord. . . . he also agreed with the First Lord that nothing must be left to chance in the North Sea, and that therefore the withdrawal of the Mediterranean fleet was justifiable. If the Foreign Office said that the maintenance of sea command in the Mediterranean was essential, then we must build a fleet for that purpose.²¹

However, Wilson argued that rather than build more ships why not institute conscription and garrison these points in sufficient strength.²² Of course, such an argument represented a mixture of rank opportunism and obstinate disregard for the principles of sea power. Besides as Lord Fisher noted in speaking both of the North Sea and the Mediterranean :

. . . the danger to transports from submarine and torpedo attack was so serious that any idea of invasion anywhere in face of them was out of the question.²³

Fisher then proceeded to inform the Committee of the 'facts of life and death' for England as tied up in the battle fleet :

. . . our battle fleet would not be in the North Sea. It would be off the North Coast of Scotland or outside the straits of Dover. If the German Fleet came out it would be attacked by submarines and destroyers, if it came out far enough it would then have to fight our battle fleet. . . . the Germans could afford to risk their whole fleet, as it would really make very little difference to them if the whole were lost, whereas to us defeat meant the loss of everything.²⁴

21 - 'Committee of Imperial Defence : Minutes of the 117th Meeting, July 4, 1912', (The Strategical Position in the Mediterranean). C.I.D. Papers, Cab.2/2/3, p. 13.

22 - See : Diary, 8 May 1912. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 113.

23 - 'Minutes of the 117th Meeting, July 4, 1912', (The Strategical Position in the Mediterranean), p. 11.

24 - 'Minutes of the 117th Meeting, July 4, 1912', (The Strategical Position in the Mediterranean), p. 13.

Wilson failed in his efforts during the summer to achieve the final consolidation of the Continental Strategy in the conclusion of a firm alliance with France. Grey was, of course, far too cautious to be pushed into a definite alliance with France refusing always to admit that the Entente had already in fact all the attributes of an alliance. However, Balfour, now without responsibility of any sort, freely pressed for a defensive alliance urging such a course of action upon Grey in mid-June 1912 :

I submit . . . (1) that the capacities of the much tried 'Entente' are now almost exhausted. (2) That the advantages, military and diplomatic of a treaty, are great and growing. (3) That its dangers, though real, are not unavoidable ; and (4) that in a judicious use of the modern machinery of arbitration may perhaps be found the best way of avoiding them.²⁵

Balfour always a firm believer in the voluntary principle,²⁶ failed to appreciate the probable consequences of such a move upon the nature of the British military commitment. Wilson and his friends were determined to place the Expeditionary Force upon the Continent regardless of its actual capacity to participate in Continent-style campaigns ; however, if capacity and strategic intent could be equated into a political reality then so much the better. However, it is necessary to understand that Balfour still regarded the Expeditionary Force as a complement to more important developments upon the sea - unlike Asquith's Government which had managed to place the cart before the horse but had failed to make the necessary adjustments in the capabilities of the two Services - It had failed because it knew that compulsion and dreadnoughts did not mix in an age when a paramount naval capacity was essential. Keeping these thoughts in mind Balfour's elaboration of the military advantages of an alliance were interesting :

Its advantages are evidently great both from a military and a diplomatic point of view. From a military point of view it enables the General Staffs of the allied countries to estimate accurately the character and amount of assistance on which they can respectively rely, and the dates at which it will be

25 - 'Memorandum on Anglo-French Relations', by Mr. Balfour, (sent by request to Sir E. Grey), 12 June 1912. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49731 .

26 - See : Balfour, B.E., Arthur James Balfour, (London, 1936), Vol. II, p. 79.

forthcoming. They need not have two sets of plans, the one based on the united action of the Western Powers, the other based upon their isolation. They will no longer feel themselves at the mercy of passing political moods and forces. They will know exactly how they stand.²⁷

Of course, Grey's policy was not only directed by his personal refusal to face the ultimate facts but also by his reliance upon Asquith and his Cabinet of extremes ; for as Sir Arthur Nicholson had told Paul Cambon 'this radical-socialist cabinet' would be destroyed by any such development if Asquith was politically foolish enough to permit it.²⁸ Noting that Eyre Crowe had told him of his advocacy of such an alliance, but that he realised also its implications, Henry Wilson noted in his diary that if such a move did in fact bring down the Government - 'so best'.²⁹

However, Grey's indecision also had its merits - that is in terms of the Entente diplomacy - as evidenced by the Belgian question which was revived in the spring of 1912. Both Wilson, and the new C.I.G.S., Sir John French, though for very different ends, sought to persuade Grey to improve relations with Belgium. While Wilson allegedly had come to agree with the French viewpoint that Germany was unlikely to employ troops north of the Meuse in the event of war, nevertheless he sought through Grey to extract a Belgian promise to uphold their own neutrality in the event of a German incursion north of that river.³⁰ French, on the other hand, was pressing for a firm agreement with Belgium to permit the dispatch of the Expeditionary Force to Antwerp in order to aid the Belgians actively in the safeguarding of their neutrality³¹ - French, as has been seen, regarded a wide German sweep through Belgium

27 - 'Memorandum on Anglo-French Relations', 12 June 1912. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49731.

28 - Cited : Taylor, A.J.P., The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848 - 1918, (Oxford, 1954), p. 479.

29 - Diary, 8 May 1912. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 113.

30 - See : Collier, I.B., Brasshat : A Biography of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, (London, 1961), p. 128 .

31 - Tyler, J.E., The British Army and the Continent, 1904 - 1914, (London, 1938), pp. 130 - 132.

north of the Meuse as a matter of common-sense. On neither score, the one being conducted through the Foreign Office, the other, French's, via Sir Tom Bridges, the Military Attaché in Brussels, were the Belgians at all receptive. Besides, the old Admiralty stricture, so often restated on the Defence Committee, forbidding operations to the east of the debouch of the straits into the North Sea, effectively precluded French's plan, as it was in August 1914, owing to the time question. Nevertheless in spite of later Foreign Office pronouncements the Defence Committee in late April accepted the considered opinion of the representatives of the War Office that the question of Belgian self-defence was not vital as they were expected to be 'favourable to us' in the actual event.³² Grey's dealings with the Belgian Government had been complicated since 1908 by the Congo question and plagued in their turn by Morel's 'Congo Reform Association' which dated from 1903.³³ Nevertheless after five years of disagreement and in the face of Morel's opposition Grey went ahead in the summer of 1913 and granted recognition to the annexation, thereby extending the de facto protection of Great Britain to this Belgium Colonial possession which the Government in Brussels felt to be threatened by the recent acquisition of parts of the French Congo by Germany, without exacting in return even a pledge of self defence in the event of a violation of Belgium neutrality. Grey's action could possibly be explained in terms of the fears which he might have entertained for the effects of such an agreement upon the Entente policy. A promise of that nature would have rendered the military arrangements with France pointless and have led to demands for an active policy of direct military assistance for Belgium. As Grey put it in writing to Bertie late in May 1914 concerning a proposal for staff talks with the Russians :

32 - 'Committee of Imperial Defence : Minutes of the 116th Meeting, April 25, 1912', (Attitude of Great Britain Towards Belgium in the Event of a Violation of Belgian Territory by Germany in Time of War). C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/2/3.

33 - See : Thomas, M.E., 'Anglo-Belgian Military Relations and the Congo Question', The Journal of Modern History, Vol. XXV, 1953, pp.157 - 165.

The conversations that had taken place between the French and British military staffs left no room for any other arrangement, even a conditional one, so far as England was concerned.³⁴

On the other hand Wilson pressed Grey to do all he could to keep Belgium friendly - hence the Congo recognition in the face of Morel's vocal opposition. Grey needed a co-operative Belgium but he did not wish to be embarrassed by any untoward Belgian favourableness.

Regardless Wilson pressed on, somehow surviving the Ulster crisis in the spring of 1914 when above all his head ought to have been the first to roll. As a politician Wilson exploited the political 'decision' which had sanctioned the Continental Strategy. As a soldier he permitted his emotions and his politics to get the better of his military judgement. Wilson accused Grey of knowing nothing of policy and strategy going hand in hand ; he was quite wrong. One could accuse Wilson of knowing nothing of the importance of the relationship of strategy to capability, of objective to method ; one would, however, unfortunately for Wilson, be quite wrong to make such an assumption. Henry Wilson was well aware of the military implications of his uncritical adoption of the French Continental Strategy ; but he gambled with England's incapacity to gain a political and if possible a military victory. In some respects Wilson won. But England lost.

Meanwhile across Whitehall Churchill initiated a regime of intimately personal control designed to reshape naval strategic thought and to bring Admiralty planning into concert with that of the War Office. Sir Arthur Wilson's offensive - defensive close blockade was scrapped in favour of Fisher's old observational blockade as established formally in 1907. Of course these terms offensive and defensive must be employed rather carefully especially when discussing British sea power. In terms of the Royal Navy the destruction of the High Seas Fleet was in essence a defensive operation ; whereas German

34 - Sir Edward Grey to Sir Francis Bertie, Foreign Office, 21 May 1914, (Circulated to the Cabinet 22 May 1914). Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/120, No. 63.

naval operations against the Grand Fleet were fundamentally offensive in character. Close blockade, of all blockade methods, is in essence offensive ; however, if it is designed not only to threaten the enemy's coasts and strangle his commerce but also to lure his battle fleet out into a major action, then it too must be regarded as having defensive elements. Fisher's Baltic Project was clearly offensive in nature pre-supposing the destruction of the enemy's potential to deny the seas to the Royal Navy. Arthur Wilson's close blockade was, on the other hand, at once defensive and offensive in character ; when Churchill scuttled the close blockade policy he denied the Navy an offensive strategy while retaining the far more fundamental defensive in the observational and later the distant blockade - which was, of course, economically an offensive tool. But nevertheless Churchill did nothing to provide the Navy with a positively offensive role discovering the implications of this shortcoming only when it was too late. Close blockade was, needless to say, sheer madness in view of the development of modern naval technology ; however, in view of the widespread belief in the Service that war when it came would be marked almost at once by a decisive fleet action, Churchill's failure to provide the Service with a viable strategy for the offence was reprehensible and but for the events of 1914 - 1916 could have been disastrous. Churchill may not be excused on the grounds of the paramount need to enforce co-operation with the War Office ; as First Lord, and de facto First Sea Lord, it was his responsibility to consider the role of the Service in its every aspect. Churchill did not subscribe to the risk theory or to the fleet in being concept, giving him, therefore, no reason not to expect a major fleet action at the earliest possible moment in the event of war. In the course of an Admiralty memorandum of the summer of 1912 the First Lord noted :

We have . . . been assured from German sources that . . . the Germans have no expectation of obtaining a victory over the strongest naval Power, and that all they seek to achieve is a standard of strength that will leave the greatest naval Power so seriously weakened after the battle is over that she would hesitate before embarking on a quarrel. This explanation is scarcely respectful of the sagacity of the German Government, and to the

high degree to which they carry their studies of military art both by land and sea. Whatever purpose has animated the creators of the German Navy, and induced them to make so many exertions and sacrifices, it is not the foolish purpose of certainly coming off second best on the day of trial.³⁵

If the price of supreme command was the sacrifice of reason and trusted tradition then that unity of purpose was worthless and indeed damaging in the extreme.

Churchill was never wholly convinced of the offensive capabilities of the submarine refusing, as has been seen, to heed Fisher's seemingly alarmist warnings. Indeed submarine policy as a whole was confused under Churchill and little interest was evinced by the Board in the further development of this weapon. The naval manoeuvres of the summer of 1912 were designed to examine the effectiveness of the observational blockade cruisers backed up by defensive under-sea boats in locating and breaking up an enemy invasion fleet. Technically the enemy 'landed' some 12,000 men as the official outcome of these trials. However, in view of the fact that no actual transports were employed - resulting therefore in no sightings by the defending submarines - this result really had little significance.³⁶ There was a further aspect of these manoeuvres which while interesting was so contradictory as to render the entire outcome extremely doubtful; writing to Mr. Balfour late in July the Earl of Selborne had noted in this connection :

I have heard two very interesting things about the naval manoeuvres.

The invaders succeeded in landing 28,000 men before they were interrupted. Callaghan also detached a single submarine which arrived unobserved off Rosyth and torpedoed one battleship after another as they came in.

The balance of that latter experience is in our favour as we have a large superiority at present in submarines, but the chance is of course doubled edged.³⁷

35 - 'Memorandum on the General Naval Situation', Admiralty, 26 Aug. 1912. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/112, No. 100, p. 4.

36 - See : Marder, A.J., From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, (London, 1961), Vol. I, p. 352.

37 - Selborne to Balfour, 22 July 1912. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49708.

This letter, leaving aside Selborne's figures, speaks for itself clearly revealing the developing offensive nature of the submarine boat. Churchill was, however, justifiably unperturbed by this failure of the cruisers and submarines noting in an Admiralty memorandum of the spring of 1913 :

On the assumption that a close blockade either of the Heligoland Bight or of the exits from the Baltic, is not possible, the Admiralty cannot guarantee that individual vessels will not frequently slip through the cruiser squadrons patrolling the wide area of the North Sea.³⁸

It was this consideration coupled to the need for effective screening of the battle fleet and the wear and tear of such patrols upon these that led finally on the eve of the outbreak of war in Europe to the adoption of the distant blockade.

The following year however, in July 1913, the manoeuvres were not conducted on such an idiotic, parsimonious, basis. This time both troops and transports were made available ; nevertheless the umpires declared the safe landing of 48,000 'enemy' soldiers. Even more astounding was the fact that 'enemy' submarines achieved a resounding success against the defending fleet whose under-sea boats were unable to dispatch a single 'enemy' transport or support vessel. However, fortunately these results had little relationship to reality. Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, at that time Inspecting Captain of Submarines, has recalled that the umpire, 'an admiral', and his chief of staff, 'a rear-admiral', were wholly lacking in submarine experience and totally ignorant of under-sea warfare ; disliking these craft and severely prejudiced against them the umpires had declared them 'sunk' on the slightest pretext. Many of the officers thus disqualified protested to Keyes noting that but for the decisions of the umpires they would have been in a position to 'sink' large numbers of transports and escort vessels. Indeed Keyes' protests to the Admiralty were successful in achieving a revision of the submarines 'lost', though no corresponding adjustment was effected in

38 - 'Admiralty Notes', 14 Apr. 1912. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/115, No. 23, p. 6.

terms of the number of troops successfully disembarked. In his Report Keyes noted :

I am convinced that there will be a very rude awakening if tactics which were common during the recent manoeuvres are repeated in actual warfare.³⁹

These manoeuvres, which had occurred in the midst of the sittings of the 1913 - 1914 C.I.D. Sub-Committee Enquiry into Overseas Attack, did not, however, receive much credence making no dent in the previous decisions of the Defence Committee on invasion, though they were probably instrumental in the retention of the stipulation that two regular divisions were to remain at home during the initial stages of a war. Writing to Mr. Balfour, who was a member of the 1913 - 1914 C.I.D. Sub-Committee, Hankey noted late in August 1913 :

The Admiralty will in due course give us a narrative and a commentary in [sic] these manoeuvres, which were most practical and useful. I shall not attempt to pre-judge the Admiralty Reports, but my own impression, formed on board the Enchantress, where I was the guest of the First Lord, is that they will confirm your own opinions in many respects. That is to say they will show the need for more coastal submarines and a general tuning up of the whole system of coastal communications.⁴⁰

Sir David Beatty, lately Churchill's Personal Private Secretary and even more recently the recipient of the patronage both of Fisher and the First Lord in his promotion over the heads of many to the command of the much sought after Battle Cruiser Squadron, noted in the course of a letter to his wife, Ethel, following upon the conclusion of the manoeuvres :

Dined last night with the C.-in-C. [Callaghan] who was very despondent about the manoeuvres and the ridiculous conditions thereof, and told me Winston was to arrive Tuesday with Sir John French and Sir Reginald Custance in the Enchantress, so I said he would have a great opportunity of pointing out his

39 - Cited : Keyes, R., Naval Memoirs, 'From the Narrow Seas to the Dardanelles', (New York, 1934), p. 50.

40 - Hankey to Balfour, 27 Aug. 1913. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49703.

opinion of the whole thing, which cheered him up. Winston would appear to be like the Great War Lord of Germany travelling about with a Naval and Military adviser. I hope he does come and will give us the opportunity of telling him what we think of the absurdity of all the conditions.⁴¹

Beatty was without doubt possessed of one of the better minds in the Service, and while no 'Fisherite' he boasted the old Admiral's breadth of vision, open-mindedness and grasp.

A number of Churchill's better informed contemporaries have been extremely critical of the First Lord's failure to develop an offensive strategy for the Navy. Churchill's actions in June 1914 and afterwards, his desperate casting about for an offensive role, revealed how clearly he himself came in time to see this failing.

Sir Herbert Richmond has recalled somewhat bitterly of the Churchill years :

The upkeep of even the small existing establishment of landing craft was abandoned in firm conviction that no such operations as those for which they had been built would ever be undertaken.⁴²

Richmond certainly over-stated his case here attributing to Churchill a clarity of purpose which was wholly lacking. Churchill, in fact, hardly considered the offensive role of the Navy until the summer of 1914 when he discovered that he was too late. Everything had been subordinated to the Continental Strategy.

Clear indication of the reorientation in strategic thinking at the Admiralty was contained in a lengthy Cabinet Memorandum drawn up by Churchill following upon the Mediterranean crisis. In the course of this paper Churchill had observed :

Germany has a very small coast-line and few great harbours in the North Sea. It would be difficult to find a more un-

41 - Beatty to Lady Beatty, 20 July 1913. Chalmers, W.S., The Life and Letters of David Earl Beatty, Admiral of the Fleet, (London, 1951), p. 126.

42 - Richmond, H.W., Statesmen and Sea Power, (Oxford, 1946), p. 283.
See also : Vagts, A., Landing Operations, (Harrisburg, 1952), p. 488.

promising coast for a naval attack than this line of small islands, with their dangerous navigation, uncertain and shifting channels and sand banks, currents, mists, and fogs. All the difficulties of nature have been developed by military art, and an immense front of fortifications crowned by enormous batteries already covers and commands all the approaches to Germany from the North Sea. With every improvement in the mine, the torpedo, and the Submarine-boat, the German coasts became more effectually protected from a naval attack.⁴³

While Churchill admitted that the submarine had some potential as an offensive weapon, as has been seen he doubted the intention to use under-sea boats for such purposes. Writing to Mr. Balfour early in 1912 he had underlined his confidence in the fundamentally defensive nature of the submarine :

I have been thinking over what you wrote about submarines. They seem to me to be a great advantage to us. They make invasion ever more difficult than before. They are the most formidable defence for their own coasts. All that suits us, increases our security, and frees our battle fleet. And as we are never likely to try to invade Germany, it does not cut both ways.

Without a friendly coast the submarine is in a weak position ; and is dependent on the parent ship. It would be a very risky and short-lived enterprise to put a German submarine flotilla in the Channel to stop a British army going to the help of France. One cannot say there is no possibility of it, and the chance will increase with the size and power of submarines. But on the balance, even so, we are the gainers from this new type.⁴⁴

This letter also clearly revealed the extent to which Churchill's strategic thought was dictated by military considerations to the detriment of all independent naval offensive thinking.

43 - 'Memorandum on the General Naval Situation', Admiralty, 26 Aug. 1912. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/112, No. 100, p. 3.

44 - Churchill to Balfour, 6 Jan. 1912. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49694.

In the course of a Cabinet Memorandum drawn up in the spring of 1913 Churchill made his more considered appreciation of the dangers inherent in close blockade quite clear :

The continuous development of the mine and the torpedo make it impossible to establish a close watch on the exits from the Heligoland Bight with heavy ships. To do so for a long period of time would mean a steady and serious wastage of valuable ships from the above causes, and, if prolonged, would effectually alter the balance of naval power.⁴⁵

Above all Churchill was fortunate in having a firm grasp of the great significance attached to the wielding of sea power, and had also a clear understanding of the relative importance of the exercise of sea power in the lives of Germany and England ; in his memorandum of August 1912 the First Lord had noted :

A decisive battle lost at sea by Germany would still leave her the greatest Power in Europe. A decisive battle lost at sea by Great Britain would for ever ruin the United Kingdom, would shatter the British Empire to its foundations, and change profoundly the destiny of its component parts. The advantages which Great Britain could gain from defeating Germany are nil. There are practically no limits to the ambitions which might be indulged by Germany, or to the brilliant prospects open to her in every quarter of the globe, if the British Navy were out of the way. The combination of the strongest Navy with that of the strongest Army would afford wider possibilities of influence and action than have yet been possessed by any Empire since Rome defeated Carthage.⁴⁶

Churchill, incidentally, wrote his own memoranda.

The First Lord's attitude towards blockade, while rejecting close in-shore operations in the face of the new technology, was nevertheless tempered by what one observer has described as Churchill's penchant for the 'seek out, hunt down and destroy' school.⁴⁷

45 - 'Admiralty Notes', 14 Apr. 1912. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/115, No. 23, p. 4.

46 - 'Memorandum on the General Naval Situation', Admiralty, 26 Aug. 1912. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/112, No. 100, p. 5.

47 - See : Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, Vol. I, p. 373.

This reluctance to relinquish some facet of the Nelsonian virtue led to a degree of indecisiveness culminating in the First Lord's long second thoughts during the summer and autumn of 1914. This was, however, merely one aspect of his far more universal leaning towards interference in a vast range of technical matters. This side of Churchill's character led to many bitter and often unjustified attacks upon his administration of both the Admiralty and the Navy as a whole ; Jellicoe's reaction was typical :

After assuming office as Second Sea Lord it did not take me long to find out that Mr. Churchill, the First Lord, was very apt to express strong opinions upon purely technical matters : moreover, not being satisfied with expressing opinions, he tried to force his views upon the Board. It is quite true that Mr. Churchill proved himself to be a very clever and able First Lord in some directions but his fatal error was his entire inability to realise his own limitations as a civilian with, it is true, some early experience of military service but quite ignorant of naval matters.⁴⁸

It was this spirit which led Churchill to choose Bridgeman and later Battenberg as his chief professional advisers. Quite apart from the weakness of his character, for much of his thirteen-odd months at Admiralty Arch Bridgeman was a sick man. Churchill was finally forced to get rid of him in December 1912. It was clear from a letter which Esher wrote on the First Sea Lord's retirement to Balfour that Bridgeman's incapacity had suited the First Lord ideally :

Bridgeman all through this last year has been unfit for his place, to judge by his appearance at the C.I.D.

He was physically and mentally unfit for the responsible post of First Sea Lord, and I think Winston C. was much to blame for leaving him as long as he did.⁴⁹

48 - Cited : Bacon, R.H., The Life of John Rushworth Earl Jellicoe, (London, 1936), pp. 181 - 182.

49 - Esher to Balfour, 28 Dec. 1912. Balfour MSS, Add. MS 49719.

Nevertheless to the credit of Churchill's impetuosity must be laid his courage in pushing ahead with 15-inch ballistics in the face of professional skepticism, and without time-consuming researching and testing. Thus the 'Queen Elizabeths' joined the Grand Fleet over a year before they otherwise would have done so - a class of dreadnoughts since described as 'the most perfect example of the naval constructor's art as yet put afloat'.⁵⁰ Above all, for all his faults and muddling, Churchill was successful in imparting to the Service something of his own spirit and drive and returned Lord Fisher to a position of fruitful advice and criticism. Writing to Mr. Balfour early in July 1912 - at the height of the Mediterranean crisis during which he successfully championed the demands for the retention of a naval force on the waters of the inner sea - Esher had noted enthusiastically :

In my experience of public life, extending over thirty years, we have never had at the Admiralty so brilliant, so resourceful, so daring a First Lord.⁵¹

Just as Lord Fisher had in effect held office both as First Sea Lord and First Lord, so Churchill in his turn exercised the authority both of First Lord and First Sea Lord. Sir Roger Keyes, who as Inspecting Captain of Submarines had little reason to love Churchill or his Board, has defended the First Lord's conduct noting :

One has heard Mr. Churchill condemned for interfering in technical opinion. There is no denying he frequently did, but I think his quick brain and vital imagination were invaluable and, in the majority of cases, his intervention was in the best interests of the Service.⁵²

Churchill's major failings during his years at the Admiralty lay in his refusal to either completely abandon all hope of close blockade or to recognise the increasing

50 - Parkes, O., British Battleships : 'Warrior' 1860 to 'Vanguard' 1950 ; A History of Design, Construction and Armament, (London, 1958), p. 562.

51 - Esher to Balfour, 1 July 1912. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. III, p. 95.

52 - Keyes, Naval Memoirs, 'From the Narrow Seas to the Dardanelles', p. 43.

dominance of under-sea warfare, and in his inability to grasp the fundamental importance of placing the naval defensive before the offensive. This latter mistake was to lead him to the Dardanelles, to lose Fisher, to wreck all hope for future 'side shows' and to his personal eclipse on the political stage, a blot on his career which he was to carry with him until May 1940 and beyond. Had Churchill seriously planned a naval offensive strategy before the war he might have achieved success - at least on paper in view of the almost universal naval belief that a decisive action at sea would mark the early stages of any war. On the other hand, in view of the ineffectiveness and paucity of organs for defence co-operation and co-ordination it was far more likely that such an independent naval offensive policy would have served only to prolong and perpetuate the state of indecision which had existed for so many years. It is true that the 'decision' finally adopted by the Defence Committee in August 1911 on the Continental Strategy bore no relation to England's defence capability - perhaps not even to her political intent - but at least it was a decision which both of the Services now largely agreed upon.

CHAPTER TEN

DENOUEMENT

LORD KITCHENER said that the Germans had violated, often with success, every rule of war. He was not inclined to say that any operation would not be attempted because it appeared to be unreasonable.

Minutes of the 129th Meeting of the
Committee of Imperial Defence ;
7th October 1914 .

Hitherto our statesmen and people have not taken seriously the challenge thrown down by Germany to their national existence.

Spenser Wilkinson ; 1914 - 1918 .

The absence of an alternative is contrary not merely to the profoundest lesson of war but to the very nature of war.

Captain B.H. Liddell Hart ; 1931 .

ENGLAND'S resolve to go to war in 1914 did not imply, as perhaps that term would indicate, any real choice on her part ; rather, that decision was the direct outcome of a military initiative which had been carefully nurtured over the years during which the Liberal coalition had ruled the country. Only now did the Cabinet, saved from the acute

embarrassment of its neglect of defence policy by the appeal from Belgium, turn to face at last the lack of effective supreme command. Only now did Asquith's Government come to grips with the problem of how best to fulfill the needs of the national interest. And only now did the Prime Minister discover that the lack of supreme command, which had permitted the military decision to prejudice the political choice, had also laid the way open for the military to dictate the actual nature of the national response. The Government, which had had no defence policy in time of peace, discovered too that it could have no defence policy in time of war; but in war, as in peace, the country itself indeed, possessed such a policy - a military policy. The Great War, which throughout Europe had been in many respects a soldiers' war, was, in England, to be conducted upon the basis of a military policy. For Europe such a development was, indeed, almost inevitable owing to the nature of the great military establishments and the dictates imposed by geography. But for England, an island and the heart of a great maritime empire built upon the exercise of sea power, such a development was, at the very least, remarkable. The 'decision' of 23rd August 1911, the events which had found their beginnings at the Whitehall Gardens' Conferences, the rise of a newly self-conscious military establishment, the gradual undermining of the position of the Admiralty, the breakdown of the Defence Committee, and the Staff Conversations themselves, had all served not only to commit England in honour to the direct military support of the French Republic, but also had forbidden the exercise of any alternative strategy. The concern here is not as to whether England should or should not have undertaken independent military operations upon the Continent, but rather it is to understand that the military initiative which had prejudiced the political decision had in itself precluded any political or military choice as how best to utilise the resources at hand in the defeat of the common foe. This essentially strategic choice, as distinct from the even more fundamental political decision to go to war, was denied to the Government because decisions had been taken during the decade prior to the coming of the War which had never been weighed in the light of England's overall strategic interests; they had never been considered because the machinery, so painstakingly created and set in motion by Mr. Balfour and Viscount Esher, had been jammed and circumvented by a government

of disunity and a defence establishment split into arrogant, selfish and narrow water-tight compartments. The Government was gravely at default in having, through inaction, placed itself and the country in such a position that it possessed no ability to take an unprejudiced political decision in 1914 ; straits in which England found herself because her government had taken a strategic 'decision' without appreciating either its true military or political implications. Even more basic was the Government's failure to think through a realistic strategic response to a given political situation. Thus in 1914, even if morally committed to France, the Government would clearly have understood the strategic implications of that commitment, and, having accepted such a commitment before the advent of the conflict, would not have sought vainly to alter those implications. As it was, in 1914 not only did the Government find itself and the country politically committed to France, but the military arrangements which had precipitated that commitment were based upon a strategic principle wholly opposed to its own more traditional inclinations as to how best England's limited military resources might be utilised in a war upon the Continent.¹ For, as the Government was to appreciate fully for the first time only at the Councils of War of early August, the strategic principle which had committed England to the direct military support of France had no relation whatsoever to the technical capability of the country's defence establishment.

Unfortunately, no official record of the proceedings of the Councils of War of August 1914 appear to have been kept - the Cabinet Secretariat being still a development of the future. Much criticism has been heaped upon the Government for failing to develop a suitable organ of supreme command in time of war ; however, this was, in fact, merely a reflection of the far deeper failure to understand the need for effective supreme command in time of peace. Indeed, no more telling commentary upon Asquith's

1 - See : Spender, J.A., and Asquith, C., The Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Earl Oxford and Asquith, (London, 1932), Vol. II, p. 104.

fallure to comprehend the nature of modern warfare can be put forward than that he attempted to run the war from the cabinet as his predecessors had done over a century earlier. However, while no minutes have survived from the meetings of 5th and 6th August, Sir Maurice Hankey, in the course of a lengthy progress report upon the War of the late autumn of 1914, reproduced a fairly detailed account of the proceedings of these Councils which has provided a useful guideline. Of course, as always when dealing with Hankey, one must be careful, for even at this juncture he had developed his penchant for presenting the unpalatable in a seemingly attractive manner. For example, referring to the Conversations, Hankey, no doubt with a perfectly straight face, calmly observed at the opening of his Report :

. . . no regular plan of operations had been agreed upon before relations were broken off. For diplomatic reasons the previous formation of such a plan was practically impossible. In the first place any plan we adopted must necessarily be concerted with France, and this could scarcely be done without implicitly committing ourselves to putting it in operation whenever she might be attacked by Germany. But any such committal was out of line with our foreign policy. We had studiously avoided an engagement either offensive or defensive with the Dual Alliance, nor did we contemplate intervention in a war in which they might engage unless we had a casus belli of our own.²

As has been seen, this simply was not the case. And, besides, the General Staff and the Defence Committee, particularly the Sub-Committee of 1908 - 1909, had explicitly stated that in their view Belgium was not to be regarded as a reliable casus belli and that, therefore, preparations ought to be taken in hand to meet the contingency of England becoming militarily involved in a purely Franco-German war. Hankey's remarks on the matter of Anglo-French planning, while punctiliously correct, were, of course, beneath contempt. Nevertheless, on the basis of this argument Hankey proceeded to discuss the

2 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', Committee of Imperial Defence, Historical Section, 1 Nov. 1914. C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 17/102B*, p. 1.

Councils of War of 5th and 6th August on the assumption that their decisions had in no way been prejudiced by earlier events. Events which Hankey described as 'a general interchange of ideas as to possible co-operation, should we be drawn into war'. All in all Henry Wilson would have been a trifle surprised to read Hankey's version of his unflagging efforts to develop a comprehensive plan of action with the French General Staff. In fact Hankey's elaborate efforts to explain away the difficulties experienced, both in the political and strategic 'decisions' of August 1914, constituted in themselves a unique commentary upon the effects of the lack of supreme command.

In setting the scene for the Councils of War of early August Hankey noted :

The most pressing need when we found ourselves at war was to settle a plan of operations for our Expeditionary Force. For the military and political reasons already given, we were still without such a plan, and on 5th August a War Council was called to Downing Street, under the presidency of the Prime Minister, to endeavour to reach a conclusion.³

So much for supreme command. The very fact that the Government had no policy for the Expeditionary Force at the time when, as Hankey points out, 'the conclusion which the Staff conferences had reached was that the surest method for us to adopt was to place our whole available force at a concentration centre on the French left at the earliest possible moment',⁴ was censure enough itself of the failure in supreme command. Hankey has recalled that the Council of the afternoon of 5th August was attended by Asquith, Grey, Haldane, Churchill, Battenburg, Douglas - C.I.G.S., Sclater-Adjutant-General, Cowans-Quartermaster-General, von-Donop - Master-General of Ordnance, Henry Wilson, Roberts, Kitchener, French, Grierson, Hamilton and Murray, with himself as Secretary although his notes do not appear to have survived.⁵ One thing

3 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 8.

4 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 2.

5 - Hankey, Baron (Maurice P.), The Supreme Command, (London, 1961), Vol. I, p. 169. The list of those who were present together with Hankey's ticks for attendance is preserved in the Imperial War Museum ; Taylor, A.J.P., English History, 1914 - 1945, (Oxford, 1965), p. 6.

became immediately clear from the very composition of this gathering in the Cabinet Room at 10, Downing Street - namely that at least in one respect supreme command had achieved some measure of success in deciding that the Navy was to play no part in the military offensive. This was an assembly of soldiers. As to whether or not that decision was correct is of no concern here ; contrary to Hankey's remarks the Continental Strategy had most certainly achieved sufficient backing as to negate all efforts to revert to an amphibious type of operation - as Sir John French was shortly to discover. In point of fact, whether Asquith liked it or not, his actions had committed England to the Continental Strategy while his inaction had forbidden any balanced appreciation of the implications of that strategy for defence policy as a whole. Even Hankey emphasised this preclusion of a naval offensive in noting the more general preoccupation with the military involvement :

The extent to which military needs necessarily dominated the situation was marked by the fact that the Council included all the leading general officers in the country, while the Navy was represented by the First Lord and the First Sea Lord only.⁶

Having already stated the pre-war appreciation that the transport of the 'army at the outset of the war was regarded as the vital condition of eventual success, and the Navy consequently had to accept the position that its operations must, so far as possible, be subservient to those of the Army',⁷ Hankey had then proceeded to observe :

The balance in the Council corresponded precisely with the actual situation. So far as could be judged, our power of influencing the direction which the war would take at the outset depended upon how soon and in what strength we could bring our army to bear upon the German right. Up to the moment political and diplomatic exigencies had condemned the War Office to inaction, and now that the bar was removed the first consideration was to give the Army the freest possible hand and the utmost assistance in making up for lost time.⁸

6 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 8.

7 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 3.

8 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 8.

Essentially, then, these Councils, if technically convened to decide upon the nature of the war effort, had actually based their deliberations upon a series of at best 'half-baked' pre-war notions of strategy which Hankey claimed in no way prejudiced their decision.

In fact, however, the Council of 5th August was devoted to a critique of the General Staff plans in view of the increasing concern of the possible intention of the German Armies to undertake major operations in Belgium, both north and south of the Meuse, and the delay in the mobilization of the Expeditionary Force. Thus as Hankey tacitly, though reluctantly, admitted the deliberations at this meeting in essence took the form of a series of doubts and second thoughts concerning the General Staff plan 'of a concentration behind the French army at Maubeuge' which Hankey had previously claimed to be merely 'a general interchange of ideas'. And so the Generals fell to squabbling among themselves with French, Haig and Roberts leading the attack upon the plans set forth by the General Staff. Again, Hankey's account in his memoirs erred in claiming that Roberts supported Henry Wilson's view that the plans prepared with the French General Staff had to be carried through.⁹ In point of fact Roberts supported French's plea for a role independent of the French Armies in dispatching the Expeditionary Force either to Antwerp or Ostend, depending upon the naval situation, so as to directly support the Belgian field army.¹⁰ Of course, such a proposal, which was tantamount to undertaking amphibious operations and would in no way necessarily commit the Expeditionary Force to remain upon the Continent until the cessation of hostilities, was abhorrent to Henry Wilson. Even Haig, who despaired of the General Staff plan, advocated the dispatch of the entire Expeditionary Force, as promised, to the French left.¹¹ However, it was Churchill, demonstrating once again

9 - See : Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, p. 171.

10 - See : Tyler, J.E., The British Army and the Continent, 1904 - 1914, (London, 1938), p. 178 .

11 - Diary, 5 Aug. 1914. Haig, Earl (Douglas), The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, 1914 - 1916, ed. R.N. Blake (London, 1952), pp. 68 - 70.

the effectiveness that his regime had had upon the development of a cohesive defence establishment, who vetoed French's proposal to go to Antwerp on the old grounds that the Admiralty could not guarantee a safe passage east of the straits, and more recently in view of the fortification of Flushing.¹² In fact, of course, there was really no decision to be taken in view of the immutable nature of the detailed Staff planning. Hankey, choosing not to mention what he preferred to ignore, merely noted in this connection :

A further objection was that as all arrangements had been made for embarking at Newhaven, Southampton and Bristol, the longer voyages which would be entailed would dislocate the time-table, and cause further delay.¹³

From all accounts it appears that Wilson said very little that afternoon - no doubt feeling that the entire affair was an academic exercise in the inane. Indeed, Hankey has recalled Wilson as being 'in a state of the greatest excitement and anxiety',¹⁴ while his superiors discussed 'strategy like idiots'.¹⁵

Following upon French's abortive proposals, the Council turned to consider the matter of what proportion of the Expeditionary Force was to be dispatched to France. In so doing this august assembly of soldiers and statesmen sought for the second time in a single afternoon to upset, even to disregard, the previous decisions of the Defence Committee. Henry Wilson's account of these events, which appears to be for the most part accurate, reveals that, in spite of subsequent misgivings, even Roberts had agreed that in view of the naval situation it would be permissible to waive the Defence Committee's decision to retain two infantry divisions for purposes of home defence.¹⁶

12 - 'Report on the Opening of the War'. 1 Nov. 1914, p. 9.

13 - 'Report on the Opening of the War'. 1 Nov. 1914, p. 9.

14 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, p. 173.

15 - Diary, 5 Aug. 1914. Wilson, H.H., The Life and Diaries of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, ed. Charles E. Callwell (London, 1927), Vol. I, p. 158.

16 - Diary, 5 Aug. 1914. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 159.

However, with Haig raising doubts about the value of any contribution that the present Expeditionary Force might be able to make, Kitchener procrastinating, expressing his desire - so typical of his distrust of staff work - to personally go over the matter with representatives of the French General Staff, and French, the Commander-in-Chief designate, himself suggesting the reversion to a semi-amphibious operation, Wilson was driven to bitterly recall this council of the elders as 'an historic meeting of men, mostly ignorant of their subject'.¹⁷

Regardless, Wilson achieved some consolation in the decision to send five rather than four divisions at once to France, although the choice of a concentration area - which had provoked a serious split within the ranks of the generals - was left unsettled for the moment,¹⁸ due, most likely, to Kitchener's vociferous opposition. French's counter-proposal had merely been based upon what he regarded to be the development of an unfavourable set of circumstances owing to the influence of the 'offensive' school and the corresponding failure to appreciate German and Belgian intentions. It is probable that French was unaware of the implications of his objections for the future of the independent military policy. However, both Kitchener and Haig had based their criticisms upon a fundamental disagreement with the Continental Strategy, realising as they did that its success involved a military commitment wholly beyond England's immediate capabilities. Haig, forecasting 'a war of several years' duration, stated that in his view all of the plans and proposals which had been discussed, whether to send the Expeditionary Force to Maubeuge, or, as Kitchener advised, to concentrate it at Amiens, or, indeed, to dispatch it to Antwerp, were absurd, but that, owing to the force of circumstances, all possible aid ought to be sent to France ; while at home it was essential to concentrate on building up an army of '1,000,000 men' upon the basis of

17 - Diary, 5 Aug. 1914. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 159.

18 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 9.

as much of the Expeditionary Force as could possibly be spared.¹⁹ However, in writing to Haldane, who was for the moment once again standing guard over the War Office, on the previous day, Haig had privately expressed an even stronger view roughly coinciding with that of Kitchener who had long regarded the idea of sending the B.E.F. to France as ridiculous and contemptible ; for as Haig had noted to his old friend and former chief on that fateful day when England went to war :

This war will last many months, possibly years, so I venture to hope that our only bolt, (and that not a very big one) may not suddenly be shot on a project of which the success seems to me quite doubtful - I mean the checking of the German advance into France. Would it not be better to begin at once to enlarge our Expeditionary Force by amalgamating less regular forces with it ? In three months time we should have quite a considerable Army so that when we do take the field we can act decisively and dictate terms which will ensure a lasting peace.²⁰

Needless to say, in his report Hankey studiously avoided any mention of Haig's objections, or indeed of Kitchener's general attitude, which had been best summed up by his remark to Viscount Esher on assuming the Seals of the War Office :

I am put here to conduct a war, and I have no army.²¹

It is clear that these objections, on the part of the three most senior general officers whose task it would be to conduct the war in Europe, had resulted in renewed hesitancy on the part of the Cabinet. However, the meeting at Downing Street of 5th August had made it abundantly clear that England had no option but to proceed as planned upon the lines of a strategic policy whose efficacy was for the first time being critically assessed - and being found wanting by England's most senior soldiers. It is, however,

19 - Diary, 5 Aug. 1914. Haig, Private Papers, pp. 68 - 70.

20 - Haig to Haldane, 4 Aug. 1914. Haldane MSS, MS 5910.

21 - Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), The Tragedy of Lord Kitchener, (Toronto, 1921), p. 35.

interesting to note that not one of these soldiers, not even the politicians who were present, either raised or even suggested the reversion to a military offensive based directly upon the exercise of sea power. To that extent, and only to that extent, supreme command in time of peace had been a reality.

On the following afternoon the Council reassembled at Downing Street constituted as on the previous day except that now Kitchener had formally assumed the Seals which Haldane had temporarily resumed.²² Seemingly there had been a Cabinet that morning at which Asquith, on Kitchener's advice,²³ had proposed that the earlier decision of the Defence Committee to retain two divisions be let stand but that the area of concentration be moved back to Amiens.²⁴ It would perhaps be somewhat over generous to ascribe these proposals to Asquith's respect for the decisions of the peace time supreme command ; but, nevertheless, both were in keeping with these decisions, for it is to be remembered that the exact area of concentration for the B.E.F. had never been fixed in the Defence Committee. Doubtless, however, Asquith's proposals had actually been prompted not by his belief in the principle of supreme command but rather by the dictates of the situation and his disinclination to set himself against the opinion of his most distinguished military adviser who was, in any case, shortly to join him in the Cabinet. At the Council of War on the afternoon of 6th August the Cabinet presented their decision which, in view of the delay in mobilization and the manner in which the German attack was developing, received considerable sympathy from the soldiers, though not, of course, from Wilson. French pressed for the five divisions which Asquith,²⁵ as Secretary of State for War, was alleged to have promised

22 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, p. 172.

23 - It is suggested that Kitchener did not actually attend this Cabinet not, as yet, having formally taken over the seals of the War Office ; Magnus, P., Kitchener : Portrait of an Imperialist, (London, 1958), p. 281.

24 - See : Taylor, English History, 1914 - 1945, p. 7.

25 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 10.

Wilson early in May 1914.²⁶ Nevertheless, Asquith refused to give way on the grounds, according to Hankey, that two divisions would be required in England, not for the purposes of Home Defence, but rather to deal with threatened civilian panic.²⁷ This was a pretty thin argument, one which had been put forward by Sir Arthur Wilson in August 1911 in his last desperate attempt to forestall the final adoption of the Continental Strategy. However, late in August and early in the following month, it was decided, in view of the solidification of the general situation and the alarming proportion of the German attack which was developing north of the Meuse, to send the remaining two divisions to French's command. Nevertheless, the spectre of the old C.I.D. recommendations returned to haunt the Government early in the autumn. At the 129th meeting on 7th October Kitchener, who was to remain apprehensive of invasion for the rest of his days at the War Office, expressed a very real disquiet lest in the event of a complete deadlock in France the enemy might consider the invasion of England as an alternative strategy.²⁸ Rejecting Asquith's and Balfour's suggestions, that his figures of upwards of 200,000 men were at odds with the previous conclusions of the Committee, Kitchener retorted with the delightful lesson in warfare which appears at the head of this chapter.²⁹ Grey, supporting his colleague at the War Office, demanded that the pre-war decision of the Committee be extended beyond the three month stipulation and that two regular divisions be set aside for purposes of home defence at once. Kitchener agreed in principle but stated his desire to hold off from withdrawing these troops until a definite deadlock had developed.³⁰ Grey persisted, but Asquith managed to avoid an open breach between his Cabinet, for both Churchill and

26 - Diary, 6 May 1914. Wilson, Life and Diaries, Vol. I, p. 147.

27 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 10.

28 - 'Committee of Imperial Defence : Minutes of the 129th Meeting, October 7, 1914', (The Situation in Regard to Home Defence). C.I.D. Papers, Cab. 2/3/3, p. 3.

29 - 'Minutes of the 129th Meeting, October 7, 1914', p. 5.

30 - 'Minutes of the 129th Meeting, October 7, 1914', p. 6.

Lloyd George had objected to Kitchener's misgivings, and their 'guest from Valhalla' in pointing out that four regular divisions from overseas would be becoming operational in the course of the next couple of months.³¹ Once again, right or wrong, the decisions of the pre-War supreme command were being upheld - if a trifle deviously. But the hesitation was fatal for the future development of effective supreme command.

Hankey maintained in his Report that upon the basis of the Cabinet decision of 6th August it was decided to inform the French Government that four divisions would be dispatched forthwith

. . . to co-operate with France in assisting her, but that a definite plan of operations was at present inadvisable. No such plan, indeed, had been definitely concerted with France . . .³²

However, in his memoirs Hankey has recalled that although no decision was taken, pending Kitchener's forthcoming meeting with the representatives of Generals Joffre and de Castelnau, 'the general view was that the concentration should be no further forward than Amiens'.³³ In point of fact the emissary from the French General Staff, who as it conveniently turned out was Colonel Huguet - having given up his London post a year earlier, was intercepted by Wilson on 7th August and sent back before Kitchener had a chance to discuss the concentration with him³⁴ - for reasons which may perhaps best be left to the imagination. Under no circumstances, of course, was such action excusable and doubly so in view of the disintegration of the General Staff whose members were on the point of leaving Whitehall in order to fill the staff appointments in the

31 - 'Minutes of the 129th Meeting, October 7, 1914', p. 6.

32 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 10.

33 - Hankey, The Supreme Command, Vol. I, p. 172.

34 - See : Collier, I.B., Brasshat : A Biography of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, (London, 1961), pp. 163 - 164.

Expeditionary Force, not to mention Kitchener's accession as de facto generalissimo. Hankey, as bland as ever, had the gall to state in his report that

The result of the final conference with the representative of the French General Staff, who had been invited to come over, was that the original plan of landing the Expeditionary Force at the French Channel ports was adhered to. The idea of a landing in Belgium was entirely dropped.³⁵

In the first place, of course, Huguet had been invited not to discuss as to whether or not the B.E.F. ought to go to Belgium, but rather as to where the Force was to concentrate in France - Maubeuge or Amiens. And in the second, Kitchener who had originally asked for the French emissary never even met Huguet let alone did he partake in a series of conferences with him. Needless to say Kitchener was appalled at Wilson's conduct as indeed was Haig who regarded his colleague as a reprehensible 'frock' in uniform and, even worse, one possessed of the sordid traits of a 'Latin Politician'.³⁶ However, to give Hankey the benefit of the doubt, it is possible that he was actually referring to Huguet's second visit of 12th August on which occasion he met with Kitchener and the General Staff just prior to its dispersal ; though, in fact, on this second occasion there was not simply one representative, of the French General Staff at the Conference of the 12th, but rather there were three - Huguet and two fellow staff officers.³⁷ Besides, in making no mention of the earlier incident of the 7th the criticism of Hankey's conduct must stand as, of course, must the above comments upon possible Belgian operations. Hankey further compromised himself in noting that following upon 'the final conference with the representative of the French General Staff' the soldiers on

. . . our Staff did agree to keep to the original concentration point and conform to the intended forward movement of the

35 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 14.

36 - See : Collier, Brasshat, p. 164 ; Charteris, J., Field-Marshal Earl Haig, (London, 1929), p. 82.

37 - See : Collier, Brasshat, p. 164.

French. And this risk was taken in spite of the conviction of our Staff that with two Army Corps only and the delayed time-table, it was not safe to concentrate further forward than Amiens.³⁸

In fact Wilson was wholly opposed to the Amiens concentration, for, as Hankey failed to point out, Kitchener prior to the 12th, had determined upon a concentration no further forward than Amiens and that it was only the united opposition of the French and British Staff's to this plan that led him finally to sanction the detailed execution of the pre-war joint-staff arrangements,³⁹ which Hankey was so anxious to minimise if not to obliterate. Thus, once again, the decisions of the peace time supreme command were upheld in spite of the hesitation of the Government in time of war. Nevertheless, it was a pyrrhic victory for it came too late, and in coming too late it negated the essence of supreme command. The decisions of peace, whether strategically right or wrong, were rehashed when the war came and whatever advantage they might have possessed was frittered away by inaction and procrastination when effective supreme command was put to the ultimate test of war. The supreme command broke down in August 1914 ; its earlier decisions were upheld not because after reevaluation they were judged to be valid, but because in hesitation the Government discovered that the decisions of peace time could not be altered in war. It is of no concern here as to whether those pre-war plans were right or wrong ; it is important to understand that they were incomplete, and because they were incomplete, because the Government had never seriously considered national defence policy as an integral whole, when war came the supreme command collapsed and what little merit such planning might have possessed was negated as the Government, for the first time, truly came to grips with the need for effective supreme command in war as in peace. It is both a measure of how important this understanding was, and how wretched were the consequences of the lack of pre-war comprehension,

38 - 'Report on the Opening of the War', 1 Nov. 1914, p. 14.

39 - See : Magnus, Kitchener, p. 281.

that England went to war in 1914 upon the basis of a plan, sanctioned by the supreme command, but whose implications were only realised by those concerned when the machinery of war had taken the initiative out of their hands. In short, the pre-War experiment in supreme command had been a dismal failure. The plans of war which had brought war upon Europe were, as Europe discovered, the plans upon which the conflict was to be decided. If the British Government entertained second thoughts in August 1914, it was because that Government had not sufficiently considered or concerned itself with these matters before the coming of the War.

Having diagnosed the ills in the defence establishment of August 1914, it is necessary to return to the more general concern in questioning the underlying causes of this malaise in the supreme command. It is not proposed here to restate the multitude of causal factors which have been raised throughout the course of this discussion, but merely to reconsider the fundamental reasons for the failure of the pre-War experiment in supreme command.

First and foremost, the Liberal coalition, that complicating factor in so many of England's affairs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, must be singled-out as the essential factor in the breakdown of the experiment. The very nature of that Government, the very fact that it was in reality a coalition, its many internal divisions and differences - especially in the fields of defence and foreign policy, all combined to render it impotent and frequently obstructive. True to its political heritage, this Government, which had been swept into office upon a platform of 'Peace, Retrenchment and Reform', calling specifically for an end of the 'bloated armaments' expenditure of the Unionists, was in no way either peculiar or, indeed, extraordinary in its parsimony with respect to defence matters. Yet, in spite of this attitude, the Services, under Fisher and Haldane respectively, actually managed to increase their efficiency during the early years of Liberal rule which were indeed marked by severe defence cutbacks.⁴⁰ Later, with the rising tide of German naval power, and

40 - See : 'Statement of the First Lord of the Admiralty Explanatory of the Navy Estimates, 1914 - 1915' ; Cd. 7302, 1914, p. 9. 'Memorandum of the Secretary of State for War Relating to the Army Estimates for 1914 - 1915' ; Cd. 7253, 1914, p. 2.

the regularization of military policy around the Expeditionary Force, retrenchment in defence while annoying, indeed in cases such as the Rosyth affair - in which Fisher played an important role - serious, by no means reached sufficient proportions to endanger national security. Nevertheless, the self-evident concern of the Little Englanders with domestic affairs gave them the whip hand, controlling as they did the Treasury, the Exchequer and the Board of Trade, which but for Fisher's nimble ability and influential friends such as J.L. Garvin might well have spelt disaster for England during the opening years of the Liberal administration.⁴¹

However, quite aside from the general disinterest in defence matters within the Cabinet, it must always be remembered that these years of what one distinguished observer has described as 'the rule of democracy' were peculiar and unique in terms of the state's unprecedented concern with social equalization and individual improvement. This concern and the opposition which it created embroiled the Government in a series of ever widening domestic crises beginning with the celebrated Budget of 1909 and culminating in the Ulster crisis just prior to the war, encompassing in the process House of Lords reform, Welsh disestablishment and a myriad of lesser problems. This endless chain of domestic crises was, to say the least, hardly conducive to any serious consideration of matters of external policy and defence, regardless of the complicating issue of the inherent differences within the Cabinet. Without exception these domestic issues, stemming almost in their entirety from Lloyd George's famous Budget, had been brought on by the actions of the Little Englander element within the Cabinet which, therefore, tended very largely to disregard foreign affairs leaving this vacuum almost exclusively to be filled by their Liberal-Imperialist colleagues. It was this division of interest, this polarity within the Cabinet that had permitted a wholly new departure in the development of unique foreign and defence policies. They were, however, policies not of the Cabinet but of the individual departments concerned. In the past, especially in foreign policy as for example under Salisbury,⁴² such a development of policy outside

41 - See : Gollin, A.M., The Observer and J.L. Garvin, 1908 - 1914 : A Study in Great Editorship, (London, 1960), pp. 28 - 92.

42 - See : Gibbs, N.H., and Keith, A.B., The British Cabinet System, (London, 1952), p. 68.

of the Cabinet would have passed almost unnoticed. But in departing from the tradition of the past, in evolving a foreign policy founded upon a military rather than a naval strategy, this development had grave consequences. For it was, at once, both this divergence of interest within the Cabinet, and the adoption of a wholly new foreign and defence policy, that in essence caused the breakdown in the pre-War experiment to construct an effective supreme command.

Had there existed a common unity of purpose within the Cabinet, the hesitation on the part of Grey, Haldane and Asquith in raising the fundamental issues of defence posture and foreign policy would have been largely dissipated. As it was, on each occasion prior to 1911 when a showdown loomed upon the matter of basic defence policy it was studiously avoided. When such a discussion was finally taken under consideration in August 1911 by the Defence Committee, only as the result of the Agadir crisis, tremendous energy was expended to ensure the secrecy of the proceedings and the continued ignorance of the Radical, 'Little Englander', element in the Cabinet. And Asquith, as has been seen, was much relieved to let the matter quietly fade away with the crisis, expressing the hope that the 'occasion' for such a decision would 'not again present itself'. Haldane's intensive campaign to remove defence policy in its entirety from the direct concern of both the Cabinet and the now defunct Defence Committee, was illustrative in itself of the failure of Mr. Balfour's experiment. The breakdown, or more precisely the inability to get started, of Mr. Balfour's Committee and the non-appearance of Viscount Haldane's Defence Ministry, gave rise to the adoption of a strategic policy for which there was no precedent in experience and no effective machinery for a proper evaluation. Haldane's partial success in bringing the two Services into some form of basic co-operation was, paradoxically, to have rather alarming and unexpected consequences. For, no longer was there a strenuous or vocal lobby of any appreciable size within the Service for a naval offensive policy. And with a government which had no wish to impale itself upon its internecine squabbles nothing was, or indeed could be, effected to bring the new strategic policy under serious consideration.

It would not be altogether idle to speculate as to what might have come about had such an overall evaluation and appreciation been undertaken. This much may be said : either the military policy would have been rejected as bearing no relationship to England's defence capability, or it would have been understood that in order to render the policy effective conscription for the Regular Army would be essential. Now, it is more than doubtful that it would have, even been considered economically let alone politically feasible, in the event of the latter decision, to maintain England both as a first class military as well as naval Power. It was, perhaps, fortunate then that no such consideration was undertaken, for any decline in England's sea power inevitably implied a corresponding lowering of her position in the world, and, ultimately her demise. Every Liberal-Imperialist, every Little Englander, indeed every Englishman, knew this to be the case. It is, therefore, more than conceivable that, faced with such a choice, the British Government would have reverted to the naval policy of combined operations, rejecting all notion of the Continental Strategy in spite of the consequences for England's foreign policy. For, regardless of those consequences, isolation and its consequences, however grave, was preferable to starvation. In fact, considering the obvious relationship between England and sea power, the vast increase in naval expenditure after 1909, the traditional Whig-Liberal inclination towards building up the naval arm at the expense of the military establishment, and the Government's continuing development of a naval capability while starving the military, it may be flatly stated that, faced with such a decision, the Asquith Cabinet, to a man, would have adopted the naval policy.

The objection sometimes raised that, in view of the military belief in the terse character of the wars of the future, the adoption of the Continental Strategy was of little consequence even though it did break with tradition, must be rejected. History in fact proved this view to be unsound. But, again it must be emphasised that the concern here is not as to whether this belief was true or false, or indeed as to whether it was universally held - which, as has been seen, was not the case - as has frequently been claimed. But, true or false, the belief had never been closely examined. Neither had its implications,

if proved to be correct, for the security of England been considered. In point of fact it was an opinion based in large measure upon a desire on the part of the soldiers to believe in its wisdom, and upon a false interpretation of the extremely peculiar circumstances of the Franco-Prussian War. Again, it was an opinion divorced from any appreciation of the consequences of modern technology or economic capability for warfare as a whole. All of these were factors which could and ought to have been considered by the supreme command. And, if that consideration in the light of all available evidence had confirmed the military opinion, then, in view of the gravity of the consequences of Germany's gaining the hegemony of Europe in the space of a few short weeks, England would have been grossly negligent in failing to safeguard her own national interests through the provision of a Continental style mass army for their defence. All of these arguments are, of course, highly speculative, but, regardless of which way one turns, the fact nevertheless remains that for the lack of effective supreme command all these views remained no more than mere opinion.

On the other hand there was much that was concrete in England's past experience pointing towards the true significance of sea power and of a military offensive based upon the exercise of the naval initiative. It was the mixture of this past experience and the type of speculative opinion already discussed that, taken together, constituted the basis upon which was built England's pre-War 'defence policy'. Because there was no clear thinking, no real appreciation of what at best were vaguely sensed changes in the methods of war and warfare, England in 1914 went to war with an untried military policy based upon the traditional exercise of sea power. She had a military strategy and a naval capability without having a strategy for the latter or a capability for the former. Of course, England had a naval strategy - but it was essentially only a 'half-strategy' being based upon the defensive concept of a fleet action and the passive offensive strategy of distant blockade; there was no definite proposal of exploiting the absolute command of the sea which the generally anticipated fleet action would give to England. The Army went to France upon the basis of what had been envisaged as a classic campaign in the style of Clausewitz culminating in a decisive struggle of the opposing forces upon the battle field. In every respect the British Army was quite ill-suited to

such an undertaking. That Army consisted, as its very name implied, of no more than an expeditionary force whose employment in the main theatre of conflict set directly in contest against the great military establishments of the Continent was a perversion of its more obvious amphibious role as a flexible instrument designed to exploit to the utmost England's unique command of the sea. Perhaps, as the military argued, amphibious operations were indeed no longer of value in determining the outcome of the main conflict, perhaps 'side-shows' were foolish, but until these questions were carefully considered in the light of England's interest and strategic needs as a whole, as in fact the invasion problem was considered, no conclusions, right or wrong, could possibly even begin to be formed.

In short the entire pre-War picture was remarkable for its general wooliness of thought, thought which had very largely been replaced by slogan and ill-considered catch-phrases, as the two Services embarked upon a bitter struggle with one another. If, as the soldiers claimed, the whole nature of modern warfare had changed so radically, and if the Navy in that modern world was, indeed, worth no more than 500 bayonets, the only possible way of even beginning to resolve these problems lay in undertaking a serious all-embracing evaluation of national policy and capability upon the highest level of government. But the Army, as the poor relation of the Navy, had a vested interest in entrenching itself within the defence establishment. It was this purely selfish professional struggle between the soldiers and the sailors which constituted, in essence, the second fundamental cause of the failure in the pre-War experiment in supreme command. Many of the soldiers had at best a minimal respect for the benefits to be accrued from the exercise of sea power, while others, such as Wilson, were wholly antipathetic. The sailors, on the other hand, assaulted in the bastion of their long tradition as the truly 'Senior Service', reacted to this military onslaught quite predictably. This squabble was conducted not upon the level of principle but rather took the form of a direct clash between the vested selfish interests of the two Services. The sailors were possessed of no more virtue than the soldiers in this struggle - only it happened that, so far as could be judged without the benefits of supreme command, that the Naval interest coincided with that of the nation as a whole. This squabble, as has been seen, led in turn to mutual

deceit in relations between the Services and the Cabinet and the Defence Committee respectively. Thus Fisher, for example, sent hundreds of pages of false plans to various Ministers of the Crown so as to keep them quiet without precipitating a showdown with the military over national defence policy.⁴³ A showdown which neither side could afford any more than could the Government.

But if the experiment in supreme command initiated by Mr. Balfour and Viscount Esher had been a failure, then, initially, that failure must be attributed to the Prime Minister himself. For the Committee of Imperial Defence was unique in that it was a personal organ of the Prime Minister, a direct extension of his prerogative, the forerunner of what in subsequent years was to become known as the Cabinet Office. The C.I.D. was not a committee of the cabinet, but rather an advisory body placed directly at the discretion of the Prime Minister to aid him in his capacities as head of government and de facto Minister of Defence - using that term in the spirit put forward by Viscount Haldane, rather than in the post-War concept of a logistical co-ordinating body. Thus where the C.I.D. had been designed to be the lynch-pin between the Services and the central forum for the development of an overall defence policy, so, indeed, that lynch-pin was itself dependent upon the interest and the influence of the Prime Minister in order to be truly effective. Thus where the Committee failed the Prime Minister failed and this failure must be of concern to this discussion.

It would be all too easy simply to ascribe Asquith's failure where Balfour had showed every sign of success to his more obvious character faults and weaknesses. Evidence enough has already been presented to point up the fact that Asquith was, indeed, a weak individual, a man dedicated to the path of compromise rather than to a course of resolution.

43 - Writing to John Leyland, one of his editorial supporters, late in 1911 Fisher openly admitted these deceptions; see: Fisher to Leyland, 7 Nov. 1911. Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Fear God and Dreadnought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. II, pp. 411 - 412.

Again, it might well be claimed, as a recent observer has in fact done so,⁴⁴ that Asquith had no interest in defence matters. But this too is not in itself an altogether satisfactory explanation, for it must be kept in mind that his handling of the comparatively minor issue of invasion was exemplary and most certainly would not indicate that he was unconcerned with such issues. Those decisions on Home Defence had been periodically reviewed and altered from time to time by the Defence Committee - precisely in the manner which Balfour had envisaged. Fundamentally the invasion enquiries had been successful because they dealt with a concrete threat to the security of England which had nothing to do with the 'political decision of the government of the day'. In exactly the same manner the Navy remained strong during these years because she was designed, again, to counter direct aggression against England and the Empire. All of which contrasted with the indecision and uncertainty surrounding the implementation of the Continental Strategy ; by degrees that strategy became the expression of the Government's policy and yet that Government, unable to face the implications of its actions, procrastinated and delayed postponing a formal decision, thus strangling the Defence Committee and in so doing eliminating the one organ capable of matching strategy and policy to technical capability. The technical implications of the Continental Strategy were, therefore, never defined or clearly understood, and so that otherwise unsuitable and ill-considered strategy - given the nature of England's defence establishment - remained at the heart of England's defence policy. Perhaps Asquith, indeed, lacked something of Mr. Balfour's interest especially when it came to initiating a fresh approach, and, doubtless this was a contributing factor to the overall failure of the Defence Committee. Asquith's failure to provide the necessary leadership

44 - See : Mackintosh, J.P., 'The Role of the Committee of Imperial Defence Before 1914', The English Historical Review, Vol. LXXVII, 1962, p. 497.

was only in part the dividend of any possible flaw in his character, for the weakness of his personality was more than offset by the circumstances of his Cabinet. Quite apart from the fact that he ruled via a coalition every bit as real as a true inter-party alliance, Asquith himself lacked the prestige of a Balfour, Salisbury, Rosebery or even a Campbell-Bannerman. Even his immediate predecessor at 10, Downing Street, both a Radical and a figure of considerable personal prestige and influence,⁴⁵ had discovered that unity within the coalition demanded the adoption of very much of a middle-of-the-road stance on his own part - thus Campbell-Bannerman in accepting the military conversations so as to assuage the Liberal-Imperialists was painstakingly careful in ensuring that the Cabinet as a whole, with its Radical faction, remained ignorant of these developments in foreign and defence policy.⁴⁶ Asquith, lacking Campbell-Bannerman's personal prestige, himself at least a titular Liberal-Imperialist, and faced with a predominantly Radical Cabinet, was thus more than ever forced to tread very carefully being, as Churchill has recalled, under constant surveillance.⁴⁷ Lady Violet Bonham Carter, in recalling the Prime Minister's excruciating balancing act during these years, has recently observed :

It was no mean achievement of my father's to hold such a team together without a single resignation until the outbreak of the First World War. He hated quarrels. No one shrank more from what Lord Keyes has called 'the solid clay of personal issues'. Rivalries, jealousies, and tale-bearing filled him with embarrassment and distaste. But he rated quality above all else, and rather than shed a drop of it he was prepared to labour, with great patience, to compose differences, devise formulae, soothe wounded vanity and amour propre⁴⁸

45 - See : Ensor, R.C.K., England, 1870 - 1914, (Oxford, 1936), p. 384.

46 - See : Monger, G., The End of Isolation : British Foreign Policy, 1900 - 1907, (London, 1963), pp. 255 - 256.

47 - Churchill, W.S., The World Crisis, (New York, 1923), Vol. I, p. 29.

48 - Bonham Carter, V., Winston Churchill As I Knew Him, (London, 1965), p. 160.

Unfortunately it is sometimes not sufficient to 'compose differences' through compromise especially when such divergences are so wide and involve matters so vital to national security. It was this facet of Asquith's Government, the circumstances under which he laboured coupled to his personal weakness and failure to comprehend the urgency of the problem of supreme command, that constituted his failure.

Perhaps unlike any other prime minister in the recent history of England, Asquith conformed more closely to the concept of 'primus-inter-pares'. It was an age when government remained very much a matter of personal ability rather than automated authority. The influence even of a prime minister was very much dependent upon his ability to lead rather than to be led, to be in the forefront of new ideas and developments, and by example to impress his authority upon his colleagues in the cabinet. Force of circumstances coupled to his personal character flaws prevented Asquith from assuming any such paramount position of authority. Quite aside from these circumstances, it is to be remembered that Asquith presided over a Cabinet of 'individuals' many of whom were themselves accomplished statesmen as well as consummate politicians. In short Asquith had in his Cabinet material enough for many prime ministers including both of England's outstanding future war-time leaders. Whereas, on the other hand, it has elsewhere been pointed out that Mr. Balfour's Government, following upon the resignations of Chamberlain and Devonshire in the early autumn of 1903, had been devoid of a single figure approaching anywhere near to the stature or strength of character of the Prime Minister who had, as has been seen, a very high opinion of the unique nature of his own position.⁴⁹

Viscount Haldane's reflections upon Asquith's character have already been discussed at some length,⁵⁰ however, his comments upon the Government as a whole are of no lesser

49 - See : Jennings, W.I., Cabinet Government, (Cambridge, 1936), p. 146.

50 - See above, page 16 .

interest revealing as they do the manner in which Cabinet business was compartmentalised according to the dictates of the interests and prejudices of the two sections of the coalition, and how obviously the Radical element dominated Cabinet affairs as a whole :

In the Liberal Government from 1905 to 1915 I played a part which was more at close quarters with individuals than with the Cabinet as a whole. I was not really good in that Cabinet, partly from temperament, and partly because I found it difficult to get really interested in its work. I was myself taken up almost entirely with the large task of reorganizing the Army for possible war. I should have liked to extend that work to the Navy, and did the best I could, but the Government was not really interested in those things, and the result was that there was very little opportunity for this sort of scientific consideration in Cabinet deliberations. Our relations with Germany were of course of a critical kind, and my ties to Grey gave me much opportunity of speaking with him, but here again there were difficulties, because I was suspected by the public of being pro-German. In truth all I wanted was to make my countrymen see that there was a problem of German character raising questions of a very dangerous kind, and that the organizing power of Germany had to be understood before we could make ourselves safe. This was not so merely in military matters. In commerce and industry, in regard to which I also had special means of making myself acquainted with the progress of German advances, the danger appeared to me not less. What I saw in Ballin, of Sir Ernest Cassel and of German commercial magnates whom I met at the latter's home, made me think that there was a peril here really greater than that of war, in war we could always fall back on sea power. Science had been developed and applied in Germany as it had not with us, and it was very difficult to get my colleagues to realise this, and to avoid when I approached it being put down as a pro-German enthusiast. Anyhow, it was organization for war and organization of industry which were the two subjects that fascinated me during the ten years of Liberal Cabinet life, and I did not succeed in educating my colleagues, although I got the Army re-organized, the Navy influenced and more universities founded. The situation grew more and more difficult as Liberalism, growing older and more inert seemed to me to be losing touch. I daresay my colleagues thought that I was falling off, and no doubt there was a certain partial paralysis due to the shifting of the centre of interest. Anyhow, by degrees the conviction deepened with me that Asquith was not sufficiently moved by new ideas to give the nation the lead it needed, . . . I had no faith in his ability to think anything out or to stick to the conclusion he had arrived at. Moreover he

seemed to me a bad judge of men. Splendid at getting out of a corner, he had no prevision of coming situations.⁵¹

But it is only fair to add that if Asquith was not sufficiently moved neither was his Cabinet, whose unity remained always a constant threat and worry to the Prime Minister.

And so it was that the breakdown in the old Whig-Liberal Party which had been set in motion in the late nineteenth century coupled to the advent of a weak prime minister and a cabinet of exceptionally strong 'Individuals', combined with the bitter squabbles of the intra-military feud, which came to the fore during the decade prior to the War, to ensure the failure of the pre-War experiment in supreme command and, inadvertently, to commit England, as the country discovered in that late summer of 1914, to a campaign upon the Continent for which, as Kitchener put it, she has no army. The experiment had failed; the 'decisions' of the supreme command had strictly speaking not been decisions at all, in that despite their grave significance they had not been considered in the exhaustive manner necessary if supreme command is to be meaningful and effective. For a strategic decision divorced from tactical reality is in reality not a decision. And it is this facility to decide, to render a sound judgement, which is the essence of supreme command.

51 - 'Notes on Letters Contained in My Boxes', Autumn 1926, pp. 15 - 17.
Haldane MSS, MS 5923.

APPENDICIES

APPENDIX I

THE ADMINISTRATIVE AND OPERATIONAL ORGANISATION OF THE WAR OFFICE AND THE ADMIRALTY 4TH AUGUST 1914

THE WAR OFFICE

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR
AND
PRESIDENT OF THE ARMY COUNCIL

FIRST MILITARY MEMBER OF THE ARMY COUNCIL
AND
CHIEF OF THE IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF

THE ARMY COUNCIL

Adjutant-General to the
Forces

Quartermaster-General of
the Forces

Master-General of
Ordnance

Civil Member

Permanent Under-Secretary

Financial Secretary

Inspector-General of the
Forces (Home)

Inspector-General of the
Forces (Abroad)

THE IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF

Director of Military
Operations

Director of Military
Training (Home Defence)

Director of Staff
Duties

THE ADMIRALTY

FIRST LORD*

FIRST SEA LORD*

BOARD OF ADMIRALTY

ADMIRALTY WAR STAFF

Second Sea Lord* (Recruiting and Training)

Chief of the War Staff

Third Sea Lord and
Controller* (Design and Construction)

Head of the Division of
Naval Operations

Fourth Sea Lord* (Transport Service
and Naval Stores)

Head of the Division of
Naval Intelligence

Civil Lord* (Works, Buildings and
Greenwich Hospital)

Head of the Division
of Naval Mobilisation

Additional Civil Lord

Head of the Division
on Trade

Parliamentary and Financial
Secretary

Permanent Secretary

* Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, and Members of the Board.

APPENDIX II

BRITISH CAPITAL SHIP CONSTRUCTION

1905 - 1914

<u>CLASS AND NAME</u>	<u>COMPLETION</u>	<u>ARMAMENT</u>	<u>DISPLACEMENT</u> (Tons)	<u>SPEED</u> (Knots)
<u>Dreadnought</u>	1906 ('05)	10/12-inch	17,900	21
<u>Invincible (B.C.)</u>	1909 ('06)	8/12-inch	17,250	25
<u>Indomitable (B.C.)</u>	1908 ('06)	8/12-inch	17,250	25
<u>Inflexible (B.C.)</u>	1908 ('06)	8/12-inch	17,250	25
<u>Bellerophon</u>	1909 ('06)	10/12-inch	18,600	20.75
<u>Suberb</u>	1909 ('07)	10/12-inch	18,600	20.75
<u>Temeraire</u>	1909 ('07)	10/12-inch	18,600	20.75
<u>Collingwood</u>	1910 ('07)	10/12-inch	19,250	21
<u>St. Vincent</u>	1909 ('07)	10/12-inch	19,250	21
<u>Vanguard</u>	1910 ('08)	10/12-inch	19,250	21
<u>Neptune</u>	1911 ('09)	10/12-inch	19,900	21
<u>Indefatigable (B.C.)</u>	1911 ('09)	8/12-inch	18,800	25
<u>Australia (B.C.)</u>	1913 ('10)	8/12-inch	18,800	25
<u>New Zealand (B.C.)</u>	1912 ('10)	8/12-inch	18,800	25
<u>Colossus</u>	1911 ('09)	10/12-inch	20,000	21
<u>Herclues</u>	1911 ('09)	10/12-inch	20,000	21
<u>Conqueror</u>	1912 ('10)	10/13.5-inch	22,500	21
<u>Monarch</u>	1912 ('10)	10/13.5-inch	22,500	21
<u>Orion</u>	1912 ('09)	10/13.5-inch	22,500	21
<u>Thunderer</u>	1912 ('10)	10/13.5-inch	22,500	21
<u>Lion (B.C.)</u>	1912 ('09)	8/13.5-inch	26,350	27
<u>Princess Royal (B.C.)</u>	1912 ('10)	8/13.5-inch	26,350	27
<u>Queen Mary (B.C.)</u>	1913 ('11)	8/13.5-inch	26,350	27
<u>Ajax</u>	1913 ('11)	10/13.5-inch	25,700	21.7
<u>Centurion</u>	1913 ('11)	10/13.5-inch	25,700	21.7
<u>Audacious</u>	1913 ('11)	10/13.5-inch	25,700	21.7
<u>King George V</u>	1912 ('11)	10/13.5-inch	25,700	21.7

<u>Iron Duke</u>	1914 ('12)	10/13.5-inch	25,000	21
<u>Marlborough</u>	1914 ('12)	10/13.5-inch	25,000	21
<u>Benbow</u>	1914 ('12)	10/13.5-inch	25,000	21
<u>Emperor of India</u>	1914 ('12)	10/13.5-inch	25,000	21
<u>Tiger (B.C.)</u>	1914 ('12)	8/13.5-inch	28,500	29
<u>Barham</u>	1915 ('13)	8/15-inch	27,500	24
<u>Malaya</u>	1916 ('13)	8/15-inch	27,500	24
<u>Queen Elizabeth</u>	1915 ('12)	8/15-inch	27,500	24
<u>Valient</u>	1916 ('13)	8/15-inch	27,500	24
<u>Warspite</u>	1915 ('13)	8/15-inch	27,500	24
<u>Rammillies</u>	1917 ('13)	8/15-inch	27,500	23
<u>Resolution</u>	1916 ('13)	8/15-inch	27,500	23
<u>Revenge</u>	1916 ('13)	8/15-inch	27,500	23
<u>Royal Oak</u>	1916 ('14)	8/15-inch	27,500	23
<u>Royal Sovereign</u>	1916 ('14)	8/15-inch	27,500	23
<u>Erin (ex-Reshadieh)</u>	1914 ('11)	10/13.5-inch	23,000	21
<u>Agincourt (ex-Rio de Janeiro)</u>	1914 ('11)	10/12-inch	27,500	22
<u>Canada (ex-Almirante Latorre)</u>	1915 ('11)	10/14-inch	28,000	23

WAR TIME CONSTRUCTION 1914 - 1918

<u>Renown</u>	1916 ('15)	6/15-inch	26,500	30
<u>Repulse</u>	1916 ('15)	6/15-inch	26,500	30
<u>Glorious</u>	1917 ('15)	4/15-inch	18,600	32
<u>Courageous</u>	1917 ('15)	4/15-inch	18,600	32
<u>Furious</u>	1917 ('15)	2/18-inch	19,513	32
<u>Hood</u>	1920 ('16)	8/15-inch	41,200	32

APPENDIX III

THE ADMIRALTY WAR STAFF

THE circumstances surrounding the establishment of the War Staff at the Admiralty during the Churchill years deserve a somewhat closer scrutiny than has hitherto been accorded them. Both the First Sea Lord and the First Lord had been removed from office towards the close of 1911 for their negligence in failing to develop an effective operations planning division as recommended by the Defence Committee late in 1909. That same recommendation had in itself ensured Lord Fisher's resignation. Subsequent observers have tended very largely to accept this implicit criticism of the Admiralty and to make free use of it in ascribing virtually every deficiency, real or imagined, in naval affairs to the lack of a war staff at the Admiralty. However, the fact that the war staff issue had shown itself to contain, at the very least, potent side-effects for the politics of the defence establishment must not be overlooked. Of course, strictly speaking and from the vantage point of hindsight, the absence of an effective operational planning division at the Admiralty was deplorable. However, some doubt must be cast upon the assertion that such a body was either considered generally to be vital during the years before 1914, or, indeed, that those who advocated such a staff had any clear idea of its supposed functions.

The movement for the establishment of a war staff for the Navy had found its beginnings in Spenser Wilkinson's book entitled 'The Brain of a Navy' which appeared in 1895. During its early years the movement was closely connected with the activities of the Navy League. However, the cause soon languished owing to the decline in the intellectual activity of the League which had succumbed to the rising tide of 'materialism'. But Wilkinson's campaign received the wholehearted, and genuinely sincere, support of Admiral Lord Charles Beresford giving it a new lease on life during the years after

1902.¹ In time, however, Beresford's concern for a naval 'thinking' department became submerged in his more general campaign directed against Fisher. This development was of considerable significance for, understandably, it prejudiced the Admiralty against the proposal on grounds quite separate from those of professional disagreement. Wilkinson, not wishing to become a party to the Feud, abandoned his pressure for a naval staff turning instead to pursue the further development of a unified supreme command. There the matter had rested until 1909 when Beresford once again utilized the staff issue in order to attack Fisher, thus providing Haldane with the wherewithal that he needed so as to set about imposing some form of unity and co-ordination upon the two Services.

In view of the generally confused thinking upon the actual functions of a naval staff, and considering the many nuances of terminology and interpretation, before going further it would be wise to provide some workable definition of the purposes and functions of a naval war staff ; Vice-Admiral Kenneth Dewar has noted in this connection :

The study of strategy, tactics and the special requirements of war are shouldered out of the way by the demands of technical work and the daily current of administrative routine. Under the circumstances, there is nothing surprising in the fact that the best drilled armies and navies often prove themselves the least efficient. The main object of the staff system is to guard against this danger by placing the control of policy, operations and training in the hands of officers who are, to a large extent, freed from the routine of technical and administrative work. Hence the guiding principle of the system lies in a clear-cut distinction between administration - that is, the production and maintenance of the instrument of war - and operations, that is, its use. This division is even more necessary in a Navy than an Army because routine and technical work weigh more heavily on the naval officer.²

1 - Luvaas, J., The Education of an Army : British Military Thought, 1815 - 1940, (Chicago, 1964), p. 267 .

2 - Dewar, K.G.B., The Navy From Within, (London, 1939), pp. 140 - 141 .

However, this view differed sharply from that of the 'material' school of which Fisher has generally been regarded as the foremost spokesmen. This latter group tended to view the rapid development of modern naval technology as a negation of all past historical experience concluding that the best preparation for war lay in the development and familiarization of personnel in the new technology and techniques. Thus developed the 'historical' and the 'material' views upon the nature of the higher direction of the war at sea. As with most such dichotomies mutual opposition led to mutually untenable positions with the one school wholly opposing technological considerations while the other concentrated upon their development to the exclusion of all else.

Sir Arthur Wilson, in rejecting an enthusiastic Memorandum on the formation of a naval war staff drawn up by the new First Lord just three days after assuming office, stated the case for the extreme 'materialist' school noting :

The thinking in the Navy is mainly occupied with producing the most perfect ships, guns, and machinery, with crews trained and organised to make the most perfect use of them, and constantly practised under conditions approaching as nearly as possible to those of war.

. . . .

The Navy must be constructed and organised definitely with a view to meeting the actual forces of any combination of nations that is at all probable, as they are known to exist now, or as far as they can be foreseen for the future.

. . . .

. . . Army policy must be framed principally from the records of past wars and the opinions of officers who have taken part in them, while Naval policy is based almost entirely on experiment and the results of actual practice at sea.³

3 - 'Naval War Staff', Memorandum by the First Sea Lord - Admiral of the Fleet Sir Arthur K. Wilson, 30 Oct. 1911. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/108, No. 136, pp. 2-4.

Thus Sir Arthur, both as a dogmatist and something of a purist, had succinctly put forward the 'materialist' thesis arguing that only contemporary experience had any validity in modern warfare and that, therefore, in a sense the entire fleet was one vast war staff requiring no body of specialised 'thinkers'. Much of Wilson's Memorandum had concerned itself with explaining away the need for a naval war staff on the grounds that the Navy, unlike the Army, had no need for intricate transport, supply and topographic planning. Critics, such as Dewar, have seized upon these remarks claiming that this obvious confusion within Wilson's own mind between logistics and operational planning indicated clearly that he had no understanding of the true nature and purpose of a staff system.⁴ This was, however, too facile a conclusion, for Wilson's above quoted remarks clearly revealed that he was, at least, aware of the true nature and purpose of a war staff for the Navy. Had his views simply been based upon a 'logistical' understanding of 'staff' work, they would not only have been pointless but altogether without meaning.

It would, however, be quite wrong to suppose that this somewhat esoteric argument between the two schools, waged so avidly by men such as Richmond and Dewar, had any directly concrete application in the practical politics of the defence establishment. Fisher, above all, was by no means adapted to the pursuit of such an academic argument and, always being flexible, was liable to change his views from one day to the next. Flippant remarks such as 'history is the record of exploded ideas' were seized upon as evidence of Fisher's dogmatic refusal to consider any but the 'matériel' aspect of naval affairs. In truth, Fisher opposed the function of a war staff essentially on the grounds of pragmatic convenience and necessity. The corollary to his success as First Sea Lord had been his refusal to brook opposition or bow before any attempt to diminish his

4 - See : Dewar, The Navy From Within, p. 140 .

authority ; a tame war staff would, at the very least, have forced him to share that supreme authority at a time when its every last ounce was required to ram through his great reforms. To have accepted the principle of the war staff would have been to show weakness before the demands and pressures of the 'Syndicate', a weakness which would have driven him from office before his great work had been accomplished.

Nevertheless, given the most favourable of circumstances, it is unlikely that Fisher would have ever freely chosen to establish a truly viable operational planning division complete with a core of specially trained staff officers. Like Churchill, Fisher had, of course, a supreme confidence in his own native abilities, and, as with Churchill, he had little understanding of the true nature and purposes of a war staff. Lord Fisher's subsequent acceptance of Churchill's Staff had been based to some extent upon his apprehension that

. . . you MAY have a d - d fool as First Sea Lord, and so you put him in commission, as it were. But if there's a Barham as First Sea Lord, he'll run the war, and no one else !⁵

Fisher's War Council of late 1909 and, indeed, Churchill's Admiralty War Staff formed early in 1912 were in fact little more than cyphers wholly dependent upon the opinions and directives of the First Sea Lord and the First Lord. Churchill's Memorandum of late October 1911 revealed his total misunderstanding of the role of a staff, feeling somehow that it was a substitute for the brain of the First Sea Lord ; in the course of that preliminary Paper he had noted :

The Navy has been fortunate in having many very capable men in the position of First Sea Lord who were fully equal to their responsibilities at all times. But there is no guarantee that such will be the case. At the best of times the field of selection is

5 - Fisher to Leyland, 7 Nov. 1911. Fisher of Kilverstone, Baron (John A.), Fear God and Dread Nought : The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952 - 1959), Vol. II, pp. 411 - 412.

small, and it is not every man who is gifted with the strategic insight of a St. Vincent or a Barham. But all might have their fitness for the position improved by training at an earlier period of their career, and the least capable would not be likely to go far wrong on important points if he had a thoroughly competent staff A competent strategist might occupy the position of First Sea Lord in the event of war no doubt, but not at all necessarily.⁶

Here Churchill had placed his finger upon the true significance of a war staff but, regrettably, had stopped short of its fulfillment. Fundamentally the true purpose of a naval war staff was the establishment of a body of officers throughout the service specially trained to deal with and to decide upon strategic and tactical questions. The widespread misunderstanding concerning the true functions of a war staff extended to a number of the most outstanding officers in the Navy, including Ottley.⁷ Much of their belief in the all important nature of the First Sea Lord's power of initiative appears to have been based upon the assumption that in the event of war the Admiralty would undertake the direct supervision of all operations at sea - as indeed it was to do, with most unfortunate consequences, during the War. This, in turn, largely accounted for the relative lack of concern, even under Churchill, for the development of independent 'strategically minded' fleet officers. No matter how brilliant the mind of the First Sea Lord happened to be if his 'captains of ships', in Churchill's phrase were not also 'captains of war' his intellectual vigour counted for very little. Throughout the war this lack of individual initiative was time and again to account for a sorry litany of lost opportunities. Churchill's War Staff, on first glance at least, had some of the elements of a successfully functioning operational planning body designed not only to equate material development with strategic capability but also to gradually infiltrate the

6 - 'Memorandum on Naval War Staff and Training', by the First Lord - The Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill, 28 Oct. 1911. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/108, No. 135, pp. 3 - 4.

7 - Ottley to Haldane, 11 Dec. 1909. Haldane MSS, MS 5908.

Fleet with officers trained to take full advantage of their material - and of their opportunities. On New Year's Day 1912, just prior to the actual establishment of the Admiralty War Staff, Churchill set forth in the course of a lengthy Memorandum the terms of reference under which it was to be constituted. In part the First Lord noted :

The War Staff is to be the means of preparing and training those officers who arrive, or are likely to arrive, by the excellence of their sea service, at stations of high responsibility, for dealing with the more extended problems which await them there.⁸

Unfortunately, however, the new body was delegated no power of initiative it being explicitly stated :

It is to be an instrument capable of formulating any decision which has been taken or may be taken, by the Executive, in terms of precise and exhaustive detail.⁹

In order to train those officers it was stipulated that

. . . a special course of training at the War College will form an essential part of the new arrangements.¹⁰

And, in order to ensure full benefit from these improvements for the Fleet as a whole it was laid down that

In all cases . . . regular periods of sea-going executive duty will alternate with the other duties of Staff Officers of all ranks, in order that they may be kept up to the necessary standard as practical sea officers.¹¹

8 - 'Naval War Staff', Memorandum by the First Lord, 1 Jan. 1912. Cabinet Papers, Cab. 37/109, No. 1, p. 2.

9 - 'Naval War Staff', 1 Jan. 1912, p. 2.

10 - 'Naval War Staff', 1 Jan. 1912, pp. 4 - 5.

11 - 'Naval War Staff', 1 Jan. 1912, p. 5.

The Staff Course at the War College, which commenced in March 1912, was, by all accounts, a rather dismal affair ; Dewar has recalled his days on the Staff at the College noting :

If the function of the War College were to teach strategy, tactics and command, the principal thing to be said about the lectures is that they had very little bearing upon these subjects.¹²

Dewar further recalled that not only was the teaching staff incompetent, and the Commandant - Sir Henry Jackson, subsequently Chief of the War Staff - reactionary, but the Admiralty consistently despatched inferior officers to the course just as assiduously as it posted poor candidates to fill the War Staff appointments. In truth, Dewar wrote, 'we had the opportunity but not the intellectual capital to float a staff'.

In short, the Admiralty War Staff, as established and developed under Churchill, in no way altered the basic manner in which Naval policy was decided. No effort was expended to make truly effective use of the Staff which was largely employed, not wholly without result, in the development of strategic principles laid down by the First Lord and the First Sea Lord. Administration as well as operational planning remained fundamentally solely within the scope of the First Lord and the professional head of the Service. The essential difference being that now the germ of that strategical concept put forward by the 'Executive' was to be revealed to a planning body of officers, of indifferent ability, for verification by a detailed comparison with the effective limitations under which policy had to be formulated. The Naval Staff was thus to accommodate itself to the ill-educated and decidedly limited scope of a single man's brain. In short the new body, while perhaps better organized, was almost exactly identical with the Navy War Council of 1909, which Richmond had described at the time of its establishment as

12 - Dewar, The Navy From Within, pp. 129 - 130.

. . . the most absurd bit of humbug that has been produced for a long time. It pretends to be the basis for a General Staff, but its constitution shows that whoever devised it has no ideas of what a staff is wanted for, or the particular functions of such a body The 1st Sea Lord remains supreme and imposes his crude strategical ideas on the nation.¹³

As has been seen, Richmond could as well have been describing the Churchill War Staff.

However, aside from a few junior unpublicised officers such as Richmond and Dewar who repeatedly pointed out the travesty which Churchill and the Admirals had perpetrated upon the nation in the Admiralty War Staff, no further criticism of any appreciable volume was voiced concerning the problem of naval operational planning or the education and intellectual development of deck officers. Churchill, an accomplished performer, had succeeded in persuading the country and the best informed of his many critics that the new War Staff was indeed the required remedy for the ills of the Senior Service. Viscount Esher was moved to write to Churchill describing the establishment of the Admiralty War Staff as

. . . the most pregnant reform which has been carried out at the Admiralty since the days of Lord St. Vincent. All other changes sink into insignificance compared with this one which you have inaugurated.¹⁴

However, perhaps the most damning commentary upon the true nature of Churchill's War Staff was Fisher's approval for the new body ; that approval, which Churchill emphatically could have done without, had hardly been founded upon the 'right' motive especially in the manner in which Fisher put it on writing to Esher early in 1912 :

. . . the War Staff is an exceedingly useful body to be kicked and to deal with d - d rot ! and make out schemes for the German Emperor to have next morning at breakfast !¹⁵

13 - Diary, 27 Oct. 1909. Richmond, H.W., Portrait of an Admiral : The Life and Letters of Sir Herbert Richmond, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London, 1952),

14 - Esher to Churchill, 8 Jan. 1912. Esher, Viscount (Reginald B.), Journals and Letters, ed. Oliver Viscount Esher (London, 1938), Vol. III, p. 77.

15 - Fisher to Esher, 3 Jan. 1912. Fisher of Kilverstone, Correspondence, Vol. II, p. 425.

Esher himself, in approving of the War Staff, nevertheless continued to cling to the view that it was merely a standby to safeguard against the deficiencies of an inferior First Sea Lord.¹⁶ Of course, the War Staff was not capable or indeed constituted to fulfill even this role.

Above all there were no further objections from Haldane concerning the lack of an effective planning staff at the Admiralty. Haldane had, of course, objected to Churchill's attempt to subordinate the Chief of the War Staff directly to the First Lord. Here Haldane had been successful, though Churchill in fact was to exercise precisely such a direct *de facto* control over the War Staff. That this was so, and that Haldane made no further protests regarding the development of a 'thinking navy' was in itself highly significant. In truth, he had no further reason to agitate for such a reform in the Senior Service, for indeed his concern had been not so much with the deficiencies of naval planning as with the need for interservice co-ordination and co-operation in the interests of supreme command. No doubt Haldane had regarded the establishment of an effective operational planning body at the Admiralty as very necessary; nevertheless, its convenient absence had provided him with the necessary leverage to remove those elements opposed to the establishment of effective supreme command.

The great flaw in the Navy's preparation for the War lay in the poor development of its intellectual apparatus. No one man was responsible for this failing, which was, of course, the undesirable dividend of the revolution in matériel. Indeed, 'captains of war' were preferable to 'captains of ships' assuming, of course, that one possessed the Navy to float such 'intellectual capital'. The concern over the lack of a war staff both within the service and the circles of government was very largely based upon a misconception of the functions of such a body, and upon a recognition of the leverage which such a criticism offered to

16 - Esher to Fisher, 9 Jan. 1912. Esher, Journals and Letters, Vol. III, p. 78.

those who desired to so alter the administration of the Admiralty as to bring it into line with the more pressing need for defence co-ordination. The advent of the Churchill Board fulfilled the requirements of those who sought the development of a unified supreme command. However, the Churchill years were marked by little advancement in the intellectual standards of the service, and the War Staff, the establishment of which had officially brought Churchill to the Admiralty, was never permitted to develop into a strong and healthy nerve centre for the evolution of strategic concepts or the higher education of naval officers, remaining always the repository of inferior minds wholly overshadowed by the fertile brain of Winston Churchill - that glorious concomity of First Lord and First Sea Lord.

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