

Reporting the Battle for Peace: The Press at the Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922



Manila Times editorial cartoon, November 15th, 1921.

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Introduction and Context: Diplomats and Journalists

On the Eleventh of March 1922, about a month after the conclusion of the Washington Naval Conference, the office of Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes gave out a statement of principles disguised as a thank-you note, disguised as a press release.¹ Only three of eight paragraphs actually concerned the gift, a pair of scissors intended to reference the Gordian Knot, (a mythical knot too tangled to untie - Alexander the Great fulfilled a prophecy by choosing to chop it with his sword instead), given by a group of journalist led by Matthew Fizzsimmons Tighe, a Hearst reporter nicknamed ‘dean’ of the Washington press.² The bulk of the press release instead concerned the press as a whole. Hughes addressed their role in diplomacy in general and at the conference in particular. He began by acknowledging that Tighe and company called themselves, “The Junior class of diplomatists,” (a period synonym of ‘diplomat’); Hughes described them as, “Cross-examining,” diplomats— pointing out knots for Hughes to use the scissors on.³ Hughes admitted that his most difficult task was, “To maintain the proper contact...with public opinion,” neither causing suspicion nor revealing secrets. He believed the reporters understood this due to their close contact and mutual trust with the State Department, vital to both informative journalism and democratic diplomacy.⁴ Hughes acknowledged that this balance proved difficult to maintain during the naval arms control conference at Washington but felt that he fulfilled both roles.⁵ He concluded by promising to carry out his, “Duty,” to use the shears to, “Clip industriously,” from all sorts of papers to ensure that the State Department stayed

¹ Charles Evans Hughes, Press release - Tighe Gift, 11 March 1922, box 30, folder “Addresses, Speeches, and Lectures,” Charles Evans Hughes Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York. [hereafter Tighe Press Release]

² “Col. Matthew Tighe, Dean Of Capital’s News Writers, Dies,” *Washington Post*, September 18, 1924, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A29918-2004Sep17.html>; *Who’s Who in the Nation’s Capital* (Consolidated Publishing Company, 1921), 391. Tighe may have written a few of the unsigned conference reports in the *New York American* and *Washington Times* cited in chapters two and three.

³ Tighe Press Release

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

honest.⁶ While often ignored by historians, the American press provided Hughes with a blade he used well at a critical diplomatic moment.

Why did Hughes see a role for the press in diplomacy greater than that which diplomatic historians have given it and why should what the press did matter to them? At the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-1922, the American press adapted to its newfound diplomatic role interpreting and assigning meaning to the events of the conference as the Harding Administration sought to enlist the press as a tool of conservative internationalist foreign policy.

Diplomatic historians writing about the conference often draw upon the press and public opinion, even while neglecting their roles. For example, in his, “Japan and the United States, 1915-1925,” centered on the conference, Sadao Asada draws upon public opinion forty-three times and the press nine times.⁷ In all of these instances, Asada, like many other diplomatic historians, treats the public opinion and press of each nation as monoliths, contrary to the reality of a sometimes united-sometimes divided American press discussed below. As discussed in Chapter Three, conspiratorial thinking originating in the press shaped the historiography that diplomatic historians have responded to.

The foreign policy crafted during the Harding Administration has been labeled “conservative internationalism.”⁸ Colin Michael Grenig and Thomas Knock have defined conservative internationalism as: focusing on singular conferences of individual states rather than organizations such as the League of Nations in order to keep vital national interests off the table, and changing the behavior of other nations by a slow process of example, appeals to public

⁶ Tighe Press Release

⁷ Sadao Asada, “Japan and the United States, 1915-25” (Ph.D., United States -- Connecticut, Yale University), accessed March 18, 2022,
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/302139914/citation/2C3B722573D14D85PQ/1>.

⁸ Colin Michael Grenig, “Conservative Internationalism in American Foreign Policy: The Foreign Policy Rhetoric of the Republican Ascendancy, 1920-1930” (M.A., United States -- Ohio, Kent State University), accessed October 17, 2021,
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1717033325/abstract/EABED758E79E4523PQ/1>, 6.

opinion, (this thesis' subject) and soft power rather than coercion (a la the League).⁹ This definition aligns with Hughes' own summation of the type of diplomacy done at the conference: "Methods permitting concert, flexibility, more frequent informal intercourse, and decisions...which are relatively speedy...and a new sense of responsibility to peoples."¹⁰ conservative internationalism emerged out of the opposition to Wilsonianism, was structured at the Washington Conference, and shaped policy through the Hoover administration.¹¹

While Wilson kept a distance from the press both during and after the Paris Peace Conference,¹² Harding (himself a newspaper editor/owner) and Hughes sought to consciously use the influence of press coverage on public opinion as a diplomatic tool. Less intentionally, fear of public opinion often dictated Washington Conference decision making,¹³ and American delegates used the press for European news.¹⁴ Courting American public opinion also had domestic political motivations: to outflank the irascible maverick senator William Borah of Idaho and to avoid Wilson's failure in 1919 to secure popular and senatorial support for the Treaty of Versailles. This raises two questions: how did the press react to this attempt to use it as a tool for diplomacy and did Hughes' plan and the similar British attempt to abolish submarines through appeals to American public opinion succeed and why? Washington was not the first occasion where the American press saw itself in a diplomatic role - as Joseph Hayden discusses in

⁹ Grenig, "Conservative Internationalism," 6.

¹⁰ Charles Evans Hughes, "Some Observations on the Conduct of Our Foreign Relations", 3 July 1922, box 179, folder "Speeches 1922," Charles Evans Hughes Papers, LOC, Washington, 365.

¹¹ Grenig, "Conservative Internationalism," 6.

¹² Joseph Hayden, *Negotiating in the Press: American Journalism and Diplomacy, 1918-1919*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 185-186.

¹³ Theodore Roosevelt Jr. (All mentions of 'Roosevelt' and 'Theodore Roosevelt' in this thesis refer to him.) mentions in his diary that the structure of the Four-Power Treaty and the rejection of a British proposal to modify the tonnage ratio in consideration of British design philosophy were both based on public opinion. Theodore Roosevelt Jr., *Diary Volume 1*, 1921-1933, box 1, folder "Diaries 1921-1933, volume 1," Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, LOC, Washington, 90, 112-113.. [hereafter Roosevelt Diary]

¹⁴ Ibid, 72, 86.

Negotiating in the Press, American reporters, despite a much less friendly reception, tried to enter into and influence diplomacy at Paris.¹⁵

The conference occurred at an important moment in the history of the American press. In the early 1920s, American newrooms found themselves in the midst of two transformative processes: the professionalization of media and the developing idea of ‘public opinion.’ As part of Progressive Era professionalization, journalists sought to professionalize to resolve tensions in the profession and improve their status in society.¹⁶ Journalists prioritized ideals of objectivity and constructed a role as educators of the public, specifically formation of public opinion.¹⁷ The idea of public opinion was still in its infancy during this time, yet public opinion proved a central concern of journalists and of both American and British diplomatic strategy. Major international conferences such as Paris and Washington provided prominent and high-stakes stages for these new trends in journalism to exhibit and prove themselves. Furthermore, Hayden argues that, in this period, journalism and diplomacy shared a strange convergence. Both sought to manage the flow of information, seen as a force for progress if properly directed by experts, in an atmosphere of professionalization, with a particular interest in public opinion.¹⁸ In the Great War’s aftermath, Progressives saw diplomacy as in need of major reform, with journalism as a means.¹⁹

With the image of professional diplomats fundamentally connected to aristocracy, secrecy, the Old World, and the outbreak of the Great War, interaction and involvement of increasingly professionalized journalists in increasingly open diplomacy provided a way for diplomats to embrace the spirit of Progressivism and Wilsonian ideals.²⁰

¹⁵ Hayden, *Negotiating*, 83-84.

¹⁶ Hayden, *Negotiating*, 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 57.

¹⁸ Hayden, *Negotiating*, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 41.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 65.

Lastly, this thesis contributes to revisionist historiography of interwar foreign policy. Recently, historians such as Stephen Wertheim have questioned the idea that Americans and their governments between Wilson and Roosevelt were ‘isolationist.’ By showing both how the American government interacted with the press for diplomatic reasons and how the press portrayed the Washington conference as a uniquely American diplomatic endeavor, this thesis also contributes to this new way of looking at interwar America. While few of the trends and norms at Washington survived the collapse of the interwar order in the face of fascism, as Hayden notes, “Scholars have focused relentlessly on the disappointing results of that endeavor without justly acknowledging the remarkable nature of the experiment.”²¹

Quite the endeavor it was. The conference, officially the Conference on the Limitation of Armaments, was the largest gathering of the world’s great powers since the Paris Conference in 1919. Nine delegations (from the United States, the British Empire and Dominions, Japan, France, Italy, China, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Portugal)²² met from November 1921 to February 1922 at the invitation of President Harding to discuss both the titular limitation and the establishment of a new order in the Pacific. The three major treaties they signed (the Five-, Four-, and Nine-power treaties) largely halted the postwar naval arms race and established a new framework for East Asian and Pacific affairs that successfully governed the region until the Kuomintang reunified China in 1928.²³

The multifaceted international pre-Great War naval arms race, while often reduced in the popular imagination to an Anglo-German affair, is well-known as a cause of the First World War, and was condemned as such in the 1920s. Not as well-known is the abortive post-war naval race

²¹ Hayden, *Negotiating*, 1-2.

²² US Department of State, *First-Plenary Session, Washington, November 12, 1921- ... Première-Séance Plénière, Washington Le 12 Novembre, 1921*, (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1922) ii-xxxii.

²³ Emily O. Goldman, *Sunken Treaties: Naval Arms Control between the Wars* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 1.

that (largely) ended at Washington. During the war, the United States Navy (USN) and the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) had greatly expanded their capital ship fleets and planned to build far more. The Japanese embraced the absolute limit of what they could build with the 'Eight-Eight' plan and the United States Congress passed Wilson's 1916 Naval Bill, calling for construction of fifty dreadnoughts²⁴ to ensure that America possessed a navy 'second to none' to back Wilsonian foreign policy.²⁵ Wartime exigency slowed the Royal Navy's (RN) expansion, and it seemed the USN might soon outpace it to become the world's most powerful navy.²⁶ An all-out USN-RN building race seemed likely, with the IJN, while smaller, being a second competitor to the USN - it seemed that war might result, like between Britain and Germany before. Nonetheless, admirals continued to push for more ships. Opposing them arose voices of a public in each nation weary of war spending and unconvinced that the former Allied nations needed to engage in a hostile naval race against each other.

Harding, who campaigned on a return to normalcy, agreed with many statesmen of the other powers that a new naval arms race would be ruinous and unnecessary as well as a threat to peace. He sought to initiate and host an international conference on the matter, to be better able to set the terms (and spy on the other delegates), succeed in an international conference where Wilson had failed, establish stability in the Far East, and outflank maverick advocates of disarmament within the GOP, especially Borah.²⁷ The key American figures in the actual planning of the conference were Secretary of State Hughes (previously a supreme court justice and nearly-successful GOP presidential candidate in 1916, later chief justice during the

²⁴ 'Dreadnought' refers to the battleship type then considered as a frontline unit of Great Power navies and the yardstick of naval power. The term also covers battlecruisers. The term 'capital ship' here, as at the time, refers to both types of dreadnoughts and older battleships, while excluding aircraft carriers.

²⁵ Lawrence Lenz, *Power and Policy: America's First Steps to Superpower, 1889-1922*, (New York: Algora Pub, 2008), 230.

²⁶ Roger Dingman, *Power in the Pacific: The Origins of Naval Arms Limitation, 1914-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 112-113.

²⁷ Lenz, *Power and Policy*, 226; Goldman, *Sunken Treaties*, 48-59.

Depression), and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt Jr. (later commander and Medal of Honor winner on Utah Beach).

The Five-Power Treaty established a fixed ratio of capital ship tonnage amongst the five great powers (5:5:3:1.75:1.75 USN:RN:IJN:MN:RM), restricted the size and power of capital ships, froze fortification construction in the Pacific, and halted naval construction programs, while the Four- and Nine-Power Treaties dealt with the Far East. While the conference did not succeed in every goal it set, it provided the precedent for a series of later conferences, and while challenged by the unification of China under the KMT, various methods of evasion and use of loopholes, and developments in naval technology, the naval side of the Washington System endured until the general collapse of international order in the late 1930s and significantly influenced the composition of the fleets and even the operations of the Second World War.²⁸

My main primary source base is American newspapers and magazines, primarily major publications from the east coast, as well as a few books made of compiled articles. While by no means a comprehensive sampling of the fragmented American media landscape, my selection includes most of the critical shapers of public opinion. I will focus on two moments on the naval side of the long span of the conference: the conference's opening on November 12th, 1921 and the debates on the limitation and possible abolition of the submarine in December 1921 and January 1922. In addition to periodicals, the thesis draws on the papers of Secretary Hughes, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. (especially his diary), Dudley Knox, editor of the *Army and Navy Journal* and a regular contributor to the *Chicago Tribune*, as well as the records of the Advisory Committee to the American delegation and the official conference transcripts.

Outside of the study of international relations, and diplomatic and naval history, the conference has lapsed into obscurity. Yet, during the Cold War, three different schools of thought

²⁸ Goldman, *Sunken Treaties*, 1-3.

emerged in the context of nuclear disarmament. Some authors condemned the treaties signed at the conference as ineffective thanks to the system's breakdown in the leadup to the Second World War. Others instead saw the conference as successful in light of events preceding it and the need to create a postwar security regime in East Asia. A few instead place the conference in the American context as I do.

Postwar arguments by aggrieved admirals such as Robert Coontz and Elmo Zumwalt resurfaced in works such as Harlow Hyde's, who in *Scraps of Paper* denounced the conference's treaties as just that, drawing a line from them to Pearl Harbor.²⁹ The 70s and 80s also saw the rise of a more holistic lens of understanding of conference as successful in light of preceding events and domestic politics. Important in this vein were Roger Dingman's *Power in the Pacific*³⁰ and Emily Goldman's *Sunken Treaties*.³¹

Four works looking at the conference from unconventional lenses are important to this thesis. Sadao Asada saw the work of the conference as American and Japanese diplomats synthesizing pre-Wilsonian and Wilsonian methods of diplomacy in "Between the Old Diplomacy and the New, 1918–1922: The Washington System and the Origins of Japanese-American Rapprochement" (2006).³²

Neil Earle's "Public Opinion for Peace: Tactics of Peace Activists at the Washington Conference on Naval Armament (1921-1922)" (1998)³³ focuses not on the diplomats, but on church-based peace activists, including their extensive media campaign.

²⁹ Harlow Hyde, *Scraps of Paper: The Disarmament Treaties between the World Wars*, (Lincoln, NE: Media Publications, 1988).

³⁰ Dingman, *Power*.

³¹ Goldman, *Sunken Treaties*.

³² Sadao Asada, "Between the Old Diplomacy and the New, 1918–1922: The Washington System and the Origins of Japanese-American Rapprochement," *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 2 (2006): 211–230.

³³ Neil Earle, "Public Opinion for Peace: Tactics of Peace Activists at the Washington Conference on Naval Armament (1921-1922)," *Journal of Church and State* 40, no. 1 (1998): 149–69.

Joseph Hayden directly discussed the role of media in interwar diplomacy in *Negotiating in the Press: American Journalism and Diplomacy, 1918-1919* (2010).³⁴ He considered the work of American journalists essential in determining the course of the Paris Peace Conference.

Colin Michael Grenig discussed the formation of post-Wilsonian foreign policy through rhetoric at Washington in “Conservative internationalism in American foreign policy: The Foreign Policy Rhetoric of the Republican Ascendancy, 1920-1930.”³⁵

I use these approaches to complicate preceding historiography by situating the conference in the domestic American search for a place in the world after the Senate’s scuttling of the League of Nations.

A critical concept that appears throughout this thesis is that of ‘openness’ in diplomacy, embodied in the first of Wilsons’ Fourteen Points calling for “Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at.”³⁶ The call for openness formed a central plank of the call for a New Diplomacy on a basis of Wilsonian principles, as opposed to the condemned Old Diplomacy, associated with secretive, smoke-filled rooms, naked interests, militarism, autocracy, and the Old World.³⁷ Walter Lippman, in *Public Opinion* went so far as to define propaganda as dependent on lack of openness to function.³⁸ Openness benefited the press in obvious ways, but also dovetailed well with their progressive principles. While many of the actual negotiations took place in private meetings of small groups of diplomats, 7 out of 59 of the official conference sessions, including the first, were plenary sessions open to large numbers of reporters, and transcripts of the other

³⁴ Hayden, *Negotiating*.

³⁵ Grenig, “Conservative Internationalism.”

³⁶ Hayden, *Negotiating*, 116-117; “Avalon Project - President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points,” accessed March 27, 2022, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp.

³⁷ Hayden, *Negotiating* 117.

³⁸ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York, N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922), 42-44.

large sessions were given to the press and printed shortly after the meeting's conclusion.³⁹ In contrast, at the Paris Conference, only a limited number of reporters, most of whom had to stand, could only witness plenary sessions from an adjacent room, and sometimes ran into serious trouble from French censors. This was better than the Portsmouth Conference in 1905 - where the journalists simply waited in a nearby hotel for the one communique of the day, often lacking key details.⁴⁰ Chapter One will interpret the newspapers' coverage of the unique spectacle of Open Diplomacy at the Washington Conference's opening. The chapter will illustrate how nearly all the journalists surveyed saw this opening not only as an excellent way to kick off the conference's work but as a distinctly American event. The second and third chapters will look at the greatest failure of the naval side of the conference - the inability to get the five powers to agree to limits on submarines, and the press' reactions as the conference drew more and more closed. Specifically, the second chapter will deal with how the press parsed the submarine debates, especially how they dealt with Britain's attempt to abolish the submarine through force of American public opinion, Hughes' attempt to justify retaining the submarine with some limits based on that very same idea of public opinion, and the press' reaction to French intransigence on submarines. The third chapter will deal with the ugly accusations of propaganda and conspiracy that emerged out of the passion of the submarine debate.

At the Washington Naval Conference, the American press found itself in a new diplomatic role thanks to the Harding Administration's pursuit of publicity and appeals to public opinion as a tool of its conservative internationalist foreign policy. In navigating this role, the press first nearly-universally celebrated the opening of the conference as a triumph of American

³⁹ Government Printing Office, *Conference on the Limitation of Armament*, 10 February 1922, box 165, folder "Washington Conference Printed Matter Report of the Conference," Charles Evans Hughes Papers, LOC, Washington, 3-4.

⁴⁰ Hayden, *Negotiating*, 120, 124-126, 129.

diplomatic openness, both by establishing a particularly American meaning for the international event, and by provoking contestation and conspiracism when later conference events around the regulation of the submarine seemed to undermine that openness.

Chapter 1: Baseballs and Bombshells: Opening the Washington Conference

The Conference on the Limitation of Armaments opened on the rather cold morning of Saturday, November 12, 1921 in Memorial Continental Hall in Washington D.C. Many of the hundreds of people who converged on the hall expected to take part in a major historical event, but none but a few expected what would happen that morning. This chapter will focus on how the press interpreted the dramatic events of that morning, largely through coverage published the day afterward. After the entrance of the delegations (save President Harding) and the audience, and the reading of a prayer, President Harding entered and gave a speech concerning the ideals that led to the calling of the conference and bemoaning the evil of war.⁴¹ Hughes then gave a speech, beginning with the expected formalities and technicalities, before giving a brief history of previous unsuccessful attempts at arms control, and then suddenly (and in complete contrast to diplomatic etiquette) launching into a public, sweeping, and concrete proposal for a plan to massively reduce the three strongest navies on earth.⁴² The Hughes plan, after establishing the tonnage of dreadnoughts as the yardstick for measuring navies, called for a complete cessation of the building programs then underway (a ‘naval holiday’), the scrapping of forty-eight extant dreadnooughts of nearly one millions tons displacement, limits on the size of future dreadnoughts, and a fixed ratio of future naval strength between the three greatest navies after the holiday: 500,000 tons USN to 500,000 tons RN to 300,000 tons IJN.⁴³ Before Hughes could adjourn, the congressional galleries shouted for responses from the heads of the other delegations, who gave speeches one by one until the session could finally be dismissed.⁴⁴

⁴¹ State Department, *First-Plenary*, 4-9.

⁴² *Ibid*, 12-20.

⁴³ Hyde, *Scraps*, 9-11; State Department, *First-Plenary*, 26.

⁴⁴ State Department, *First-Plenary*, 28-38.

This chapter will examine how reporters assigned meaning to and interpreted the events of that morning, and how that played into the construction and promotion of conservative internationalism as a distinctly American form. I will start by examining the interpretation of President Harding's speech and the preceding prayer, before moving to the central drama of the day: Hughes' speech. After that, there will be a more direct investigation of the dialectic that Asada Sadao describes between Wilsonianism and Old Diplomacy, through three lenses: the focus on the remarks afterwards by Prime Minister Briand, the inclusion and participation of Congress in the proceedings, and direct comparisons made (and not made) between Washington and the Paris two years before. A number of alternative perspectives on the day's events will also be discussed: the elision of the presence of women in the American delegation, the critique made by airpower advocates, and the perspectives of the Black and Communist press. Finally, I will look at the American diplomats' intentions for the opening and how closely the press followed the route Hughes, Harding, and Roosevelt laid out for it.

While the rather general speech President Harding gave immediately before Hughes did not garner as much attention, the press paid attention to his remarks and saw his words as embodying an American spirit on the world stage. Harry Price, in a front-page *Washington Post* article, even went so far as to juxtapose the aim of the conference with the American public when he claimed that Harding's remark that the American people, "Want less of armament and none of war" exemplified both America and the conference's goals.⁴⁵ Price presented Harding as not just voicing America's concerns but also those of the world's people at large, while simultaneously speaking to that same world.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Price presented Harding simultaneously speaking for the American government as well by highlighting how Harding

⁴⁵ Harry N. Price, "Harding Voices Hope of World for Peace," *Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 1921.

⁴⁶ Price, "Harding Voices."

promised each delegation that America lacked any ulterior motives. Albert Fox, also of the *Post*, expounded on Price's points. Fox described how after an "American welcome," Harding suggested that the assembled delegates of the world powers use the (supposedly) American way of just reducing arms to solve the age-old (and Old World) problem of arms races.⁴⁷ Fox read this into the speech, as it contained no explicit statement of any such American method.⁴⁸

John Owens, of the *Baltimore Sun*, took a broader view of Harding's speech. Owens, unlike Price and Fox, noted that Harding did not make a grand entrance, but surprised the crowd by entering from an unexpected direction without a large entourage, embodying an American ideal of simplicity, not European monarchy. Owens admitted that Harding was a relatively subpar speaker, but claimed that he made up for this by exemplifying the American everyman (and simultaneously the world everyman) trying to articulate his simple desire for his Main Street life free from the demands of international competition before the statesmen of the Great Powers. Owens thus not only ascribed universal characteristics to Harding as Price did, but subtly excluded Harding from the intrigues of Great Power politics, presenting him not as the conference's instigator and planner, but as the outsider petitioning before the mighty of the world. Owens touched on similar themes earlier in his piece when he discussed the prayer prior to Harding's speech.⁴⁹ Owens condemned how the delegates did not seem moved by, or even followed, the prayer, except for the Asian delegates and General Pershing, whose greater devoutness Owens credited to his Western yeoman upbringing, similarly to how he described the everyman qualities ascribed to the Ohion Harding. I wonder how Owens observed all of this if he bowed his head and followed as closely as he hoped the delegates would. Unlike the prayers,

⁴⁷ Albert Fox, "Scrap Capital Ships, America's Bold Arms Proposal Laid Before Conference by President and Hughes," *Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 1921.

⁴⁸ State Department, *First-Plenary*, 4-9.

⁴⁹ John Owens, "U. S. Navy Cut Plan Stuns Conference. Kato, For Japan, Agrees In Principle; Britain's Delegates Noncommittal," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 13, 1921.

Owens wrote that Harding's speech for/of the common man gave the room, "A new spirit," (i.e. the New Diplomacy) that enabled the delegates to rise to the gravity of the consequential task before them.⁵⁰

The many descriptions of Charles Evan Hughes' opening speech in newspapers nearly all agreed on how his sudden presentation of a concrete plan for a steep reduction of the world's three greatest navies surprised the room. The generally Democratic⁵¹ *New York Times*' Edwin James,⁵² the *Baltimore Sun*'s John Owens,⁵³ and the Republican-leaning⁵⁴ *New York Herald's* Louis Seibold, among many others, all (rather ironically) compared Hughes' speech to a bombshell although none were as ironic as Seibold's comparison to a declaration of war.⁵⁵ The metaphor apparently became so prevalent that *The Independent's* editors later complained about it,⁵⁶ although variety did exist: Lincoln Eyre of the *Sun* referred to the Hughes plan as, "A big caliber melinite shell,"⁵⁷ the *New York Tribune* ran a piece where army officers explained how "Hughes' Peace Attack" emulated the elements of a good surprise attack,⁵⁸ and Ida Tarbell compared the shock to that of a Czechoslovak farmhand stopping a charging bull with a sledgehammer.⁵⁹ She considered the greatest effects of the conference's opening to not be on armaments, but on three essential tenets of Old Style diplomacy, the first (the other two will be returned to later) being the destruction of its secrecy by Hughes' open proposal, the genesis of

⁵⁰ Owens, "Cut Plan Stuns Conference."

⁵¹ David Pietrusza, *1920: The Year of the Six Presidents*, 1st Carroll & Graf ed (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007), 102.

⁵² Edwin James, "American Plan a Surprise," *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1921.

⁵³ Owens, "Cut Plan Stuns Conference."

⁵⁴ Pietrusza, *1920*, 212.

⁵⁵ Louis Seibold, "Decisive Plan to End War Furnishes Big Surprise," *New York Herald*, Nov. 13, 1921.

⁵⁶ "Disarming the Conference: The Generalship of Hughes in the Campaign of Practical Idealism," *The Independent and Weekly Review*, November 1921, 8.

⁵⁷ Eyre, "French Upset by U.S. Plans For Naval Cut," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 13, 1921.

⁵⁸ Washington Bureau, "Hughes's Peace 'Attack' Good Military Tactics," *New York Tribune*, Nov. 13 1921.

⁵⁹ Tarbell, *Peacemakers--Blessed and Otherwise*, (New York: Little & Ives, 1922), 44.

which she placed at the end of a line of efforts by Americans such as John Hay and Woodrow Wilson towards open diplomacy.⁶⁰

The same reporters interpreted their surprise as evidence of this new American manner of diplomacy. Edwin James described how America had not just literally sat at the head of the conference table, but taken leadership of the affair,⁶¹ Owens in the *Sun* presented the atmosphere changing from one more befit to a social gathering (a theme repeated by just about every other witness, even H.G. Wells)⁶² to a more appropriate one, Hughes scolding the delegates and audience almost like a schoolmaster, changing the atmosphere to one akin to the businesslike atmosphere of a party convention,⁶³ something uniquely American. Seibold's *New York Herald* piece attributed the genesis of the Hughes Plan (and even the arrangement of conference tables) to an especially American determination and business sense. Seibold considered Hughes' recounting past failed arms control conferences akin to a lawyer's citation of precedents, a practice of common law courts. Seibold discussed how Hughes refuted "Archaic and elusive" diplomatic methods and how surprised the Europeans and Asians must have been at Hughes' rejection of their accustomed, "Leisurely approach" of ceremony, formality, and social gatherings.⁶⁴ Arthur Sears Henning, writing for the GOP-leaning⁶⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, proclaimed that Hughes' bold yet common, "American shirt sleeve diplomacy," had surprised and triumphed over, "Veterans accustomed to the concealments and maneuverings of old world diplomacy."⁶⁶ Henning presented Hughes and America as heroically sacrificing more than anyone for peace.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 43.

⁶¹ James, "American Plan."

⁶² H.G. Wells, *Washington and the Hope of Peace* (London: W. Collins, 1922; Project Gutenberg Australia, 2013), Chapter VI, <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks13/1303711h.html#chap06>.

⁶³ Owens, "Cut Plan Stuns Conference."

⁶⁴ Seibold, "Decisive Plan."

⁶⁵ Pietrusza, 1920, 338.

⁶⁶ Arthur Sears Henning, "U.S. to Equal Britain in New Craft; Japan 3D," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 13, 1921.

⁶⁷ Henning, "U.S. to Equal."

A piece in the *Washington Post* declared that Hughes' speech, "Will complete the Declaration of Independence."⁶⁸ All this tied into ideas from Great War propaganda, which presented American youth rescuing Old Europe by a war against the American idea of Europe.⁶⁹ The fact that Hughes' reticence on certain foreign issues earned him the nickname Charles 'Evasive' Hughes during his 1916 campaign was swiftly forgotten.⁷⁰

In "Between the Old Diplomacy and the New, 1918–1922," Asada Sadao clearly describes a dialectic between Old and New Diplomacy at Washington creating conservative internationalism.⁷¹ Hughes used similar language in an article he wrote a few months after the conference, while ascribing the process to, "Democratic sentiment," and, "Public criticism."⁷² This section of this chapter will look at three factors specific to this dialectic of diplomatic methods: the reaction of foreign delegates, the role of Congress on the opening day, and references to Wilson and Wilsonianism by the newspapers.

Since conservative internationalism's mission included spreading norms, the papers dedicated much space to the reactions of, speculations about, and interviews with the foreign delegates, especially the most important leaders: Lord Balfour for Britain, Baron Kato of Japan, and Prime Minister Briand of France. Despite France's status as a second rate naval power on the verge of falling to third rate status⁷³ leading Hughes to not even include it in his plan, Briand received disproportionate attention. The reporters seemed to appreciate Briand's reaction most:

⁶⁸ AP, "Navy Holiday Plan Startles England," *Washington Post*, Nov. 13 1921.

⁶⁹ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 42-43.

⁷⁰ John A. Morello, *Selling the President, 1920: Albert D. Lasker, Advertising, and the Election of Warren G. Harding* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2001), 23.

⁷¹ Asada, "Between," 211–212.

⁷² Hughes, "Observations," 365.

⁷³ While a major naval power for the 19th and even the beginning of the 20th century, the dreadnought revolution left France behind, exacerbated by the Army's needs during the Great War. Joel Blatt, "France and the Washington Conference," in *The Washington Conference, 1921-22: Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability and the Road to Pearl Harbor*, ed. Erik Goldstein and John Maurer (London: Kass, 1994), 192-193. Marshall Foch went so far as to tell Theodore Roosevelt Jr. that France no longer had a navy worth discussing at the conference. Roosevelt Diary 12.

when Edwin James of the *New York Times* asked Briand about Hughes' speech, he praised Hughes' strength and directness "À l'américaine," and when France's turn to lead came in the future he would attempt to emulate Hughes' diplomacy "À l'américaine," (a statement that would come back to bite him).⁷⁴ This statement was reprinted in a few different translations and misspellings in the headlines and subheads of a large number of papers,⁷⁵ quite extraordinary given that Briand's statements mattered far less to the success of the Hughes Plan than Balfour's or Kato's. Perhaps Briand's statements seemed to confirm that the American way would spread, while Balfour's and Kato's guarded replies did not.

Most unusually, nearly the entirety of both Congressional Houses got front-row seats to the conference's opening day. This subsection will look at two prongs of the coverage of Congress' role: their participation as a vital component of the new American diplomacy and as a contrast to their earlier blocking of the Wilsonian project.

Albert Fox of *The Washington Post* clearly noted the novelty of the inclusion of Congress, and discussed how he believed Congress quickly took the new opportunity by breaking the old diplomatic protocol when they shouted for responses from the delegates.⁷⁶ Edwin James called Congress' intervention both characteristically and uniquely American in the *New York Times*,⁷⁷ as did Ida Tarbell. While she attributed Congress' response to jealousy about the conference getting more attention than it, she also placed it on a pedestal by declaring Congress' demolition of diplomatic propriety the second tenant of Old Diplomacy shattered at Washington. She described Congress as acting, "As if it were at a ball game," cheering during speeches like home runs, and calling on Briand, "As they might have called for Babe Ruth."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Edwin James, "Briand Confident of Quick Success," *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1921.

⁷⁵ Edwin James, "'American Way' in Arms Offer Wins Briand's Praise," *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1921; AP, "Delegates Praise Hughes' Arms Plan," *Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 1921; Eyre, "French Upset."

⁷⁶ Albert Fox, "Scrap"

⁷⁷ Edwin James, "American Plan."

⁷⁸ Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 49-50.

Tarbell compared the new American diplomatic method to an essential aspect of Americana, and despite the sarcasm, she also credited Congress with delivering, “What William Allen White called ‘the yelp of democracy.’”⁷⁹ Afterwards, when a shocked British delegate told her about how such a thing just “Isn’t done”, she replied, “But it had been done, and the chances are that there will be more of it in the future,”⁸⁰ a remark in line with the conservative internationalist mission, notable because of Tarbell’s strong Wilsonianism.

Henning of the *Chicago Tribune* called Congress’ cheers a, “Spontaneous indorsement [sic],”⁸¹ by Congress, in stark contrast to the long, acrimonious debate over the League. John Owens in *The Sun* also focused on the Senate’s seeming unanimity in cheering the Hughes plan.⁸²

Tarbell placed the conference in a series of efforts by America to promote open diplomacy, including Wilson’s at Paris, who she argued was betrayed, although she did not say whether by the Senate or the Allies. While she noted that the Senate approved and the foreign diplomats would likely accede, this sense of betrayal continued in one sphere: despite most of the delegates having been present at Paris, Hughes omitted any mention of Paris or the League of Nations from his recounting of previous arms limitation, an omission, “So obvious as to force attention,”⁸³ in Tarbell’s words. This omission sent a strong message - she found all discussion of the League vanished from Washington.⁸⁴ Some went even further in connecting to Wilson: *The Chicago Tribune* featured a snippet from *The Kansas City Post* calling the Hughes plan a, “Triumph for Woodrow Wilson and the ideals for which he was crucified,”⁸⁵ while the editors of

⁷⁹ Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 50.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Henning, “U.S. to Equal.”

⁸² John Owens, “Cut Plan Stuns Conference”.

⁸³ Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 46.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 47.

⁸⁵ “Editorials Sound the Praise of America’s Bold Stroke,” *Chicago Tribune*, 13 Nov. 1921.

The Independent presented Hughes' speech as the antidote to, "The example of another great conference...too recent not to bring painful memories."⁸⁶ More positively, Edwin James claimed that parts of Harding's address were, "Truly Wilsonian," such as the first line to receive applause, which declared the consequences of the conference would decide the world's future.⁸⁷ Other lines he pointed out included Harding's referral to his call for the conference as, "The spoken word of a war-weary world," and his declaration that America bore no ulterior motives.⁸⁸ Interestingly, James also placed the line where Harding says the conference is not, "A council of nations, seeking to remake human kind,"⁸⁹ a central tenet of conservative internationalism, in his claim, perfectly showcasing the dialectic between the two at work. This jump to Wilson is all the more remarkable because it seems probable that the Harding administration, or at least some elements of it, specifically aimed to make the Conference not Wilsonian.⁹⁰

Besides the assaults on diplomatic secrecy and propriety by Hughes and Congress, Tarbell also mentioned a third law of diplomacy broken at Washington: the complete exclusion of women from any role besides spectator or reporter. Twenty-one people sat behind the American delegation, an advisory committee drawn from the public,⁹¹ of which four were women, who Tarbell labeled as, "The diplomatic pioneers of the United States," connecting the four to the quintessentially American frontier. Tarbell recounted several conversations with shocked foreign delegates asking her why women were included in the American delegation.⁹² To their questions, she wrote: "Man's exclusive, vested interest in diplomacy had been

⁸⁶ "Disarming the Conference."

⁸⁷ Edwin James, "American Plan."

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Roosevelt Diary, 4.

⁹¹ Although one must wonder how representative the (all-white) group really was, since the list on page ii of *First-Plenary* shows that ten (all men) of the twenty-one were current or former government and military officials, many of high station.

⁹² Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 52.

invaded—its masculinity attacked like its secrecy and propriety. What would come of the invasion no one could tell.”⁹³ Yet, despite this (supposedly) representative body’s inclusion in the American delegation fitting perfectly into the narrative of common-man American style diplomacy, the four ‘pioneers’ only got one mention besides Tarbell: a brief bottom-page story in the *Los Angeles Times*, whose headline, “[Hughes’] Program Indorsed [sic] by Women,” did nothing to indicate that the four women whose supportive opinion it quotes were official members of the delegation, and whose text made no mention of their presence being a first, although unlike Tarbell, the *Times* article at least names the four.⁹⁴

Due to editing a monthly magazine, *The Independent’s* editorial board had time to let the emotional surprise of Hughes’ speech wear off before responding to it, and thus they took a relatively critical approach to Hughes’ plan. The *Independent’s* critique provides a quite interesting perspective: those of airpower advocates, the disciples of Billy Mitchell.⁹⁵ The editors could not understand why Hughes sidestepped what they considered the strongest weapon - aircraft, although they celebrated the scrapping of battleships they considered obsolete against airpower. They also condemned what they considered far too much generosity towards submarines. They speculated that the Hughes plan took the form it did since everyone would quickly agree at the outset to get rid of the supposedly manifestly obsolete dreadnoughts, while other fields would require more work.⁹⁶ Wales, in the *Los Angeles Times*, similarly criticized Hughes for leaving out airships, despite what he (incorrectly) called the “Valuable and reliable work,” of Scheer’s Zeppelins at Jutland.⁹⁷

⁹³ Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 53.

⁹⁴ “Program Indorsed by Women,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 13, 1921. The four female advisors were Katherine Phillips Edson, Anna J. Bird (always called Mrs. Charles Sumner Bird in period sources), Alice Ames Winter (always called Mrs. Thomas G. Winter in period sources), and Eleanor Frank Egan.

⁹⁵ Whose (in)famous sinking of the *SMS Ostfriesland* had occurred earlier that year.

⁹⁶ “The Conference,” *The Independent*, November 1921, 14.

⁹⁷ Wales, “Time Needed.” No Zeppelin even sighted any of the Grand Fleet until well after the battle had begun, thanks to miscommunication and the infamously poor visibility that day. V.E. Tarrant, *Jutland: The*

The Black press dedicated far less space to the events in Washington. Besides one letter to the editor in *The New Journal and Guide*, declaring that only Christianity, not conferences, would bring peace to the world, only a handful of articles in reaction to the conference appeared on the pages of four of the nation's most prominent Black papers⁹⁸ during the opening week of the conference. This is understandable given the complete lack of Black representation at the conference,⁹⁹ the local focus of these papers, and the fact that the negotiations only indirectly affected African-Americans. Perhaps the most powerful reaction to the conference, an editorial cartoon in the *Chicago Defender* entitled, "A Real Job for the Conference" explains the relative disinterest of black papers in the conference.¹⁰⁰

German Perspective, 76-77. "German airship reconnaissance, like the U-Boat trap, had proved to be of no value, and would have no bearing whatsoever on the course of the battle." p. 77.

⁹⁸ The four I looked at are: *The New Journal*, *The Chicago Defender*, *the Baltimore Afro-American*, and *The Philadelphia Tribune*.

⁹⁹ Notwithstanding the speculation on whether President Harding had passing ancestors.

¹⁰⁰ L. Plodbery, "A Real Job for the Conference," Editorial Cartoon, *Chicago Defender*, December 19th, 1921.



Figure 1: "A Real Job for the Conference," *Chicago Defender*, 19 December 1921¹⁰¹

The lone black figure's plea does not seem to worry The Lyncher happily walking along, and we cannot see who, if anybody, is listening to the black man. Not all depictions were pessimistic. In the *Philadelphia Tribune*, William Imes, despite general pessimism in the conference, had hope in the Hughes plan, which he considered a first step towards a more comprehensive program of arms limitation. Nonetheless, Imes condemned Hughes for leaving out all but the greatest powers.¹⁰² A.L. Jackson, in a back page article in the *Chicago Defender*, shared many of Imes' concerns, but praised the simplicity of the Hughes plan as comprehensible

¹⁰¹ Plodbery, "A Real Job."

¹⁰² William Imes, "The Rising Tide as Seen in the Washington Conference on Limitation of Armament," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 19, 1921.

to, "The man in the street."¹⁰³ Jackson called out the disinterest of the black press in the conference, since the achievement or failure to gain peace would affect all races, and since "The stakes for which they are playing," were largely colonial territories inhabited by non-white peoples.¹⁰⁴ He ended by sarcastically noting that if the world powers ceased their violent competition for these territories, their attention could instead go towards developing a policy which would allow the people there to develop themselves.¹⁰⁵ Lastly, Herbert Seligman¹⁰⁶ wrote a series of articles published in the *Philadelphia Tribune* and the *Afro-American* denouncing the entire conference as merely a nice way for colonial powers (and the bankers behind them) to divide and exploit colonized peoples, similarly to the last paper this chapter will analyze.¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸

The most sarcastic and critical coverage came, from *The Toiler*, the Communist Party's weekly predecessor to *The Daily Worker*. Its editors argued that, "Secretary Hughes, plenipotentiary of American imperialism, has suddenly overwhelmed the world by an attack of astounding kindness," only in order to stave off the inevitable collapse of capitalism,¹⁰⁹ which they identified in an earlier article by a paradox: if the US disarmed, then it would increase already high unemployment (*The Toiler's* editors linked the Washington Conference's opening to a failed unemployment conference held in Washington previously - and were the only paper to mention shipyard employment), but if America refused to do so, then it would go bankrupt.¹¹⁰ The article addressed the depiction of the Hughes plan as quintessentially American by claiming it as a typically American duplicitous plot, "To play the role of the Good Samaritan among the

¹⁰³ A.L. Jackson, "A Master Statesman," *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 19, 1921.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Seligman was the NAACP's publicity director, with a long career writing about civil rights issues. He published a whole series of articles on the Conference, but sadly I was unable to find most of them.

¹⁰⁷ Herbert Seligmann, "Prominent Author Gives Views on Arms Conference," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 19, 1921.

¹⁰⁸ Herbert Seligmann, "The Armament Conference II.," *Afro-American*, Nov. 18, 1921.

¹⁰⁹ "Scrapping the Navies," *Toiler*, Nov. 26, 1921.

¹¹⁰ "The Outlook," *Toiler*, Nov. 26, 1921.

nations,” in order to disguise the true economic nature of American imperialism.¹¹¹ Even the most extreme fringe of the American press followed others’ presentation of Hughes, just with Hughes as bad rather than good. While noting that the other powers would likely accept the Hughes plan with a few modifications, *The Toiler* echoed the concerns of *The Independent’s* editors about technology. *The Toiler’s* editors argued that the conference’s true purpose was to ensure imperial domination in China and Siberia, while excluding the Soviets,¹¹² a line also used by Seligman.¹¹³ Alongside a comparison to the Tsar’s Hague Conference, *The Toiler’s* editors called on the workers to hold demonstrations to expose the reality of Washington,¹¹⁴ and in the edition from the week before, there is an advertisement for such a demonstration in New York.¹¹⁵

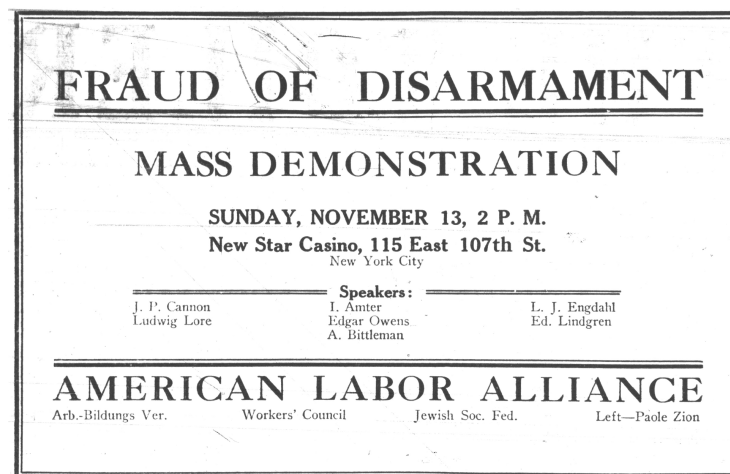


Figure 2: Advertisement on top of page 2 of *The Toiler*, November 19, 1921.¹¹⁶

The Harding Administration specifically devised Hughes’ opening speech as a dramatic spectacle in order to appeal to public opinion both at home and abroad. At home, Harding needed to outflank radical advocates of disarmament within the GOP, especially Senator Borah, to retain

¹¹¹ “Scrapping the Navies.”

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Seligman, “Prominent Author”; Seligmann, “The Armament Conference II.”

¹¹⁴ “Scrapping the Navies.”

¹¹⁵ American Labor Alliance, “Fraud of Disarmament,” advertisement, *The Toiler*, Nov. 19, 1921, 2.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

control of the GOP.¹¹⁷ Harding, Hughes, and Roosevelt wanted to demonstrate good faith to the public and rally the American people behind them, so they could pressure the Senate into ratifying the conference's results, and present a strong hand to foreign delegations worried about a repeat of the Senate's refusal to ratify Versailles.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the American delegates hoped public opinion in the other countries would pressure their delegations to accept the American proposal. It worked spectacularly.¹¹⁹ While the factual content of the newspaper articles largely aligns with both secondary sources and Roosevelt's diary, the reporters added symbolic and moral dimensions to the day's events. It worked so well that Roosevelt found himself perturbed after the second plenary session when the press read meanings into the British and Japanese speeches there, which Roosevelt knew did not exist.¹²⁰ In *The Brass Check*, Upton Sinclair noted how the, "Whirlwind of excitement," from a sudden story could bypass the usual processes of newspaper editing¹²¹—a process that likely happened at the conference's opening. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann argued appeals to such, "Soulfilling," ideals such as Americanness contextualized complex facts in the public imagination,¹²² an interpretation clearly in line with how the reporters covered Hughes' speech. Similarly, the invocation of Americanness allowed conservative internationalism to be placed into an imagined continuity with past American diplomacy, as Hughes does near the beginning of a later article.¹²³

With the (partial) exception of *The Toiler*, just about every observer in every paper explicitly declared the conference as one of the most momentous events of the era or even a

¹¹⁷ Lenz, *Power and Policy*, 226.

¹¹⁸ According to Roosevelt, Hughes said it was the only workable method to get the American public to support the Administration. Roosevelt Diary, 1, 5.

¹¹⁹ Lenz, *Power*, 233-236.

¹²⁰ Roosevelt Diary, 37.

¹²¹ Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check; A Study of American Journalism; Evidence and Reasons Behind the Media's Corruption* (Pasadena, California: Self-Published, 1919), 42-43.

¹²² Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 402.

¹²³ Hughes, "Observations," 365-366.

critical turning point in world history, a choice between a peaceful future or another world war.

The highlighting of the conference's opening as the birth of a new American diplomatic order rooted in a new conception of how diplomacy should operate thus placed an American stamp and an American mold on the course of the world's future in the minds of the reporters and readers, albeit a stamp the same papers would retreat from in December.

Chapter 2: “Good Selling Sensationalism:” (Not) Explaining the Submarine Deadlock

During the Great War, the *Kaiserliche Marine* used its U-Boats to wage unrestricted submarine warfare, nearly forcing Britain out of the war.¹²⁴ It led to public outrage, especially in the United States, where in 1921 there was a mass letter-writing campaign against the submarine, discussed below.¹²⁵ This moral outrage against the submarine, considered to be a weapon used by the unscrupulous Kaiser to slaughter helpless civilians and neutrals, was extremely passionate: to take a singular example, Carrie Chapman Catt called the submarine a weapon, “Hell born; satanic, diabolic, infernal,” and she called for nations that supported it and men voting for it to be outlawed along with it.¹²⁶

Besides capital ships, the program Hughes presented in November also included a tonnage ratio for submarines with the allocation of 90,000 tons USN, 90,000 tons RN, and 54,000 tons IJN.¹²⁷ The submarine issue came to the fore suddenly on the coattails of the finalization of the capital ship balance, when after failing in to gain a disproportionate allotment of capital ships, France agreed to back down as long as she got her way in submarines.¹²⁸

While British governmental and military opinion was divided, strong public support in Britain led the British delegation to propose the abolition of submarines in war on humanitarian grounds, which they officially did in committee on December 22nd, against immediate opposition from Japan, Italy, and France. The British hoped to even the odds via American public opinion. Hughes, after initially dodging the question, read out a statement written and

¹²⁴ Submarines attacking merchant shipping without following international laws (‘cruiser rules’) meant to protect civilians and neutrals, but difficult for submarines to carry out. Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (Headline, 2018), 100, 127.

¹²⁵ Dingman, *Power*, 83.

¹²⁶ Carrie Chapman Catt, “Advice Wanted,” *The Woman Citizen*, Dec. 17, 1921.

¹²⁷ State Department, *First-Plenary*, 48.

¹²⁸ Roosevelt Diary, 60.

passed unanimously by the Advisory Committee, advocating for the retention of the submarine and endorsing Hughes' ratio, leaving only the ceremony of the British conceding.¹²⁹

The diplomats then moved to discussion of relative tonnage. France demanded a disproportionate allotment. Hughes suggested a compromise plan, which the French rejected as less than their 90,000 ton minimum. On the 28th, the delegates admitted that they would not reach an agreement, leading the British to refuse limitation on other surface ships.¹³⁰ Rather than interrogating why the American delegation refused to endorse abolition, the press overflowed with writing on, as the Advisory Committee's Committee on General Information, tasked with monitoring the press on behalf of the diplomats, put it, "Good Selling Sensationalism,"¹³¹ found in the foreign delegations, rather than the big questions at home.

This chapter will analyze the press' understanding of two vital moments of the submarine debate at the conference: the failure of submarine limitation on December 28th, 1921 and the failure of submarine abolition four days earlier, through coverage of France, Britain, and the Advisory Committee.

Many news outlets explained the failure of the submarine negotiations by painting France as unready to join the new conservative internationalist order. This framing predated the submarine debates: first emerging when Briand ended any possibility of army limitation,¹³² an impression reinforced by France's sudden battleship demands. The press reaction to that was swift and furious, but paled in comparison to that during the submarine debate.

¹²⁹ Hyde, *Scraps*, 64-66.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Committee on General Information, "News Summary No.25", 9 December 1921, JX 1974.5.A6 U62 1922, volume *Limitation of Armament Conference 1921-2 Committee on General Information, American Delegation: News Summary Periodical Comment Editorial Summary Special Bulletins*, LOC, Washington.

¹³² Hyde, *Scraps*, 62; Wells, *Washington*, Chapter XI, <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks13/1303711h.html#chap11>.

The papers quickly blamed France for failure to limit submarine tonnage. Louis Seibold put it most artfully in the *Herald*: "The French Government to-day [sic] torpedoed the American plan for limitation of naval armaments," which Seibold described as a ruthless crushing of hope.¹³³ Seibold's assessment was joined by a chorus of others: *The Independent*'s editors argued that France had harmed the world and itself by dashed its hopes;¹³⁴ the *Washington Post*'s editors thundered condemnation at France's, "Course of folly,"¹³⁵ while on the front page Albert Fox, under a headline reading, "Limitation and Ten-Year Holiday Given Up Except for Battleships," lamented that the prospect of any comprehensive naval holiday was doomed.¹³⁶ Well before this, reporters and editors saw France as the cause of submarine issues. As early as December 17th, Frederick William Wile of the *Public Ledger* argued that the French, "Have deliberately planted a snag in the smooth-flowing conference stream,"¹³⁷ for submarines and as the chances of an agreement dimmed, the chorus which Seibold would form the pinnacle of grew. On the 26th of December, *The Herald* declared that the American delegates faced a crisis of conduct,¹³⁸ and the *Times* argued that despite America's great sacrifice, the conference could not move forwards unless France gave in, an unlikely scenario which threw submarine limitation into question.¹³⁹ On the 27th, the *Times* declared France the, "Key log in the jam on the submarine issue," but warned that Hughes could not force the French.¹⁴⁰ The *Chicago Tribune* also claimed that the fate of the conference laid in French hands,¹⁴¹ while Seibold declared that, "Obstinate," and,

¹³³ Louis Seibold, "Submarine Limit Abandoned, France Refusing to Yield; Britain Reserves Right to Build Auxiliaries at Will; Root Offers Resolutions to Restrict Undersea War," *New York Herald*, Dec. 29, 1921.

¹³⁴ "Nerves and Submarines," *The Independent and Weekly Review*, January 1921, 6.

¹³⁵ "France's Astounding Attitude," *Washington Post*, Dec. 30, 1921.

¹³⁶ Albert W. Fox, "Limitation and Ten-Year Holiday Given Up Except for Battleships," *Washington Post*, Dec. 29, 1921.

¹³⁷ Frederick William Wile, "Parley Issues Now Shifted to London," *Public Ledger*, December 18, 1921.

¹³⁸ NY Herald Bureau, "American Delegation Is Now Facing Crisis," *New York Herald*, Dec. 26, 1921.

¹³⁹ "Doubt Agreement In This Conference On Submarine Cut," *New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1921.

¹⁴⁰ Albert W. Fox, "France May Ask a Later Conference," *Washington Post*, Dec. 29, 1921.

¹⁴¹ "Deadlock Seen On Submarines; May Meet Again," *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 27, 1921.

“Jealous,” Paris posed the only danger to further progress,¹⁴² and even the blatantly pro-French *New York American* declared that France’s course endangered the conference.¹⁴³ By the 28th, with the French decision made, the banner and all the headers of Edwin James’ article laid out French blame, even as the article itself took a more measured tone.¹⁴⁴ Yet, a few dissenting voices sounded among the chorus - in an editorial published on the 30th, the editors of the *New York Times* wrote that because of high hopes for the conference, the American press had been swift to judge without understanding and incorrectly laid every mishap at France’s feet.¹⁴⁵ So what reasons did the papers give their readers to understand the French actions?

The most common explanation given was that France was unready or unwilling to participate in the new order, in several different variations - in the first, Briand and/or France in general simply could not understand the purpose, atmosphere, or way of doing diplomacy at Washington. Journalists took what they considered disregard for the conference’s purpose seriously. The *Public Ledger* highlighted Briand’s off the cuff remark on the 21st calling Washington a mere, “Economy Conference,” above even his flippant reference to the sinking of the *Lusitania*!¹⁴⁶ The editors of *The Woman Citizen* called France a, “Jarring and retarding influence,” “Out of step and out of tune at the Conference,”¹⁴⁷ a sentiment echoed by the editors of the *Washington Post*,¹⁴⁸ and in the *Times*¹⁴⁹— quite the departure from the praise of Briand’s ‘À l’américaine’ remark a month earlier. Louis Seibold was a bit more generous in the *Herald* -

¹⁴² Louis Seibold, “France Holds Firm on Submarines,” *New York Herald*, Dec. 27, 1921.

¹⁴³ Universal Service, “France Rejects Hughes’ Submarine Limit,” *New York American*, Dec. 27, 1921.

¹⁴⁴ Edwin James, “French Cabinet Rejects Hughes Offer On Submarines, Urges New Conference,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1921.

¹⁴⁵ “Patience with France,” *New York Times*, Dec. 30, 1921.

¹⁴⁶ Norman W. Baxter, “Briand Says He Will Not Yield On Submarines,” *Public Ledger*, Dec. 21, 1921.

¹⁴⁷ “France,” *The Woman Citizen*, Jan. 14, 1922.

¹⁴⁸ “Astounding,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 30, 1921.

¹⁴⁹ “Japan Ready,” *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1921.

Harding and Hughes imbued the French with the spirit of the conference at its start, but the French had lost it.¹⁵⁰ Drexel thought similarly in the *Public Ledger*.¹⁵¹

Edwin James argued on the *Times*' front page that the sequence of French demands derived from the bargaining methods of European Old Diplomacy.¹⁵² Similarly, Frederick William Wile in multiple articles for the *Public Ledger* considered French opposition to Britain to derive from thoughts, "Of a bargaining character," as did Sidney Thatcher of the *Washington Post*.¹⁵³ The editors of the *Chicago Tribune* argued that other writers were overreacting, since Old Style diplomacy would produce results in time.¹⁵⁴

Others did not show such patience. At the very beginning of their analysis of what went wrong at the conference, the editors of *The Woman Citizen* lamented what they saw as a backslide of their beloved liberal France towards militarism, while the British editorials printed in the *Times* went so far as to declare the French submarine stand, as a reversion to Napoleon, even outright comparing France to Wilhelmine Germany.¹⁵⁵ Others thought France brought ancient European rivalries to the American conference. Laurence Hills in the *Herald* argued that the French public's age-old dislike of England got in Hughes' way, as did Wile and others in the *Public Ledger*.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ Louis Seibold, "French Delay Naval Agreement," *New York Herald*, Dec. 25, 1921; Louis Seibold, "France Rejects Hughes Plan to Cut Submarine Tonnage," *New York Herald*, December 28, 1921.

¹⁵¹ Constance Drexel, "Spiritual Success of Parley Seen," *Public Ledger*, Dec. 21, 1921.

¹⁵² Edwin L. James, "France Will Cut Capital Ships Demand If Assured Big Ratio On Small Craft," *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 1921.

¹⁵³ Frederick William Wile, "Four Powers Oppose Britain On Submarines," *Public Ledger*, Dec. 23, 1921; Wile, "Parley Issues."; Sidney Thatcher, "French Submarine Plea Stirs Britain," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 24, 1921.

¹⁵⁴ "Patience and Shuffle the Cards.," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 29, 1921.

¹⁵⁵ "France.," "British Suspect French Designs," *New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1921; "France Criticized By London Press," *New York Times*, Dec. 29, 1921.

¹⁵⁶ Laurence Hills, "Briand May Refuse Request by Hughes," *New York Herald*, Dec. 23, 1921; Wile, "Parley Issues.," Public Ledger Washington Bureau, "French Accept 1.75 Ship Ratio," *Public Ledger*, Dec 21, 1921.

Seibold lamented this, “Injection” of continental differences which threatened the peace Americans were building, and in the *Tribune* Henning argued that the French rejection of submarine limitation would lead to an underwater repeat of the pre-war naval arms race, threatening Europe’s peace, as the Associated Press article on the *Washington Post*’s front page discussed lurid claims of imminent possibility of war due to an Anglo-French naval race, and even the *Chicago Tribune*’s measured editors, considered such a conflict inevitable, fearing the Germans would take advantage.¹⁵⁷ Only Seibold explicitly opposed this theory, dismissing it as a, “Conflicting pessimistic view,” to support his own belief that with Paris’ influence distant, the French delegates would work out a new compromise.¹⁵⁸

The most remarkable theory on France’s stubbornness saw the French insistence on 90,000 tons of submarines as merely a symptom of a great psychosis caused by the Great War. This theory, while most developed in *The Independent*, also appeared in a number of other publications. In early January 1922, in the wake of the submarine discussion, the *Independent*’s editors wrote a full page editorial entitled “Nerves and Submarines.” The editors argued that France had endangered the conference, misunderstood it, and acted against its own interests, since the French psyche suffered from a case of, “Neurotic cynicism.”¹⁵⁹ This resulted in little faith in the conference, undue suspicion of neighboring countries, and extreme defensiveness on matters of national pride and honor. To make things worse, French politicians were exploiting the national malaise, and France might fall into “The mania of persecution.”¹⁶⁰ Yet, hope was not lost - all of this was the natural aftereffect of the Great War (although that brings to mind the question of why neither Britain nor Italy, less than a year away from fascism, exhibited this supposed

¹⁵⁷ Seibold, “Submarine Limit.”; Arthur Sears Henning, “Subs Peril Europe’s Peace,” *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 29, 1921; AP, “Saraut Asserts Attitude of Paris Is Final,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 29, 1921; “The French Submarine Policy,” *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 30, 1921.

¹⁵⁸ Louis Seibold, “France Holds,” *New York Herald*, Dec. 27, 1921.

¹⁵⁹ “Nerves and Submarines,” *The Independent*.

¹⁶⁰ “Nerves and Submarines,” *The Independent*.

psychosis), and as long as the other nations remained patient with France, the psychotic state would dissipate in time.¹⁶¹

Echoes of this fantastic theory occur in nearly half a dozen different places. The editors of *The Woman Citizen* warned the readers that France suffered from a, “Terror,” of Germany incomprehensible to Americans, exacerbated by the insult to French pride of being placed below Japan in strength despite (supposedly) being a leading naval power before the war.¹⁶² Ida Tarbell explicitly medicalized, “The shell-shocked minds and souls,” of France, also incomprehensible to America.¹⁶³ Seibold in the *Herald* also argued that the lingering fears of Germany which had, “Beclouded the French vision,” explained France’s behavior but Seibold also attributed to France a need to attract attention, comparing it to the spectacle of a French swimmer diving into the Seine during the Paris Conference and argued that after a short while the French would end their gesture and compromise.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, in the excerpt from Constance Drexel’s article on Harding’s remarks quoted above the, “Fear and hate,” that she warned fight against conservative internationalism were almost certainly meant to be the French, for afterwards she listed a series of actions only carried out by France.¹⁶⁵ Even when the *Times*’ editors explicitly sought to defend France, they still fell back upon the idea that a slight to sensitive France’s pride led to her obstinacy on submarines - the *Times*’ editors claimed French dissatisfaction had simmered from the start but Hughes’ spirit kept it in check until mid-December.¹⁶⁶ Ralph Courney in the *Herald* echoed this theory, albeit with more skepticism towards France.¹⁶⁷ The psychological focus began even before the failures of the submarine talks - at their opening, Edwin Hill of the *Herald*

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² “France.”

¹⁶³ Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 147-148.

¹⁶⁴ Seibold, “French Delay.”

¹⁶⁵ Drexel, “Spiritual.”

¹⁶⁶ “Patience.”

¹⁶⁷ Ralph Courtney, “French Charge Dictation by Leading Naval Powers,” *New York Herald*, Dec. 26, 1921.

warned that the naturally pugnacious French temperament caused difficulties during capital ship negotiations, and would again during the submarine debates.¹⁶⁸ Pierre Marsac, the French correspondent of *Le Petit Parisien*, wrote a column for the *Washington Post* using the psyche argument to defend France. He argued that Washington was a classroom for nations to learn each other's psyche, but that the other nations, especially America, neither learned or understood as much about the French psyche.¹⁶⁹ Americans missed the grave effects of the conference events on the French psyche and public opinion hoping for a great maritime future based on France's rich seafaring history.¹⁷⁰

Some journalists, mostly from the *New York Times*, more reasonably recognized the influence of Briand's weak parliamentary position on the French delegates. The first *Times* article on the French refusal emphasized the role of Briand's cabinet and the nationalist parliament elected in 1919, warning that they would have forced Briand out if he accepted the compromise plan.¹⁷¹ These points were echoed by Henry Wales in the *Tribune*, Pierre Marsac in the *Post*, two *Times* editorials, and again on the *Times*' front page by Edwin James, warning that Briand's replacement would be a hardline nationalist like Poincaré.¹⁷²

The press wrote little about the advisory committee until its prominent role in Hughes' rejection of submarine abolitionism. The *Washington Post* described the committee as a mere, "Sounding board."¹⁷³ In a front page story, while briefly mourning the Committee not endorsing abolition, the *Herald* bureau saw the Committee's endorsement of submarine limitation and

¹⁶⁸ Edwin C. Hill, "French Temperament Described as Running True to Form in International Parley," *New York Herald*, Dec. 21, 1921.

¹⁶⁹ Pierre Marsac, "France's Great Sacrifice in Ship Limit Not Realized Here, He Says," *Washington Post*, Dec. 22, 1921.

¹⁷⁰ Pierre Marsac, "France Will Fight Hard for Place On the Seas, Paris Writer Asserts," *Washington Post*, Dec. 25, 1921.

¹⁷¹ "Briand Preparing Refusal For Hughes," *New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1921.

¹⁷² Henry Wales, "France Firm for 'Subs,'" *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 24, 1921; Marsac, "Sacrifice"; "The French Demand for Submarines," *New York Times*, Dec. 29, 1921; "Patience"; James, "French Cabinet."

¹⁷³ AP, "Hopes High for Early Accord Despite Halt in Arms Parleys," *Washington Post*, Dec. 22, 1921.

banning poison gas as the culmination of the demands of worldwide public opinion, led forwards and directed by teachers, pastors, civic leaders, government officials, and most importantly, the *Herald* itself, that would eventually result in abolition down the road.¹⁷⁴ This positive impression from submarine abolitionists did not last.

The British knew they would face an uphill battle in advocating abolition of the submarine against the wishes of the other four powers, but believed that an appeal worded in humanitarian terms might sway public opinion in the United States.¹⁷⁵ Considering the press' glowing reaction to Hughes' opening, how did they react to Lords Lee and Balfour trying the same thing? Some reporters stressed national interests (in contrast to November), both stressing America's need to retain submarines and arguing that the British appeal was not actually humanitarian. Others portrayed submarine abolitionism as a noble, but lost cause.

The editorial page of the *New York American*, the rabidly Anglophobic Hearst paper, embraced the defense of American national interests against Britain. At the top of practically every *American* editorial page for the month of December lay Hearst's "A Defensive Programme for the United States," which demanded the construction of a fleet of submarines strong enough to prevent any invasion of America alone. The end of the programme brazenly declared that any foreign power opposing it meant to attack the United States, especially Britain, whose opposition to submarines supposedly indicated a desire to burn the White House again. The programme argued that Britain, as a European empire, would always practice perfidious old diplomacy, rendering it unfit to make the same appeal as Hughes.¹⁷⁶ In an editorial, the *American's* editors argued that America and France shared the similar interests in the defensive value of submarines,

¹⁷⁴ NY Herald Bureau, "Limit Use of Submarine and Outlaw Gas in War, Recommended to Parley," *New York Herald*, Dec. 2, 1921.

¹⁷⁵ Dingman, *Power*, 200; B.J.C McKercher, "The Politics of Naval Arms Limitation in Britain in the 1920s," in *The Washington Conference, 1921-1922*, ed. Erik Goldstein and John Maurer (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 87, 89.

¹⁷⁶ "A Defensive Programme for the United States," *New York American*, Dec 1921

and that, Britain only opposed America's legitimate interest due to nearly being beaten by U-boats.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, an article in the Hearst-owned *Washington Times* declared that the submarine was uniquely American (due to the *Turtle*), meaning England always sought its destruction, and that instead of submarine limitation or abolition America needed, "An American policy for the American people, with American interests always First."¹⁷⁸

The *Army and Navy Journal* also carried a repeated message on its editorial page, defining the weekly paper's mission as ensuring that both servicemen and civilians understood the American national interests that affected them both.¹⁷⁹ As the submarine debate loomed, the *Army and Navy Journal* published several long editorials on submarines. The *Journal* framed the debate as an attempt by utilitarians trying to achieve true parity to make themselves heard over the objections of sentimentalist pacifists.¹⁸⁰ Unlike the Hearst papers, the *Journal* stressed that it did not aim to be Anglophobic, only for America to defend its interests as the others did.¹⁸¹ Despite its denouncement of sentiment, the editorial went out of its way to prove that submarines could fight humanely, showing the prevalence of abolitionist arguments.¹⁸²

Arthur Sears Henning, depending largely on the Advisory Committee's report, also framed Britain's demand as a function of the British Empire's interests and its strength at sea. Henning ignored the controversies over the Committee and portrayed its report as representative of public opinion.¹⁸³ The *Washington Post's* editors, openly opposed to submarine abolition, used

¹⁷⁷ "No Ban on Submarines," *New York American*, Dec. 23, 1921.

¹⁷⁸ "Britain Prevails On America to Abandon Naval Supremacy," *Washington Times*, December 26, 1921, The article incorrectly credits Fulton the first submarine but the date given makes it likely that the author meant to refer to Bunshell's *Turtle* rather than Fulton's *Nautilus*. Hearst's *Washington Times* is unrelated to the current *Washington Times* associated with the Unification Church.

¹⁷⁹ "The Mission of this Paper," *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 1921.

¹⁸⁰ "Submarines vs. Sentiment," *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 10, 1921; "Arms Limitation Agreement Gives Britain Control of Atlantic," *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 17 1921.

¹⁸¹ "Arms Decisions Delayed by Question of Necessities for National Security," *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 3 1921.

¹⁸² "Submarines vs."

¹⁸³ Arthur Sears Henning, "Submarines to Remain; Limit Is Put Upon Uses," *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 23 1921.

the national interest argument early. In a wide-ranging editorial published on the 14th of December 1921, the *Post's* editors denounced submarine abolition as a way to strengthen the RN at the expense of others.¹⁸⁴ Even the staunch anti-submarine editors of the *Independent and Weekly Review* claimed that pressing national interests alone prevented supposed abolitionists Hughes and Harding from joining the British.¹⁸⁵

Constance Drexel in the *Public Ledger* attempted to use the template provided by Hughes to counter national interest argument. Drexel listed all the national interest talking points of the national interest camp and rather than engaging directly, dismissed all of them as characteristics of base, “Fear and hate and insistence that human nature is inherently bad,” which she ascribed to Old Diplomacy.¹⁸⁶ These needed to be countered by, “The trust and faith and harmony,” of conservative internationalism.¹⁸⁷ Drexel cleverly flipped the national interest paradigm, but in doing so, showed the prevalence of its arguments. The reporting on the British abolition efforts by the outspoken abolitionists of the *New York Herald*,¹⁸⁸ followed the same lines as Drexel - flipping retentionist arguments. In his reporting of the exchange of diplomatic notes between Hughes and Briand, Laurence Hills repeated the argument that submarine abolition merely strengthened Albion’s interests, but put it in the mouths of the seemingly unreasonable French.¹⁸⁹

Similarly to how it interpreted Hughes’ opening, *The Toiler* took the national interest argument to its furthest conclusion, but painting it as a nefarious capitalist plot rather than a necessary evil. Under economic pressure, Hughes led the others to change gears from expensive, aging, and ineffective battleships to increasingly potent and cheaper weapons of the future: gas,

¹⁸⁴ “Some Conference Questions,” *Washington Post*, 14 December 1921.

¹⁸⁵ “The Story of the Week: The Submarine,” *The Independent*, January 1921, 10.

¹⁸⁶ Drexel, “Spiritual.”

¹⁸⁷ Drexel, “Spiritual.”

¹⁸⁸ NY Herald Bureau, “Limit Use.”

¹⁸⁹ Hills, “Briand May.”

airplanes, and submarines.¹⁹⁰ For evidence, *The Toiler*'s editors looked toward Briand, who they called the only honest voice at the conference for blatantly defending national interest.¹⁹¹

On December 12th, two of the women on the Advisory Committee, Anna J. Bird and Alice Ames Winter, met with the leaders and representatives of a number of women's organizations at the headquarters of the National Council, a leading disarmament organization,¹⁹² with at least two reporters present: Constance Drexel¹⁹³ and Ellen Foster Stone.¹⁹⁴ Drexel began her article for the *Post* by noting that while the women advisors had, "Been lunched and tead [sic] and dined to weariness, and have been very generous in getting up to say a few polite words," they had done little but endorse submarine retention.¹⁹⁵ Drexel described how the organization leaders, responsible for the public pressure that (in her view) led both to the conference itself and the inclusion of the four women, asked nearly unanimously for Bird, Winter, and the other advisors to reconsider their retentionist stance.¹⁹⁶ Stone, however, wrote that only some of the assembled women argued for abolition.¹⁹⁷ Drexel's article was placed on the fourth page,¹⁹⁸ and Stone's confined to the 'Society News and Women's Interests' section.¹⁹⁹ In *The Woman Citizen*, the newspaper of the League of Women Voters, (LWV) the meeting's concerns were front and center.

Carrie Chapman Catt, founder of the LWV, wrote and signed the first editorial in the *Woman Citizen* for December 17th, fervently denounced the submarine as a satanic weapon, and questioned how the Committee created to represent public opinion was informed of public

¹⁹⁰ "The Mad Scramble at Washington," *The Toiler*, Dec. 23 1921.

¹⁹¹ "The League of Loot," *The Toiler*, Dec. 24, 1921.

¹⁹² Earle, "Public Opinion for Peace."

¹⁹³ Constance Drexel, "3 Parley Advisers and Women Confer," *Washington Post*, Dec. 13, 1921.

¹⁹⁴ Ellen Foster Stone, "Women's Clubs and Allied Groups," *Public Ledger*, Dec. 18, 1921.

¹⁹⁵ Drexel, "3 Parley Advisers."

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Stone, "Women's Clubs."

¹⁹⁸ Drexel, "3 Parley Advisers."

¹⁹⁹ Stone, "Women's Clubs."

opinion on submarines. Catt noted that across the country, churches and Limitation of Armament committees condemned submarines, and so had, “The petitions, which...have been blocking the mails in Washington.”²⁰⁰ Catt repeated a call by the National Council to write the Committee, and she reminded the readers that they, their families, and their friends were part of public opinion and should make themselves heard, showing the concept’s novelty in 1921.²⁰¹

While it did not change the position of the Committee or the American delegation, the call by the Council garnered a response - while the Committee only received 37,376 letters for calling for abolition up to December 15th, 365,203 more flooded in in the next thirteen days, opposed by only 23,305 retentionist letters. Yet, during that same period, the Committee received half a million letters echoing the *Tribune’s* call - that matters be left to the judgment and expertise of the delegates.²⁰²

As the month continued, the National Council’s call received greater attention: on the 28th, the *Post* printed some of their arguments, including the charge by Frank Libby, its leader,²⁰³ that the mass of mail opposing retention proved that the Committee no longer represented public opinion.²⁰⁴ Drexel went much further in the *Public Ledger*. She also wrote about Libby’s statement, including him specifically stating that the advisors representing subgroups (such as women and organized labor) needed to make those groups’ voices heard. Drexel then dropped an

²⁰⁰ Catt, “Advice Wanted.”

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Committee on General Information, “Special Bulletin No.5”, 14 January 1922, JX 1974.5.A6 U62 1922, volume *Limitation of Armament Conference 1921-2 Committee on General Information, American Delegation: News Summary Periodical Comment Editorial Summary Special Bulletins*, LOC, Washington. The first two numbers include letters calling directly for abolition and those that advocated total disarmament, more prevalent until the 15th. The Committee counted a letter twice if it asked for two different things - i.e. a letter asking for both submarine abolition and for an open session would be counted separately under each column. The third number includes letters calling for any course of action besides abolition. The bulletin is somewhat unclear while the table is as indicated above, the text below it claims, “Of the opinion received there is almost unanimity in favor of abolition.” I have chosen the numerical values over the subjective assessment.

²⁰³ Earle, “Public Opinion for Peace.” 153.

²⁰⁴ “Advisers Urged to Reconsider on Submarines In View of the Mass of Demands to Abolish Them,” *New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1921.

investigative bombshell. The advisors wrote and voted on their submarine statement before they began collecting public opinion, and thus in light of the flood of abolitionist sentiment in the past few weeks, the committee's report did not represent public opinion and needed a redraft.²⁰⁵ She claimed that the subcommittee on General Information leaked her this information through a Commander S.F. Bryant, USN.²⁰⁶ Drexel's accusations had basis in fact. The Committee's bulletins showed that no letters on submarines were received before December 1st,²⁰⁷ the Committee on General Information did not begin monitoring until then either, so the committee could not have known what public opinion wished of it when it adopted its resolution on December 1st.²⁰⁸ Newspaper reports printing the full text of the recommendation clearly show that, as Drexel claimed, the Advisory Committee's recommendation had been published on the 1st. Drexel then denounced the four women advisors for both approving the report and not saying anything about it afterwards.²⁰⁹ This interesting expose did not appear in any other paper surveyed, although the Committee on General Information did note that, "Constance Drexel continues to prod the advisory Committee," in the last page of its report on the conference news for December 28th.²¹⁰ This reaction from those criticized might show the article's reach.

The *Chicago Tribune* exemplifies the other common argument - while submarine abolition was a noble and ultimately just cause, it was an impractical lost cause, and the American citizenry needed to support the position of the government and the Advisory Committee, backed by naval experts who knew better. On every editorial page of the *Tribune*

²⁰⁵ Constance Drexel, "Petitions Protest Use of Submarine," *Public Ledger*, Dec. 24, 1921.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. I have not found any such officer, although Drexel may have been referring to Samuel W. Bryant, who was the right rate at the time, but his biography does not seem like a leaker's.

²⁰⁷ Committee On General Information, *Special Bulletin No.5*.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Drexel, "Petitions Protest."

²¹⁰ Committee on General Information, "News Summary No.24", 28 December 1921, JX 1974.5.A6 U62 1922, volume *Limitation of Armament Conference 1921-2 Committee on General Information, American Delegation: News Summary Periodical Comment Editorial Summary Special Bulletins*, LOC, Washington.

during December sat a quotation from naval hero Stephen Decatur in large print: "Our Country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong."²¹¹ From the beginning, Grafton Wilcox depicted submarine abolition as nearly certain to fail because of French national interests.²¹² Another story the same day described Britain's push for abolition as if it had already failed. The same article also argued that regardless of, "Great public sentiment in the United States against the submarine," it would be impractical (it did not say why) for the American delegation to push for abolition at Washington.²¹³

The *Post* relied on reports from the Associated Press for Washington news during the submarine debate's height, since Albert Fox did not write then.²¹⁴ The AP reports subtly declared abolition as a lost cause, both before the British made their plea, when their story declared that the British would likely fail, and during it, when they mentioned the attempt to report on its inevitable failure and speculate on what the British would do afterwards.²¹⁵ Similarly, the *Tribune's* report on a speech by Balfour focused on the technical aspects, not his graphic description of the horrors of German unrestricted submarine warfare.²¹⁶

The prevalence of the lost cause argument is best shown by the title of the *Public Ledger's* front page article on the end of Balfour and Lee's efforts for submarine abolition: "Four Powers Oppose Britain On Submarines," nearly the same as headlines in the *Chicago Tribune* ("Four Powers to Oppose England on Submarines"), and in the *New York Times* ("Four Powers Oppose Plea Of Britain To End Submarine").²¹⁷ They all emphasized the insurmountable

²¹¹ Untitled Editorial Page Quotation, *Chicago Tribune*, December 1921.

²¹² Grafton Wilcox, "Auxiliary Ship Gains Attention of Conference," *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 21 1921.

²¹³ "Four Powers to Oppose England on Submarines," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 December 1921.

²¹⁴ Committee On General Information, *News Bulletin No. 24*. The Committee said this was due to the, "Clouded condition," of the conference which Fox apparently blamed France for.

²¹⁵ AP, "Hopes High"; AP, "French Ship Accord Spurs Submarine Issue," *Washington Post*, Dec. 21, 1921.

²¹⁶ "Balfour Makes Powerful Plea Against 'Subs,'" *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 24 1921.

²¹⁷ Wile, "Four Powers Oppose Britain"; "Four Powers to Oppose." ; Edwin James, "Four Powers Oppose Plea Of Britain To End Submarine, But All Favor Curb," *New York Times*, Dec. 23 1921.

coalition facing Britain, instead of America's specific position, role, or potential in the debate. On the other hand, the anti-submarine *Herald* ran, "France Delays Curb on Submarines," above the header, "British Only Would Abolish Submarine,"²¹⁸ and the second page headline "Big Powers Take Up Submarine Question," above the headers, "Lord Lee Tells Conference They Are Only Vessels of Murder and Piracy," and, "Other Nations Dissent."²¹⁹

In the early days of the submarine discussions, the *Times*' Edwin James declared that the British push for abolition would fail due to the other delegates preventing them from holding a plenary session to influence public opinion. James seemed perturbed by the cancellation, declaring that, "There can be had no official explanation of this change,"²²⁰ but said nothing further. He was not alone in his tepidness. Most journalists followed Seibold, who avoided dwelling on it at all. Ida Tarbell condemned the cancellation, but also chose not to speculate about the reasons for it.²²¹ Similarly, when she argued that Hughes should have been more Wilsonian and proposed submarine abolition on the first day, she refused to write about why he was not. This consistent refusal to partake in even the slightest speculation regarding American motives in closing the conference stands in stark contrast to coverage of the French and British delegations and the muckraking pasts of some of the reporters, especially Tarbell.

The *Times* had a British author writing on the conference— J.G. Hamilton of the *London Daily Chronicle*. He wrote extensively on submarine abolition, describing it as a doomed cause, but he argued that Balfour and Lee stood nobly against insurmountable odds not with hope of victory, but hoping to create an inspiration for a future wave of public opinion.²²² This discounted

²¹⁸ NY Herald Bureau, "France Delays Curb on Submarines," *New York Herald*, Dec. 23, 1921.

²¹⁹ "Big Powers Take Up Submarine Question," *New York Herald*, Dec. 23, 1921.

²²⁰ Edwin James, "French Want 300,000 Tons of Light Ships," *New York Times*, Dec. 22, 1921.

²²¹ Louis Seibold, "France Asks Submarines [Sic] Far Above Hughes Quota; Reed Assails Pacific Pact," *New York Herald*, December 22, 1921.

²²² J.G. Hamilton, "British Scored Against Submarine," *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1921.

the power of American public pressure in the present. If the massive letter writing campaign described above was not enough, then what would be?

Hearst's staunchly pro-submarine *New York American* strongly supported the Advisors' report in order to attack Hughes' compromise plan. The *American* interpreted the compromise plan's differences from the Advisors' report as him betraying them. The *American* thundered that the Committee, "Represented EVERY SHADE OF PUBLIC OPINION," so an offhand comment by Hughes to Balfour that many Americans opposed submarines was false and treasonous.²²³ An editorial the next day, by a 'Politicus' took this even further. He argued that the Committee, while merely formed to quiet demands for presence at the great conference, bravely stood up for America's interests by taking a retentionist stance. Despite this good work, Hughes, according to Politicus, betrayed the committee for fear of antagonizing the British - by merely reading out the Committee's report instead of immediately endorsing it, and by switching to the compromise plan without consulting them. Politicus acerbically noted that, "Apparently this report [the Committee's] was worth only the paper on which it was written,"²²⁴ harkening back to the 'scraps of paper' rhetoric used by Wilhemine Germany.

Why did foreign intrigue receive so much attention during this critical phase of the conference instead of the American position? The discourse demonstrated the flexibility of the new concept of conservative internationalism in service of American ends. Coverage of France provided a way grounded in conservative internationalism to explain the submarine failure. By focusing on inscrutable European rivalries or national psychotic malaises, reporters presented France as obsolescent, needing a few years of patience while it caught up and became suitable to join the new way of doing things. The idea of an overriding psychosis countered arguments made

²²³ Universal Service, "France Rejects."

²²⁴ Politicus, "Work of Armament Advisors Goes Mostly to Hughes' Waste Basket," *New York American*, December 28, 1921.

by pro-League elements such as the *Times* - The League would not change this ingrained psyche. French intransigence similarly countered claims from Senator Borah that the administration had not gone far enough - exactly what Harding hoped would happen.²²⁵ Coverage of France delegitimized international opposition to conservative internationalism by presenting it as selfish or insane. Lastly, as the Advisory Committee noted, sensationalism sold newspapers - reading about the mystery of the French psyche excited more than shifting French parliamentary blocs, and the romantic story of a hopeless lost cause more than uncomfortable questions about how representative new American diplomacy really was.

The portrayal of the lost cause of submarine abolition shows the flip side of the moral jubilation of November. The soft power focus of conservative internationalism allowed a moral victory to substitute for concrete steps towards abolition or even limitation. The submarine issue rather embarrassed the American diplomats - even in Hughes' incredibly detailed recounting of the conference in a speech to the American Historical Association months after the conclusion of the conference, he glossed over the submarine issue, while offering huge amounts of detail on everything else.²²⁶ Fortunately for him, the press largely chose not to pry too deeply.

When thrust into the limelight by Hughes to legitimate for an unpopular stance, the Advisory Committee had the hopes of the reporters and editors writing about it projected onto it and the legitimacy that its representation of public opinion (or illegitimacy of its failure to represent) endowed with the writers' views. Henning, Hearst, the *Herald*, Drexel, and the LWV all saw public opinion as certainly on their side and supported or criticized the committee based on how well it reflected that idea - not too different from the use and misuse of data today. While

²²⁵ Dingman, *Power*, 207.

²²⁶ Charles Evans Hughes, *Some Aspects of Our Foreign Policy*. Speech transcript. 29 December 1922, p.7. LOC. *Charles Evans Hughes Papers, Box 79, "Speeches 1922."*

coverage of the Advisory Committee served to project writers' hopes, the conspiracies and accusations that form the subject of the next chapter derived from fear.

Chapter 3: “Oceans of Propaganda and Misinformation:” Conspiracy in the Press

The submarine debates also spawned a dark thread: amid the passionate discourse, some opposed to abolition began to see the conspiratorial hand of foreign influence behind their opponents, who they denounced as propagandists. Beginning as mere suggestions and intimations, this line of thought would at the end of December turn into almost farcical conspiracy theories prominently pushed by the editors of several papers with high circulation. This chapter will focus on the two most critical nodes of conspiratorial thinking: *The Army and Navy Journal*, and William Randolph Hearst.

The most comprehensive and varied narratives of propaganda and conspiracy came from the *Army and Navy Journal*. While slow to build, the seeds for this began even before the conference itself - an editorial published November 12th began by bemoaning the common use of the term ‘disarmament conference’ rather than ‘limitation’ conference. The author admitted that most cases were just slips of the tongue, but also considered that it sometimes could be a deliberate word substitution, as part of a supposed campaign of pacifist propaganda.²²⁷ This angle remained unexplored for a while. In the next several weeks, *Journal* articles continued to bemoan public views on the conference considered detrimental to American security, but simply attributed this to excessive optimism or civilian ignorance, also warning against manipulation of public opinion by demagogues or utopians.²²⁸ In fact, the *Journal’s* first discussion of the submarine issue contained no references to public opinion whatsoever.²²⁹

By mid-December, despite celebrating a widespread and passionate readership and influence across the nation,²³⁰ the *Journal’s* editors did not think that their efforts to educate the

²²⁷ “Naval Disarmament Impossible,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Nov. 12, 1921.

²²⁸ “Some Problems of Limitation of Naval Armaments,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Nov. 12, 1921; “Public Opinion and the Arms Conference,” *Army and Navy Journal*, November 19, 1921.

²²⁹ “Submarines vs.”

²³⁰ “Press Comment Shows Journal Is Widely Read,” *Army and Navy Journal*, December 17, 1921.

public were working. What they described as, “A large section of the public,” still ignored the ‘facts’ in favor of their ingrained desire for disarmament and peace, and while the root cause lay in Americans’ natural inclinations, the editors claimed evidence existed (which they did not present) that foreign powers were taking advantage of civilian myopia for their own purposes.²³¹ A quite different tone would dominate the next week’s edition.

Congress needed to determine the next year’s naval appropriations for equipment, personnel, and other such expenditures in the midst of the conference. The Harding Administration feared this moment since the start of the conference - naturally, people would expect immediate savings, but the benefits would take time to actually be reflected in the budget, creating a feeling of betrayal.²³² Once again, the *Journal’s* editors confronted seeming failure to win over the American public opinion as their, “Careful perusal of the press and a summary of many conversations,” (once again claiming evidence existed without showing it) revealed that Americans still largely based their views of the Conference on feelings rather than what the military considered reality.²³³ The *Journal’s* Washington correspondent, E.B. Johns, struck a pessimistic tone about Congressional appropriations, warning that pacifist sympathizers in Congress threatened the United States with a fate worse than post-Versailles Germany. Johns did present a glimmer of hope when he wrote of, “Indications of a reaction, not only in Congress but throughout the country,” as several Congressional leaders stood by the appropriations figures.²³⁴ The editors took a darker tone. They warned of supposed publicly expressed hostility towards servicemen in statements of several congressmen on appropriations only explainable by “Many undercurrents of powerful propaganda at work to discredit and emasculate the National

²³¹ “Practical Military Results of Conference vs. Desire Based on Sentiment,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 17, 1921.

²³² Roosevelt Diary, 70.

²³³ “Business Heads at Conference,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 24, 1921.

²³⁴ E.B. Johns, “Leaders in Congress to Oppose Decrease in Army and Navy Personnel,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 24, 1921.

Services.”²³⁵ Despite what the editors considered consistent military support for limitation, the allure of eternal world peace through disarmament supposedly so tempted the press that it not only ignored slights to the military that would have caused outrage previously, but adopted positions so extreme they undermined the negotiating positions of the American delegation, (according to the editors). The editors claimed that propaganda of pacifists and foreign delegations tricked many reporters ignorant of technical details. Despite all this, the editors believed that most Americans still followed the views of the administration they had voted for, but they needed to make themselves heard as the navy needed, “The immediate support of the straight thinking, red blooded civilians who form the real backbone of this country, however inarticulate they may be in printer's ink,” although the editors did not specify what they wanted citizens to actually do.²³⁶ Whatever it was, either the red-blooded masses did not do it, or it did not work, for in the next few weeks the *Journal* would embrace the most extreme rhetoric it would during the course of the conference.

At the end of December, the *Journal's* editors jumped into full-blown conspiracism in an editorial starkly titled, “Reaction Against Pacifism.” The editors declared that pacifists had seen an opportunity and jumped at the chance to push, “Widespread suggestive propaganda,” which, “Perverted the subconscious public mind into accepting the object of the conference to be the prevention of war,” rather than limitation.²³⁷ Even clarification by President Harding himself was insufficient to halt the wildfire spread of this propaganda from becoming the predominant narrative. Both American extremists and foreigners used the naivete of Americans about the dog-eat-dog nature of international politics to dupe well-meaning organizations into doing their bidding. Nonetheless, evidence, “From reading the press and from private conversations,” (again

²³⁵ “Services Need Civilian Support,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 24, 1921.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ “Reaction Against Pacifism,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 31, 1921.

supposed unverifiable evidence) showed that most Americans now realized that the conference would not and could not end war, and the editors pointed to a rise in ROTC volunteers and increased business interest in industrial mobilization to show that most Americans still rejected pacifism.²³⁸ The editors called for these citizens to join with soldiers and sailors to push back against pacifist rhetoric.²³⁹

In early January, Johns laid out a picture of the submarine debate centered on blaming foreign propaganda for practically every event therein in an unusually long report. In contrast to Hughes, whose only interactions with most of the press consisted of a dry press conference just covering facts only when a major conference event occurred, the foreign delegates would hold press conferences every day and use them to push their views, as well as sending voluminous amounts of mail to the reporters—“Clearly the work of master minds in publicity and propaganda,” according to John.²⁴⁰ Thus when France tried to get its way in submarines, British and Japanese propaganda led the American papers to conclude that France aimed to wreck the conference rather than provide essential security. Johns claimed that British propaganda disproportionately amplified the whole submarine issue and obscured coverage of America’s submarine interests in the press. Hethen turned to peace organizations, which he claimed appeared out of nowhere with unclear funding sources. He then criticized the platforms of two of them: a Bostonian businessman and the National Council. Johns conceded that some patriots were in Council leadership, but denounced most of its leadership as pacifists who opposed preparedness, and concluded by bemoaning the (supposed) lack of any patriotic organizations that could counter their influence.²⁴¹

²³⁸ “Reaction.”

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ E.B. Johns, “Weekly Washington Letter,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Jan. 7, 1922.

²⁴¹ Johns, “Weekly.”

In the same issue, the *Army and Navy Journal* ran an editorial entitled, “Time to Hold Pacifists Responsible,” which denounced the National Council as mainly working for, “The issuance of misinformation.”²⁴² The author then analyzed a National Council circular on Congressional apportionment, which he argued so clearly contrasted facts, (i.e. a recent *Journal* article on the topic), that either the National Council was entirely ignorant of reality or aimed to mislead. The author indicated the latter by calling a passage, “A perversion of fact for which there can be no excuse.”²⁴³

The editorial denounced the pacifists as cowards and blamed them and foreign propaganda for ensuring that America was unprepared and took unnecessary casualties in the Great War. The author held that the pacifists and propagandists held as much responsibility for those deaths as the Germans. The editorial argued that the, “Oceans of propaganda and misinformation [that] are being spread over the country,” aimed to conflate all efforts to be prepared with Prussian militarism. The editorial ended on a passage that deserves quoting in full:

It is time that the men and women who have paid the price in the past wars and who would pay the price in future wars found out, not *who the paid press agent prostitutes writing the propaganda are, but who the directing brains are and who is putting up the large amount of cash necessary to conduct the campaign, so that they may stand clearly before their fellow countrymen as responsible.* In a democracy freedom of thought and freedom of expression of views are essential. Along with that freedom must go the square acceptance of responsibility for the consequences.²⁴⁴

(*The Army and Navy Journal* editors would probably make quite popular thinkpiece or op-ed writers today, or podcasters, or maybe draw a pretentious webcomic with stick figures.)

In late January, the editors of the *Journal* turned their attention to other newspapers, responding to accusations of militarism from a host of papers based in mid-sized midwestern

²⁴² “Time to Hold Pacifists Responsible,” *Army and Navy Journal*, Jan. 7, 1922.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ “Time to Hold.” (italics are original, underlining is mine)

cities, which it in turn accused of being unable to separate Prussian militarism, impossible among the principled American citizenry, from preparedness.²⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the editors sounded an optimistic tune near the end of the month, looking to an article by Wile in the *Public Ledger* opposing apportionment cuts, praising the patriotic efforts to save Congress from pacifists.²⁴⁶

After the conference concluded, the *Journal's* editors reflected on the supposed propaganda campaign, and what needed to be done in the future, but surprisingly backed down from conspiracism. In, "Truth for Publicity," the editors argued that during critical periods of the conference, the newspapers had not published the so-called American view, especially during critical moments. The editors admitted this might not have been because of propaganda, but the pressures of writing a story every single day with insufficient technical knowledge, forcing reporter attention from tight-lipped Americans to more loquacious foreign delegations,²⁴⁷ similar to events Upton Sinclair described in 1919.²⁴⁸ Well-meaning reporters inadvertently published foreign propaganda and hurt American interests. For example, the editors claimed that the reporters did not realize that the Hughes Plan represented the outer limit of American national security, not the middle of the road, allowing foreign delegations to chip away at it - supposedly, if it were not for the press' ignorance, the American delegation might have blocked Japan's demand for halting Pacific fort construction. The editors claimed that during the submarine debate American papers were "So thoroughly indoctrinated," that they paid no heed to America's retentionist interests, and the press' support of abolition forced Hughes to offer the compromise plan.²⁴⁹ Even when France swooped in to save America by demanding 90,000 tons or nothing, the American delegation found themselves with no public opinion behind them to strike a new

²⁴⁵ "Time to Hold."

²⁴⁶ "Support for the Navy," *Army and Navy Journal*, Jan. 21, 1922.

²⁴⁷ "Truth Through Publicity," *Army and Navy Journal*, Feb. 4, 1922.

²⁴⁸ Sinclair, *Brass Check*, 42-43.

²⁴⁹ "Truth." Actually, Roosevelt devised the compromise plan. Roosevelt Diary, 106.

deal. The press did not deliberately sabotage America, but with no readily available Americans, they walked into a trap, allowing American public opinion to be manipulated by foreigners.²⁵⁰ This ignored the American government's publicity campaigns, planned since September by Hughes and Roosevelt.²⁵¹ The editors believed that military officers needed to supply the correct views to the press. Until recently, regulations had prevented serving officers from speaking to the press, and while this restriction had ended, force of habit still ensured reticence. The editors told officers that speaking to the press to save public opinion from propaganda was now a duty, and the only way to correctly inform the public on military matters.²⁵² In its last article on the subject, the *Army and Navy Journal* struck an optimistic tone, predicting that no matter what the pacifists did, the spirit of the American people stood firmly for preparedness, because of the consequences of the opposite during the Great War.²⁵³

In contrast to the steady rise and decline of conspiracism in *The Army and Navy Journal*, conspiracism remained merely an ember in Hearst's Anglophobic *New York American* before dramatically exploding in late December. The program for limitation printed on every editorial page declaring foreign criticism proved a desire to attack the United States planted the seed of xenophobia essential to Washington Conference conspiracism.²⁵⁴ On the 26th, an *American* warned that the British would soon begin a propaganda campaign to weaken the American merchant marine, completing British maritime dominance.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ "Truth"

²⁵¹ Theodore Roosevelt Jr., "Theodore Roosevelt Jr. to Charles Evans Hughes," September 16, 1921, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, Box 39, "Washington Conference, the Limitation of Armament, 1921-1922," LOC; Charles Evans Hughes, "Charles Evans Hughes to Theodore Roosevelt Jr.," September 22, 1921, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Papers, Box 39, "Washington Conference, the Limitation of Armament, 1921-1922," LOC.

²⁵² "Truth."

²⁵³ "National Defense Spirit," *Army and Navy Journal*, February 11, 1922.

²⁵⁴ "Defensive Programme"

²⁵⁵ "Britain Wins Big Victory Over U.S. on Submarines in Parley," *New York American*, Dec. 26, 1921.

At first, the most prominent place for conspiracism in the *American* was the (hilarious) editorial cartoons. While these largely concerned themselves with the Four-Power Treaty, some strips in the series, ‘Oh, What a Pal is Sammy!’ presaged the theme of America being at the mercy of a British-led cabal that would show up in print later. In line with the focus on Americanism seen earlier in the conference, these cartoons often stressed the monarchism of Britain and Japan. For a representative example, see the cartoon for December 21st - America is left ignorant as Britain and company wheedle what they wish out of the American diplomats behind closed doors.²⁵⁶



Figure 3: *New York American* editorial cartoon, 21 December 1921²⁵⁷

Despite being larger than the figures representing the other three powers, and perhaps upset at their treatment of him by the look on his face, ‘Sammy’ remains passively sitting.²⁵⁸ On

²⁵⁶ F. Opper, “Oh, What A Pal Is Sammy!” Editorial Cartoon, *New York American*, December 21st, 1921.

²⁵⁷ Opper, “Sammy!”

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

the 23rd, the *American's* editorial page cartoon both mocked American diplomats and presaged Hearst's fears of an Anglo-Japanese plot.²⁵⁹

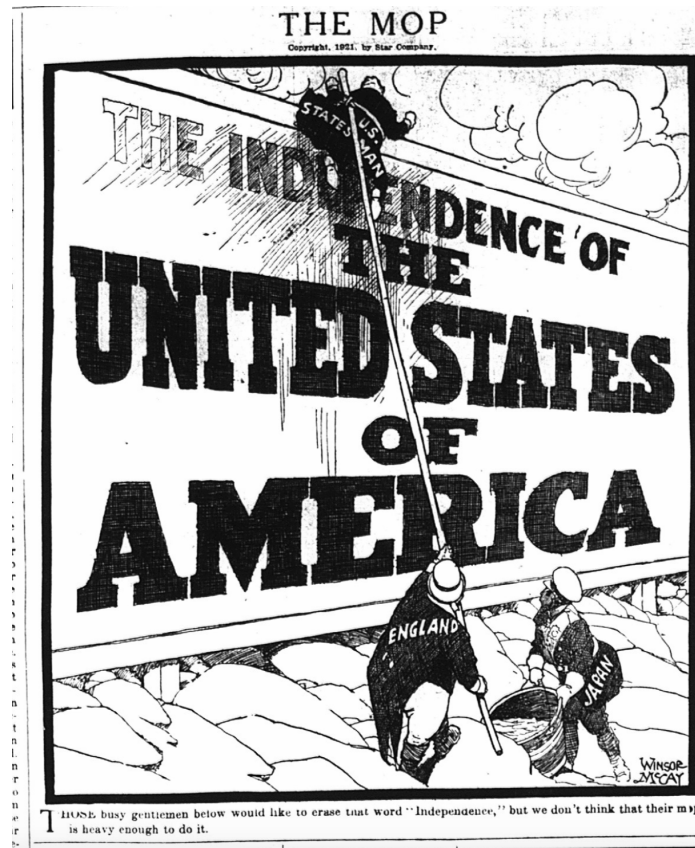


Figure 4: *New York American* editorial cartoon, 23 December 1921. Caption: “Those busy gentlemen below would like to erase that word ‘Independence,’ but we don’t think that their mop is heavy enough to do it.”²⁶⁰

On December 27th, in the wake of French rejection of the compromise plan, William Randolph Hearst himself wrote and prominently signed a front page editorial in the *American* entitled, “Unlike America, France Unwilling to Be Shoved into Doormat Class,” which presented an almost unbelievable degree of conspiracism. Hearst began by praising France, which he declared was the one nation with a government not controlled by Britain, and the one

²⁵⁹ Windsor McCay, “The Mop,” Editorial Cartoon, *New York American*, December 23rd, 1921.

²⁶⁰ McCay, “The Mop.”

nation, “Whose representatives are not marionettes worked [sic] on the financial wires of the international bankers, but genuine, patriotic statesmen.”²⁶¹ While he hoped that the French attitude might spread, he considered this unlikely, since American diplomats still failed to realize that the nature of Perfidious Albion made true disarming at Washington impossible. He then described the demands for the reduction of submarines and fortifications as an Anglo-Japanese conspiracy to leave nations defenseless. The next part must be quoted at length:

France knows that the international bankers who run our Government are not really international bankers, but British bankers...France knows that the various proposals of America at the conference are really the proposals of England made through the international bankers and communicated by the international bankers to the statesmen at Washington, whom they own and operate and include among their tangible assets when they balance their books every night. France knows that whatever is to be done at the Washington conclave each day is decided upon by Root and Balfour in private conference every previous night, and that whatever Mr. Balfour decides in the interest of England and Mr. Root decides in the interest of the international bankers our super-statesmen advance next day as the proposals of America—and that then these proposals by way of camouflage and strategy are vigorously opposed by Japan, and after much apparent deliberation and pretended hesitation, are reluctantly approved by England.²⁶²

This conspiracy did not feature naive Americans falling prey to foreign tricks, but willing cooperation by named officials at the highest level of the American government to subjugate the United States. Supposed French knowledge about this was why France was uncooperative. Hearst concluded by comparing the facial hair of the American delegates to a doormat laid out for British use, and warned the, “Good, upstanding Americans—those of you who are left,” that England would take full advantage,²⁶³ encouraging further paranoia from readers who might start to suspect their neighbors might not fall into this august category.

²⁶¹ William Randolph Hearst, “Unlike America, France Unwilling to Be Shoved into Doormat Class,” *New York American*, Dec. 27, 1921.

²⁶² Hearst, “Unlike America.”

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

The next day, conspiracism again received attention in the *American*, this time in an editorial cartoon casting a small American against a gigantic John Bull banker:²⁶⁴



Figure 5: *New York American* editorial cartoon, 28 December 1921 Caption: “The public is not supposed to know what the international bankers have in mind for it until all the deals are hatched and all the ways greased. The public may, however, get a hearing before the Senate acts.”²⁶⁵

A rare conspiracist, indeed, who relies on the US Senate to save the day. Despite being labeled ‘international’ the banker is clearly a John Bull figure.

²⁶⁴ Manny Murphy, “A Private Affair,” Editorial Cartoon, *New York American*, December 28th, 1921.

²⁶⁵ Murphy, “A Private Affair.”

Conspiracism also received print attention in the aforementioned editorial by ‘Politicus.’ While mostly dealing with the Advisory Committee, Politicus presented the background events through an entirely conspiratorial lens. Politicus claimed the existence of a strong British anti-submarine propaganda campaign from the conference’s very first days, assisted by Hughes’ reticence (which Politicus exaggerated as, “Silence,”), and while this campaign did not sway the Advisory Committee, it was successful enough to convince the British to push for full abolition. Politicus ended by implying that the British were behind the compromise plan,²⁶⁶ reinforced by his previous day’s article in the *Washington Times* in which he interpreted various diplomatic niceties in the conference transcripts as proof that the other delegates were in Britain’s thrall.²⁶⁷

Yet, the most extraordinary conspiracy about submarines pushed by the *American* actually came early on, albeit quietly. In the midst of the abolition debate, the *American* published an article by ‘aviation expert’ Henry Woodhouse (actually an Italian-American fraudster, forger, and convicted murderer named Mario Terenzio Enrico Casalegno²⁶⁸), who spun a story hardly out of place in a pulp science fiction magazine. He declared that the British push for submarine abolition was actually an elaborate scheme to gain the lead on seafloor oil extraction and mining. Woodhouse claimed he had spent the last two years doing research that showed that undersea mining/oil extraction/shipwreck treasure hunting using submarines was both technologically feasible and potentially very profitable. He also claimed to have evidence that the British government covertly undertook similar research slightly ahead of his own. How did this fit into the conference? Woodhouse claimed that an agreement banning military use of submarines would free up the vast RN submarine fleet to be converted into mining vessels and

²⁶⁶ Politicus, “Work of Armament.”

²⁶⁷ Politicus, “Submarine Cut Is Floated on Sea of Words,” *Washington Times*, Dec. 27, 1921.

²⁶⁸ “Found in the Archives No. 55,” Fairfax County, Fairfax Circuit Court Historical Records Center, September 2019.

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/sites/circuit/files/assets/documents/pdf/hrc/fita/fita-september-2019.pdf>.

sold to a British private company secretly under government control to exploit the seafloor.²⁶⁹

Woodhouse specifically identified the RN's large K-Class submarines as ideal mining vessels, somehow managing to top out the rest as the single most blatantly ridiculous statement of the article.²⁷⁰ Lastly, Woodhouse argued that this commercial fleet under the shadow control of the British government could easily rearm in wartime.²⁷¹

This was not Woodhouse's only conference-related conspiracy theory - a few days later he wrote an article for the *Washington Times* claiming he discovered that, unbeknownst to the American people, a web of secret Middle Eastern pacts (actually entirely unrelated clauses of various recent treaties which had nothing to do with the Washington Conference) meant that Japan would use the Four-Power Treaty to legalize a surprise attack on the Philippines and that the Five-Power Treaty ensured the attack would succeed.²⁷²

Why did these conspiracies flourish in these two nodes, while remaining marginal elsewhere? There is little direct evidence to speculate based on. In Hearst's case, I believe that his Anglophobia, nationalism, grudge against Hughes for defeating him in the 1904 New York gubernatorial election and the nature of yellow journalism played roles, as well as the perception of the submarine as a sneaky and underhanded weapon. Furthermore, Hearst was not the first to spin conspiracies about the Harding administration: during the 1920 election, Harding's opponent, James Cox, repeatedly described irregularities in the Harding campaign's finances as

²⁶⁹ Henry Woodhouse, "Hoax Seen in British Fight on Submarines," *New York American*, Dec. 22, 1921.

²⁷⁰ Woodhouse, "Hoax." Woodhouse believed mining submarines would operate 200 feet below the sea, at the limits of the (theoretical) safe diving depth for a K-Class boat - a type infamous for barely controlled dives. Most importantly, however, the K-Class was designed specifically for speed on the surface due to their intended role as fleet boats whose high surface speed would enable them to join in major surface engagements, at a severe cost in diving capabilities, the very thing most required for a mining submarine. Astonishingly, Woodhouse actually mentions the K-Class' surface specialization in the article.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Henry Woodhouse, "Japan's Secret Pacts Menace to America, Declares Woodhouse," *Washington Times*, Dec. 25, 1921.

a, “Business Plot.”²⁷³ Like Cox’s accusations, Hearsts’ editorial conspiracies did contain a legitimate grievance - the opening session’s public nature had created an expectation of Open Diplomacy, but most of the conference’s sessions were private. The British requested a plenary session on the submarine, but Hughes blocked them without sufficient public explanation - in fact, Hughes denied the request specifically out of fear of the domestic consequences.²⁷⁴ Naturally this bred suspicion - note the emphasis on the closed doors in two of the three above cartoons. George R. Holmes of the *Washington Times* stressed the secrecy at the very start of his front page articles, while Politicus compared the exclusion of the public from the sessions to German war crimes!²⁷⁵ This factor did not go unnoticed at the time. Walter Lippman considered censorship an essential ingredient for propaganda and Ida Tarbell warned that the lack of openness on submarine issues created an atmosphere of suspicion perfect for those, “Trained in the cynical school of sensational journalism, to look for mischief and intrigue —and it must be confessed, often finding it.”²⁷⁶ Despite this admission of the reality of intrigue, Tarbell roundly condemned such journalists as rabble-rousers pretending to work for peace while only causing partisan division, and only seeing the worst in the conference while predicting its collapse again and again.²⁷⁷ In *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in American History*, Christopher Fee and Jeffrey Webb note that conspiracy theories often grow out of a sense of alienation and that conspiracies about the business world can be seen as calls for a freer market.²⁷⁸ Similarly, Hearsts’ conspiracies can be interpreted as radical calls for open diplomacy. Upton Sinclair’s *The*

²⁷³ Morello, 83-84.

²⁷⁴ McKercher 89.

²⁷⁵ George R. Holmes, “U.S. Offers to Scrap More Submarines,” *Washington Times*, December 25, 1921, Morning edition; Politicus, “Submarine Cut,” *Washington Times*, Dec. 27, 1921.

²⁷⁶ Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 42-44; Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 150.

²⁷⁷ Tarbell, *Peacemakers*, 155-156.

²⁷⁸ Christopher Fee and Jeffrey Webb, “Introduction,” in *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in American History Volume 1*, ed. Christopher Fee and Jeffrey Webb (Santa Barbara California: ABC-CLIO, 2019), xxviii; “Business and Financial Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories” in *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories*, 4.

Brass Check provides other possibilities. He heavily attacked the yellow press, especially Hearst, but at one point he argued that it was better than the respectable press since it occasionally would attack the powerful. He ascribed this to purely economic motives: attacks on power acted as good sensationalism, and Hearst could always find someone who did not advertise in his papers to target. As the British and Japanese governments did not place ads in the Hearst papers, why not target them? Sinclair argued that Hearst's Anglophobia only existed to increase circulation among Irish-Americans,²⁷⁹ but this cannot explain all, since right at the same time, nearly every newspaper ran front page stories about Ireland's independence, so what need was there for elaborate attempts to draw in Irish readership? Walter Lippmann's analysis of the yellow press offers a different possibility: in *Public Opinion*, he argued that Hearst's coverage of high society allowed people who felt ordinary to live vicariously through the (supposed) experiences of the rich.²⁸⁰ Perhaps to Hearst's readers, the 'facts' of the Anglo banker cabal mattered less than being able to imagine themselves in the smoke-filled room.

What of the officers of the *Army and Navy Journal*, who by their own admission, were not used to participating in the public sphere? To some extent, their dismay can be explained as the natural reaction, to having, as Theodore Roosevelt Jr. observed, to give up on whole careers advocating for a strong Mahanian fleet (even in the 1920s, many senior officers would have living memory of the parlous state of the post-Civil War USN). Roosevelt (correctly) feared that despite his best efforts, the conference would result in widespread resentment among naval officers.²⁸¹ Surprise might account for the conspiracism - perhaps the officers expected that their wise and expert opinion would be quickly adopted by all as soon as it was expressed - then jumped to conspiracism when it was not. In contrast to Hearst's quip about 'those who are left'

²⁷⁹ Sinclair, *Brass Check*, 83-84, 236.

²⁸⁰ Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 332.

²⁸¹ Roosevelt Diary, 9.

the *Journal's* editors seemed to generally, if not always consistently, believe that the average man on the street fundamentally stood with them, unsurprising considering the recent upsurge of patriotism during the war years. The only way to square the circle of the patriotic masses disinclined to believe the patriotic truth was a conspiracy among the media. Yet, there may have been something deeper at work. In the pre-war years, naval officers worldwide more or less controlled the discourse on naval affairs, and the world seemed firmly on the path of ever more shipbuilding with the public (if not penny-pinching governments) always behind it - for examples take the naval appropriation debate for 1909 in England, the popularity of Mahan, the various dreadnoughts funded by popular subscription, including by schoolchildren, or the vast influence of the Navy League in Wilhelmine Germany. Roosevelt mentioned that the idea of authoritative control of naval affairs went so far that some of the servicemen and diplomats in the delegation "Resented," his authority over them due to his outsider status and youth (he was 33), despite his name, role in founding the American Legion, and distinguished service in the Great War (albeit in the Army).²⁸² Now that their discourse control seemed under threat from Frank Libby, a previously obscure churchman who now headed the massive National Council,²⁸³ it is unsurprising that conspiratorial ideas started to form. Especially early in the conference, discourse control seemed to be in the hands of the peace activists - while the Harding administration purposefully set limited objectives to avoid Wilsonianism, as seen throughout previous chapters, many voices saw possibilities of disarmament and world peace at the conference. A previously discourse-dominant expert class finding themselves reaching for extreme solutions and barely coherent conspiracies due to a surprising opposition movement in fact not driven by evil conspiracy but simply by capable coalition-building, simple messaging,

²⁸² Roosevelt Diary, 54.

²⁸³ Earle, "Public Opinion For Peace."

and superior local organization: simply add more sanctimonious smugness, organic coffee-drinking, a terminal Twitter addiction, misdirected frustrations of an increasingly unprofitable industry, and the echo chamber of the internet that allows a new moral panic whenever a Brooklyn writer or comfortable suburbanite parent accidentally wanders outside his or her chosen internet bubble, and we arrive at a situation rather similar to that a century hence from the unremembered day of the Washington Conference's conclusion in 1922, albeit with an audience much more willing to listen.

The *Journal's* editors might have found inspiration elsewhere - among the numerous newspaper clippings I found in the papers of Dudley Knox, naval editor of the *Journal*, were a pair from the *New York Tribune*. One, dating from December 17th, reported on statements by senator James Reed, a Missouri Democrat and prominent League opponent, denouncing the four- and five-power treaties as Anglo-Japanese collusion, and claiming that the treaties would result in Americans speaking Japanese.²⁸⁴ The second, published on December 21st, claimed that a statement from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace asking for more prompt reduction of armaments written by Elihu Root and Nicholas Murray Butler supported Germany.²⁸⁵

While discussing coverage of the Bolsheviks in *The Brass Check*, Sinclair noted that, "The more loudly we proclaim that their [Bolshevik] propaganda is false, the more deeply we seem to dread its success."²⁸⁶ Perhaps as the editors of the *Journal* kept encountering peace activists, the officers ascribed them a greater influence than they had, an influence that had to be fought. Eventually the peace activists became a fixation, a tangible opponent onto which to pin

²⁸⁴ NY Tribune Washington Bureau, "Reed Declares Pact Ties U.S. Up to League," *New York Tribune*, Dec. 17, 1921, Clipping from box 23, folder "Clippings 1921," Dudley Wright Knox Papers, LOC.

²⁸⁵ NY Tribune Washington Bureau, "Root and Butler Issue Appeal on Arms Reduction," *New York Tribune*, Dec. 21, 1921, Clipping from box 23, folder "Clippings 1921," Dudley Wright Knox Papers, LOC.

²⁸⁶ Sinclair, *Brass Check*, 391.

the anxieties of the beginning of the sunset of the dreadnought and their hopes of a reaction to regain their societal influence.

The ideas promulgated by Hearst and the *Journal* did not stay there: the halfway stance of the *Herald* has been discussed above, and several papers, including the *New York Times*, penned anti-conspiracy editorials in response.²⁸⁷ Even Hughes himself picked up on the trend: during his summation of lessons from the conference, he warned of the dangers of American diplomacy being undermined by pressure groups, especially immigrants extending European rivalries to America.²⁸⁸ Throughout all the conspiracies ran the idea of Americanism under threat, in Hughes' case, together with the heightened nativism borne out of the Great War and often expressed by Wilson.²⁸⁹ These conspiratorial views colored the historiography of the conference.

In 1926, in a speech to the Army and Navy Club, Rear Admiral Bradley Fisk framed grievances of the naval officers about the conference by blaming Anglo-Japanese collusion to spread propaganda against adequate preparedness.²⁹⁰ Fisk was not alone in his criticism, with Hughes even privately complaining about this disinformation in letters to friends.²⁹¹ While the blatantly conspiratorial elements would eventually fade away, the feeling that America had been cheated at Washington heavily influenced early historiography of the conference, as seen in works such as Leonard Hoag's *Preface to Preparedness* (1941), the first major historical work on the conference,²⁹² all the way to Harlow Hyde's *Scraps of Paper* (1988).²⁹³ This narrative in turn,

²⁸⁷ "Lest We Forget," *New York Times*, 1921.

²⁸⁸ Hughes, "Observations," 367.

²⁸⁹ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 12.

²⁹⁰ Bradley A. Fisk, "Address of Rear Admiral Bradley A. Fisk, U.S.N. (Ret.) to the Army and Navy Club," December 20, 1926, box 56, folder "Washington Conference on Disarmament," Charles Evans Hughes Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

²⁹¹ Charles Evans Hughes, "Charles Evan Hughes to Richard Hooker," Dec. 13, 1927, box 56, folder "Washington Conference on Disarmament," Charles Evans Hughes Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

²⁹² Hoag, *Preface to Preparedness*, (Washington: American council on public affairs, 1941).

²⁹³ Hyde, *Scraps*.

blended into others about the interwar period to form the idea of interwar isolationism that so obscured conservative internationalism from history for decades.

A look at the conspiracism surrounding submarines at the Washington Conference complicates the historiography of conspiracism in American history. Many works on the history of conspiracism in America only start at the Cold War. Even the otherwise comprehensive *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in American History* dedicates only one of its over one hundred entries to an event of the 1920s (Teapot Dome).²⁹⁴ The submarine conspiracies also contradict a number of widely held dictums about American conspiracy theories: they are associated with the rise of ‘big government,’²⁹⁵ (not so applicable in an era dominated by small-government conservatives), and with times of crisis,²⁹⁶ not applicable to 1920s America. H.G. Wells, even in the midst of predicting worldwide economic catastrophe, could not help but remark at the distinct lack of an air of crisis in America.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Fee and Webb, *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories*.

²⁹⁵ Fee and Webb, “Introduction,” xix, xxii.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, xx.

²⁹⁷ Wells, *Washington*, Chapter I, <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks13/1303711h.html#chap01>.

Conclusion: To the Next Generation

A few months after the conference's conclusion, Hughes gave the commencement speech for the University of Michigan. Rather than speaking about diplomatic maneuvers of the conference itself, he dedicated nearly the entirety to the, "Paramount importance," of the press and public opinion in diplomacy.²⁹⁸ Hughes' speech touched on many themes discussed here, but also highlights possibilities for future research.

In a remarkably pertinent section, Hughes strongly denounced demagogues and conspiracists spreading misinformation as "The most dangerous enemy of the public," due to their ability to take advantage of newly opened diplomacy.²⁹⁹ The rhetoric of both Hearst and the *Journal* editors parallels fascist rhetoric. The calls for a virile citizenry to unite with military officers playing a new political role to save the nation from cowardly pacifists who led to the deaths of soldiers, and the hope to put the pacifists' wealthy backers on trial certainly bears more than a passing resemblance, as does the hope for a nationwide anti-pacifist 'reaction.' Replace 'English' with 'Jewish' in Hearst's editorial and remove the praise of France, and Hearst's editorial could easily pass for Nazi propaganda. This poses some questions for the historiography of fascism: how did such extreme rhetoric arise, not in the context of a military defeat or a threat to Jim Crow, but over limitation or abolition of a single type of weapon at a diplomatic conference? Why and how did the military officers back away from their rhetoric so quickly and then return to it in later years, while Hearst continued to support far-right causes?

Hughes' solution to the problem of misinformation was to create an educated elite (the students in front of him) to lead the public opinion of the rest in the right direction, remarkably similar to how Lippmann conceived of 'manufacturing consent.'³⁰⁰ In contrast, Hughes said

²⁹⁸ Hughes, "Observations," 368.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 374.

³⁰⁰ Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 248.

nothing about the Advisory Committee. Both of these angles present excellent opportunities for further research.

The Advisory Committee was just one of many remarkable diplomatic experiments at Washington. Hughes connected public opinion with, “International feeling,”— what for the past couple of decades has been called soft power.³⁰¹ What this thesis has shown above all else is the same conclusion Goldman drew during the Cold War - the 1920s, rather than a period that we can safely sneer at as ‘isolationist,’ was a time of remarkable experimentation and of concerns at the center of discourse today - from the role of spectacle, to national PR, to the fears held by, and of, the conspiracist and propagandist, and the equal importance of the moves of the politicians in Continental Hall, and the narratives used to convey what they did (or did not do) to the wider world which Hughes, Harding, and Roosevelt first began to want to enlist.

³⁰¹ Hughes, “Observations,” 371.

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