

Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution Reconsidered: Winston Churchill at the Admiralty, 1911-14

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Abstract

This article challenges claims by revisionist historians that in July 1914 the Royal Navy was on the verge of instituting a “naval revolution” based on the ideas of Admiral Sir John Fisher. Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, was not prepared to rely on Fisher’s concept of “flotilla defence” in the North Sea, as revisionists contend. Nor did he wish to send capital ships to distant waters. He increasingly looked to submarines to protect Britain’s interests in the Mediterranean, a secondary theatre, but he still believed that Britain must maintain a preponderance of strength over Germany in capital ships in the North Sea. Churchill’s strategic views were generally conservative. He hoped that new designs or new technologies would one day allow submarines to supplant battleships, and he actively supported measures that might help to make this possible. But there is no evidence that he and his naval advisers were ready to gamble on a radical departure in force structure or naval strategy on the eve of the First World War.

Arthur J. Marder’s seminal account of British naval policy in the decade prior to the First World War has been under assault by revisionist scholars since the late 1980s.¹ Jon Sumida, who fired the opening shots, has argued persuasively that Admiral Sir John (“Jacky”) Fisher, Britain’s First Sea Lord from 1904-1910, never intended to launch the “dreadnought revolution” with which he has frequently been credited. Fisher’s real goal, Sumida argues, was to transform the navy’s force structure and to control naval spending by building “battle-cruisers”, a new type of fast, heavily armed warship capable of performing the roles traditionally assigned to both battleships and armoured cruisers.² The revisionist assault gained momentum in the 1990s with the appearance of groundbreaking work from Nicholas Lambert. Lambert maintains that Fisher had another radical idea for creating a cheaper and more efficient navy – “flotilla defence”. Fisher, it is argued, believed that a large force of torpedo boats and submarines could inflict such heavy losses on enemy transports that they could deter or, if necessary, defeat an attempted invasion of the British Isles.³ According to Lambert and Sumida, Fisher believed that by adopting “flotilla defence” in

the narrow seas around Britain, the navy's capital ships – ideally battle-cruisers – would be free to defend British trade and imperial interests in distant waters.

These radical ideas encountered such strong opposition within the Royal Navy that Fisher was unable to achieve the transformation he sought during his initial tenure as First Sea Lord. The revisionists contend, however, that Fisher's goals were later embraced by Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty from 1911-1915, who was on the verge of instituting Fisher's proposed "naval revolution" when the First World War began in late July 1914. This argument rests on Lambert's claims that Churchill and his top naval advisers decided secretly in 1914 to cancel two of the proposed four dreadnought battleships in the navy's 1914-15 new construction programme in order to finance an expanded programme of submarines and torpedo craft. This, it is argued, amounted to the explicit – though still secret – abandonment of Britain's traditional policy of measuring naval power in terms of battleships. On this basis, the revisionists maintain that the Admiralty had accepted Fisher's radical schemes as the best solution to the Royal Navy's ever-increasing financial problems.⁴ This part of the revisionist argument is problematic, however. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that Churchill and his professional advisers were contemplating major changes to the navy's new construction programme for 1914-15, but claims that the Royal Navy was on the verge of a truly revolutionary change in its force structure are difficult to sustain. This article will demonstrate that British naval policy in the months leading up to the outbreak of war was at once more complicated and more conservative than the revisionists have suggested.

Nicholas Lambert has presented a compelling case that, in broad terms, the Royal Navy's leadership in the decade prior to the First World War had a more progressive outlook on new technology than previous accounts had allowed. British admirals, in short, recognised that the submarine and the torpedo would have a major impact on how navies operated, and were not all obsessed with battleships and decisive fleet actions. But with little documentary evidence to explain why the Admiralty was considering major alterations in the 1914-15 construction programme, the revisionists have made two critical – and mistaken – assumptions. The first is that Churchill and his advisers ultimately accepted the radical schemes advocated by Fisher *in toto*. There is no reason, however, to think that battle-cruisers and "flotilla defence" were an inseparable combination for anyone but Fisher himself. The revisionists do not allow for the possibility that

Churchill was willing to decouple these two goals, and consequently fail to recognise his real objective in 1914: to adopt a form of “flotilla defence”, but only in a secondary theatre of operations, and primarily as a means to strengthen Britain’s concentration of capital ships in the critical North Sea theatre. The second assumption is that Britain possessed only a single naval “standard” during this period. In fact, the Royal Navy employed several different standards between 1912 and 1914, and two of these directly regulated battleship strength.⁵ It is therefore misleading to speak of a “strict battleship standard” being abandoned. The revisionists erroneously conclude that discussions of standards in 1913-14 related solely to preparations against Germany in the North Sea. But only one of the two battleships standards in place at the time – that pertaining to the Mediterranean – was likely to be scrapped in 1914. And this was not, as the revisionists contend, evidence that the navy’s faith in the battleship had dramatically weakened. On the contrary, dropping the “battleship standard” in a subsidiary theatre was an implicit reaffirmation of the Admiralty’s faith in the battleship in the main and decisive theatre, and the need to maintain the existing standard there.

When Churchill became First Lord of the Admiralty in October 1911, the navy had already acknowledged the seriousness of the German and American naval challenges by abandoning its traditional policy of maintaining a “two-power standard” in capital ships measured against the next two strongest naval powers. In 1909 the Admiralty decided that British security would be preserved by maintaining a superiority of sixty per cent in capital ships over Germany alone. Churchill announced the new standard to Parliament in March 1912 while introducing the navy’s annual estimates for 1912-13. The two power standard had been a reasonable guide, he explained, when “the next two strongest naval Powers were France and Russia, and when those two Powers were also the what one might call the most probable adverse diplomatic combination”. But the rise of the German navy had transformed the situation. Britain now faced “a very powerful homogenous Navy, manned and trained by the greatest organising people of the world, obeying the authority of a single Government, and concentrated within easy distance of our shores”. It was therefore time, he maintained, to “readjust our standards in closer accord with the actual facts and probable contingencies”.⁶ Churchill also announced that Britain would build two additional capital ships for every one added to the existing German programme. These were expensive commitments, as the new German navy law of 1912 signalled Germany’s plans not just to build more dreadnoughts, but also to keep a higher percentage of warships in full commission at all

times, significantly increasing the immediate striking power of the High Seas fleet.

Churchill was determined to maintain the sixty per cent margin of superiority over Germany in dreadnought battleships, but he regarded new construction as only a partial solution to the German naval threat: Britain would also need to concentrate its capital ships as far as possible in home waters, where they would be immediately available in the event of a crisis. He announced in March 1912 that battleships would be withdrawn from the Mediterranean for this purpose. The revisionists maintain that Fisher wanted the Royal Navy to be equally capable of protecting British home waters, trade routes, and imperial possessions. All of these, Sumida argues, “were vital – one could not be emphasized at the expense of the others without risk of disaster”.⁷ Churchill took a different view. The foundation of his naval strategy prior to the First World War was the primacy of British home waters over all other theatres and requirements. In his opinion, Britain had at all times to retain a pronounced numerical superiority over the German fleet in the North Sea, which he regarded as the decisive theatre in any future war. “[M]astery on the seas” did not depend, he noted in January 1912, “on the simultaneous occupation of every sea.”

On the contrary it depends upon ability to defeat the strongest battlefleet or combination wh[ich] can be brought to bear. This ability cannot be maintained by a policy of dispersion. The sea is all one, and war is all one. The supreme strategic principle of concentration of superior force in the decisive theatre ... must govern all naval dispositions. ... Dispersion of strength, frittering of money, empty parades of foolish little ships ‘displaying the flag’ in unfrequented seas, are the certain features of a policy leading through extravagance to defeat.⁸

The “first of all the laws of war”, he later explained to the Secretary of State for War, was “overpowering strength at the decisive point”. As desirable as it was to be strong everywhere, British finances would not allow it: Churchill rightly judged that his colleagues in the Liberal government would build no more capital ships than were needed to maintain the 60 per cent margin over its main rival. Britain simply could not afford a crushing numerical superiority over Germany in the North Sea while also matching the fleets of Germany’s allies, Austria-Hungary and Italy, in the Mediterranean. The only solution, Churchill argued, was to concentrate on the most important theatre. As long as Britain won the decisive battle against the German fleet “we can put everything else straight afterwards,” he observed. But if Britain lost that battle, “there will not

be any afterwards”. “It w[oul]d be very foolish”, he concluded, “to lose England in safeguarding Egypt.”⁹

There were obvious risks involved in stripping the Mediterranean of capital ships, but Churchill believed these would have to be accepted. To minimize the danger, he initially contemplated relying on flotilla vessels at Gibraltar and Alexandria to protect British interests in the absence of a battle fleet.¹⁰ The influence here of Fisher, who was acting as a sort of unofficial adviser to Churchill at this time, is obvious. “Let the French take care of the Mediterranean,” the Admiral urged Churchill in March 1912, “and a hot time they’ll have of it with submarines poking about in that lake. We are well out of it!”¹¹ The prospect of denuding the Mediterranean of battleships generated little enthusiasm within the Admiralty, however, and provoked a storm of criticism from other quarters, as many feared that the withdrawal of capital ships would badly damage British prestige in peacetime and leave national interests vulnerable in wartime.¹² In May 1912, Churchill tried to satisfy his critics by agreeing to station two modern battle-cruisers at Gibraltar, but he continued to face strong pressure in Cabinet to maintain a full battle squadron in the Mediterranean. Fearing that this would lead to a reduction of Britain’s strength in the North Sea, Churchill was determined to resist. Fisher was one of those encouraging him to stand firm. “The margin of power in the North Sea is irreducible”, the Admiral wrote, “and requires this addition of the Mediterranean battleships.”

Is it proposed to build another fleet for the Mediterranean, and also perhaps for China, and so on? *We cannot have everything or be strong everywhere.* It is futile to be strong in the subsidiary theatre and not overwhelmingly supreme in the decisive theatre.¹³

Churchill made his case to the Cabinet in June. The pre-dreadnought battleships currently in the Mediterranean were simply no match for the new Austrian and Italian dreadnoughts, he warned. In wartime, they “would only be a cheap and certain spoil.” He was therefore opposed to leaving these ships at Malta solely to “*keep up appearances.* It would be a bluff which would deceive nobody”.¹⁴ Only the most modern warships would be any use in the Mediterranean, and Britain could not afford to maintain a two-power standard in the Mediterranean against Italy and Austria-Hungary *and* preserve a 60 per cent. margin over Germany in the North Sea. “This would be a very extravagant policy,” he remarked, “and is not necessary to the fundamental safety of the

British Empire or to our ultimate victory and supremacy at sea.” He clearly did not regard flotilla defence as an ideal solution, but he insisted that there was no other realistic choice. “It must be plainly recognised that we must adopt the *rôle* in this minor theatre appropriate to the weaker naval Power,” he wrote, “and while in the North Sea we rely on the gun as our first weapon, we must in the Mediterranean fall back mainly on the torpedo.” To make this idea more attractive to the Cabinet, he pointed out that these flotillas would probably never be tested, as Britain would likely have the support of the French navy in the event of war. The two navies together should match the combined forces of Italy and Austria-Hungary, and Churchill advocated “a definite naval arrangement” with France to help secure British interests in the region.¹⁵

The subject was referred to the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) on 4 July 1912. Churchill, with the support of his naval advisers, continued to resist any reduction of Britain’s margin over Germany in home waters. “[A]ll other objects,” he argued, “however precious, must, if necessary, be sacrificed to secure this end.” To meet his colleagues’ concerns about British security in the Mediterranean, he outlined two options. The first was to aim at a one-power standard of strength in the Mediterranean against Austria-Hungary alone. This, he warned, would be expensive. The Admiralty would have to construct additional dreadnoughts, and British shipyards might be forced to stop building for foreign powers in order to concentrate on meeting Britain’s own needs. The other option, which he favoured, was to aim for a combined Anglo-French superiority in the Mediterranean over the combined strength of Austria-Hungary and Italy. This scheme would require the construction of only two additional capital ships, both battle-cruisers. This would allow for a force of four British battle-cruisers based at Malta in peacetime, which was sufficient, he insisted, to maintain British prestige in the region. The committee, following the lead of the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, decided that a one-power standard in the Mediterranean was necessary to give weight to British diplomacy in the region. It also ruled that the Admiralty’s first priority must be to retain a “reasonable margin” of superiority over Germany, but as the margin was not defined, Churchill and the Admiralty were not guaranteed the 60 per cent they wanted.¹⁶

This decision created significant problems for Churchill. From his perspective, the Cabinet had transformed the naval race with Germany into a naval race with Germany *and* Austria-Hungary. The former contest was certain to be expensive, but the latter threatened to be ruinous. The 60 per cent margin Churchill had announced to Parliament made no allowances for

construction by another power, but the Admiralty would now have to find additional ships for the Mediterranean. As an interim measure, Churchill persuaded the Cabinet that it would be sufficient to station four battle-cruisers at Malta.¹⁷ But in the long term, as Austrian and Italian dreadnoughts were completed, more heavy ships would be required. Churchill concluded that he would need a squadron of eight capital ships in the Mediterranean by mid-1915. This policy would make it difficult to avoid additional new construction beyond that projected in March 1912, but Churchill was eager to put off this expense as long as possible, and ideally to avoid it altogether.¹⁸ In a speech to the House of Commons on 22 July 1912, he pointedly omitted any reference to the government's decision to maintain a one-power standard in the Mediterranean, although he did hint that more dreadnoughts might eventually have to be built to meet Britain's commitments there.¹⁹

Churchill hoped to avoid this by shifting some or all of the additional burden to Britain's self-governing Dominions. Australia was building a battle-cruiser in British shipyards at this time for the newly-established Royal Australian Navy, and New Zealand was financing the construction of another for use by the Royal Navy. The Canadian government was also showing an interest in building dreadnoughts for Britain. In July 1912, Churchill had outlined the naval situation at length to Sir Robert Borden, the Prime Minister of Canada, at a meeting of the CID in London. The First Lord claimed that Britain needed to lay down three extra capital ships to ensure that it maintained its standards in both the Mediterranean and the North Sea.²⁰ Borden appeared eager to cooperate, and Churchill abruptly dropped the plans he had announced just two months earlier to combine Canadian, Australian and New Zealand-funded capital ships into a single "Dominion Squadron" to protect imperial interests in the Pacific. The appeal of the earlier arrangement was that Britain could have withdrawn its own modern ships from the Pacific to the North Sea without recriminations from the Dominions. But the need to maintain the Cabinet's new "one-power standard" against Austria-Hungary effectively killed the scheme. Churchill now wanted all the empire's capital ships available for service in Britain's home waters and the Mediterranean: imperial defence would have to take second place to the principle of concentration.²¹

This redistribution began in July 1912, when two battle-cruisers, *Indomitable* and *New Zealand*, which had been allocated to the Pacific under a 1909 agreement between the Admiralty and the Dominions, were reassigned to home waters. In Canada, Borden's government introduced

legislation to provide three dreadnoughts for the Royal Navy. But Churchill's plan to use dominion warships to maintain the Mediterranean standard were soon endangered by the inability of Borden's Conservative government to obtain the support of Canada's Liberal-dominated upper chamber. By early 1913 the fate of the Canadian ships was becoming increasingly uncertain. The potential loss of the Canadian dreadnoughts was partially offset, however, by increased naval cooperation with France. In July 1912, Churchill had accepted a French request to consider arrangements for joint naval action in the event the two powers became embroiled in war with Germany. While taking care to ensure that a naval agreement did not entail any binding political commitments, he encouraged the French to maintain enough ships in the Mediterranean to match the forces of Austria-Hungary and Italy combined.²² Over the next several months, an agreement was hammered out between the two governments that gave the French navy responsibility for protecting British interests in the western Mediterranean, while Britain agreed, under certain conditions, to protect French interests in the North Sea and English Channel. A formal naval convention with France was concluded in February 1913, but this did not bring Churchill any closer to having the ships necessary for the one-power standard.

Borden's naval aid bill was rejected by the Canadian senate in May 1913, creating a new set of complications. Churchill's commitment to the Mediterranean one-power standard was never strong. He instinctively disliked the idea of tying up modern capital ships in a secondary theatre, and he assumed that the naval agreement with France made it strategically unnecessary for Britain to match Austro-Hungarian strength. It was "extremely improbable", he concluded in September 1913, that Britain would have to face Germany and one or both of its allies without French support. And since France alone could be expected to match both Austria-Hungary and Italy, Britain could afford to remove some, if not all, of its capital ships from the Mediterranean in wartime. If Britain were at war with Germany alone, Churchill proposed to bring home the *entire* Mediterranean fleet.²³ He continued to plan for a full squadron of capital ships in the Mediterranean in peacetime as the Cabinet had stipulated, but seems to have regarded these ships as a sort of reserve force available for redeployment to home waters in wartime.

Churchill also never lost sight of the possibility that Britain might have to fall back on a policy of "flotilla defence" in the Mediterranean. In the autumn of 1912, he had considered reducing the number of battleships in the estimates for 1913-14 in order to divert resources to the expansion of the submarine fleet. There is no indication of how the additional submarines were to

be deployed, but Churchill clearly saw a use for them in the Mediterranean. “There is no doubt that Austria intends to have a great Mediterranean Fleet”, he had told Grey and Asquith in October 1912. “Our best and cheapest – perhaps our only – way of meeting this will be a large submarine and torpedo development supported by a fast squadron.”²⁴ At that time, his naval advisers were receptive to this idea. A study by the naval staff’s operations division in November 1912 concluded that the Austro-Hungarian fleet would be vulnerable to British submarines and destroyers as it exited the Adriatic Sea through the Strait of Otranto, which was only 40 miles wide. Captain George Ballard, the division’s director, believed that a “force of 80 sea-going Submarines” could “make the Adriatic entrance practically impassible [for the Austrians] if properly disposed and manoeuvred”. This would allow Britain to reduce its capital ship requirements in the Mediterranean.²⁵

But Churchill still regarded flotilla defence as an inferior means of protecting British interests, and he was eager to maintain the one-power battleship standard if at all possible. Since the Cabinet had dictated the need for capital ships in the Mediterranean, he naturally looked there for relief. He explained to his colleagues in June 1913 that, without the three Canadian dreadnoughts, Britain would fall behind Austro-Hungarian strength in the Mediterranean by the autumn of 1915. To prevent this, he recommended moving ahead the start date of three dreadnoughts already authorized in the Admiralty’s 1913-14 estimates. This would allow Britain to maintain the sanctioned standards in both home waters and the Mediterranean until the autumn of 1916. But he warned that the acceleration of the current programme would only provide a temporary solution. If the Canadian government did not build the proposed dreadnoughts, Britain would have to consider adding additional ships to its 1914-15 programme to be sure of maintaining the one-power standard beyond 1916.²⁶

After obtaining Cabinet sanction for the acceleration of the British ships, Churchill wrote privately to Borden stressing the importance of the Canadian dreadnoughts to imperial security. The situation was complicated, however, by Churchill’s plans for Britain’s 1914-15 programme of new construction. The naval staff was investigating means to increase the number of submarines in the annual estimates the following year without increasing the overall cost of new construction.²⁷ Churchill had no desire to see these plans wrecked for the sake of laying down additional battleships for the Mediterranean. He therefore explained to Borden that if the Canadian dreadnoughts were not approved by the following spring, when the annual estimates were

submitted to parliament, the Admiralty would probably expand its submarine fleet rather than build additional capital ships of its own. “My naval colleagues”, he informed Borden, “consider that for less money than 3 capital ships would cost, we could by a greatly increased flotilla construction in the narrow seas liberate 3 ships for general service.” The difficulty with this course was that Churchill – with the consent of the Cabinet – had publicly stated that the Canadian dreadnoughts were needed to meet an emergency. This pronouncement had been intended to make it easier for Borden to secure domestic support for his naval program, but it made it difficult for the Admiralty not to build the additional dreadnoughts itself if the Canadian contribution failed to materialize.²⁸

The one-power Mediterranean standard continued to complicate Churchill’s plans during the autumn of 1913. Borden remained committed to financing dreadnoughts for the Royal Navy, but he clearly faced enormous obstacles to securing the necessary political support. Churchill calculated that further delays in the construction of the Canadian ships could be covered by moving forward the start date of battleships in the Admiralty’s 1914-15 programme, but this would only provide another short-term solution. If Canada ultimately did not pay for the additional dreadnoughts, Churchill assumed he would have little choice but to ask the Cabinet for three capital ships beyond those already projected. He explained his difficulties in a Cabinet memorandum in early December 1913 outlining the Admiralty’s proposed estimates for 1914-15. Britain could have a one-power standard fleet in the Mediterranean by the end of 1916 or early 1917, he advised, but *only* if the Austrians did not add to their current building plans *and* if Canada built three dreadnoughts. In the meantime, four battle cruisers would be based at Malta to support British diplomacy. If Canada did not begin building dreadnoughts, Britain would have to make good this shortfall. He also warned that Austria-Hungary was contemplating an additional four capital ships in its programme, and those would have to be matched as well. A request for more British capital ships was hardly unreasonable in the circumstances, but Churchill probably assumed that his colleagues, faced with the tremendous expense of building three or more additional dreadnoughts, would quietly abandon the Mediterranean standard and rely on the understanding with France to safeguard British interests there.²⁹

If Churchill expected debate over the 1914 naval estimates to revolve around the question of expanding Britain’s building programme he was mistaken. A strong faction within the Cabinet favored a *reduction* in the estimates. This group, which included the Chancellor of the Exchequer,

David Lloyd George, proposed to drop two of the four dreadnoughts included in the following year's programme. Their reasons were mainly financial. The navy estimates for 1911, the year Churchill arrived at the Admiralty, had been £42.4 million. Since then, naval expenses had increased drastically. Britain was building more ships than before, at a greater individual cost, and was also keeping more vessels in commission. The number and pay of naval personnel was also increasing, and a new naval air service had been created. Churchill's proposed estimates for 1914 came to nearly £50.7 million, and he warned that an additional £2 million might become necessary if shipyards made more rapid progress than expected on vessels already under construction. This represented an increase of nearly 25 per cent in naval expenditure in just four years. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was faced with the prospect of raising taxes in the coming year, was alarmed by the size of Churchill's estimates, and did not believe that a small reduction in the capital ship programme would jeopardize British security. To his colleagues, he argued that four dreadnoughts were not needed that year to maintain 60 per cent superiority over Germany, and that such a large programme would be "distinctly provocative" at a time when Anglo-German relations were improving.³⁰

Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, who had originally suggested the one-power Mediterranean standard, proposed to the Cabinet in mid-December that reductions in the shipbuilding programme might be possible if Britain withdrew some of its capital ships from the Mediterranean.³¹ This would have gone a long way towards solving Churchill's difficulties, and he probably would have been happy to reduce Britain's Mediterranean commitments if this course had not become explicitly linked to a reduction in the shipbuilding programme. But Churchill had publicly committed himself in March 1912 to starting four capital ships in the 1914-15 fiscal year, and to the preservation of 60 per cent superiority over Germany. If the Cabinet – which had not protested against these commitments when they were made – now repudiated them, Churchill's position would be untenable and he was prepared to resign. The situation was further complicated by his public declarations that the Canadian dreadnoughts were required to meet a naval emergency. It would be highly damaging to Churchill if the government demonstrated that there was no emergency, and that the situation was in fact so secure that it could afford to reduce Britain's own programme. Moreover, any chance of obtaining the Canadian ships would be wrecked. Churchill also claimed to be alarmed about the repercussions in Germany. The construction programme outlined in 1912 had been the stick with which he hoped to induce the

Germans to accept his proposals for a mutual “naval holiday” in new battleship construction.³² He warned that a major change in British policy would signal a weakening of British resolve and encourage the Germans to renew their efforts.³³

On 18 December Churchill appealed to Prime Minister Henry Asquith for patience. There was still a chance that Borden might obtain funds for the new dreadnoughts, in which event Britain could maintain both the 160 per cent standard against Germany and the one-power standard against Austria-Hungary. In other words, by approving all four battleships in the current programme, Britain ultimately stood to obtain seven new dreadnoughts. Cutting the programme to two, on the other hand, would ensure that two was the most Britain could hope for. By “hold[ing] firm now”, Churchill insisted, there was still “good chances of a complete success”. But if Borden failed, Churchill did not see any insuperable obstacle to reducing Britain’s commitments in the Mediterranean. He suggested to Asquith that he could if necessary “develop an argument ab[ou]t submarines in that sea wh[ich] will obviate a further constr[uctio]n of battleships for this 2dary theatre”.³⁴ Flotilla defence might still provide an alternative to the one-power battleship standard in the Mediterranean. An unpublished memorandum dating from around this time illustrates Churchill’s thoughts on this subject. Matching Austrian dreadnoughts with British dreadnoughts represented “no more than a plain and simple interpretation” of the one-power standard, he concluded.

The obvious method of meeting like with like would impose an unbearable strain on our resources. We must therefore seek safety in some disconcerting variation. To do the same thing as your enemy but on a smaller scale is futile. If you cannot be superior, you must be different. We are justified in adopting less direct methods of maintaining our position in a secondary theatre than are required in the North Sea.

Rather than build three additional British dreadnoughts to maintain a precise one-power standard, Churchill suggested that Mediterranean requirements might be met by increasing the speed of two battleships in the current programme and building additional vessels in other classes, including twelve submarines and eight fast destroyers. This would allow Britain to maintain a squadron of five fast capital ships in the Mediterranean by 1915. Such a “force is not directly comparable to the Italian or Austrian fleets”, he conceded,

but we consider that its speed and quality would enable it, if well handled, to seize any opportunity of striking a heavy blow which a temporary weakness of the enemy might offer, and to avoid being brought to action in unfavourable circumstances. It is peculiarly well adapted to protecting British trade in the Mediterranean, and could continually harass and injure the enemy. We are of opinion that such a force would in fact though not in form meet the requirements of the "One Power Standard" prescribed.³⁵

When the debate over the naval estimates resumed in January 1914, Churchill produced a new memorandum for the Cabinet laying out the full implications of the decision in July 1912 to maintain a one-power Mediterranean standard. If the government did not accelerate more of its own ships in 1914-15 temporarily to fill the gap left by the Canadian dreadnoughts, the opposition would have every right to demand that Britain build an additional three capital ships to fill the gap permanently, making a total of seven new dreadnoughts that year. By accelerating three capital ships in the previous year's estimates, Churchill maintained that his colleagues had publicly committed themselves to maintaining the ships needed for a one-power Mediterranean standard. The only alternative to building three additional ships, he argued, was to accelerate work on two of the new ships in the 1914-15 programme. If that course were rejected, he insisted that the Cabinet would have to consider abandoning the one-power Mediterranean standard entirely. And if it wished to retain the standard, it would also have to consider its response if either Austria-Hungary or Italy increased its building programme, as appeared likely.

Churchill made his own position on these issues clear in a minute to Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg, the First Sea Lord, and Admiral Sir Henry Jackson, the Chief of the Admiralty's War Staff. All four battleships must be approved, he wrote, in order to maintain the 160 per cent standard, and two of these vessels should be laid down as soon as possible to cover the shortfall in the Mediterranean. He also proposed that the government should continue to "Adhere to the Mediterranean decision [i.e. the one-power standard]: but keep it secret". This, presumably, would make it easier to drop the standard later if the Canadian dreadnoughts fell through. Finally, Churchill suggested that Britain should simply ignore future building by Italy, while matching new Austro-Hungarian battleships with submarines.³⁶ In January 1914, Churchill remained committed to obtaining authorisation for all four battleships. This would save him any political

embarrassment in the short term and keep open his options when it came to determining how the new construction budget would be allocated. It was still possible that the Admiralty might have to build four battleships, but a reduction of the authorised programme would virtually preclude any possibility of funding additional submarines from the capital ship budget.

Churchill and Lloyd George reached a compromise near the end of January. The First Lord obtained approval for the construction of four new dreadnoughts, which would entail estimates of £52.8 million. In return, Lloyd George was assured that the estimates for 1915-16 would be kept below £50 million.³⁷ The only outstanding question now was the fate of the Mediterranean standard. In early February, Churchill took the question of acceleration back to the Cabinet. If the start date of two ships of the new programme were not moved forward, he warned again that it would be necessary to abandon either the existing margin over Germany in home waters or the one-power Mediterranean standard. The latter course would destroy any chance of obtaining dreadnoughts from Canada, and Churchill was still eager not to take this step unless absolutely necessary. To make acceleration more attractive, he proposed that offsetting economies could be obtained by delaying the start of a number of smaller warships and the other two dreadnoughts in the 1914 estimates. If Borden obtained authorisation for the Canadian dreadnoughts, Churchill suggested it might even be possible to delay some of the battleships in the 1915 programme. But if the Canadian ships were definitely abandoned, it would be necessary to accelerate part of the 1915 programme in order to maintain the Mediterranean standard for another year. Churchill suggested, however, that by the time such a decision had to be taken, “the progress of naval science, especially in regard to submarine construction, may enable a new view to be taken of the naval situation as a whole”. The Cabinet would therefore not necessarily be committed to building additional battleships if the Canadian ships did not materialize.³⁸

The acceleration of two battleships from the 1914 programme was approved in February, despite strong opposition from some ministers. But the Cabinet was not willing to commit itself to any future increase in Britain’s capital ship programme for the sake of the Mediterranean. According to Asquith, it was agreed “that Parliament should be clearly informed that in the event of Mr Borden’s continued default, the British government was under no obligation to supply the 3 missing Canadian ships, and that our standard of construction is to be maintained at 60%”.³⁹ This amounted to a tacit repudiation of the one-power Mediterranean standard. The details of the Cabinet’s discussion about naval standards are not recorded, but ministers were by now well aware

that by superimposing the Mediterranean standard on the original 160 per cent standard, the government had inflated its battleship requirements beyond what the Admiralty considered necessary and what the Cabinet was willing to pay for. As Churchill noted shortly afterward, in a minute to the Director of the Admiralty's Intelligence Division, the existing battleship standards "would carry us to an individual strength superior to the whole Triple Alliance". In other words, Britain had unintentionally created a *de facto* three-power standard. "Such a position", Churchill remarked, "could not be defended." He noted, however, that the Cabinet was inclined to limit its obligations by adopting a new formula by which Britain would maintain either a 160 per cent standard against the next strongest power, or a two-power standard measured against the next two strongest powers excluding the United States, "whichever alternative is the greater".⁴⁰

A new formula along these lines would, to use Churchill's words from 1912, readjust Britain's "standards in closer accord with the actual facts and probable contingencies".⁴¹ Britain would still have had a battleship standard, but one that would reduce the government's obligations in this class of vessel to a more manageable and realistic level. Numbers were only a problem from Churchill's perspective if he had to maintain *both* the 160 per cent standard and the Mediterranean one-power standard. If Britain abandoned the latter, there would be enough ships on hand to maintain the Admiralty's "irreducible" requirement of 50 per-cent. superiority over Germany in the North Sea and still provide a small but fast squadron for the Mediterranean. No formal decision was taken to abandon the one power standard, but it had clearly become untenable by April 1914, when it was learned that Austria-Hungary and Italy intended to increase their existing programmes by an additional four dreadnoughts each.⁴² Neither the "acceleration" of British ships nor Canadian construction would suffice any longer to maintain the one-power standard. This development appears to have convinced Churchill that the time had come to rely more heavily on submarines in the Mediterranean.

At the same time, the First Lord regarded Britain's position in the North Sea with growing confidence. British shipyards were able to build capital ships more rapidly than their German counterparts, and in the spring of 1914 Churchill was seemingly unconcerned about the security of the 160 per cent standard. Writing to Battenberg on 13 May, he noted that Britain could expect to complete 13 new capital ships between the fourth quarter of 1914 and the first quarter of 1916, while Germany would complete only two. This "great military fact", he remarked, altered "the whole proportion of battle strength between the fleets". In his opinion, this development was "one

of the strongest justifications for a general review of types".⁴³ Not long afterward, he observed to his private secretary that "the European situation has so greatly improved and the German increase has been so largely overhauled by our exertions" that it would now be safe to begin scrapping a large number of obsolescent warships, a policy he had planned to pursue when he came to the Admiralty but which had been shelved following the German naval increases in 1912.⁴⁴

Britain's growing strength in home waters would have reassured Churchill that a reduction in the number of capital ships in the current programme would not immediately endanger the 60 per cent margin over Germany, a course that would have been politically dangerous. And by moving capital ships to the North Sea from other theatres, the standard could be made even more secure. The only obligation Churchill had to worry about was the specific construction program he had outlined to Parliament in 1912, which included two extra British capital ships for every one added to the previous German naval programme. However, this commitment was largely forgotten or ignored in 1914. The Admiralty and the Cabinet both assumed that Britain's formal obligations would be adequately met just by maintaining the 60 per cent margin.⁴⁵ Dropping some ships from the building programme announced in 1912 would have meant openly abandoning the 2:1 margin over new German construction and might have spelled the end of Churchill's hopes for a "naval holiday", but with public attention focussed on the 60 per cent standard, there was little likelihood of a strong backlash.

The worsening situation in the Mediterranean, on the other hand, only increased Churchill's resolve to reduce Britain's commitment in this secondary theatre. On 30 May he drafted a lengthy minute outlining the advantages of withdrawing Britain's battle squadron from the Mediterranean entirely. As in 1912, he maintained that a small force at Malta would "be a bluff wh[ich] w[oul]d deceive nobody".

Hitherto we have always had sufficient force in the Meditn to cope with the reasonably probable adverse power or combination. That is going to cease: not because of the withdrawal of the Malta battleships, but because of the completion of the Austrian & Italian Dreadnoughts. It will cease certainly & soon, whether the Malta battleships are withdrawn or not. Only in the latter case we shall have more to lose in a subsidiary theatre, & less to win with in the decisive theatre. ... It has never been the policy of the Admy to rest upon the appearance of strength in any theatre; but rather to have enough ships to beat the

probable rival, or not to compete in that theatre at all, until a main decision has been obtained elsewhere. Abandonment of that policy cannot be defended on any sound strategic principle, but only by hanging on & hoping for the best. In this case detection in time of peace & punishment in time of war are equally certain.

The only reason to maintain capital ships in the Mediterranean, he argued, would be to strengthen the French fleet in wartime. But as long as France maintained its superiority over the combined Austro-Italian fleet, the addition of British ships would not be necessary. It was therefore in Britain's interests, he argued, to strengthen Britain's naval agreement with France.⁴⁶

There is no record of the one-power standard being formally dropped, but an informal understanding appears to have been reached. On 4 July, Churchill informed Asquith that he was "looking to the development of flotilla defence in the Mediterranean as a partial substitute for battleship strength, which would entail such heavy new construction charges".⁴⁷ Preparations were, in fact, already under way to increase the British submarine force at Malta. But there was no desire to publicise any of this. On the contrary, Churchill attempted to conceal what was happening. On 7 July 1914, just three days after informing Asquith of the plan to substitute flotilla vessels for battleships in the Mediterranean, the First Lord announced to the House of Commons that Britain would "have a battle-squadron of eight battleships in the Mediterranean, which is a very powerful squadron".⁴⁸ This maintained the appearance that British policy had not changed. Altering or abandoning a naval standard was always a significant step, and the Liberal government had good reason to fear that its domestic critics would claim that Britain's naval security and interests in the Mediterranean were not being adequately protected. More seriously, British prestige abroad would be damaged and potential enemies warned of the changes in Britain's naval force structure in the Mediterranean. It was therefore more convenient in 1914 not to announce any change in policy. When the eight capital ships failed to appear in the Mediterranean as promised, Churchill presumably intended to fall back on the argument he later outlined in an unpublished draft chapter of *The World Crisis* – that dreadnoughts could be treated "not as capital ships but as units of power which could, if desirable, be expressed in any other form".⁴⁹ By this slight of hand, the one power battleship standard in the Mediterranean could be transformed into a something that could still be described as a one-power standard, thus reassuring the general public that no significant change was taking place.

The revisionist argument that Churchill and the Board of Admiralty effectively abandoned the traditional battleship standard in 1914 is therefore based on a misunderstanding of British naval policy. Virtually all the discussion within the Admiralty in 1913-14 about dropping or modifying naval standards related to the one power Mediterranean standard, not the 160 per cent standard against Germany. Because the revisionists fail to distinguish between the two, they reach the wrong conclusions about policy-makers' objectives. Financial considerations forced Churchill to accept a reduced role for battleships in the Mediterranean, but the same was not true of the North Sea. On the contrary, adopting a form of flotilla defence, or a "units of power", standard in the Mediterranean promised to release the battleships needed to ensure Britain's continued superiority in this class of warship in home waters. By taking this step, Churchill, the Admiralty, and at least a handful of cabinet ministers were reaffirming their faith in the battleship as the ultimate means of ensuring Britain's maritime security, at least in the short term, in the theatre they regarded as the most essential of all.

Churchill's views on the future of the battleship were complex. He was well aware of the claims being made in some quarters that submarines and aircraft would one day make big gun capital ships obsolete; he believed this outcome would probably be realised as new technologies were developed; and he was eager that the Royal Navy should be at the forefront of progress in this area. But at the same time he was conscious of the limitations of existing technology, and he was cautious about abandoning a proven type of warship prematurely. On 10 November 1913, he told an audience at the Guildhall that the "question has often been raised whether the great ships of the Dreadnought era will some day follow the mammoth and the mastodon into a convenient and highly desirable extinction".

Those who believe that that time will come – and they are a considerable school – point with a warning finger to the ever-growing power of the submarine, and to the new and expanding possibilities of the air, and they ask whether the day will not come when, guided by information out of the sky, a blow may not be struck beneath the water which will be fatal to the predominance of great capital ships, at any rate in the narrow seas.

"That time", he assured his audience, "has not yet come, and the ultimate decision of naval war

still rests with those who can place in the line of battle fleets and squadrons which in numbers and quality ... are superior to anything they may be called upon to meet.”⁵⁰

His views on the submarine were also complicated. In August 1913 Churchill drafted a detailed minute describing the three distinct types Britain required. The first were “coastal” vessels with limited range suitable for protecting the narrow waters around Britain itself. The second were “overseas” vessels with considerably greater range, capable of operating near the enemy’s shores. At the time, he calculated that with 48 submarines of this type it would be possible to maintain a continuous blockade of the German coast. The third type were “ocean” submarines (more commonly known as “fleet” submarines), which he described as a “decisive weapon of battle; and as such must count in partial substitution of battleship strength”. No submarine of this class had yet been developed, but Churchill possessed a clear idea of what was needed:

Surface speed is the dominant characteristic required of the Ocean submarine. This speed is not tactical but strategical. The Ocean submarine (or submarine cruiser) must have sufficient speed to overhaul a battle fleet so as to make sure of being able to anticipate it at any point, or to get ahead of it in order to dive and attack. Such vessels attack by getting there and being overtaken. 24 knots would be an ample margin of speed for Ocean submarines. These vessels cruise under escort and fight alone. They must be protected by other vessels when on the surface; and be guided by them to their point of attack.

Churchill suggested that three or four of these vessels should be grouped together into a submarine flotilla along with two fast light cruisers. Each flotilla would be “considered equal as a decisive fighting unit to a first class battleship or battle cruiser”.⁵¹ Thus, the submarine would only be capable of supplanting the battleship when a new class had been developed capable of achieving a speed around 24 knots.

During the latter half of 1913 Churchill was eager to develop an efficient “ocean” submarine, and he supported the construction of experimental boats that promised to meet his speed requirements. But he also wanted to expand Britain’s existing fleet of overseas submarines in order to restore Britain’s ability to maintain a close watch on the German coast. The Royal Navy had successfully employed this strategy in previous wars, but when Churchill arrived at the Admiralty in 1911 it was clear that developments in submarines, aircraft, mines and torpedoes

made such a policy extremely dangerous. The navy's plans for close military blockade were therefore dropped early in 1912. The Admiralty war staff initially contemplated its replacement with an "intermediate" or "observational" blockade, which would keep the main British fleet in its own northern waters while cruisers and destroyers patrolled a line extending mid-way through the North Sea between Britain and Germany.⁵² Churchill was never enthusiastic about this plan, and it was dropped after the 1912 manoeuvres demonstrated that it was not practicable.⁵³ Towards the end of the year, the naval staff began to outline plans for what became known as a distant blockade. The British fleet would now be held in Scottish waters in order to block Germany's exits from the North Sea. Churchill was not enthusiastic about this strategy either, fearing that it would leave the main fleet poorly positioned to stop a German attempt to invade Britain, attack its coastline, or interfere with the transportation of an expeditionary force to France.

Distant blockade also struck Churchill as an unduly passive policy, and he was instinctively drawn to the idea of using submarines and other flotilla vessels to reestablish a close blockade of the German coast.⁵⁴ At an Admiralty conference on submarine policy in early December 1913, a consensus was reached that priority should be given to the construction of "overseas" submarines for blockading purposes. The main proponent of developing the "ocean" submarine on this occasion was the First Lord. The Director of Naval Construction produced a design for 24 knot ocean submarine using steam propulsion, and Churchill was eager to proceed with the construction of more than one of these vessels. His professional advisers were more cautious, however. Britain already had two experimental steam submarines under construction at the time, HMS *Swordfish* and HMS *Nautilus*, and they felt that these should be completed and tested before any commitment was taken to producing a new and untried design. This was a prudent decision. The steam-driven K-class "fleet" submarines produced during the First World War proved to be a notable failure.⁵⁵ In December 1913 the Admiralty decided to build only one experimental 24-knot submarine; additional vessels would be considered in late 1914.⁵⁶ Churchill was impatient, however, and was soon under pressure from the Cabinet to effect economies in the 1914-15 estimates. He therefore informed the Sea Lords on Christmas day 1913 that they must press ahead with the development of the proposed new design that would "supply us with ocean submarines of the required speed and sea-going qualities". He concluded that if these were "to be constructed they must be a substitute for the battleship preponderance and paid for out of money that would have otherwise have gone into battleships".⁵⁷

Churchill was evidently confident that the Royal Navy was on the verge of building a successful “ocean” class (or “fleet”) submarine, and he was eager to have some of these vessels ready at the earliest date possible. If the new design proved to be successful, he undoubtedly contemplated a transformation of the navy’s force structure. But the technology for this new class of submarine was as yet untested. Churchill was not attempting to initiate a “naval revolution” at this time so much as he was gambling part of his budget on research and development that might make a future revolution possible. And even then, he did not regard this new class of submarines as the backbone of an asymmetric strategy of “flotilla defence”, as the revisionists argue, but rather as a means of augmenting the traditional line of battle with a new type of warship to enhance its offensive capabilities in the North Sea against its German counterpart.

While Churchill attempted to further this goal, it also appeared that a relatively modest expansion of Britain’s “overseas” submarines would allow the navy to revive the policy of close blockade. These considerations, together with the need for a larger flotilla in the Mediterranean, all pointed in the same direction: an immediate expansion of the submarine fleet. In late December 1913, Churchill and the naval staff began actively exploring the possibility of replacing one or maybe two battleships in the 1914-15 programme with submarines.⁵⁸ There is no doubt, as Lambert has shown, that Churchill was a driving force behind the idea of an “extraordinary” substitution policy. In an unpublished draft chapter of *The World Crisis*, Churchill describes how he explained the rationale for his policy to Lloyd George and worked out an agreement, later endorsed by Asquith, allowing the Admiralty to replace two of its capital ships for that year with torpedo vessels of equivalent value.⁵⁹ The timing of this agreement is not clear, although there is no basis for Sumida’s claims that a deal was secretly concluded in January 1914, even as the Cabinet debates over the naval estimates were taking place.⁶⁰ It seems more likely that Churchill waited until his preparations were further advanced before approaching the Treasury, in which case an agreement was probably reached between April and early July 1914. In the event, the First Lord only began to press the naval members of the Board of Admiralty for a decision on the substitution programme in July.

Churchill himself was enthusiastic about proceeding. “I am convinced that the time has come for action”, he wrote to Battenberg on 12 July, “and although the steps are serious I do not feel any anxiety about taking them. They will add greatly to the war power of the Fleet and bring credit to all associated with them.”⁶¹ The options under consideration in mid-July 1914 were

described by Admiral Sir Frederick Hamilton, the Second Sea Lord, as:

- (a) To drop one Battleship and substitute 6 of the proposed “Polyphemus” Class [an experimental “torpedo cruiser”]

- (b) To drop a 2nd Battleship and substitute about 16 Submarines of the latest pattern.

- (c) To drop all the destroyers in the programme except 2 or 3 large one[s] designed for Leaders of Divisions or Flotillas and substitute submarines.⁶²

The additional submarines under consideration at this time were improved “E” class boats, an “overseas” type considered suitable for blockading the German coast. The absence of “ocean” or fleet submarines on this list suggests that these vessels were not yet sufficiently developed to be considered for the current year’s programme. Churchill’s hopes for an immediate technological breakthrough appear to have shifted over the preceding months to the proposed new Polyphemus-class, a semi-submerged and armoured “torpedo cruiser” capable of launching up to eight torpedoes against an enemy fleet. Churchill had himself instructed the Admiralty’s Director of Naval Construction to begin planning a vessel of this type, and designs were well advanced by July 1914.⁶³

According to Nicholas Lambert, Churchill and his advisers definitely decided during the latter part of July 1914 to drop two battleships from that year’s programme in order to finance additional torpedo craft. This, he maintains, demonstrates their acceptance of Fisher’s radical proposals for substituting “flotilla defence” in home waters at the expense of battleships. These claims do not stand up to close scrutiny. To begin with, the documents Lambert relies on do not entirely support – and in some ways contradict – his assertion that the senior naval officers who knew of the substitution proposals supported a “revolutionary” new course. Battenberg’s views are not documented, although Fisher noted that Churchill believed the First Sea Lord was in favour of substituting submarines for “a battleship”.⁶⁴ Hamilton, however, clearly had reservations. After learning of the proposed substitution programme from Churchill, the Second Sea Lord, who had taken up his new position earlier that month, outlined his views in a memorandum that was carefully annotated by Rear-Admiral Archibald Moore, the Third Sea Lord, and Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, Hamilton’s predecessor as Second Sea Lord and next in line as Commander-in-Chief of

the navy's Home Fleet. Hamilton concluded that the overriding consideration for any new policy "is that the change should be gradual". He therefore suggested that the best course would be to pursue only (a) and (c). Attempting option (b) that year, he warned, "would only land us in trouble and loss of efficiency". Moore was also inclined to move slowly. "[I]t would savour of insincerity or stupidity", he commented, "to make a sudden departure" from the existing naval standard". Later in the document he remarked that he "deprecate[d] sudden decisions[;] development of material has been gradual & clearly defined & on this account only the change of standard should be gradual. The political & strategical situation has not had a sudden revolution & does not warrant abrupt rearrangement of forces."⁶⁵ Jellicoe expressed his agreement with these views, and stated that the only substitution he would recommend was two of the Polyphemus class cruisers for destroyers.⁶⁶ He was thus clearly in favour of the full programme of four battleships that year.

Churchill's proposed Polyphemus-class cruiser enjoyed some support within the Admiralty, but Admiral Sir Doveton Sturdee, the Chief of the Admiralty's War Staff, prepared two memoranda on 24 July outlining his strong reservations. These ships were relatively expensive to build, he noted, but they offered no clear advantage over existing types of warship. Like other surface vessels, they would be no substitute for submarines in a blockade; and with their low freeboard they would be little use for defending or attacking trade on the high seas. They were fast enough to accompany a battle fleet, but in a fleet action they would be vulnerable to the enemy's destroyers, which presented a smaller target for torpedoes. Most importantly from Churchill's perspective, Sturdee maintained that battleships could not "be replaced by any number of Polyphemus's". He was sympathetic to the need to reduce costs, but the best course at this time, in his opinion, was to "develop the Submarine for oversea attack and maintain our Battleship strength by Battleships to overpower those of the enemy".⁶⁷

The views expressed by these senior decision-makers in July 1914 generally bear out Lambert's broad argument that naval leaders held more progressive views than traditional accounts would suggest. But these individuals were clearly more interested in tinkering with the construction programme for that year than in embarking on a revolutionary new course. And even then, they were not agreed amongst themselves as to what changes were desirable. The only real consensus was that there should be no radical departure from existing policies. In this connection it is important to note that the proposals under consideration did not necessarily constitute a model for subsequent years' construction programmes. On the contrary, the 1914 substitution proposals

appear to have been regarded as a “one-off”. Churchill’s immediate goal at this time, other than obtaining some financial relief, was to make up as quickly as possible the perceived shortage of submarines on hand to blockade Germany and to increase their numbers in the Mediterranean. If he could also introduce a new type of warship that could reduce Britain’s battleship requirements, he would have been happy to do that as well. But from Churchill’s perspective, a revolutionary transformation of the navy’s force structure in home waters depended on innovative designs or new technology that was not yet ready in July 1914. His naval advisers were even more cautious when it came to committing scarce funds to untested designs. There was therefore no basis for a “naval revolution” in July 1914, although Churchill probably continued to believe that radical changes would be necessary and feasible in the long-term.

The revisionists also argue that the professional members of the Board of Admiralty ultimately approved an “extraordinary” substitution policy in July 1914. If true, the reservations expressed by the sea lords can be brushed aside. But Lambert is only able to marshal a single piece of evidence to support his claim that a final decision was taken: the Admiralty’s order on 27 July for gun-mountings for just two capital ships.⁶⁸ This, he maintains, is “conclusive” proof that two of the projected battleships had been cancelled. This claim is problematic. In the first place, it overlooks the Cabinet’s decision in February 1914 to “accelerate” two battleships from the 1914-15 programme. Invitations to tender for these two vessels, originally planned as repeats of the Royal Sovereign class, were issued in March 1914, and contracts were concluded with Palmer’s and Fairfield in May.⁶⁹ The other two ships of the 1914-15 programme were both allocated to naval dockyards. One of these, HMS *Resistance*, would also belong to the Royal Sovereign class; the other, HMS *Agincourt*, would be a variant of the Queen Elizabeth class. But there was never any intention of starting the two dockyard ships until early 1915. Besides keeping the substitution option open, this late start would ensure that the cost of the vessels was kept to a minimum in the fiscal year in which they were voted, which was the normal practice before Churchill adopted the expedient of “accelerating” some ships in a given year. The starting dates of the four battleships were therefore staggered. The gun mountings ordered by the Admiralty on 27 July were intended for the two “contract” battleships that had already been ordered. Additional gun mountings for the two dockyard ships would not have been required for several more months at least. Thus, while there is no certainty that the final two battleships would have been started if the war had not intervened, there is equally no proof that they had definitely been abandoned. The

Third Sea Lord, responsible for naval procurement, certainly did not believe any decision had been taken in July. He addressed a minute to Churchill and Battenberg on 24 August enquiring as to the fate of the final two battleships. “The design of these vessels has received considerable consideration,” he noted, “as also the possibility of substituting other classes of vessels for them, but a decision *had not been reached up to the outbreak of war.*” The question was settled two days later, when Churchill minuted that the remaining ships would not be proceeded with.⁷⁰

The revisionists claim that Churchill and his professional advisers planned to transform naval force structure and finances in 1914 by relying on flotilla defence in home waters so that the heavy surface ships – whether battleships or battle-cruisers – could be deployed to defend trade and imperial interests abroad. Nicholas Lambert fails to establish the first component of Fisher’s proposed radical program – that the Navy shifted decisively away from battleships in the North Sea in favour of flotilla defence. It has largely fallen to Jon Sumida to show that the Churchill administration intended to use battle cruisers to defend British interests abroad, thereby fulfilling the second essential component of the Fisher’s proposed “revolution”. These efforts are also unsuccessful. There is, to be sure, some truth in Sumida’s claim that the Admiralty intended to rely on battle-cruisers in the Mediterranean. Churchill did prefer battle cruisers (or fast battleships) in this theatre, but his main goal was to fulfill the Cabinet’s desire to retain some capital ships there. He was willing to do so because the battle cruisers so deployed were not required to maintain the approved margin of superiority over Germany in the North Sea. In other words, Churchill deployed some battle cruisers abroad because he believed Britain’s superiority in capital ships in home waters had effectively neutralized the German threat, not because he believed that flotilla defence made it safe to denude the North Sea of heavy ships.

Sumida also asserts that in early 1914 the Admiralty had decided “to create a battle cruiser force in the Pacific, and was in the process of implementing the plan when the war broke out in August”.⁷¹ Churchill’s policy was, in fact, the opposite of this. As First Lord, he believed that the principle of concentration in the decisive theatre applied to the Pacific with even greater force than to the Mediterranean. He therefore substituted pre-dreadnought battleships for the two British battle-cruisers that the Admiralty had agreed to provide for the Pacific in the 1909 agreement with the Dominions. During the course of 1913, he went further still and attempted to substitute older

vessels for the modern Bristol-class cruisers that had been earmarked for New Zealand waters. And finally, in March 1914, Churchill announced his goal of creating a new “Imperial Squadron” of fast capital ships. This force would be nominally available for “imperial service” in the Pacific, but it would normally be stationed at Gibraltar in peacetime, where it would be immediately available for deployment to the North Sea or the Mediterranean. This force was supposed to include the heavy ships financed by Canada, New Zealand and Malaya, but also, Churchill hoped, the new Australian battle-cruiser, HMAS *Australia*, which he feared would otherwise remain tied to the Pacific.⁷² Churchill’s goal in 1914 with respect to the Pacific was thus to deprive it of battle-cruisers and other modern ships until such time as there emerged an immediate and pressing threat in the region that justified detaching ships from more important theatres.⁷³

The revisionists have performed a valuable service by articulating, with great force and insight, the revolutionary ideas developed by Jacky Fisher during his first term as First Sea Lord (1904-1910), and by highlighting many of the shortcomings of Arthur Marder’s influential work on the Royal Navy during the Fisher era. But it would be a mistake to substitute the new interpretive framework proposed by Lambert and Sumida for the discarded orthodoxy based on the works of Marder, at least for the period when Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty. Fisher’s ideas were not a straightforward blueprint for developments in British naval strategy or force structure during these years. The admiral undoubtedly influenced Churchill’s thinking on a range of issues, and can be credited in particular with inspiring his belief in the *potential* of the submarine to revolutionize naval war. But Churchill and his top professional advisers did not adopt Fisher’s programme in its entirety. Most importantly, Churchill himself rejected the idea that equal weight should be assigned to the defence of British interests at home and abroad: his overriding concern was always home defence. He believed in amassing the greatest possible concentration of force in home waters, and in 1913-1914 he still believed that the security of British interests, both in home waters and abroad, depended on Britain’s ability to maintain its superiority in battleships in the North Sea.

Submarines had a clear role to play in coastal defence and, potentially, in establishing a close blockade of the Germany’s North Sea littoral, but Churchill did not have sufficient faith in “flotilla defence”, given the technology then available, to risk Britain’s survival on it. He sought an increase in Britain’s submarine strength in 1914 partly to save money, partly as a “quick fix” for a perceived shortage of existing submarine types, and partly to augment the traditional battle fleet

with a new type of submarine that would enhance its offensive capabilities and, potentially, reduce Britain's reliance on battleships. The apparent security of Britain's battleship margin over Germany at this time meant that, from Churchill's perspective, there was no significant risk involved in dropping two battleships from that year's programme to pursue these goals. But it would be wrong to assume that either Churchill or his advisers saw submarines as an immediate substitute for the battleship in the North Sea in July 1914, or that "flotilla defence" was the only possible role for an expanded submarine force in this region. The situation in the Mediterranean was, from Churchill's perspective, fundamentally different. He was willing to run risks there – even to adopt radical ideas – because he was determined to maintain an ample margin of superiority in the decisive theatre, because Britain had less to lose in the Mediterranean, and because he was confident that British interests would ultimately be protected by the powerful French navy. Given a choice between flotilla defence in the Mediterranean, on the one hand, and a complete British withdrawal and total reliance on the French, on the other, Churchill naturally opted for the former. In mid-1914, a combination of flotilla defence and a fast squadron of capital ships was an expedient that was considered strategically acceptable in a secondary theatre. The result was that at the end of July 1914, Churchill had put his own stamp on British naval strategy: battleships would be concentrated to ensure Britain's security at home, submarines would be used to protect its interests in the Mediterranean, and the Pacific would be largely abandoned.

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 18. Uncirculated Churchill memorandum, 6 July 1912, *Churchill*, II/3:1588-91; CID 118, 11 July 1912, CAB 2/2.
 19. Speech of 22 July 1912, *Complete Speeches*, II:1994. Also his speech of 24 July, *ibid.*, II:2004.
 20. CID 118, 11 July 1912, CAB 2/2.
 21. Christopher M. Bell, "Sentiment vs Strategy: British Naval Policy, Imperial Defence, and the Development of Dominion Navies, 1911-1914", *International History Review* (forthcoming)
 22. Churchill memorandum, 17 July 1912, GP Gooch and Harold Temperley (eds), *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914*, 11 vols (London: HMSO, 1927-1938), vol. X, part II, 600-1; Marder, *From the Dreadnought*, I:304-5.
 23. Churchill memorandum, 23 September 1913, *Churchill*, II/3:1784.
 24. Churchill to Grey and Asquith, 22 October 1912, Cab 1/34.
 25. Ballard memorandum, "Considerations as to the Best Composition of the Mediterranean Fleet in 1915", 20 November 1912, ADM 116/3099.
 26. Churchill cabinet memorandum, "The Three Canadian Ships", 3 June 1913, CAB 37/113/128; *Churchill*, II/3:1808-10.
 27. "Submarine Construction – 1914-15: Precis of Papers", Keyes papers, British Library, Add. 82455; Lambert, *Naval Revolution*.
 28. Churchill to Borden, 30 June 1913, Borden papers, National Archives of Canada, microfilm reel C4349, ff. 67776-85.
 29. Churchill memorandum, "Navy Estimates, 1914-15", 5 December 1913, *Churchill*,

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30. Lloyd George memorandum, December 1913, CAB 37/117/97; Friedrich Wilhelm Wiemann, "Lloyd George and the Struggle for the Navy Estimates of 1914", A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 71-91.
31. Wiemann, "Navy Estimates of 1914", 79.
32. Churchill's most recent proposals for a naval holiday were outlined in his Dundee speech of 18 October 1913, *Complete Speeches*, II:2174; John H. Maurer, "Churchill's Naval Holiday: Arms Control and the Anglo-German Naval Race, 1912-1914", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 15, 1 (March 1992): 102-27.
33. Churchill memorandum, 13 December 1913; Churchill to Asquith, 18 December 1913; Churchill to Grey, 25 December 1913; *Churchill*, II/3:1825-7, 1834-5, 1836-8.
34. Churchill to Asquith, 18 December 1913, *Churchill*, II/3:1835.
35. Undated [but 1913 based on internal evidence] Churchill memorandum, CHAR 13/6A.
36. Churchill minute to Battenberg and Jackson, CHAR 13/6A.
37. Asquith to King George V, 29 January 1914, CAB 41/35/1.
38. Churchill cabinet memorandum, 6 February 1914, CAB 37/119/25; *Churchill*, II/3:1863-6.
39. Asquith to King George V, 11 February 1914, CAB 41/35/3.
40. Churchill to DID, 26 February 1914, CHAR 13/25.
41. Speech of 18 March 1912, House of Commons, *Complete Speeches*, II:1929.
42. Churchill memorandum, "Italian and Austrian building programmes", 26 April 1914, CAB 37/119/57.
43. Churchill to Battenberg, 13 May 1914, *Churchill*, II/3:1977.
44. Churchill to Masterton-Smith, 23 May 1914, CAB 1/34. See also Geoffrey Miller, *The Millstone* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1999), ch. 16.
45. John H. Maurer, "The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry and Informal Arms Control, 1912-1914", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 36, no. 2 (June 1992), 295.
46. Churchill minute, 30 May 1914, CAB 1/33.
47. Churchill to Asquith, 4 July 1914, Lambert, *Submarine Service*, 259.

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48. Speech of 7 July 1914, *Complete Speeches*, III:2323.
49. CHAR 8/61.
50. *Complete Speeches*, II:2183.
51. Churchill minute, "Notes on Submarines", 20 August 1913, DEY (Sir Eustace Tennyson d'Eyncourt papers, National Maritime Museum) 31; Lambert, *Submarine Service*, 207-9; see also Churchill to Fisher, 30 August 1913, FISR (Fisher papers, Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge), 1/13.
52. Shawn Grimes, "War Planning and Strategic Development in the Royal Navy, 1887-1918", PhD dissertation (King's College, London, 2005), 211-18; Marder, *From the Dreadnought*, I:369-73; Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 261-5;
53. Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 263-8.
54. Churchill to Battenberg, 17 February 1913, ADM 116/3412.
55. Don Everitt, *The K Boats* (London: Harrap, 1963).
56. "Record of Conference held in First Lord's Room on 9th December", Keyes papers, Add. 82455.
57. Churchill to First, Second and Third Sea Lords, 25 December 1913, CHAR 13/22B.
58. Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 296. In his article "Churchill and British Sea Power, 1908-29", Sumida claims that Churchill and the Admiralty secretly decided in December 1913 to proceed with a policy of substitution, but even on the basis of Lambert's evidence it is clear that discussion was still very tentative at that stage, and that no decision had been reached as late as July 1914.
59. CHAR 8/61.
60. Sumida, "Fisher's Naval revolution".
61. Churchill to Battenberg, 12 July 1914, Cab 1/34.
62. Undated Hamilton memorandum, HTN/124, Admiral Sir Frederick Tower Hamilton papers, National Maritime Museum (hereafter "Hamilton memorandum"); see also Churchill to Greene and Battenberg, 12 July 1914, Cab 1/34.
63. Churchill minute to Moore and d'Eyncourt, 1 June 1914, ADM 138/428A (ship's cover, Polyphemus), Brass Foundry, Woolwich.
64. Fisher to Jellicoe, 25 May 1914, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, II:506.

65. Moore minutes on Hamilton memorandum.

66. Jellicoe minutes on Hamilton memorandum. See also Fisher to Jellicoe, 25 May 1914, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, II:506.

67. Sturdee memoranda, “What is the Strategic and Tactical Value of a Polyphemus?” and “What is the Raison D’Être of a Polyphemus at the Present Time”, MB1/T37/361-2, Prince Louis of Battenberg papers, University of Southampton Library, Archives and Manuscripts.

68. Lambert, *Naval Revolution*, 303.

69. ADM 138/416 (ship’s cover), Brass Foundry, Woolwich.

70. Minutes by Moore (24 August 1914) and Churchill (26 August 1914), Fisher papers, FISR 1/15. Emphasis added.

71. Sumida, “Fisher's Naval revolution”; this claim appears to be based on the final paragraphs of Nicholas Lambert, “Economy or Empire?: The Fleet Unit Concept and the Quest for Collective Security in the Pacific”, in Keith Neilson, and Greg Kennedy (eds), *Far Flung Lines* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 75-6, which notes that the evidence for the despatch of battle-cruisers for imperial defence at this time is inconclusive.

72. Bell, “Sentiment vs Strategy”.

73. *Ibid.* This trend in Churchill’s thinking has been noted by Nicholas Lambert in “Strategic Command and Control for Maneuver Warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy’s “War Room” System, 1905–1915”, *Journal of Military History*, 69, no. 2 (April 2005): 393.