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The Burden of Trafalgar

Decisive Battle and Naval Strategic Expectations on the Eve of the First World War

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This paper is written as part of a book-length study, currently in progress, of the origins and development of naval offensive thinking during the five decades or so leading up to the First World War. Its particular focus is the idea of the "decisive battle," i.e., the belief that dominated naval thinking in the Victorian and Edwardian periods that the goals of war at sea could, would, and ought to be settled by a single, all-destructive clash between massed battle fleets. The Great War would demonstrate, of course, that "real" war was a far cry from the "ideal" that had been promoted by the "pens behind the fleet." When the "second Trafalgar" failed to take place, apologists were quick to propose that this was only to be expected and that the "uneducated hopes" were disappointed because they had failed to grasp the distinction between what modern students of strategy call *declaratory* and *action* war planning. The implication was that the professional naval strategist *did* know the difference and had prepared all along to enjoy, as Churchill put it after the Battle of Jutland, "all the fruits of victory" without the need for the British to seek the battle at all.

The distinction between declaratory and action policy, i.e., between what one says will be done and what is planned in fact, may be an obvious one in principle; in practice it is not, not even for the professional military planner. An important reason is that only declaratory strategy receives public exposure at home and abroad, and only it is read, discussed, absorbed, and liable to be acted upon. Declaratory plans, when repeated often enough, can take on a life of their own and assume an action reality that was never intended. This phenomenon is not unique to naval war planning at the turn of the century. Take, for example, the U.S. Navy's "Maritime Strategy" of the 1980s. Some people hold that the avowed aim of an immediate forward offensive was declaratory and intended to be a deterrent. Or did the "war-fighters" really mean what they said? Or is it the true sequence of events that planners became so carried away with their own declarations that in the course of public promotion, demonstrative exercises, etc., war-fighting came to imitate war-posturing? It needs also to be kept in mind that "real" war planning cannot be at too great odds with public professions for the simple reason that the discrepancy will eventually become evident from the kinds of military forces that are built. The fleets that went to war in August 1914 were built in the image of the decisive battle.

It is true that there were some naval strategists on both sides in 1914 who were skeptical about the prospect of a royal road to victory. It is also correct that the war plans on both sides allowed for strategies short of an immediate pursuit of battle. Indeed, both the British and German naval war plans say remarkably little about quick and decisive action. It is nevertheless

disingenuous to suggest that only lay opinion had been led astray, whereas the professionals knew better and were unsurprised by the absence of early battle action. When all was said and done, the naval profession as a whole was just as committed to what one commentator in 1915 called the "totally wrong idea of the meaning of naval supremacy."[1]

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Introduction

Where is our Nelson?

Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon
The Jutland Scandal (1925)

ON THE AFTERNOON OF 31 MAY 1916, the British grand fleet and the German High Sea Fleet met in the only massed battle fleet action of the First World War. After a series of exchanges that lasted some twelve hours, both sides, in what became known as the Battle of Jutland, broke off battle and failed to engage each other again. The German decision was prompted by the unexpected appearance of the Grand Fleet's superior number of battleships; Admiral Sir John Jellicoe's decision not to pursue his fleeing opponent stemmed from his fear of running into a torpedo trap. Both sides claimed victory. The British rested their case on strategic considerations: the enemy's attempt to break into the North Sea had been thwarted, and he, not the British, had been forced to turn tail and hurry back to the safety of his ports, thus preserving British command of the North Sea. The Germans claimed victory on tactical and moral grounds: they had inflicted heavier losses than they had suffered (the battle cost the British about 112,000 tons in fighting ships compared with 60,000 tons for the Germans), but more important, the outcome had shown that the Royal Navy was not unbeatable after all.

Government spokesmen in London sought to downplay the significance of the material losses and the failure to sink the High Sea Fleet as an episodic setback with no strategic or historical importance. To bolster their case, they pointed out that it had taken Nelson two years of waiting and watching to bring Napoleon's fleet to battle at Trafalgar in 1805. Even then, went Jutland's apologists, the destruction of the combined Franco-Spanish fleet had done surprisingly little to improve the safety of British merchantmen from commerce-raiding privateers.

But few of the "uneducated hopes of the British nation" took solace in this explanation.[2] Popular sentiment as voiced in the press and Parliament tended

toward the opinion instead that the Grand Fleet's failure to bring the Germans to a final battle "showed a departure from the spirit of modern warfare as handed down in the Nelsonic tradition."[3] And in truth, the people of Great Britain had reason to be disappointed, for an outpouring of navalist literature and Admiralty pronouncements during the years leading up to the war had led them to believe that years of national investment in a superior battle fleet had guaranteed a quick, victorious, and war-deciding Trafalgar-like North Sea "Armageddon." As one of the war's key naval participants put it:

> When the late war burst on the nation with meteoric suddenness, the minds of the people were imbued with old ideas of naval warfare which created vast expectations of spectacular achievement and victories similar to those of Trafalgar and the Nile . . . eyes were longingly fixed on the glories of a Fleet action.[4]

Jutland came and went without "decision" and the war dragged on in the trenches of Flanders. "People asked," wrote Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon after the war, "What is wrong? Where is our Nelson?" Each day, he wrote, they looked "to find that the German ships had been forced to come out and give battle to our fleet. They then confidently believed our day would at last have come—Trafalgar would be repeated, and ship after ship of the German navy would be sent to the bottom."[5]

Another Trafalgar, fought with steam and steel in place of Nelson's wooden walls, was central to popular and professional naval expectations about naval strategy and war on the eve of the First World War. War at sea was expected to be quick, destructive, and, most important, decisive. Battle fleets on both sides were built, exercised, and indoctrinated for this purpose, yet, as is argued in this paper, no one seemed to know exactly what a modern-day Trafalgar was to decide.

Decisive Battle
Promise and Reality

One of the unfortunate aspects of history . . . is its inevitable concentration on battle as the decisive element in the unfolding of events.

H.P. Willmott
Sea Warfare (1981)

A LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY naval chronicler wrote how, despite huge technological changes in the implements of combat at sea, "the great laws which govern it are the same now as a thousand years ago: concentrate your force, cripple your enemies' motive power, capture, risk, destroy."[6] But what exactly was a victorious *bataille royale* to decide? What were its aims, and how did one tell a decisive from an indecisive battle? Or is decisive battle a chimera that, like "command of the sea," has a great deal of seductive significance for the naval historian and theorist but little operational meaning for the naval practitioner? Is perhaps Russell Weigley's recent study of the "age of battles" correct with the conclusion that decisive battle is the ideal of theorists, but that indecision has been the common outcome of war and battle?[7]

Few turn-of-the-century military and naval thinkers would have comprehended Weigley's thought that war, let alone its "highest expression"—battle—was futile. Most would have sympathized instead with Kolmar von der Goltz's observation that the humane way for the "civilized" nations to settle their military quarrels was to concentrate the maximum amount of violence in the shortest time span. This highly respected German military thinker wrote in 1903: "The fact that each new invention and each new advance of technical science seeks, in these days, to be utilised in military service need not . . . alarm us, or appear to us aught else than a retrogressive step in the direction of humanity and civilisation. By these means, on the contrary, the battle is only the more rapidly decided, and the war sooner brought to an end."[8] French naval officer Lt. A. Baudry sounded the same theme. Wars, he wrote, "tend to become less barbarous. In the conflict of civilized nations there is no more sacking and

pillage.... If the weapons of the field of battle are always being improved, war, outside the immediate area of their use, is becoming or tending to become, more human."[9]

Most navalists of the Edwardian era also seconded the conviction of Baudry and others that victory in naval battle, especially victory won "gallantly," was one of the greatest accolades to the human spirit. But they were also practical men who idealized battle for its expected practical payoff. The problem was that few knew what exactly this payoff was to be.

Three themes pervaded the navalist conception of the nature of battle's decisiveness. The first and most grandiose looked on battle as a grand-strategic undertaking whose outcome determined or altered the course of history. The second, less ambitious, theme was strategic and held decisive battle as a prescription for shaping the course and outcome of the war at hand. Navalists believed decisive battle to be the royal road to command of the sea. The third and last theme was tactical and was centered on the importance of decision for its own sake, i.e., the collision of fleets that would tell the winner from the loser.

The next discussion considers the historic decisiveness of battle from all three perspectives, especially the first two, by reviewing, first, the importance of naval battle in the overall chronology of so-called decisive battles, and next, the actual significance of some of history's most celebrated seagoing clashes. It is important to keep in mind that the spokesmen for the turn-of-the-century "golden age" of navalism rarely distinguished between battle's grand-strategic, strategic, or tactical decisiveness. This had two implications: first, the admixture of all three connotations had a mutually reinforcing effect so that the decisive battle idea became elevated to the apotheosis of all levels of naval strategic and tactical thought. Next, the failure to define decisiveness explicitly encouraged the tendency to reduce the ideas of grand-strategic and strategic decisiveness to the lowest common denominator of destructiveness at the tactical and material level of combat. A corollary consequence was that battles in which few ships were sunk were usually ignored for their strategic ramifications.[10]

Decisive Battle and Historical Counter-Determinism

Battles decide the fate of a nation.

Frederick the Great
The Art of War (1753)

THE CLASSIC COMPILATION of decisive battles is Creasy's *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World from Marathon to Waterloo.*[11] Creasy selected his battles as decisive "on account of their enduring importance and by reason of the practical influence on our own social and political condition, which we can trace to the results of these engagements."[12] Only one naval fight, the defeat of the Spanish armada in 1588, met this stringent criterion. Using a similar measuring stick, Fuller's *Decisive Battles: Their Influence upon History and Civilization*, also deemed only one naval engagement (Lepanto in 1571) worthy of inclusion among the twenty-nine battles that the author claimed had altered the "destinies of nations."[13] Fletcher Pratt's *The Battles That Changed History* is more generous. It counts four sea encounters (Quiberon Bay in 1759, Chesapeake Bay in 1781, Trafalgar in 1805, and Midway in 1942) as "turning points after which things would have been a great deal different if the decision had gone in the other direction."[14]

Several things stand out in these and similar listings. First, battles are selected and credited with decisiveness for what historian Joseph Dahmus has called their "counter-deterministic" impact on history.[15] The idea here is that certain battle outcomes literally and permanently changed the "expected" course of history. For example, had Waterloo not taken place, or had Napoleon been the winner, the world would presumably have turned out very different from what it is today. Now, the thought that the course of human events is predetermined, and yet can be interfered with and revised by battle, is controversial to say the least. Be that as it may, it is clear that non-naval battle chroniclers have given little credit to the history-altering power of war at sea.

It is no surprise that the naval historians who wrote at the turn of the century promoted a different point of view. Most were also propagandists who sought to elevate the interest in naval affairs from its narrow professional backwater to a national passion.[16] Their efforts to interpret history in light of war at sea were literally highlighted in the title of Alfred Thayer Mahan's most famous book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*.[17]

Mahan's navalist *confreres*, especially in Great Britain, could not agree more. Writing half a century afterward, even Major General J.F.C. Fuller, the historian of land warfare, enthused how Nelson's victory at Trafalgar decided far more than a contest between two fleets:

> In every respect, Trafalgar was a memorable battle and its influence upon history was profound. It shattered forever Napoleon's dream of an invasion of England. It brought to an end the 100 years struggle between her and France for the lordship of the seas. It gave England the Empire of the Oceans, which was to endure for over a century and make possible the Pax Britannica. More immediately important, it showed the world of 1805 that Napoleon was not invincible, and it compelled him to fall back on his Continental System, to seek to establish a universal empire which would economically strangle England, and which instead ended by his own political strangulation. Without Trafalgar there could have been no Peninsular War, and without the Peninsular War it is hard to believe that there would ever have been a Waterloo.[18]

It was on the sea, not land, wrote another author, where "all great destinies were decided."[19]

Another observation is that, with the exception of a few instances, e.g., Waterloo, there is little agreement among historians on which battles should be counted as counter-deterministic. The reasons are not difficult to find. The most important one has to do with the self-evident difficulty of deciding which battles truly changed history. A related reason is that the historian is a captive of his own time and place, and will therefore be apt to give greater prominence to recent military events that involved his own nation or part of the world than those that happened far away a long time ago. This explains why, for example, an 1899 American author included his country's then recent victory (the year before) over the Spanish fleet at Santiago, Cuba, among history's *Twenty Most Famous Naval Battles*.[20]

A last observation concerns the evident paucity of naval battles in the annals of decisive warfare. One reason may be statistical. Most warfare takes place on land so that in theory, at least, the probability of a counter-deterministic engagement between armies is much greater than for fleets. Another explanation may be that history ultimately concerns human beings who inhabit *land*. Sea battles usually involve only the immediate fighting forces; fleets do not

seize and occupy territory or cities. The operations of armies, on the other hand, commonly inflict "collateral" damage on the area's civilian population, and the outcome of battle on land, more so then at sea, has commonly had "decisive" consequences for the control of real estate.

A third, perhaps most obvious, explanation is that it has been extremely difficult for a naval battle to produce results that, as Frederick the Great put it, "determine the fate of the kingdom."[21] The next discussion suggests that this is almost certainly the case. It argues that it takes a generous view of the meaning of decisiveness in order to rank even some of the most famous sea engagements in history as counter-deterministic. Here we review three battles: Lepanto in 1571, the defeat of the Spanish armada of 1588, and the Battle of Midway in 1942. The decisiveness of history's arguably most famous naval battle, Trafalgar, is considered later on.

The Battle of Lepanto

Lepanto was fought on 7 October 1571 between a Turkish fleet of about 220 ships and a Christian (mainly Spanish and Venetian) coalition with over 200 vessels. The chief Christian objective was to halt Turkish advances in the Mediterranean. For Venice, this meant, especially, saving Cyprus. The main Turkish aim was precisely the opposite. Each side believed its goal could be achieved only by eliminating the other's fleet. The coalition victory is commonly claimed to have secured Europe's Christian future. As one historian put it, "it determined the fate of the world's future by settling that old struggle between East and West."[22] But did it? Lepanto was certainly the most massive and destructive naval battle fought in the Mediterranean Sea since Marc Anthony's defeat at Actium in 31 B.C. It was also the first time since the fifteenth century that the Ottoman empire had been defeated. Losses amounted to 150 ships and 25,000 dead, compared with a paltry one dozen or so vessels on the Christian side. Clearly, the outcome's tactical decisiveness was overwhelming.

The result could have been strategically decisive as well. The elimination of the Ottoman fleet gave the allies effective command of the sea and the opportunity to assault Cyprus, whose occupation by the Turks had triggered the campaign. This did not happen; the coalition fleet dispersed to go home and celebrate. Contrast this with the Turks' resolve. Within one year they had assembled an equally powerful fleet, and command of the Mediterranean's eastern basin was back in their hands. The Venetians, without allies, were compelled to sign a humiliating peace treaty that not only confirmed Turkish possession of Cyprus, but that also had the Venetians pay the cost of capturing

the island! During the negotiations, the Turkish vizier pointedly reminded his opposite number of Lepanto's fleeting results:

> You have doubtless observed our courage after the accident which happened to our fleet. There is this great difference between our loss and yours. In capturing a kingdom [i.e., Cyprus] we have cut off one of your arms, while you, in destroying our fleet, have merely shorn our beard. A limb cut off cannot be replaced, but a beard when shorn will grow again in greater vigour than ever.[23]

In sum, Padfield and Shaw are correct with their respective conclusions that, strategically speaking, Lepanto was a "famous battle, but it had no significance," and "was not decisive."[24]

But if Lepanto failed to have a decisive impact on the war at hand, did the Christian victory have yet perhaps a grand-strategic significance in the sense that it halted Ottoman expansion and made Europe safe for Christianity? Hardly so. One year after the peace treaty, Turkish sea power had expanded its domination of the Mediterranean to the sea's central basin; Turks ravaged the coasts of Sicily and southern Italy at will. By 1575, four years after Lepanto, Turkish command of the sea was restored throughout the Mediterranean when an army was landed at Tunis to wrest the city from Spanish control.[25] The reality is that the final arrest of Ottoman expansionism did not come for another century, and that, if there is such a thing as a decisive battle that reversed the specter of a Muslim Europe, the pride of place goes to the defeat of the Turkish army before Vienna in 1683.

The Defeat of the Armada

Naval battle chronologies frequently cite the loss of the Spanish armada in 1588 as another sea battle that shaped the course of history—in this case the triumph of freedom of (Protestant) religion and, if one is to believe General Fuller, the birth of the British Empire. The defeat of the armada, Fuller wrote, "whispered the imperial secret into England's ear," and "laid the cornerstone of the British Empire by endowing England with the prestige Spain lost."[26] But a different view has been offered by David Howarth, who wrote that "At the time, to people who knew, it did not seem a famous victory, and it was not until long after that history made it one."[27]

Historians are divided over the exact size of the Spanish fleet that battled the English in the summer of 1588; numbers are somewhere between 100 and 130.[28] They do agree that in the course of a running engagement that lasted

seven days, actual Spanish combat losses numbered twenty, most of which were smaller auxiliaries, i.e., converted merchantmen. This signifies that the tactical decisiveness of the battle rested on a 15-20 percent loss rate with little damage to the armada's frontline galleons.

Most of the English participants were disappointed by the results; few saw them as decisive. When the armada took advantage of a southerly wind to escape into the North Sea, the English fleet, fearing that the enemy might yet reverse course and land elsewhere on the coast, went home to replenish stores. Lewis has described the somber English mood at the time as follows:

> . . . the English, both seamen and people, were far from elated. They were uncertain of the future. They did not know the completeness of their victory. They did not realise the damage they had inflicted, either material or moral. They only knew, at least the seamen did, that the material results had been disappointing.[29]

If the measure of tactical decisiveness is the infliction of an inordinate amount of damage, then the English had failed. The armada suffered its worst damage by far when, caught in a storm while rounding Scotland and Ireland, it lost fifty ships. The battle's true decisiveness lay at the strategic level. Although his combat casualties had been relatively light, they were enough to reinforce the Spanish commander's pessimism about the expedition's chances to the point of no return. Fearing further losses and unable to make his junction with the Spanish invasion army that waited in Flanders, the Duke of Medina Sidonia chose to vacate the field of battle and effectively surrender command of the Channel to the English fleet.

But did the defeat of the armada at the combined hands of the English and the natural elements perhaps signal a decisive reversal of the course of history? Spain's King Phillip II evidently did not think so. Before his death in 1598 he dispatched three more fleets, the last of which managed to appear in the Channel undetected. Fortunately for the English it was not an invasion force but carried reinforcements for the Spanish army in the southern Netherlands.

The destruction of the armada decided events at a particular moment in history; this is perhaps all that can be credited to all so-called decisive battles. The event altered the momentary course of human affairs in the sense that it strengthened the confidence of those who believed that religious unity would not be reimposed by force of arms. The armada was part of the *flow* of history—it did not decide it. The final settlement of the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not come until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Garrett Mattingly's concluding summary on the events of 1588 sought to make the point:

> . . . in spite of the long, indecisive war which followed, the defeat of the Spanish Armada was really decisive. It decided that religious unity was not to be reimposed by force on the heirs of medieval Christendom, and if, in doing so, it only validated what was already by far the most probable outcome, why, perhaps that is all that any of the battles we call decisive have ever done.[30]

The Battle of Midway

There is a basic problem with Mattingly's conclusion on the one hand that the victory of protestantism was almost certainly foreordained, yet that the defeat of the armada was decisive. The same apparent inconsistency is found in some of the treatments of the Battle of Midway. Here, the tactical decision clearly went in favor of the Americans; Japanese losses amounted to four aircraft carriers, one cruiser, 250 aircraft, and 2,500 dead. Also, no historian questions that the outcome signaled the turn of the tide of the Pacific war, for the loss of the carriers in particular forced the Imperial Japanese Navy to fall back on a strategically defensive campaign. In this sense, the American victory was decisive at the strategic level as well. To be sure, the U.S. Navy did not win full command of the sea—that came later, but Midway did rob the Japanese of what had thus far been their command. Midway was strategically decisive because it put command in "dispute."

But did Midway decide the war? Or, to reverse the question, would a Japanese victory have led to a different end result? No one has yet come forward to say that it would have. On the contrary, historians are evidently unanimous that, regardless of Midway, the Japanese never had the wherewithal to defeat the United States and make their counter-deterministic impact on history. According to this view, an American defeat at Midway would have been tactically decisive and could have set back the strategic course of the conflict, but its significance for the war's final outcome could only have been temporary.

The point has been argued persuasively in Willmott's critique of Paul Dull's analysis of the battle. Dull, Willmott said, could not have it both ways with his claim that Midway was "*the* 'decisive' battle of the war in the Pacific," even if a Japanese victory would not have led to an American defeat.[31] He went on to explain why this "explains nothing":

> It is hard to see how a battle's conclusion could possibly prove "decisive" if a different result could only have prolonged the war and not changed its outcome. . . . The use of the word *decisive* about Midway's outcome implies one of two things: either that the American victory at Midway was one from which the Japanese could not recover or that it reversed a situation

which could never have been turned around without such a battle and victory. At best, both are doubtful propositions. . . .

If the final defeat of the Japanese was assured because of the disparity of national resources, Midway was at best only a milestone on the road that led to defeat; it was not a signpost that marked a parting of the ways, one track leading to American victory and the other in precisely the opposite direction. The American victory in the Pacific war might have been inevitable. The American victory at the battle of Midway might have been decisive. But these statements cannot both be true. In short, the notion of an inevitable victory is irreconcilable with that of a decisive battle.[32]

Decisive Battle and Command of the Sea

. . . until the enemy fleet is destroyed, it is not strictly correct to speak of either combatant having command of the sea.

Gerald Fiennes
Sea Power and Freedom (1918)

THE HISTORIAN WHO DEMANDS that a naval battle merits the accolade "decisive" only if and when the outcome countermands the march of history asks too much. A practical interpretation requires that we lower our sights to the strategic level of analysis. It is here that the counter-deterministic influence of the decisive naval battle must be sought—not counter-deterministic in the grand historical sense, but for its influence on the course and outcome of the particular war at hand. This means that a battle may be called decisive if the outcome either brought an immediate end to the war at hand, or if it determined the subsequent course of combat toward war termination. For the navalist, decisive battle at the strategic level of analysis involved the struggle for *command of the sea*. Although he himself was skeptical about the practical prospects of the big battle, Julian Corbett has set forth its connection with command of the sea most clearly:

> Whatever the nature of the war in which we are engaged, whether it be limited or unlimited, permanent and general command of the sea is the condition of ultimate success. The only way of securing such a command by naval means is to obtain a decision by battle against the enemy's fleet. Sooner or later it must be done, and the sooner the better.[33]

One of Corbett's French contemporaries, René Daveluy, explained how command of the sea-deciding battle would solve all the "ulterior" tasks of navies: "Destroy the enemy and you will secure all these results at once: the protection of the coast will be assured and you will conclude successfully whatever operation the circumstances demand."[34]

The trouble with this promise was that it gave the impression that the "friction" of war at sea could be overcome quickly and permanently with a single stroke. Corbett tried to warn his audience of the reality of "real" war at sea by which the glamorous prospect of a command-deciding battle would almost certainly be overtaken by a tedious *waiting* for battle while protecting one's commerce in an "uncommanded" sea.[35] After all, why should an enemy agree to a single toss of the dice unless he is convinced of his own power to secure a favorable outcome?

There is another reason why even an equally capable opponent might avoid battle. Namely, if it is granted that battle can indeed decide command of the sea, it follows that both sides will be inclined to seek a decision only if both subscribe to the same "regular system of warfare."[36] Conversely, battle for the explicit purpose of deciding the issue of command will not likely take place if one of the opponents holds to a different "philosophy" of war at sea, e.g., commerce raiding. This is likely to be the case if one of the antagonists is preoccupied with *continental* security.

It is important to recall in this connection that the literature on naval warfare and strategy is dominated by the codified experience of the "seafaring" nations, that is to say, countries whose military and economic security has literally risen and fallen on the ability of fleets to protect against invasion or the stoppage of commerce. For those nations, Great Britain being the prime example, naval strategies aimed at command of the sea were a necessity. Conversely, for Great Britain's continental opponents, France and Germany, command of the sea *per se* was a luxury that did not warrant the risk of a decisive battle and perhaps losing a fleet that was necessary for the *continental* scheme of naval warfare. The first priority of this scheme was to deny a maritime opponent enough command to imperil a decision on land. The continental system of naval strife has therefore aimed at avoiding pitched battle and preserving the fleet instead for "secondary" purposes—diversionary raids against the enemy's coast, *guerre de course*, or defense against coastal invasion. Mahan's great accomplishment had less to do with his reputed discovery of the principles that spell the difference between victory and defeat, than his success at "selling" those principles as universal truths. One French commentator had it right:

> Mahan's system is part of the arsenal of Great Britain. Whether the English believe it or not, it is to their advantage to persuade the world that a war against them is scientifically and historically hopeless.[37]

The belief that battle is the royal road to an all-securing command of the sea had a number of unfortunate consequences that would be painfully evident in the First World War. Most important, the phrase "decisive battle" encouraged

the belief that security at sea was an all-or-nothing condition that could be had on the strength of a superior battle fleet. True, thoughtful naval theorists, such as Corbett, recognized that absolute "sovereignty of the seas" was the slogan of pamphleteers, and that real-world control of the sea lines of communications was a circumstantial condition. Corbett also recognized that even should a battle fleet win command of the sea, light forces, i.e., cruisers, would still be needed to enforce it and protect shipping against surviving enemy "leakers." Unfortunately, these sobering reminders did little to dispel the popular image of command as the absolute condition that was portrayed by, for example, Clarke and Thursfield's unequivocal assertion that "There is no such thing as partial or incomplete command of the sea. . . . It is either absolute, or its does not exist."[38]

The image of command of the sea as an all-or-nothing condition, with battle as its key, conditioned the pre-war preoccupation with fleet action so that naval planners were all too inclined to reduce the real-world complexities of sea strategy to a single and overriding denominator: how to ensure that a hostile battle fleet would be brought to action. Yet, even as naval staffs on opposite sides of the North Sea were fixated with schemes and stratagems for luring the opponent into a general encounter, the high stakes of the "real" war cautioned against bringing matters to a head.

The practicalities of the war at hand took over from its theoretical ideal as soon as the first shots were fired in August 1914. Both sides discarded the navalists' battle-oriented "system" and settled down to fighting instead *their* war as befitted *their* particular geostrategic circumstances and war aims. Admiral Bacon's reminder that the Grand Fleet's disproportionate losses at Jutland ought to be judged in strategic terms, that is to say, the Royal Navy's strategic terms, applied equally to the Germans in the context of their own system of naval strategy.[39]

Bacon's advice was sound enough, but the fact remains that the British and German admiralties did look to comparative battleship strength and losses as the principal measure of strategic advantage and therefore the most reliable clue as to which side would have command of the sea. Moreover, and as Bacon himself well knew, the concept of battle's strategic decisiveness was invariably linked with the idea of tactical annihilation. The dream of "another Trafalgar" took its cue far less from the strategic advantages that Nelson's victory presumably brought, than from the wish to duplicate the great admiral's tactical achievement and produce, like Nelson, more than "merely a splendid victory."[40]

The vision of fleet action as the magic formula for a matter of general victory at sea spurred the tendency to subordinate the strategic ends of war to the tactical means of battle—war became confused with battle, and the logic of naval

strategy was confounded with the logic of battle. Thus, pre-war Royal Navy planners contemplated the pros and cons of blockading Germany's ports less with an eye on the resulting safety of shipping than on the chances that a frustrated enemy would come out and seek battle.[41]

Perhaps the most harmful effect of the professional enamorment with battle as the strategic cure-all was that planners gave only passing attention to other day-to-day and less than decisive methods for disputing command. Most notorious is the broad failure on the part of the British before the war to thoroughly prepare for the protection of shipping in the event that battle did not live up to its decisive reputation.[42] The general attitude was pure Mahanian: "Control of the highways of the oceans by *great fleets* destroys an enemy's commerce root and branch," whereas the "depredations" of scattered cruisers could merely inflict "immense vexation and even embarrassment."[43] (Emphasis added.) The Admiralty reluctantly acknowledged that it had a responsibility for the safe arrival of Great Britain's foodstuffs, but made it patently clear to a Royal commission in 1905 that it would not sanction a defensive scheme that it believed would weaken the fleet's readiness to fight the big battle. The pertinent paragraph in the commission's final report makes for intriguing reading to say the least:

> . . . in commenting upon the apprehension that the disposition of the British Fleet, squadrons, or ships might be adversely affected and the free action of the Admiralty impaired by popular pressure, exercised through Parliament upon the Government, thus influencing the Admiralty instructions to the admirals, it was remarked that the Admiralty could never allow their action to be influenced by any pressure, and yet consent to remain responsible for the conduct of the war.[44]

Decisive Battle and Annihilation

The idea that safety is of paramount importance, and that the defeat of the enemy is only secondary, is not only directly opposed to military principles, but it is calculated to undermine and destroy the military spirit.

Admiral Sir Reginald Custance
The Ship of the Line in Battle (1912)

FEW EDWARDIAN NAVAL PROFESSIONALS had the time or inclination to try and decipher the strategic, let alone grand-strategic, significance of decisive battle. For most of them, tactical annihilation on a Nelsonic scale sufficed as the measure of decisiveness at *all* levels of planning. And after all, for the practical sailor, the only concrete form of decisiveness that he could aim for by his own endeavors was at the fighting level of battle. The outcome might or might not determine the campaign or war at hand, but by seeking pitched battle and the enemy's annihilation, he had done all that there was in his power to bring final victory. The fleet's job done, it was now up to the nation's leadership to turn the battle's tactical decisiveness into one of strategic proportions. The unfortunate side effect of this otherwise eminently practical vision was the deification of battle for its own sake.

The tendency to portray battle as a "glorious" object can be found in the writings of the big gun enthusiasts of the era, for example, Lieutenant A. Baudry of the French Navy, and Admiral Sir Reginald Custance in Great Britain. Baudry admitted that command of the sea had "its importance," but added that if won without battle, it could only be an "incomplete formula." True victory, he insisted, could be had at the point of a gun, whereas "neutralization, bottling-up, dispersion without . . . a great and decisive battle are only half-measures, half-successes."[45] Custance, could not agree more. The "true aim of war," he wrote in 1912, "is always to destroy the enemy's fighting force," and "our watchword should be, not safety, but the victory which is only to be won by well-served guns in sufficient numbers at 'decisive ranges.'"[46]

Custance was one of the era's most prominent tactical interpreters of the decisive battle. Decision for him was a function of the ability to "strike blows in greater number than those received." The key to doing so was owning a fleet that could envelop its opposite numbers with gunfire at "decisive range."[47] He described this as the distance at which "the one combatant develops such a superiority of attack that the other ceases to be able to offer further effective opposition."[48] In other words, decision turned on a competition in destructiveness with massed broadsides as the arbiter.

Custance's preoccupation with the tactical decisiveness of battle is particularly striking in his criticism of Japanese Admiral Heihachirō Togō's decision during the Russo-Japanese War to bottle up the Russian fleet in Port Arthur with "defensive" mines. Doing so, Custance complained, had only served to arrest the offensive spirit of Togō's opponent, Admiral Makaroff, thereby denying the Japanese the decisive battle that would have brought quicker victory and fewer casualties.[49] The reluctance to rely on mines for fear that this would inhibit the chances of decisive fleet action seems also to have contributed to the Royal Navy's failure before the war to keep pace with offensive mine warfare technologies and the timidity during the war to mine the High Sea Fleet's exit routes.[50]

Trafalgar
Decisive Battle in Retrospect

Trafalgar was the turning point in the long conflict between England and Napoleon.

James Thursfield
Naval Warfare (1913)

THE BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR was the navalists' apotheosis of the decisive battle idea. If its hero, Admiral Horatio Nelson, was, in Mahan's words, the "embodiment of sea power," then for the naval professional and layman alike, the battle itself was the embodiment of sea power in action.[51] The encounter seemed to meet all the criteria of decisiveness. It is said to have reversed the course of history by arresting Napoleonic domination of Europe and ensuring instead one hundred years of "Pax Britannica"; it saved Great Britain from invasion and ended more than two centuries of Anglo-French naval strife; it proved, once and for all, the superiority of the offensive at sea; and tactically, of course, the Franco-Spanish defeat was of annihilating proportions. It is no wonder that one late-nineteenth century British naval author concluded that his country's "subsequent naval history, though notable enough, need not detain us."[52]

Trafalgar's heady list of accomplishments is considered shortly. But before doing so, it is necessary to try and explain why Trafalgar in particular and not some other famous sea fight became *the* "model" for the decisive battle that the generation of naval officers one century afterward sought to emulate. Why not, for example, Quiberon Bay in 1759? It too staved off a French invasion plan. Or alternatively, why not the Battle of La Hogue (Barfleur) in 1692? One naval historian at least has rated it as important as Trafalgar.[53]

Part of the answer has to do with the *way* Trafalgar was fought as foreshadowed in a comment made by Nelson shortly before the battle. He confided to an old comrade-in-arms how, "No day can be long enough to arrange a couple of fleets and fight a battle according to the old system."[54] The

"old system" was the custom of fighting battle in opposing line ahead formations—fleets drawn up in long parallel lines, with each seeking to outlast the other, while exchanging weight of roundshot.[55] Designed to ensure fleet order and discipline while guarding against being outflanked, the line ahead formation was basically a defensive tactic. The main preoccupation, wrote Corbett, was "not so much to break the enemy's line, as to prevent your own being broken."[56] It worked admirably, but it also offered little hope of breaking through the enemy formation to prevent his retirement and bring the fight to a conclusive result. But as Michael Lewis has observed, the naval leadership of the day was willing to pay the price: "The pursuit of total victory, with all its attendant glory and risk, was subordinated to the need for discipline and operational control."[57]

Trafalgar was different from La Hogue or Quiberon Bay in that it broke, for once and for all, the line ahead "fetish" that Mahan lamented had led to the preoccupation with "defensive consideration of avoiding disaster" over "offensive effort for the destruction of the enemy."[58] Trafalgar and Nelson did for naval strategy and war-making what Napoleon had done on land: battle and annihilation replaced maneuver and limited aims as the "ideal" of strategy.[59] The result was the discovery of the "true principles" of warfare that students of Napoleonic warfare believed would dominate future hostilities on land, and which Nelson's successors thought would be the hallmark of future naval wars.

The Preliminaries and Battle

Trafalgar was fought on 21 October 1805, two years and five months after France and England had resumed their war begun in 1793 but interrupted by the Peace of Amiens of 1802. Aligned with the British in the Third Coalition were Russia, Austria, Sweden, and Naples. Spain and French-occupied Holland were allied with France; together they marshaled about ninety combat-ready ships of the line. The British number was some one-hundred twenty.[60]

Between 1793 and 1802, the English navy had fought and won four major battles: Ushant ("The Glorious First of June") in 1794, Cape St. Vincent in 1797, the Nile (Aboukir) in 1798, and Copenhagen in 1801. Its principal preoccupation between battles was to "observe" the French and French-controlled naval bases that were strung out between the Dutch island of Texel in the north and Toulon on the French Mediterranean shore. The purpose of observation was to prevent the opponent from concentrating his different squadrons so they might overwhelm the English fleet piecemeal and perhaps go on to raid England's overseas possessions, or even land an army on the

English coast itself. French invasion fleets had twice so far (1796 and 1798) managed to elude the English blockade and sail for rebellious Ireland. Both expeditions failed, due to bad weather in the first instance and the Royal Navy's interception of the force in the second. Meanwhile, the British naval blockade, the seizure of France's overseas possessions, and the operations of cruising squadrons had served to effectively halt all French oceangoing commerce. Not interrupted was the enemy's important coastal trade.

The principal plus on the French side of the naval ledger during the wars of the first two coalitions had come by way of *guerre de course* against British merchantmen. It has been estimated that just over 5,000 vessels engaged in overseas trade were captured by French cruisers and privateers between 1793 and 1800.[61] It has also been calculated that this amounted to an annual average loss rate of almost seven percent of English shipping engaged in overseas trade. The peak year was 1797, when 11.5 percent of shipping fell victim, prompting passage of the Compulsory Convoy Act that required shipping to sail in escorted groups.[62]

The enemy's depredations caused consternation in London's financial circles, but they never came close to threatening the kind of economic strangulation that appeared within the grasp of the U-boats in 1917. For one, Great Britain of 1800 was far less dependent on imported foodstuffs than it would be one century later. For another, and unlike 1914–18, new ship construction more than made up for losses; between 1793 and 1815, the number of English-registered vessels went up from 16,329 to 24,860.[63] Having said this, it should be noted that the French commerce-raiding activities had nevertheless demonstrated the limitations and relativeness of command of the sea. The Royal Navy's superior battle fleet and the victories at Ushant and elsewhere had secured a *general* command, but this had not been enough to keep the enemy from carrying out a harmful "secondary" strategy. Historian Geoffrey Marcus put his finger on the problem: "The immense numerical superiority of the Navy was of small avail in the face of these destructive, mosquito-like tactics."[64]

It is also noteworthy in this connection that the privateer's bounty was richest in precisely those sea areas where English sea power was at its peak: the North Sea and the English Channel.[65] This suggests that command of the sea is normally a relative condition not only in terms of time and place (i.e., the concepts of temporary and local command) but also in *functional* terms. In other words, the situation is conceivable in which one side may exercise enough command to protect against one enemy course of action, say, invasion, yet be incapable of preventing another—for example, commerce raiding. It follows from this that if two opposing navies pursue asymmetrical objectives, *both* can theoretically be in a position to claim command.

Both sides resumed their customary strategies when war broke out again in 1803—the English fleet blockaded the French and allied ports, and the French re-embarked on *guerre de course*. A key additional preoccupation for the Royal Navy was to monitor the progress of French preparations to launch a cross-Channel invasion. These had begun in 1801, and by the summer of 1805 more than 90,000 of Napoleon's troops were encamped at different Channel ports with enough landing craft to transport an army of more than 150,000.[66]

The series of naval operations that culminated in Trafalgar began in March 1805 with the escape of Vice Admiral Villeneuve's 11-strong line-of-battle squadron from Nelson's cordon at Toulon. Villeneuve, joined by six Spanish vessels, sailed for the West Indies to ravage the British island possessions and shipping. While so engaged, he was to await for forty days the arrival of the Brest and Rochefort squadrons, so that the entire fleet could next return to Europe and "proceed direct to Boulogne."[67] He was also instructed that, should the *rendez-vous* with the 21-ship Brest squadron fail to take place, he was to return to Cadiz, Spain. In the event, the Brest force never managed to slip through the British blockade. The Rochefort squadron of five ships broke out, failed to join up with Villeneuve, and broke back into port, having achieved nothing.

Nelson followed Villeneuve a month or so afterward, after he had concluded that his original hunch that another French invasion of Egypt was in the offing was wrong. His fleet of eleven ships-of-the-line arrived in the Caribbean on 4 June. When, four days later, Villeneuve learned of his antagonist's arrival, he decided to return to Europe before the end of the 40-day waiting period. Nelson pursued again, hoping to catch his prey before Cadiz, where he thought the French might be heading. Again, the two missed one another as Villeneuve aimed his fleet for the northern Spanish port of Ferrol instead. On his way, he fought an inconclusive encounter with a British squadron under Admiral Sir Robert Calder.

As soon as Nelson learned that Villeneuve had gone north and that therefore the Mediterranean was safe, he too turned north, to join Admiral Sir William Cornwallis' fleet off Brest. This was the Channel fleet that was responsible for fighting the "last stand" against invasion in the event the blockading squadrons had failed to keep the French fleet from concentrating. Uncertain of Villeneuve's next move, Nelson is said to have followed the Royal Navy's first rule: "In case of any uncertainty as to the enemy's movements, all forces are to fall back on Ushant, so as to cover the mouth of the Channel. At that point it is of the utmost importance to have a decisive superiority, for if the enemy command the Channel, England is lost."[68] In mid-August 1805 the Channel Fleet boasted forty ships-of-the-line.

Napoleon's plans to use Villeneuve's fleet to support an invasion of England had meanwhile evolved through a bewildering succession of orders and counterorders. In mid-May he sent instructions for Villeneuve to team up with the Ferrol squadron to drive off the English blockading force before Rochefort, and then to join forces with Admiral Ganteaume at Brest. The "principal object of the whole operation," he wrote, "was to procure our superiority before Boulogne for some days."[69] But there was a catch, or actually *two* catches. Villeneuve's junction with the Brest force was to be consummated without risking an encounter with the Channel fleet. Should this prove impossible, the admiral was given two options: he could sail around Ireland in order to *rendez-vous* with the Dutch squadron at Texel, or, if this proved infeasible, he was allowed to return to Cadiz. These orders arrived in the West Indies after Villeneuve's departure.

In late July, after he had learned that his admiral had returned to Europe, Napoleon drew up a new set of instructions that urged Villeneuve to sail for Brest, enter the Channel and ensure command of the sea "even for three days only." The emperor wrote: "If you can make me master of the Pasde-Calais even for three days only, by God's help, I will put an end to the destinies and existence of England."[70]

Although he was worried about the condition of his Combined Fleet and uncertain about the strength and whereabouts of his opponents, Villeneuve obeyed and left Ferrol with twenty-nine ships-of-the-line on 13 August. His anxieties got the best of him however; a week later the fleet dropped anchor at Cadiz. In another ten days an English force of thirty ships-of-the-line had gathered under Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood to bar his exit. At the end of the next month Nelson arrived to take command. Villeneuve and the Combined Fleet were trapped.

The French emperor learned of Villeneuve's return to Cadiz one week after he had decided to raise his camp at Boulogne and march on Vienna.[71] Furious with his admiral's apparent timidity, he ordered Admiral Rosily to Spain to assume command of the fleet. At the same time he sent Villeneuve his last instructions, ordering him to take the fleet to Naples. A raucous council between the French and Spanish ship captains followed. According to Villeneuve, everyone "recognized that the ships of the two allied nations were for the most part badly manned from the weakness of the crews. . . . To put to sea in such circumstances," he wrote, "has been termed an act of desperation."[72]

But Villeneuve had become a desperate man. Although he had yet to receive the formal letter of his dismissal, rumors were rife. On 15 October, three days before the Combined Fleet set sail for its final destiny, Villeneuve graciously wrote of Rosily's impending arrival that, "I should indeed be delighted to yield

him the foremost place," but added that, "It would be too terrible for me to lose all hope of having an opportunity of showing that I was worthy of a better fate."[73]

On 21 October the two fleets, twenty-seven English and Thirty-three Franco-Spanish ships, clashed. The battle lasted about six hours. The English lost no ships, but half of the fleet was badly damaged and casualties were 1,700, including Nelson. The Combined Fleet lost one ship due to battle damage, but sixteen others were captured (thirteen of these were lost in the next two days in a storm or were recaptured by the French). Four of the surviving French vessels were captured on 4 November. Allied casualties were 2,600 dead and wounded plus 7,000 prisoners, including Villeneuve.

What Did Trafalgar Decide?

Of all the great victories there is not one which to all appearance was so barren of immediate results.

Julian S. Corbett
The Campaign of Trafalgar (1910)

PAUL KENNEDY HAS WRITTEN THAT Trafalgar was "probably the most famous naval battle in history."[74] No other naval battle has received as much literary glorification.[75] It was the last great sea fight under sail whose outcome arguably laid the foundation for one hundred years of Pax Britannica. In sum, Trafalgar was Mahan's "superb battle" that the Edwardian naval professional turned to for inspiration on how victory at sea was to be achieved.[76]

But fame aside, what did Trafalgar accomplish? What was decided? Was Nelson's victory counter-deterministic? Did it save Europe from French domination and was therefore Waterloo "but the *coup de grace*" and Trafalgar "really the mortal wound?"[77] Was Great Britain saved from invasion, or is Corbett right that this is merely a "legend" designed to fill the void of a great victory "which to all appearance was so barren of immediate result?"[78] Or is the fair question to ask whether Trafalgar's decisiveness was strategic? Did the battle secure British command of the sea and thereby produce greater security for Great Britain's seagoing enterprises and less so for the French? In short, which decisive outcome was it that Nelson's successors on the eve of the First World War believed another great battle would emulate?

Trafalgar and Tactical Decisiveness

There is no argument about Trafalgar's decisiveness at the tactical level of combat. The scale of human losses was unprecedented in two hundred fifty years of sailing ship warfare. According to Fred T. Jane, Franco-Spanish casualties averaged three hundred or more per ship; in one, the killed and wounded

amounted to five out of every six.[79] Between captures and other mishaps, the Combined Fleet practically ceased to exist, yet it is an interesting side note that this was a different kind of "annihilation" than naval planners one hundred years later envisioned. Annihilation on the eve of World War I meant destruction; preferred in Nelson's day was the term's broader meaning, i.e., the opponent's *nullification.* The most rewarding way of doing so was to capture, not sink his ships, for this not only diminished the enemy's strength, but also added to one's own.[80]

Nullification of the enemy was probably all Nelson had in mind when he prepared for battle. He was fully aware of Napoleon's invasion scheme (he had led an abortive raid against the Boulogne landing flotilla in 1801), but there is no evidence that his desire for an annihilating battle was spurred by the fear of a French invasion.[81] There are vague hints in his correspondence at strategic motives; for example, his expressed hope that Villeneuve's defeat would bring a "seven years' peace."[82] Yet, the burden of his writings indicate little preoccupation with the strategic, let alone grand-strategic significance of battle. He was a fighting admiral, not a strategic planner.

Nelson was a vainglorious man as well. For him battle was a professional responsibility, but also the opportunity to make his mark on history. But this is not the same as saying that he had calculated that Villeneuve's annihilation was necessary to change the course of history. The admiral's instructions when he left England to take command of the blockading force before Cadiz contained no hint that only an absolute victory could guarantee his country's survival. His orders were to prevent French interference with the forthcoming passage of an English expeditionary fleet to Naples, and to do so, he was given practically a free hand, and was not directed specifically that only the enemy's annihilation would to the job.[83] As far as Prime Minister William Pitt was concerned, all Nelson had to do was keep Villeneuve from putting to sea.

As Corbett has phrased it though, "the ideas of the Government did not quite coincide with those of Nelson."[84] For Nelson, merely containing the enemy, no matter how decisive from the strategic point of view, was not enough. He did not question that keeping Villeneuve locked up in Cadiz would have ensured the safety of the expeditionary force, but after having chased his opponent back and forth across the Atlantic for seven months, he resolved that it was "annihilation the country wants."[85]

Trafalgar and Strategic Decisiveness

Much more doubtful than the battle's tactical decisiveness is Trafalgar's strategic significance. If the strategic measure of a naval battle's decisiveness

is the gain or loss of command of the sea, then for the British, at least, Trafalgar was unnecessary. They already owned "general" command before the battle, and the victory did little to improve this. At best, Trafalgar was the "knock-out blow" in a fight the British had long won on points.

The defeat of the Combined Fleet did not improve the safety of British shipping. In fact, the opposite occurred. Just as Jutland forced Germany one century later to recognize that British naval power would not be defeated by "traditional" means, leaving unrestricted U-boat warfare as the only option left, so Trafalgar prompted Napoleon to break up his fleet for cruiser warfare. "That," wrote his minister of the marine, "would be a war after my own heart."[86] The results showed; in 1804, French privateers and cruisers accounted for 387 captures; in 1806 they rose to 519, and in 1810 they climbed to 619, prompting a public outcry.[87] The *Naval Chronicle* wrote at the time: "We have more than once referred to this very surprising fact that, with a fleet surpassing the navy of the whole world, and by which we are enabled to set so large a portion of it at defiance, we cannot guard our coasts from insult."[88]

Merchantmen were not the only vessels that remained at risk in spite of Trafalgar, for British warships continued to be lost to enemy action at about the same rate as before. Between 1793 and October 1805, eighty-seven combatants of all types were sunk or captured by the enemy; between November 1805 and 1815, sixty-one were lost, plus another twenty due to American action in the War of 1812.[89] Neither did the elimination of the Combined Fleet negate the necessity to escort civilian and military shipping. The hazardous supply condition of Wellington's army on the Iberian Peninsula is illustrative.

In the summer of 1813, Wellington reported that shortage of supplies had forced his army to use the smaller caliber French ammunition. "Surely," he wrote to London, "the British navy cannot be so hard run as not to be able to keep up communication with Lisbon with this army."[90] A few days later he ruefully compared his desperate supply situation with the *French* ability to send reinforcements by sea.[91]

One of Mahan's most famous phrases holds how "Those far distant, storm-beaten ships, upon which the Grand Army never looked stood between it and the dominion of the world."[92] Did Trafalgar tie the final knot in the economic noose the British fleet had laid around France's ports and harbors? Not likely. While it is quite true that British naval preponderance effectively reduced French overseas shipping to zero, command of the sea was never complete enough to interfere with the enemy's much more important coastal trade.[93] Furthermore, oceanic commerce made a comparatively small contribution to France's overall import and export picture. Most trade was carried on with the continental neighbors and few, if any, overseas imports involved vital

foodstuffs or critical raw manufacturing materials. Economic historians have accordingly long found that the loss of overseas income had a marginal effect at best on France's fiscal condition. For example, at the same time that its trade had been swept from the seas, the French government spent one billion francs on public construction and social services without having to raise one loan.[94]

Unfortunately, Royal Navy planners gladly embraced Mahan's "far distant, storm-beaten ships" thesis.[95] When mated with the decisive battle idea, the result was a single formula for success that went something like this: a superior battle fleet equated to decisive battle victory; victory in decisive battle meant command of the sea, and command of the sea ensured war-terminating economic pressure. The equation was elegant for its simplicity, but it ignored such complex intervening variables as the opponent's actual dependence on the sea, and the risk that he might force a decision on land before economic pressure had taken its toll.

As explained by Willmott, the adjective "decisive" must mean one of two things: the battle outcome is one from which the loser can never recover, or it reverses a situation for the victor that could not have been brought about in any other fashion. This signifies that the strategic meaning of Trafalgar's decisiveness must be found in one of the following: either Villeneuve's defeat spelled the end of Napoleon's pre-Trafalgar naval and military ambitions, or Nelson's victory was Great Britain's last chance of fulfilling its naval and military goals.

Trafalgar and Grand-Strategic Decisiveness

Napoleon's plan to invade the British Isles is the emperor's one history-altering ambition that Trafalgar is alleged to have ruined. Not only is Villeneuve's defeat supposed to have scotched the emperor's immediate scheme to master the Channel for "three days only," but also his long-term hope to subdue Great Britain by sea. The reality is much less dramatic—the battle did not save the country from seaborne assault, either in 1805 or later. The story that it did is, to repeat Corbett, a "legend."

It is a legend on several counts, even if it is allowed that Napoleon did mean to invade. This is not a trivial point, for historians are still at odds over the question of whether the invasion scheme was a legitimate threat or merely an elaborate hoax. Desbriere, for example, maintained that an invasion plan existed all right, but that it was abandoned sometime in 1804.[96] He also seconded Napoleon's claim that the Army of England was kept at Boulogne instead of further to the east in order to lull the Austrians into a false sense of security.[97]

Corbett agreed that, considering Napoleon's military genius otherwise, the "astounding confusion in which the arrangements sank ever more deeply," meant "that so great a captain can never have intended the operation seriously."[98]

Other, mostly more recent historians are less convinced that Napoleon did not mean business. Howarth, for example, believes that "the threat was real" that "of all his conquests, this was the one he most passionately wanted."[99] Glover, too, has concluded that Napoleon had "every intention of landing in England and crushing his enemies there on their own soil."[100] And finally, Weigley thought that the Army of England's very appearance of unreadiness, i.e., the shortage of horses and wagons, was proof of the plan's genuineness.[101]

The truth lies probably somewhere in between. To begin with, Napoleon invested too many resources over too long a time, and his wish to bring Great Britain to heel was too strong for the invasion scheme to have been but a deception. The plan was real; what was missing for its execution was the right opportunity, that is to say the right opportunity on Napoleon's terms. The invasion army was genuine; what gave the preparations the appearance of a charade was Napoleon's failure to make an equal investment in *creating* the opportunity to get across. Napoleon sought to "master" the Channel on-the-cheap—by relying on luck (a dark winter's night to slip by the British fleet undetected, a popular uprising in Ireland, the off-chance that Villeneuve had the courage and good fortune to escape unmolested from his British guardians) or his opponent's mistakes (by, for example, planting the rumor that Villeneuve had sailed for Egypt). Unfortunately for Napoleon, luck was against him and the British made no mistakes. It is an intriguing paradox that the same man who sought battle at all cost on land sought his crowning achievement at sea by subterfuge and maneuver.

As a practical matter, the question whether the invasion plan was a hoax or not is irrelevant for Trafalgar's outcome or, for that matter, even Villeneuve's failure two months earlier to give Napoleon his "three days."[102] Recall that in the first instance Villeneuve had no intention to sail north—his destination was Naples. Had Trafalgar been less than decisive and the Combined Fleet still seaworthy, or (and this is difficult to imagine), had the decision gone the other way, that is where he presumably would have gone.[103] As to the second instance, even if Villeneuve had not aborted his departure from Cadiz in August and had managed to arrive off Boulogne intact, he would have found the invasion army gone. Namely, already before Napoleon received positive confirmation that his admiral had returned to Cadiz, his army had already broken camp to march against the Austrians. The irony of the situation did not escape Desbriere, when he wrote how Napoleon began his mobilization against Austria before he could be certain that Villeneuve's fleet had not arrived in the Channel

and "would not carry out the great design which was to enable England to be stricken to the heart."[104]

Even had the army still been waiting at Boulogne, it is extremely doubtful still that Villeneuve's fleet could have mastered the narrow seas to cover an invasion. If this scenario had come to pass, the invasion fleet would almost certainly have fallen in with Cornwallis' Channel fleet of forty sail. Desbriere at least believed that "there can be no possible doubt that Villeneuve would have been overwhelmed."[105]

If Nelson's victory did not settle his country's military fate, did perhaps Villeneuve's defeat catalyze a decline of Napoleon's war fortunes? Popular navalist lore at the turn of the century has commonly portrayed it that way. Thus, one writer told how Trafalgar ensured "the ultimate fall of the continental Dictator," for it was "the ships of Nelson that were the victors at Waterloo."[106] Again however, Trafalgar's *mystique* looms larger than its factual significance for either the outcome of the war of the Third Coalition itself, or the final *denouement* of the Napoleonic wars ten years later. It was *after* Trafalgar that Napoleon reached the zenith of his power and seemed to be most unbeatable. At the time of its occurrence, most European politicians and military men, including French and British, looked on Trafalgar as a "sideshow"—heroic and uplifting for the British and embarrassing for the French, but hardly relevant for the great contest that was being fought in central Europe. In London, the news of Nelson's victory did little to raise Prime Minister Pitt's spirits. Only days before he had learned of his Austrian allies' defeat at Ulm; his effort to entice the Prussians into the Coalition was about to collapse. It happened on 2 December with Napoleon's "thunderstroke victory" at Austerlitz.[107] In another three weeks the Austrians were compelled to sign the humiliating Treaty of Pressburg that broke the Third Coalition and, so it is said, Pitt's heart.[108]

The evidence neither supports the popular belief that the defeat at Trafalgar terminated, for once and for all, Napoleon's naval ambitions, including his hope to send an army across the Channel. Great Britain's military-political leadership certainly did not see it that way at the time. Four months after Trafalgar, shortly after Austerlitz, the head of the Admiralty, Lord Barnham, feared that Napoleon's defeat of Austria would bring "an immediate revival of his design to invade this country."[109] The fortification of the coastline and the raising and training of an anti-invasion militia went on unabated.[110] And the British had good reason to still cast a wary eye across the Channel, for as one studies the events of 1805 and after, it becomes clear that Napoleon considered Trafalgar a temporary setback, not an unalterable failure of his invasion plan. Almost until the very end of his regime, the emperor continued to deluge his Navy with instructions of one sort or the other to prepare for an amphibious assault.[111]

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence that the British naval leadership at the time were far less ready than their successors to proclaim the finality of Trafalgar was the (successful) Copenhagen campaign of 1807 and the (failed) Walcheren expedition of 1809. Both operations were aimed at preventing a buildup of enemy naval power that would outstrip the Royal Navy.[112] Had Trafalgar reversed Napoleon's fortunes beyond repair, the preventive destruction of the Danish fleet and the attempt to destroy the Antwerp dockyards would not have been necessary.[113]

Trafalgar was the last big fleet engagement of the Napoleonic wars, and popular history proposes more than a coincidence. It urges instead that, after having been defeated at sea with tiresome regularity, Trafalgar was for France the final straw that broke the back of its aspiration for a naval "destiny." Again though, there is nothing about Napoleon's post-Trafalgar planning that suggests that he had resigned himself to a condition of permanent naval inferiority. Within days after the battle, the emperor and his naval minister laid the groundwork for a new fleet that ultimately was to have numbered 150 ships-of-the-line. The goal was never reached, but a few years later "another navy, as if by magic, sprang forth from the forests to the sea-shore."[114] By 1813 it numbered eighty ships ready for sea with another thirty-five building.[115] Fortunately for the British, they never learned how Napoleon expected to use this force. The more immediate dangers on the Continent, and mismanagement of relations with reluctant coalition partners ensured that France's fleet-in-being remained exactly that. Nevertheless, Lord Melville, then First Lord of the Admiralty, conceded after the emperor's final defeat that, had Napoleon won his battles in Russia and at Waterloo, he would "have sent forth such powerful fleets that our navy must eventually have been destroyed, since we could never have kept pace with him in building ships nor equipped numbers sufficient to cope with the tremendous power he could have brought against us."[116]

Jutland and the Burden of Trafalgar

Officers and men were haunted by the fear that the day of reckoning might never come.

Arthur J. Marder
From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: Vol. II, The war Years—To the Eye of Jutland (1965)

ON 4 AUGUST 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany and "her large Fleets vanished into the mists at one end of the island."[117] "Rarely," wrote Arthur Marder, "had a fleet so itched for action or had so much confidence in the outcome."[118] On the opposite side of the North Sea the High Sea Fleet too waited for *der Tag*, convinced that "the English Navy would immediately take the offensive."[119] Both fleets were confident that the titanic clash would take place in the first weeks of the war. After all, everyone expected the conflict to be short, and both navies were imbued with "a healthy contempt for the defensive."[120] Few planners on either side seem to have given much thought as to how they would reap the *strategic* benefits of a victorious new Trafalgar.

Pre-War Expectations of a North Sea Trafalgar

It is difficult to conclude that, for all the mental and material preparations that went into the prospect of a North Sea Trafalgar, much systemic thought was given to how success on a Nelsonic scale was to be exploited. The theory of the decisive battle offered a number of possibilities. First, a great fleet action, ideally coinciding with a victorious battle on land, might ensure the short war that everyone expected. Both navies toyed with this hope early in the war, but it soon became evident that the opposing armies had settled down in the trenches for the duration and were not likely to be dislodged by a big battle at sea. In any case, neither side had given much thought on how decisive fleet action would support the armies' strategies on land.[121] This lack of "jointness" cut the other

way as well. Neither the British, nor the German army war planners seem to have considered whether and how naval battle might contribute to their goals on land. The British general staff was interested in the Navy's plans mainly so as to make sure that its expeditionary divisions would get across the Channel safely. Its German counterpart was even less interested. It thought that naval interference with the British cross-Channel expedition would be helpful, but not necessary. When the Navy's chief of staff, Vice-Admiral Baudission, asked Von Molkte in 1908 whether the army preferred that the fleet not be initially involved in a decisive battle, he was told that the army had no objections to the fleet's full involvement and that it "would happily greet any tactical success that the fleet would have."[122]

If battle at sea alone could not end the war, successful fleet action might still "enable" victory by securing the sea for an invasion of the opponent's homeland and, alternatively, against a counter-invasion. Both sides, the British more so than the Germans, contemplated "peripheral strategies" against the opponent's homeland, and both reckoned with the possibility of an enemy seaborne assault. Even so, few naval and military planners on both sides thought the prospect of an invasion so menacing that a decisive sea battle was called for.[123] None of the various schemes that Churchill and others put together before and during the war for launching a naval offensive in the Baltic was contingent on wiping out the High Sea Fleet first. The reason why one or the other, Frisian island or the Pomeranian coast, were never invaded had nothing to do with the continued existence of the German battleships, but everything to do with the realization that the would-be invaders would not be able to maintain themselves once they had landed.

On the more practical side of war planning, the British Admiralty reiterated the "paramount value of the quick decision" on the grounds that, with command of the sea in hand, cruisers could then be dispatched to hunt down the enemy's remaining commerce raiders.[124] The argument that the big battle would ensure the safety of one's shipping, rang "strategic" enough, but ignored historical experience, including the aftermath of Trafalgar itself: big fleet engagements have rarely solved the safety of shipping.

It is a curious paradox that Admiralty planners thought a decisive battle desirable for the sake of the safety of shipping and yet insisted that the threat to commerce would be minor compared with the depredations of Napoleon's privateers. Corbett, who was more aware of the linkage between naval strategy and commerce protection than most of his contemporaries, thought that "so far as it is possible to penetrate the mists which veil the future," the prospects for commerce destroyers making "any adequate percentage impression" were "less

promising than ever."[125] Tirpitz agreed, rejecting attack against trade as the High Sea Fleet's goal.[126]

It can be protested that Corbett, Tirpitz, and the naval profession were right; cruiser warfare on the surface would have inflicted little injury, and no one could have anticipated the havoc wrought by the U-boats.[127] The argument misses the point, however. How could another Trafalgar be promoted as decisive for the safety of shipping when the anticipated losses *before* the battle were not a major concern. If the loss of merchant shipping while command was still in "dispute" amounted to no more than "breaking eggs" while the fleet waited to fry its "omelette," then why have an omelet at all, especially since the war was not supposed to last more than a few months?[128]

A final observation concerns the Admiralty's ambiguous connection between the tactical means of fleet battle and the strategic objective of the safety of the sea lines of communications. This is that, when all was said and done, the strategy of sea warfare took a backseat to the strategy of battle. The upshot was that the protection of commerce was effectively treated as a "necessary evil" that could not be allowed to interfere with the "practical" business of battle but that yet needed to be put forward as the "national" reason for decisive battle. The irony is that the Admiralty and its supporters in the press made no effort to hide the priority of the Navy's goal over the nation's. The Royal commission report of 1905 on the Navy's readiness to safeguard the arrival of enough foodstuffs has already been cited—"popular pressure, exercised through Parliament upon the Government" could not be allowed to interfere with the Navy's concentration for battle. The Admiralty's pen-writing supporters joined in. The "defence of commerce," wrote Thursfield in Brassey's *Naval Annual* in 1906, "is merely a secondary object" that "must not in any way or to any degree" be permitted to take precedence over the "primary object" of command of the sea.[129] If the safety of seagoing traffic was not the fleet's and battle's first purpose, then what was it?

The gap between strategic purpose and battle planning was even wider in the German Navy. Before the war the German Navy formulated a series of ambitious plans for fighting an offensive *Entscheidungschlacht* on the high seas.[130] They contained a great deal of discussion about the operational "necessity" for such a battle, but at no point was it made clear what the outcome was expected to deliver other than a great deal of carnage. But then, the High Sea Fleet was built for "luxury." It was a fleet with all the material qualifications for battle but without a reason other than the vague notion that it would, somehow, bring *Weltmacht*. Had the High Sea Fleet fought and won its big battle, it is doubtful that it would have known what to do with the results.[131]

Decision at Jutland—What If?

A lot of ink has been spilled over the great things that Jellicoe would allegedly have accomplished if he had had Farragut's fortitude and "damned the torpedoes" to fight the High Sea Fleet to the bitter end. This article concludes with another look at some of those claims, a good summation of which appeared in a small, unhappy book published five years after the war. The pertinent passage is cited at length:

> There can be no doubt that a decisive naval victory at Jutland in 1916, in which the German fleet had ceased to exist, would have had a tremendous moral effect on the German nation and her armies in the field. With her armies driven back into their trenches, with enemies on all sides, and here communications with the outside world lost, Germany in 1916 may be regarded as a besieged and doomed fortress. . . . Had there been a decisive victory for us at Jutland, there certainly would have been no submarine campaign of 1917, for the submarine campaign was based on the German fleet. A decisive victory would have shortened the war and all its attendant suffering and expense, and England and Europe a very different Europe. A decisive Jutland would have thrown the Baltic completely open to us and our Allies. We could have entered the Baltic at any time had we so desired; . . . The Russian fleet would have been free to take the seas. Russian armies could have been landed on the coasts of Germany. Berlin would have been occupied and Russia would have been saved to us.[132]

Final judgments are impossible ninety years after the event. Certainly, some things would have turned out differently if the British fleet had proved that the one hundred years since Trafalgar had not diminished its invincibility. For one, if the High Sea Fleet's defeat had indeed aborted the "supreme submarine peril of 1917," it is unlikely that the United States would have been drawn into the war.[133] Jutland's draw may have been decisive in that regard at least.

But would a victorious Grand Fleet (which would have suffered its own share of losses) have entered deep into the Heligoland Bight to wipe out the "hornets' nests"? The chances seem slim for the same reason that the Admiralty embraced an "open" blockading strategy. The rejection of the old "close" blockade had nothing to do with the High Sea Fleet but everything to do with "sneak attack" weapons—with mines, torpedoes, and submarines. Moreover, the uninterrupted operations of the U-boat bases in Flanders, despite the nearness of British guns, suggest that the U-boats were quite capable of sustaining themselves without the High Sea Fleet's protective guns.

Even if the argument that a glorious Jutland would have saved Russia from revolution is addressed on its own logic, it is clear that this would have depended

entirely on the ability of (a much reduced) British Navy to force the Baltic and maintain a secure line of communications. This would have had to be done in the face of still substantial numbers of older enemy cruisers and battleships, mines, torpedo boats and, of course, submarines. The losses the allies suffered when they tried to force the Dardanelles at Gallipoli are a clue to the likely consequences. In short, the scenario is improbable for the same reasons that the specter of a post-Jutland assault against the U-boat nests lacks credibility.

Not much is left to be said about Germany's decisive battle expectations after Jutland. Jutland gave the Navy all it could have hoped for to begin with—a material victory and a setback to the "world prestige of the English."[134] Writing a couple of months after the event, Scheer came to terms with the reality of naval *strategy*:

> Should the future operations take a favorable course, it may be possible for us to inflict appreciable damage on the enemy; but there can be no doubt that even the most favorable issue of a battle on the high seas will not compel England to make peace in this war. The disadvantages of our geographical position compared with that of the island Empire, and her great material superiority, can not be compensated for by our Fleet. . . .[135]

Both the British and the German navies went to war in 1914, burdened by the legacy of Trafalgar. For the British, Trafalgar meant a set of expectations about war at sea that Trafalgar did not fulfil then and that could be lived up to even less in the technological environment of 1914. But if the British can be criticized for having too grandiose a vision of battle, Germany's naval planners were guilty of strategic myopia. Their image of an *Entscheidigungschlacht* was focused on a tactical and material trial of strength that would bring the winner "prestige." And it is in this sense perhaps that Trafalgar turned out decisive more than one century after the event. "We were defeated," wrote Tirpitz after the war, "by the old traditional English naval prestige."[136]

Notes

1. Percival A. Hislam, "Some Aspects of the Naval War," *United Service Magazine*, March 1915, p. 573

2. Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, *The Jutland Scandal*, 3d edition (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1925), p. 3.

3. Maj. A.C.B. Alexander, *Jutland: A Plea for a Naval General Staff* (London: Hugh Rees, Ltd, 1923), p. 51.

4. Bacon, *op cit.*, p. 2.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

6. Edward Kirk Rawson, *Twenty Famous Naval Battles—Salamis to Santiago*, Vol. I. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1899), p. .

7. Russell E. Weigley, *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare From Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

8. Lt. Gen. Baron von der Goltz, *The Nation in Arms* (London: Hugh Rees, Ltd, 1903), pp. 5–6.

9. Lt. A. Baudry, French Navy, *The Naval Battle: A Study of the Tactical Factors* (London: Hugh Rees, Ltd, 1914), p. 6.

10. A case in point is the Battle of Chesepeake Bay between nineteen British and twenty-four French ships-of-the-line on 5 September 1781. In terms of ships engaged, damaged inflicted (the British were forced to burn one damaged ship after the battle), or numbers of casualties (the British suffered 336 killed and wounded, and the French 209), the action did not amount to much by the standard of 18th century naval warfare. However, the British flight ensured General Cornwallis' blockade and surrender shortly thereafter at Yorktown, thus breaking the British will to continue the war with the American revolutionaries. See, David Syrett, *The Royal Navy in American Waters 1775–1783* (Aldershon Scholar Press, 1989), p. 192.

11. E.S. Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World from Marathon to Waterloo* (New York: John B. Alden, 1885).

12. *Ibid.*, p. iii.

13. Maj. Gen. J.F.C. Fuller, *Decisive Battles: Their Influence Upon History and Civilisation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

14. Fletcher Pratt, *The Battles That Changed History* (Garden City: Hanover House, 1956), p. 12.

15. Joseph Dahmus, *Seven Decisive Battles of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), p. 13.

16. For an excellent account of the role of navalist propaganda in shaping public opinion in Edwardian England, see W. Mark Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy: Methods and Organization of British Navalist Propaganda, 1889–1914* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), especially, Chapter V: "Pens Behind the Fleet," pp. 176–253.

17. Capt. A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1160–1783* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searly, & Rivington, 1889).

18. Maj. Gen. J.F.C. Fuller, *A Military History of the Western World: Vol. 2, From the Defeat of the Spanish Armada, 1588, to the Battle of Waterloo, 1815* (Cited hereafter as *A Military History of the Western World, Vol. 2* (New York: Minerva Press, 1967), pp. 403–4.

19. J.H. Burton, *History of Scotland*, Vol. I, 1873, p. 318. Cited in Adm. Sir Cyprian Bridge, *Sea-Power and Other Studies* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1910), p. 17.

20. Rawson, *op. cit.* A later generation of historians is more likely to agree with Robert Seager's conclusion that the Battle of Santiago was "no battle at all," but a four-hour turkey shoot that pitted four Spanish cruisers and two destroyers against four U.S. battleships and one cruiser. Robert Seager II, *Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and His Letters* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1977), p. 380. As Frank Uhlig has reminded the author however, there is not necessarily a contradiction between a "turkey shoot" and a decisive battle.

21. Jay Luvaas, ed., *Frederick the Great on the Art of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 139.

22. E. Keble Chatterton, *Battles by Sea* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, Ltd, 1925), p. 102.

23. Cited in Lord Eversley, *The Turkish Empire from 1288 to 1914* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1923), p. 144.

24. Peter Padfield, *Tide of Empires: Decisive Naval Campaigns in the Rise of the West, Vol. I, 1481–1654* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1919), p. 108; and Stanford Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey: Vol. I, Empire of the Gazis: The Rise and Decline of the Ottoman Empire, 1280–1808* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 178.

25. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

26. Fuller, *A Military History of the Western World*, Vol.2, pp. 38, 39.

27. David Howarth, *The Voyage of the Armada: The Spanish Story* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), p. 240.

28. Marain and Parker believe that the *Armada* set sail from Lisbon with 130 ships. See, Colin Marain and Geoffrey Parker, *The Spanish Armada* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988), p. 105. Michael Lewis has calculated that the English met a combined fleet of 105 ships. See his *The Spanish Armada* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960), p. 101. The difference between the two numbers is partly accounted for by the fact that not all ships that departed reached the English Channel. It appears, however, that the larger number is the more reliable one, for Marain and Parker cite a Spanish report of 21 August 1588, three weeks after the clash in the Channel, claiming that 112 vessels were still intact. Marain and Parker, p. 229.

29. Lewis, p. 174.

30. Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), p. 401.

31. Paul S. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941–1945)* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978), p. 166. Cited in H.P. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies February to June 1942* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1983), p. 519.

32. Willmott, p. 559.

33. Sir Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), p. 169.

34. Cdr. René Daveluy, *French Navy, The Genius of Naval Warfare*. Translated by Philip R. Alger (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1910), p. 11.

35. See Corbett, *op. cit.*, especially chapter I, "The Theory of the Object—Command of the Sea," pp. 87–104.

36. This is how Colomb described "true naval strategy," i.e., aimed at establishing command of the sea. Rear-Adm. P.H. Colomb, *Naval Warfare: Its Ruling Principles and Practices Historically Treated* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1891), p. 7.

37. J. Legrand, "La guerre sur mer et ses lecons," *La Marine francaise*, no. 13, 1900, p. 89. Cited in Theodore Ropp, *The Development of a Modern Navy: French Naval Policy 1871–1904* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), p. 336.

38. G.S. Clarke and J.R. Thursfield, *The Navy and the Nation* (1897), pp. 126–27. Cited in Geoffrey Till, *Maritime Strategy and the Nuclear Age* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 130.

39. Adm. Sir R.H. Bacon, *The Life of Sir John Rushworth, Earl Jellicoe* (London: Cassell and Co., Ltd, 1936), p. 306.

40. When he set out to fight the Battle of Trafalgar, Nelson made it abundantly clear that he meant to annihilate the enemy fleet and not score "merely a splendid victory." See, Walter Jerrold, *The Nelson Touch* (London: John Murray, 1918), p. 84.

41. Between 1905 and 1912 the Admiralty produced a series of war plans that envisaged a blockade of the German coast. In each case though, the object of bringing economic pressure to bear was secondary to the primary goal of enticing the High Sea Fleet to come out and give battle. For the authoritative account of British naval blockade planning, see A.C. Bell, *A History of the Blockade of Germany and of the Countries Associated with Her in the Great War, 1914–1918* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO), 1961), especially, pp. 23–32. The volume was originally published in 1917 "for official purposes only."

42. For an account of the abysmal lack of systematic Admiralty thinking about the problem of commerce protection, or what the author generously called "confused thinking," see Bryan Ranft, "The Protection of British Seaborne Trade and the Development of Systematic Planning for War, 1860–1906," in Bryan Ranft, ed., *Technical Change and British Naval Policy 1860–1939* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), pp. 1–22.

43. Capt. A.T. Mahan, *Sea Power and Its Relations to the War of 1812*, Vol. II (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1919), p. 126.

44. Archibald Hurd, *The Merchant Navy*, Vol. I (London: John Murray, 1921), p. 214.

45. Baudry, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

46. Adm. Sir Reginald Custance, *The Ship of the Line in Battle* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1912), pp. 105, 113.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 3.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 3. Custance was a critic of Admiral Fisher's all-big gun *Dreadnought* policy and proposed to rely instead on a decisive "hail of fire" brought to bear at medium and close ranges.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 131–32.

50. See, Capt J.S. Cowie, *Mines, Minelayers and Minelaying* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 31.

51. Capt. A.T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*, 2 volumes (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1897).

52. Cdr. Charles Robinson, *The British Fleet: The Growth, Achievements and Duties of the Navy of the Empire* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1895), p. 47.

53. Helmut Pemsel, *A History of War at Sea*, trans. Maj. D.G. Smith (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977), p. 156. The author gave Trafalgar and La Hogue seven points each for their numerical and strategic importance and tactical execution. Neither received points for political significance. The author is grateful for John Hattendorf's reminder that Barfleur and La Hogue were, strictly speaking, two battles, separated by two days. Hattendorf also reminded the author of the 1719 Battle of Cape Passaro in which a British fleet under Admiral Byng annihilated a twenty-strong Spanish fleet.

54. Cited in John Keegan, *The Price of Admiralty: The Evolution of Naval Warfare* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc), 1989, p. 50. The end of naval warfare under sail did not diminish the crucial importance of time in preparing for and concluding battle. The author is indebted to James Goldrick's reminder that Jellicoe was well aware that the geography of the North Sea meant that if the Grand Fleet and High Sea Fleet were to meet at all, it would almost certainly happen in mid-afternoon, and there would therefore be little time to bring about a decision.

55. For the evolution of the line ahead tactics, see Julian S. Corbett, *Fighting Instructions 1530–1816* (Navy Records Society 1905) (New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), pp. 133–320, and William Maltby, "Politics, Professionalism, and the Evolution of Sailing-Ship Tactics, 1650–1714," in John A. Lynn, ed., *Tools of War: Instruments, Ideas, and Institutions of Warfare, 1445–1871* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 53–73.

56. Corbett, *Fighting Instructions 1530–1816*, p. 178.

57. Michael Lewis, *The Navy of Britain: A Historical Portrait* (London, 1948), p. 470. Cited in Maltby, p. 69.

58. Capt. A.T. Mahan, *Types of Naval Officers Drawn from the History of the British Navy* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1901), p. 13.

59. Frank Uhlig, Jr., has reminded the author that, though not then in use, the term "operations" would be a more precisely accurate description for Nelson's achievement than "strategy" wars.

60. Pemsel, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

61. Hurd, p. 68.

62. G.J. Marcus, *A Naval History of England: Vol. 2, The Age of Nelson* (Sheffield: Applebaum Ltd., 1971), pp. 119–20.

63. Hurd, p. 69.

64. Marcus. *op. cit.*, pp. 361–62.

65. The reason the Narrow Seas were the privateers' most popular hunting grounds was their nearness to their well-protected bases, of course.

66. Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay: Defence Against Bonaparte, 1803–14* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973), p. 14. The author's data are taken from Edouard Desbriere's *Projects et Tentives de Debarquement aux Isles Britanniques* (Paris, 1902).

67. Edouard Desbriere, *The Naval Campaign of 1805: Trafalgar* (Paris, 1907). Translated and edited by Constance Eastwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 1.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 105. A footnote by the English editor points out that this quotation could not be traced.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
71. *Ibid.*, pp. 145–56.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
74. Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), p. 124.
75. The Battle of Jutland may have received as much literary coverage as Trafalgar, but it was not "glorious."
76. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*, Vol. II, p. 398.
77. This was the claim made by Capitaine de Vaisseau Gabriel Darrieus in his *War on the Sea: Strategy and Tactics*, trans. Philip R. Alger (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1908), p. 54.
78. Julian S. corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), p. 408.
79. Fred T. Jane, *The British Battle-Fleet: Its Inception & Growth Throughout the Centuries* (London: S.W. Partridge & Co., 1912), p. 123.
80. Nelson almost certainly had the "nullification" of Villeneuve's fleet in mind. A few hours before the battle he and Captain Blackwood discussed how many *captures* would constitute a "glorious victory." Blackwood thought that fourteen would be enough, while Nelson would not be satisfied with fewer than twenty. Nelson also made it clear that the enemy's ships were to be destroyed only as a last resort if they evaded capture and attempted to flee back to Cádiz. See, Mahan *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*, Vol. II, p. 373.
81. After the failed attack against Boulogne in 1801, Nelson wrote of the French landing craft he had seen that, "I do not think it possible to row to England; and sail they cannot." Cited in Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
82. Jerrold, p. 72.
83. Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, p. 320.
84. *Ibid.*
85. Jerrold, p. 84.
86. Desbriere, *The Naval Campaign of 1805: Trafalgar*, p. 148.
87. Hurd, p. 68.
88. Marcus, p. 366.
89. Otto von Pivka. *Navies of the Napoleonic Era* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1980), pp. 217–21, 239–45. Pivka's data were taken from William Laird Clowes's classic *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present*. (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1899).
90. Michael Glover, *Wellington as Military Commander* (London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd, 1968), p. 118.
91. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
92. *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, Vol. II, p. 118, cited in G.J. Marcus, p. 242.
93. See, Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay*, p. 60.
94. Bell, pp. 19–20.
95. In 1909 the British consul-generals in Hamburg, Frankfurt-on-Main, Amsterdam, and Antwerp responded to a request by the Foreign Office that they investigate Germany's dependence on overseas supplies, and reported that an economic blockade would be of little consequence. The Admiralty thought that their report made a "somewhat too favourable case" for Germany. Without marshalling any supporting evidence, it preferred to conclude that a blockade would create shortages "such as to produce a condition of grave distress little short of national calamity." *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.
96. Desbriere, *The Naval Campaign of 1805: Trafalgar*, p. 100.
97. This is reported by the Austrian foreign minister, Prince Metternich, in his memoirs. Cited in Colomb, *op cit.*, p. 200.

98. Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, Vol. I, p. 17.
99. Howarth, *op cit.*, p. 45.
100. Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay*, p. 16.
101. Weigley, *op cit.*, p. 376.
102. Three days was only one of Napoleon's progressively conservative estimates of the time needed to get his army across the Channel. In June 1805 he asked for six hours, later six days, then fifteen days, and ultimately two months. See, William Laird Clowes, p. 181.
103. Cautious critics of Nelson's tactics at Trafalgar pointed out that, had he been faced with an aggressive and skilled fleet, the result could well have been disaster. See Corbett, *Fighting Instructions 1530–1816*, pp. 335-42, 351-58. Nelson's genius was, of course, that he knew that Villeneuve's fleet did not have those qualities.
104. Desbriere, *The Naval Campaign of 1805: Trafalgar*, p. 146.
105. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
106. Robinson, *op cit.*, pp. 46–47.
107. Just as Trafalgar became synonymous with the decisive battle at sea, so Austerlitz came to personify "the thunderstroke victory that destroyed the enemy army in a single clash of arms" that became "almost every general's hoped-for means to the goal." Weigley, p. 389.
108. Legend has it that the news of Austerlitz was "the blow that broke Pitt's heart." The prime minister's final words reputedly were, "I am sorry to leave the country in its present condition." See Richard Eddington, *The Duke—A Life of Wellington* (New York: Viking Press, 1943), p. 103.
109. Cited in Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay*, p. 123.
110. For an excellent discussion of Great Britain's anti-invasion measures, see Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay*, especially chapters 5 and 6.
111. For example, in the spring of 1808 Napoleon calculated that he would have seventy-four French and allied ships-of-the-line that, combined with armies at Bayonne, Cádiz, Lisbon, Brest, and Texel, "will give us a good chance against the English." Capt. D.A. Bingham, ed., *A Selection from the Letters and Dispatches of the First Napoleon*, Vol. II. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884), pp. 377–78.
112. At the Treaty of Tilsit in July 1807, Tsar Alexander I and Napoleon agreed to combine all the European navies and overwhelm the British with numbers. Glover has calculated that in the summer of 1808 the confederated fleet numbered 155 ships-of-the-line. Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay*, pp. 28–29.
113. See, Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay*, p. 16.
114. Edward Pelham Brenton, *The Naval History of Great Britain From the Year 1783 to 1846* (London: Henry Colburn, 1847), p. 112.
115. For an overview of Napoleon's ship-building efforts after Trafalgar, see Richard Glover, "The French Fleet, 1807-1814; Britain's Problem and Madison's Opportunity," *Journal of Modern History*, no. 39, 1967, pp. 233–52.
116. Cited in Richard Glover, *Britain at Bay*, p. 19.
117. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911–1918*, Vol. I. (London: Odhams Press, 1938), p. 185.
118. Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era 1904–1919: Vol. II, The War Years—To the Eve of Jutland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 436.
119. The High Sea Fleet's commander-in-chief in 1916–18, Admiral Reinhardt Scheer, wrote after the war "how universal was the conviction that the English Navy would immediately take the offensive." Admiral Scheer, *Germany's High Sea Fleet in the War* (London: Cassell and Co., 1920), p. 26. Scheer's predecessor during the war, Admiral Von Ingenohl, wrote later how "The entire development of the fleet. . . , our tactics, our maneuvers, even part of our building program. . . , hinged on the expectation of a decisive battle within or near the German Bight." Korvettenkapitaen Otto Groos, *Der Krieg in der Nordsee: Vol. I, Von Kriegsbeginn bis Anfang September 1914* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1920), p. 62. This volume is part of the official German account of the First World War at sea, *Der Krieg zur See*.
120. This is how the popular British naval commentator Percival A. Hislam characterized the German Navy's "spirit" in his *The Admiralty of the Atlantic—An Enquiry into the*

Development of German Sea Power Past, Present, and Prospective (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1908), p. 59.

121. The lack of joint planning between the military and naval staffs in both Great Britain and Germany is legendary. Thus, even as the British general staff finalized plans to dispatch the Army to France, the naval staff schemed to use it as a "projectile" to be fired against Germany's Baltic coast. See, Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command 1914–1918*, Vol. Two (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1961), pp. 76–84. The absence of coordination on the German side was even worse. According to Luigi Albertin's study, "There had been no collaboration between the Army and Navy general staffs. Germany had acquired a powerful navy worthy to measure swords with that of England. But the Navy chiefs were not asked for their opinion on the problems raised by a possible European war. *The Origins of the War of 1914*, Vol. III. Translated and edited by Isabella M. Massey (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 249.

122. Cited in Ivo Nikolai Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862–1914* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 342. The Army's lack of interest in the Navy's war plans is nothing short of astounding. For example, had the High Sea Fleet been used with daring and imagination in the early days of the war against the (largely unprotected) cross-Channel convoys that were shuttling the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to France, the effect on the outcome of the German offensive might well have been decisive. The author is indebted to Frank Uhlig, Jr. for this observation.

123. The last of a series of invasion debates in the British Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) appears to have occurred in October 1914, and concluded that, though raids were still possible, no German invasion was foreseeable. This conclusion substantially reaffirmed the CID's finding of 1908. See, Hankey, *op cit.*, pp. 212–21. The Germans on their part were evidently aware of the Admiralty's scheme to land forces in Denmark or elsewhere along the Baltic coast, but neither the naval nor the Army staff thought the danger important enough to risk a big naval battle. See, Lambi, p. 342.

124. For the Admiralty's 1907 war plans, see Lt. Cdr. P.K. Kemp, *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, Vol. II (London: Navy Records Society, 1964), pp. 316–468.

125. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, p. 283.

126. While he sought to create "his" navy and learned that Wilhelm II still wavered between a battle and a cruiser fleet, Tirpitz reminded the emperor that because "commerce-raiding and transatlantic war against England is so hopeless, because of the shortage of bases on our own side and the superfluity on England's side, that we must ignore this type of war against England in our plans for the constitution of the fleet." Cited in Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent: Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet* (London: Macdonald, 1965), p. 209.

127. Fisher's famous memorandum of 1913 in which he warned that German submarines would target merchant vessels without warning was one of a few exceptions. But it is not clear if Fisher's prediction was the result of serious study, or one of his famous shoot-from-the-hip verbal thunderbolts.

128. In explaining that some merchant ship losses were unavoidable early in the war, Corbett remarked that, "We cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs." Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, p. 284.

129. J.R. Thursfield, "The Attack and Defence of Commerce" in John Leyland and T.A. Brassey, *The Naval Annual 1906* (Portsmouth: J. Griffin and Co., 1906), p. 66.

130. The German admiralty staff's last pre-war offensive battle plan was the brainchild of Vice-Admiral Baudissin. In 1909 he prepared instructions for the High Sea Fleet "to do the greatest damage to the enemy, risking all the forces at your disposal. To that end you should attack the enemy with all available high-sea forces." Cited in Lambi, p. 343. Also cited in P.M. Kennedy, "The Development of German Naval Operations Plans against England, 1896–1914," Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers 1880–1914* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1979), pp. 184–85. The Baudissin plan was quickly succeeded by the High Sea Fleet's *de facto* war strategy of a "waiting offensive."

131. Tirpitz' call for a "place in the sun" or his insistence that Great Britain be shown that Germany was her equal are not considered strategic ends that might be decided by battle.

132. Maj. A.C.B. Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

133. "The World Crisis," cited in William Oliver Stevens and Westcott, *A History of Sea Power* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1948), p. 391. Admiral Scheer's memoirs too claim that the High Sea Fleet's guns were critical for the U-boat campaign. One suspects that he sought to rationalize the fleet's inactivity otherwise. See his *Germany's High Sea Fleet in the World War.*

134. Grand Admiral Von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1919), Vol. 2, pp. 27–28.

135. Cited in Cdr. Holloway H. Frost, USN, *The Battle of Jutland* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1936), p. 510.

136. Tirpitz, Vol. 2, p. 31.