

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 224

“The Harding Era”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The speech with which US Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes opened the Washington Naval Conference began with the expected platitudes: competition in arms was a “crushing burden” from which the peoples of the world sought to be relieved.

But then he stunned the chamber by calmly proposing that the United States Navy would scrap fifteen battleships already built and halt construction of fifteen more, including some that were almost complete, thirty capital ships in all, representing two-thirds of the Navy’s battleship fleet.

He didn’t stop there. These US reductions would be contingent on the UK abandoning construction of four *Hood*-class battleships, the top of the Royal Navy line, and scrapping nineteen existing battleships, and on Japan abandoning six battleships under construction and scrapping eleven.

One gleeful reporter noted afterward that the US Secretary of State had sunk more British battleships than the combined efforts of all the admirals of every nation who had ever lived.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 224. The Harding Era.

The last time we were in the United States, Warren Harding had just been inaugurated as the 29th President of the United States. New Presidents begin their administrations by appointing the members of their cabinet. These picks were particularly significant in the Harding Administration, because of Harding’s view of the Presidency. He was not exactly what you would call a “hands on,” President; his style was quite different from Woodrow Wilson’s. He left his cabinet secretaries to run their departments as they saw fit. With regard to legislation, he believed the President should make recommendations to Congress, but should then leave it to Congress to work out the details and draft the bill.

What *did* he think Presidents should do? If you figure that one out, let me know.

Some of the Cabinet appointments Harding made were very good, and some of them were very...not. In the first category were the Secretary of State, Charles Evans Hughes, previously Supreme Court Justice and 1916 Republican Presidential nominee. Harding gave Hughes free rein at the State Department, and Hughes became Harding's most accomplished cabinet secretary. It made quite a contrast to the Wilson Administration, in which Wilson's secretaries of state complained of being figureheads, with Wilson and Colonel House doing all the real work. We'll discuss Hughes's accomplishments in more detail in a few minutes.

Harding appointed Iowa farmer and journalist Henry Wallace as secretary of agriculture, where he was an able advocate for farmers. Wallace would outlive Harding and remain in his Cabinet post until 1924, when he, too would die in office. In our time, Henry Wallace's memory is eclipsed by that of his son, also named Henry Wallace, who would also become Secretary of Agriculture and then Vice President.

Then we have Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover. He's come up before in the podcast. Hoover was a mining engineer who had traveled the world and become very rich by taking over and reorganizing mining operations. He was living in London when the Great War began and got involved in helping American civilians stuck in Europe find their way home, which led to him taking on the job of collecting American food aid and delivering it to Belgium during the period of US neutrality. When America entered the war, Hoover joined the Wilson Administration as its chief food administrator, or "food czar," if you must. Hoover's Food Administration was a big success. To "hooverize" became a synonym for "economize," and parents told their children to finish their vegetables because if they had to be thrown away, Mr. Hoover wouldn't like that.

By the end of the war, Herbert Hoover was one of the most famous and popular people in America. He was also a Progressive who supported the eight-hour workday and an end to child labor, but had no strong loyalty to either political party until 1920, when he judged the Republicans to be more likely to win the election, so he declared as a Republican and made a quixotic bid for the Presidential nomination. But he had no party connections, so that bid never went anywhere. Afterward, he strongly supported Harding and worked on building support in the party for a future Presidential run, much to the irritation of Woodrow Wilson, who figured Hoover owed his prominence to a Democratic administration and was proving to be quite the ingrate.

Hoover took the position of commerce secretary. The Department of Commerce was a small and neglected corner of the Federal government, but Hoover saw a lot of potential in it. With high unemployment and the economy in a recession, Hoover made Commerce the central office for the Harding Administration's economic recovery plans, which sometimes included having Commerce trespass into government operations that were normally seen as in the purview of some other department.

In the postwar world, two exciting new technologies were becoming available to the ordinary consumer: radio and airplanes. Hoover's Commerce Department took the lead in establishing standards and regulations for the new industries, forerunners to what would eventually become the Federal Communications Commission, or FCC, and the Federal Aviation Administration, the FAA. I'll be doing separate episodes on the development of radio later on, so I'll set that topic aside for now.

Then there were the not-so-good Cabinet appointments, beginning with Pittsburgh banker Andrew Mellon as Secretary of the Treasury. I don't know what you would expect from appointing one of the richest people in America to the Treasury post, other than recommendations that taxes be cut on the richest Americans and raised on the poorest Americans, but that's exactly what Harding got, and this will be the cornerstone of Republican economic policy for the next one hundred years and counting.

To the post of Secretary of the Interior, Harding appointed New Mexico Senator Albert Fall, whom you'll remember as "Petroleum Fall" from episode 206. The choice of a man who got rich drilling for oil to the post of Interior Secretary made conservationists apoplectic. Gifford Pinchot spoke for all of them when he said "it would have been possible to pick a worse man for Secretary of the Interior, but not altogether easy." The good news is that Fall would prove to be not as big a disaster for the environment as conservationists feared; the bad news is he will prove to be one of the biggest crooks ever to hold public office in the United States.

For Attorney General, Harding went with his campaign manager, Ohio political boss Harry Daugherty. These two picks, Fall and Daugherty, are the main reason history regards Harding so poorly, but that, as they say, is a story for another episode.

For a President who was only in office two and a half years, Harding got to pick quite a lot of Supreme Court justices, four in all. His first appointment came after the death of the Chief Justice, Edward White, who had been appointed by William Howard Taft. To this position Harding appointed William Howard Taft, who, you may recall, had wanted to be Chief Justice more than he had wanted to be President. Now he would succeed the Chief Justice he himself had appointed and become the first, and so far the only, person to serve both as President and on the Supreme Court.

Harding appointed three other Justices, George Sutherland, Pierce Butler, and Edward Sanford. Harding's appointments were all conservative Justices, with Sutherland and Butler in particular making names for themselves as two of the so-called "Four Horsemen" who will consistently oppose New Deal legislation in the 1930s.

I already touched on economic policy when I talked about Andrew Mellon. The economy was in recession when Harding was elected, a post-war adjustment slump as the US economy reconverted to peacetime production. The US government budget was only about a billion dollars a year before the war. In the 1919-1920 fiscal year, the first full fiscal year of peace, the

budget was still six billion dollars. Harding and the Republicans wanted to see that number slashed, and Republicans in general and Mellon in particular were hostile to the Federal income tax, a Wilson Administration innovation, and especially its top tax bracket of 73%. Under Harding, the top tax bracket was reduced to 58%, with the tax on capital gains reduced to 12.5% and some of the lost revenue made up by raising tariffs, a favorite Republican economic policy that was good for domestic business, bad for domestic consumers. Andrew Mellon argued that lower tax rates would actually increase government revenue, despite a lack of evidence supporting this claim. This won't be the last time Americans hear that economic argument.

The Administration also supported higher tariffs on food imports, which helped American farmers. The price of a bushel of wheat, which was in the \$2 to \$3 range during the war, fell to less than \$1 a bushel by 1920, putting the squeeze on farmers, many of whom had taken out loans and invested in new equipment when prices were high. I mentioned back in episode 173 how Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century's grandparents were farmers, and that they told her that for them, the Great Depression began as soon as the Great War ended. Tariffs helped the farmers, although again, they were also a tax increase on everyone who consumed food, which, let's face it, that's everybody, including the poorest of the poor, although I doubt that troubled Andrew Mellon very much.

Entangled with the question of fiscal policy was the question of bonuses for veterans of the Great War. Since soldiers are not usually paid as much money as they could have earned in the peacetime civilian economy, it was customary in the United States, as in some other nations, to pay veterans a bonus after the war ended to help make up the shortfall. After the Great War, with the economy slow and unemployment high, there was a loud call for a veterans' bonus, a call led by the American Legion, a veterans' organization formed in March 1919 by veterans of the American Expeditionary Force.

But Harding opposed a bonus, on the grounds that the Treasury couldn't afford it. Congress passed a bonus bill anyway in 1922, but Harding vetoed it, and the veto was sustained, narrowly.

The automobile was another new technology that had proved its worth during the war and was now being embraced in the peacetime civilian economy. As an experiment, or maybe I should say a demonstration project, the US Army on July 7, 1919, ran a convoy of trucks from Washington, DC to Gettysburg, where they picked up the Lincoln Highway, the nation's first transcontinental highway—most of it is now known as US Route 30—and followed it from there to San Francisco, where it arrived just shy of two months later, a distance of about 3,300 miles in just under 600 hours of driving time, which works out to an average speed of about five and a half miles per hour. Automobiles of this time were not very reliable, so breakdowns were frequent, and the convoy reported that just about the entire length of the trip from the Mississippi River to the border of California was over dirt roads.

A total of 297 soldiers participated in this truck convoy, including one Major Dwight Eisenhower. There's a name you're likely to hear again. Of those soldiers, 21 were injured along the way. The Army made its point, which was that in the age of the automobile, having a viable system of highways was a matter of national defense, and this led to the Federal Highway Act of 1921, the beginning of a Federal program to create and maintain a national highway network in the United States.

In 1920, the NAACP had sent a questionnaire to all the Republican candidates asking their views on political questions of interest to African Americans, including voting rights, a Federal anti-lynching law, Federal employment opportunity, and a withdrawal of US forces from Haiti. Warren Harding had been one of only three candidates to answer the questions, although his answers were couched in vague platitudes. Nevertheless, Harding did very well among African-American voters on Election Day.

Once in office, Harding did ask Congress to pass an anti-lynching bill and recommended the creation of a commission to study ways of improving race relations. He was applauded by the NAACP for these calls, but nothing came of them. Significantly, Harding did not reverse the segregation in Federal employment that had begun under Woodrow Wilson.

Back in episode 204, I described the terrible racial violence of the year 1919. That was the worst year in US history for racial violence, but the worst single episode of racial violence—and by “racial violence” I mean “white violence against African Americans”—the worst single episode happened just after Memorial Day 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

You'll recall from episode 42, Oklahoma became the 46th US state, admitted to the Union in 1907. The state had not existed during the Civil War, but in politics and in temperament, it was similar to the ex-Confederate states, and in particular, it had segregation laws as strict as anybody's.

The city of Tulsa, Oklahoma's second-largest, with a population of about 75,000 in 1921, was experiencing an economic boom thanks to the rapidly growing oil industry. About 10,000, or 13%, of Tulsa's population was African Americans who mostly lived in the Greenwood district of the city. The citizens of Greenwood shared in the good times created by the oil boom; some of the wealthiest African Americans in the nation lived there. Ironically, Oklahoma's tough segregation laws may have helped fuel Greenwood's economy, since African American consumers were not permitted in white-owned shops and businesses. Thus, African-American dollars were kept in the African-American community. Greenwood had its own doctors, lawyers, newspapers, a funeral home, a hotel, restaurants, barber shops and several churches. It was Booker T. Washington who dubbed it the “[Black] Wall Street.”

Monday, May 30, 1921 was Memorial Day in the United States. In Tulsa, most businesses and offices were closed. But a 19-year old African American man named Dick Rowland was out shining shoes on Main Street, same as always. When he had to go to the bathroom, he used the

restroom on the top floor of the Drexel Building; it was the only restroom in the area open to African Americans. The elevator operator in the building was a 17-year old white girl named Sarah Page.

What exactly happened isn't clear, but it seems likely Dick tripped or stumbled and grabbed Sarah's arm. She screamed. If you recall episode 204, you know what sort of thing happens next. Dick knew, too. He ran away. The police were summoned and took a statement from Sarah. Reportedly, Sarah told the police that it was probably an accident and she didn't want to press charges. We don't know this for sure, because the police report has mysteriously disappeared from the archives, as have other records that might have shed light on what happened in Tulsa at this time.

On Tuesday morning, the police arrested Dick Rowland. The white-owned *Tulsa Tribune* published a story that afternoon claiming that Dick had attacked Sarah and torn her clothes, which was not true. Witnesses say the paper also published an editorial calling for Dick Rowland to be lynched that evening, but no copy of the paper survives to confirm this. Even the microfilm copy is missing the editorial page. Huh.

By nightfall, a mob of hundreds of white men had gathered outside the Tulsa County Courthouse to demand Dick Rowland be handed over to them. The sheriff refused, but word of the mob made it to Greenwood, and a group of about 75 armed African-American men from Greenwood, many of them veterans of the Great War, turned up by 10:00 that night. They offered to help defend the courthouse, but the sheriff turned down the offer. As they were leaving, a white man tried to take the weapon off an African-American veteran. A shot was fired, whether by accident or as a warning, no one can say, but the white mob began shooting. The African-American group returned fire. Two African-American men and ten white men were killed in this first exchange of gunfire.

The African-American group retreated to Greenwood. White rioters began setting fires around the edges of the Greenwood district and attacked firefighters who attempted to put them out. Terror cars raced through the streets, firing on African Americans. The Tulsa police deputized hundreds of white men, many of whom had been in that lynch mob.

At daybreak, an all-out assault on Greenwood began. It lasted most of the day. People were attacked and buildings set on fire. The attackers had at least one machine gun, and airplanes were used to drop firebombs on buildings. The Oklahoma National Guard finally ended the violence. Officially, 24 residents of Greenwood were killed, but modern estimates put the figure in the 200-300 range. Hundreds more were wounded and thousands detained. Thousands of homes and businesses were looted or burned; virtually every African-American resident of Tulsa was left homeless. Property damage is estimated at \$2.3 million in 1921 dollars, equivalent to maybe US\$40 million in our time. No white person was ever charged with a crime or prosecuted for

actions related to what history now calls the Tulsa Massacre. No compensation was ever paid to those whose property was destroyed.

Afterward, an eerie silence descended over Tulsa. No one wanted to talk about it. It was never mentioned in the newspapers or in the history books or in the schools. Later generations of Tulsans, Black and white, were born and raised in the town and grew to adulthood with no knowledge of the most important event in the history of their town. And I'll add that one of my major references for this period is the 1969 history *The Harding Era*, by Robert K. Murray, which takes over 500 pages to cover the two-and-a-half years of the Harding Administration but never gets around to mentioning Tulsa.

At the 75th anniversary, in 1996, the state of Oklahoma created a commission to investigate the massacre, which helped bring the history back to light. The commission recommended reparations be paid to the descendants of the survivors of the massacre, but no action was ever taken on that recommendation. In 2014, the journalist and essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates discussed the massacre in his landmark essay, "The Case for Reparations," and that was the first time I ever heard of it. In 2019, the HBO television series *Watchmen* began with a dramatization of the Tulsa Massacre, which as far as I can tell is the first time it was ever depicted on film or TV.

Warren Harding spoke at Lincoln University, a historically Black university in Pennsylvania, three days afterward and briefly mentioned the Tulsa Massacre, saying, "God grant that...we never see another spectacle like it."

In October, Harding visited Birmingham, Alabama for a ceremony marking the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of that city. He gave a speech before a multiracial audience—a *segregated* multiracial audience—in which he criticized discrimination in education and the curtailment of voting rights in the South, much to the delight of the Black section of the audience. Unfortunately, he also declared there was an "eternal and inescapable difference" between the two races that would make full equality impossible. On the other hand, he also noted, quite astutely for the time, that race relations was no longer simply a Southern matter; in 1921 it was a concern of the North as well, and indeed, as he put it, "of democracy everywhere."

[music: Whiting and Egan & Kahn, "Ain't We Got Fun?"]

I promised you we'd turn to foreign policy before the episode was out, so let's take that up now. The biggest foreign policy issue facing the United States at this time was of course the war. With the Treaty of Versailles now a dead letter, the US remained technically at war with Germany, Austria, and Hungary. With Harding in the White House, Congress soon declared the war over and the State Department negotiated peace treaties with the three powers, treaties that followed the contours of the treaties negotiated in Paris, except for the League of Nations bit. The Harding Administration would not participate in the League or recognize it or even communicate directly with it, although American observers sometimes sat in on meetings where League business was conducted.

When he was in the Senate, Warren Harding had opposed Woodrow Wilson's liberal policy toward the Philippines. Harding had called it a "national disgrace" and dismissed self-government as teaching the Filipinos to walk before they could crawl. Harding appointed his erstwhile opponent for the Republican nomination, General Leonard Wood, as Governor-General of the Philippines. Wood would have a testy relationship with Filipino politicians, and any movement toward independence would be halted for the foreseeable future.

Relations with Latin America fared a little better. Some Harding Administration officials, notably Hughes and Fall, opposed diplomatic recognition of the new Mexican government, but over time that was gradually smoothed over and the US and Mexico finally normalized relations, although not until after Harding's death. Harding was finally able to ratify that treaty with Colombia, the one under which the US paid Colombia \$25 million dollars in reparations for supporting Panamanian independence. That would be about US\$350 million in today's money.

When Harding took office, the United States had soldiers in Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. As a Senator, Harding had opposed the Wilson Administration's decisions to intervene, first in Haiti, then in the Dominican Republic. During his presidency, US soldiers would be withdrawn from Cuba, and preparations begun for withdrawal from Haiti and the Dominican Republic. These moves were welcomed in Latin America, although the Harding Administration would resist calls from Latin American leaders to disavow any future US military intervention in the region, although Secretary of State Hughes did pledge that the US would limit itself to a defensive policy aimed at protecting US territorial interests, though keep in mind that includes the Panama Canal.

Relations between the United States and its wartime allies were strained. It wasn't just because the US had refused to join the League of Nations. Harding had run a campaign that used the slogan "America First" almost as often as it talked about normalcy. It was clearly a rejection of Wilson's internationalism, and Republicans read the 1920 election result as a mandate to rip up Wilsonianism root and branch. In practical terms, "America First" meant higher tariffs to discourage imports, a larger fleet of US-flagged merchant ships, and a continued expansion of the United States Navy. It was confidently predicted that by the end of Harding's first term, in 1924, the US Navy would be the world's largest.

It also meant saying "no" to Allied requests for debt forgiveness. At the end of the war, the Allies collectively owed the US more than ten billion dollars. Nearly half of that total was owed by the UK. By 1921, the French were openly calling for inter-Allied debt forgiveness. The government of the UK was too proud to ask openly for debt forgiveness, since Britain was still supposedly the world's most powerful nation, even if it could no longer boast of being the world's largest economy. But the Lloyd George government made it known to Washington privately that it would welcome an offer of debt forgiveness.

All the Allied governments were deeply in debt, which was hindering their postwar economies. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia meant that Russian loans would never be repaid. In 1919, the Allies looked eagerly to German reparations payments to help them pay off their own debts, but by 1921, it was becoming clear that the German economy was faltering, the German government was reluctant to make good on those reparations payments, and German complaints that the reparations demands were too great were being echoed even by voices in the Allied nations, most notably British economist John Maynard Keynes.

The Allied governments therefore saw debt relief as a way of aiding their own economies while also allowing them some breathing space to ease the terms of the German reparations. But Americans didn't see it that way. In the American view, a debt was a debt. You borrowed the money on the promise that you would pay it back, and gentlemen keep their word. Those who do not are scoundrels.

Some of this attitude comes from good old fashioned WASP-Puritan kitchen-table values. I always pay my debts; why don't the French want to? Some of it reflects the growing mood of isolationism in the US, an attitude that America has already done plenty for Europe; it's time for the Europeans to show some good faith in return. But some of it also reflects that fact Americans aren't accustomed to the role of being a major economic power.

The US in 1921 is not only the world's largest creditor nation, but it is also running a large trade surplus with the rest of the world. The US is exporting large quantities of its agricultural products and advanced manufactured goods, while importing far less. But Allied nations need trade surpluses too, so they can earn the dollars they need to pay their debts, and in the global market, they are forced to compete with the USA, the very country they need to repay. And the US is also raising tariffs in order to reduce its own purchases of Allied exports.

If an individual or a business were in this position, it would be getting rich. Hooray for them! But for a nation to be in this position, the hoarding of its own economic success inevitably means the relative impoverishment of other nations. An American might ask, "So what?" But America's success is built in part on exports. What will happen when America's trading partners can no longer afford to buy those US exports? These contradictions, left unaddressed, have the potential to bring down the entire world economy.

And that is what Mike Duncan calls foreshadowing.

The US government's ambitious plans to expand the US Navy were also an obstacle to the UK getting its economic house in order. The British position was always that the Royal Navy must be the largest navy in the world and that Britain would pay whatever it cost to ensure British naval supremacy. But those threats rang hollow in the post-war world of high debt and budget retrenchment. The Royal Navy was old. We've already seen how modern warships cost much more than their predecessors, and their service life is shorter. HMS *Dreadnought* had sparked a

revolution in naval design when she had launched fifteen years ago, in 1906. Where was she now? On the auction block. She was sold for scrap in May 1921.

So the US seemed likely to become the world's foremost naval power in a few years' time, barring a painfully expensive commitment from the UK government. But the view is not so rosy from the US side either, because of Japan, which was also expanding its navy. The United States is a bicoastal nation, so it has to divide its navy between two oceans. The Imperial Japanese Navy was already more than half the size of the US Navy, and remember that Britain and Japan are allies. Their combined navies could easily outnumber the Americans in either ocean or both.

Also remember that Warren Harding wants to cut taxes and shrink the US Federal budget. If his administration could cut back on that scheduled expansion of the Navy, that would save quite a few dollars. Also also remember that when the Allies imposed disarmament on Germany, it had come with a pledge that they would then proceed to discuss disarmament among themselves. Maybe now would be a good time to get started?

Disarmament was also politically popular in the Allied countries, whose publics were tired of war. One of the arguments the women's suffrage movement had made was that women's votes would steer the governments of the world away from militarism and toward peace. Now women's suffrage was an accomplished fact in most democracies, and women's suffrage groups were now promoting disarmament.

So that's a long list of good reasons to have a disarmament conference, and so the US government under Harding called one, the Washington Naval Conference, which was held from November 1921 through February 1922. It was a watershed moment for many reasons. It was the greatest accomplishment of the Harding Administration and of Secretary of State Hughes. It was the first arms control conference in history, and it is notable that it was held in Washington, a sign of the United States' new stature in world affairs. In the old days, it would have most certainly been held in London, or maybe Paris.

Nine nations were invited: The United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Japan, China, Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands. A number of treaty agreements came out of the conference, including the Nine-Power Treaty, signed by all nine powers, which codified America's "Open Door" policy toward China; that is, that foreign powers with spheres of influence in China would not use them to restrict Chinese trade with other powers. This was particularly directed against Japan, which was treating Manchuria like it was Japanese property, even though Manchuria was legally still part of China. In a separate but related agreement, Japan was persuaded to give up its control over the formerly German concession at Qingdao, which had been granted just two years ago in the Treaty of Versailles.

Also signed at the conference was the Four-Power Treaty, between the US, Britain, France, and Japan. Under this treaty, the four powers recognized each other's territorial holdings in the Western Pacific and agreed to peaceful resolution of any territorial disputes. This treaty was

intended to supersede the Anglo-Japanese alliance, which the British wanted to exit from gracefully. No one in Britain or in the Imperial War Council wanted to get stuck on the Japanese side of any future confrontation between Japan and the United States. This was particularly a concern for Canada.

But the most important agreement signed at the conference was the Five-Power Treaty, often referred to simply as the Washington Naval Treaty. Under this agreement, the five powers, the US, UK, Japan, France, and Italy, made an unprecedented agreement to limit the sizes of their navies. Under a complicated formula, The US and UK agreed to keep their navies equal in size, with the Japanese navy capped at 60% of the size of either, and the French and Italian navies at 35% each. Britain, Japan, and the US would collectively scrap almost two million tons of capital ships—France and Italy would be exempt—there would be a ten-year moratorium on the construction of new capital ships, and when the moratorium expired, new construction would be limited to those ratios. No new warship could be larger than 10,000 tons displacement, except for battleships, which could go up to 35,000 and aircraft carriers, which would be capped at 27,000. Aircraft carriers were still largely experimental at this time.

The Five-Power Treaty as signed was essentially the same agreement Charles Evans Hughes had proposed on the first day of the conference, and it made the Washington Naval Conference, history's first arms control conference, an unmitigated success. The five powers stuck to the agreement, more or less, and the ten-year moratorium on new battleship construction gave all five powers a respite from the arms race and a chance to get their budgets under control.

For the British, the Treaty meant a significant shift in naval strategy. We've already discussed how Britain in the 19th century adhered to the so-called "two-power standard," that is, that the Royal Navy should be as strong as the next two naval powers combined, which at that time meant France and Russia. The two-power standard had always been a bit of a bluff. The Royal Navy sometimes met the standard, but often didn't. From 1889 to 1921, France and Russia diminished as naval threats. In 1921, post-Bolshevik Russia can scarcely be said to have a navy. The French Navy is much smaller now, and besides, France is an ally. The German Navy had been a threat for a while, but it's gone now. That leaves only the United States Navy as a serious competitor to the Royal Navy, but this is not a prospect that cost anyone much sleep at the British Admiralty. No one in the UK saw the US as anything but an ally, nor saw a strong US Navy as a threat. To the contrary, American principles of freedom of the seas for everyone were not all that different from British principles, and so the British government adopted a one-power standard. So long as the Royal Navy stood at least equal to the US Navy, and either of them superior to any other fleet, that would be good enough.

It would also mean that the Royal Navy would no longer assert its power everywhere on the world's seas. Britain would effectively cede the part of the world's oceans east of Singapore and Hong Kong and west of Bermuda to the US Navy. The British still have territorial interests in the New World, of course—Canada, Jamaica, the West Indies, British Honduras, and British

Guiana—but the British government was effectively delegating the defense of these lands to the United States. This is a remarkable development, comparable to the division of the Roman Empire into Eastern and Western Empires ruled by two different Emperors. London has just ceded control over about a third of the planet to Washington, the new Constantinople.

That may have been a bit embarrassing, but far easier than the choices Tokyo faced. Japanese military planners now saw the United States as Japan's biggest rival in the Western Pacific and were developing a practical strategy for defeating the US in a hypothetical future war. The Japanese assumed, plausibly, that the Japanese Navy would be qualitatively superior. It was the US quantitative superiority that posed the problem.

Their template was the strategy Japan had successfully employed against Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. Like Russia, the US would have to split its navy between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Japan therefore did not need a navy big enough to match the entire US Navy, which was fortunate, considering that Japan's GDP was only 18% of the US GDP, meaning Japan could not hope to compete against the US in an all-out naval race. No, it would be sufficient if the Imperial Japanese Navy were, say, 70% of the US Navy. That would be enough to replicate the strategy used so successfully against the Russians.

The Americans would have to divide their navy between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Therefore, Japan could expect to enjoy numerical superiority over the US Pacific Fleet. Begin with a sneak attack on the main base of the US Pacific Fleet to cripple it, as had been done to the Russians at Port Arthur. The Pacific Fleet would be defeated before the Atlantic Fleet could arrive to reinforce it, in the same way that the Russian Pacific Squadron had been defeated before the Baltic Fleet could arrive to reinforce it. With the US Pacific Fleet out of the way, the Japanese Navy would retain numerical superiority against the arriving US Atlantic Fleet and defeat it as well. With both halves of its navy defeated, the US would then have no choice but to come to terms.

Only, the Americans were demanding the Japanese Navy be capped at 60% of the US Navy. Would that be sufficient? Could Japan agree to that? Some felt 60% would be good enough to make the plan work, given the Japanese qualitative edge. But other voices in the Japanese Admiralty feared that agreeing to the 60% limit amounted to Japan conceding naval superiority to the US for the foreseeable future.

The pro-treaty side prevailed in this debate, because their counter-argument was simple and unassailable. If Japan rejected the treaty and proceeded to start a naval arms race against the US, it could never hope to achieve that 70% ratio anyway. Indeed, it would be unlikely to achieve the 60% ratio offered by the treaty. The treaty should therefore not be viewed as capping the Japanese Navy, but as capping the US Navy. That 60% ratio was the best Japan could get in any conceivable set of circumstances; therefore Japan would just have to find a way to make it work.

This view was most strenuously expressed by a young Japanese naval officer, Commander Yamamoto Isoroku. He was Harvard educated, spoke fluent English, had traveled the US widely, and was serving as Japanese naval attaché in Washington at the time, and his assessment was this: “Anyone who has seen the auto factories in Detroit and the oil fields in Texas knows that Japan lacks the power for a naval race with America.”

What neither Yamamoto nor any other Japanese military leader knew at the time was that the United States military was operating its first-ever peacetime intelligence service, the so-called “Black Chamber,” and had broken the Japanese military code. So the Americans went into the naval conference already aware that 60% was the minimum ratio Japan was willing to accept, which is why that was the ratio included in the American proposal.

Can Japan make the 60% ratio work? Well, that is a story for another episode. We’ll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Carol for her kind donation, and thank you to Luke for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Carol and Luke help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to everyone else who has pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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The song we heard today was a 1921 recording of “Ain’t We Got Fun?” a hit song in the United States that year. In historical context, the song seems to be referencing the economic downturn of the time, yet also expressing the hope that we can have fun anyway, which seems to me a very Roaring Twenties kind of attitude.

And I hope you’ll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn toward China. When last we visited China, we saw the reaction against the Treaty of Versailles and the rise of the warlords. Meanwhile, Sun Yat-sen plans a second attempt to bring his Nationalist Party to power and institute a democratic China, but what does his death mean for the movement? We Dream of the Future, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. As I said, Warren Harding gave his cabinet secretaries a lot of leeway. That worked out well when the secretary in question was a Hughes or a Hoover, but not so well when they were a Daugherty or a Fall.

This would be the fundamental fact about Harding's role in American history. Why was this his style of leadership? Harding himself may have supplied the answer in an off-the-record appearance at the National Press Club in 1922. He told an anecdote about himself that may or may not have been true, but will eventually become famous and is perhaps the key to understanding his Presidency. According to Harding, his father once told him, "Warren, we are damned lucky you wasn't born a gal, because you'd be in the family way all the time. You can't say "No!"

[music: Closing Theme]