

The “Little Navy” Faction in the House of Representatives: Opposition to Naval Expansion 1913-1916

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Les membres du parti Démocratique, propre au Président Woodrow Wilson des États-Unis, se sont opposés à l'expansion de la marine même à un moment où les États-Unis devaient protéger leur neutralité dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Le raisonnement du groupe de la "petite marine" comprenait les soucis budgétaires et l'engagement vers la paix à travers le désarmement. Leur opposition se composait de républicains, partisans de la "grande marine" tels le sénateur Henry Cabot Lodge du Massachusetts et le démocrate "grande marine" Richmond Hobson de l'Alabama. Tandis que les avocats de la "grande marine" gagnaient finalement la bataille congressionnelle, les circonstances ont empêché d'établir le genre de marine qu'ils avaient envisagée. Après l'entrée en guerre des États-Unis en avril 1917, la nécessité n'était plus pour des cuirassés, mais pour de plus petits navires protégeant le commerce contre la campagne dévastatrice des U-boot allemands. Il est ironique qu'en dépit de la défaite de la faction "petite marine", le gouvernement des États-Unis a préconisé et réalisé leurs buts aux conférences de désarmement naval d'après-guerre.

In the years preceding American involvement in World War I, the naval policy debate in the United States focused on how to proceed with the expansion program championed by the administration of Theodore Roosevelt and continued, albeit with less executive support, under President William Taft. The administration of Woodrow Wilson initially adopted a cautious and moderate position, with Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels lobbying for modest annual increases in the size of the fleet. Only in 1915, with the war in Europe showing no signs of abating, did the Wilson Administration begin to take action on a major naval expansion proposal, which eventually became law in August 1916. The legislation, part of the Naval Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 1917, called for a three-year construction program of nearly 200 ships at a cost of over \$500 million.

Even before proposing such a significant increase in the size of the Navy, the Wilson Administration faced opposition to its naval policy in Congress, especially the House of Representatives. While Naval Affairs Committee Chairman Lemuel Padgett (Democrat [hereafter D]-Tennessee) usually supported the Administration's moderate

policy, two other groups did not. One House faction, the so-called “Big Navy” group led by Republicans Thomas Butler (Republican [hereafter R]-Pennsylvania) and Fred Britten (R-Illinois) and Democrat Richmond Hobson (D-Alabama), argued in favor of accelerating the pace of naval expansion, believing the Administration to be too cautious. Another faction, the so-called “Little Navy” group centered on Democrats Samuel Witherspoon (D-Alabama) and Walter Hensley (D-Missouri), opposed any attempt to increase naval spending.¹

This paper examines the motivations and actions of this so-called “Little Navy” faction in the naval policy debated from 1913 to 1916 and shows how its members acted out of a variety of motives. These included a desire to avoid involvement in foreign conflicts; an effort to secure international disarmament by setting an example for others to follow; and the belief that funds being spent on the Navy would be better directed to solving pressing domestic concerns. During this time, they achieved some success in limiting naval expansion and, for a time, seemed successful in derailing the Administration’s expansion proposal in 1916. Unfortunately for them, in the end the group could not overcome concerns raised by the ongoing European conflict and the United States adopted the most extensive naval expansion program in its history. However, this failure did not halt the efforts of the “Little Navy” faction, and the anti-militaristic and isolationist feelings of the immediate postwar period allowed many of their aims to achieve fruition.

The “Little Navy” group did not suddenly appear in 1913. In fact, a small but persistent group of Representatives and Senators had sought to slow Roosevelt’s naval expansionism, and proved successful in limiting the size of annual naval construction programs after 1906. Senator Eugene Hale (R-Maine), a one-time advocate of naval growth, did not believe the United States needed to become the world’s second leading naval power in order to achieve its international objectives, believing a traditional less costly defense force augmented with cruisers would be sufficient.²

A more persistent foe of naval expansion proved to be Representative Richard Bartholdt (D-Missouri), a champion of peace through disarmament. A member of the Inter-Parliamentary Union since 1899, Bartholdt supported that organization’s efforts to solve international disputes through arbitration. In sixteen years he persuaded over two hundred of his colleagues to join the Union, and in 1910 succeeded in urging Congress to pass its first ever disarmament-related legislation. Though nothing came of this measure, similar efforts would continue to help shape the naval policy debate for the next quarter century.³

¹ *Congressional Record*, 147 vols. to date (Washington, DC: GPO, 1873-), 53: 8783 (hereafter *CR*).

² Robert Albion, *Makers of American Naval Policy 1775-1947*, ed. Rowena Reed (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 215-216.

³ John Chalmers Vinson, *The Parchment Peace: The United States Senate and the Washington Conference, 1921-1922*, reprint (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 7-11. The 1910 disarmament legislation consisted of an amendment to the Fiscal Year 1911 Naval Appropriations Act calling for the appointment of a Presidential commission to examine

Bartholdt also influenced the House Democratic caucus in 1912, convincing its leadership to go on record as opposing the authorization of new battleships in that year’s Naval Appropriations Act. Secretary of the Navy George von Lengerke Meyer, ill with typhoid fever, termed this a “foolish and unwise” move by a “stingy Congress” that allowed the United States to fall behind Germany in the rankings of world naval powers. He supported the ultimately successful effort by “Big Navy” Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R-Massachusetts) to restore authorization for at least one new capital ship.⁴

The growing influence of the “Little Navy” faction led to a lack of unity among the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives during the 63rd and 64th Congresses as foreshadowed in the “lame duck” session of the 62nd Congress in late 1912. Representatives Isaac Sherwood (D-Ohio) and Thomas Sisson (D-Mississippi) came close to barring “Big Navy” Democrats from the House Committee on Naval Affairs (HCNA), though Padgett’s close ties with party leaders preserved his place as the panel’s senior Democrat. Later, during committee hearings, Witherspoon nearly came to blows with Hobson during what some described as a “furious” debate over capital ship construction. Hobson favored authorizing four ships, the Republicans supported two, and Padgett one. Witherspoon, however, argued against “an inexcusable, unjustifiable, criminal waste of public funds” and opposed any capital ship construction. In the end, a compromise authorized one vessel.⁵

When the Wilson Administration took office in 1913, it pursued a policy of continued but gradual naval expansion, much in line with Padgett’s views. As Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels put it, the Administration sought to “meet the demand to go forward in the continuation of an adequate and well-proportioned Navy” while keeping costs to “what the nation could afford to spend.”⁶

This policy met with disapproval from both “Big Navy” Republicans and “Little Navy” Democrats. The latter group immediately sought to halt any further capital ship

arms limitations. President Taft never appointed any commissioners.

4 Beekman Winthrop to Meyer, 27 July 1911, Box 24, Meyer to Alice Meyer, 29 March 1912, Box 26, Lodge to Meyer, 6, 19, and 24 July 1912, and Winthrop to Meyer, 6 August 1912, Box 28, all in George von Lengerke Meyer Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Alice Meyer to William Howard Taft, June 1912, Series 7, File 327, Reel 460, William Howard Taft Papers; Wayne A. Weigand, *Patrician in the Progressive Era: A Biography of George von Lengerke Meyer* (New York: Garland, 1988), 201-204; Albion, *Makers of American Naval Policy*, 216-217. CR 48: 11266.

5 CR 49: 3683-3688, 3695, 3814, 4072, 4108, 4312, 4706, 4811-4812; *New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*) 13 and 23 February, 1 and 5 March 1913; Ronald Spector, *Admiral of the New Empire: the Life and Career of George Dewey* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 189.

6 U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Naval Affairs, “Hearings on Estimates Submitted by the Secretary of the Navy, 1914,” 63rd Congress, 610; Paolo E. Coletta, “Josephus Daniels, 5 March 1913- 5 March 1921,” in *American Secretaries of the Navy Volume 2 1913-1972*, ed. Paolo Coletta (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 530; William J. Williams, “Josephus Daniels and the U.S. Navy’s Shipbuilding Program During World War I,” *Journal of Military History* 60 (January 1996): 9.

construction. After Winston Churchill, Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, suggested a one-year Anglo-German naval holiday, Hensley introduced a resolution calling for a unilateral one-year suspension of American capital ship construction. He stressed the economic benefits of such a move on the domestic economy, since the money saved could be shifted to other programs or eliminated all together, placing less of a burden on the American people. Bartholdt called his colleagues' attention to the moral implications of such a move on international opinion, while Finis Gray (D-Missouri) declared "I want this great constellation of states to give the signal to the world for the march to victory over war and the triumph of universal peace." Though Daniels supported in principle a multi-lateral reduction in armaments, the Navy opposed Hensley's resolution as it did not, and could not, compel other nations to follow America's lead. In the end, Hensley prevailed in the House, which passed the resolution, but failed in the Senate, which never brought the matter up for consideration.⁷

This failure did not stop the efforts by the "Little Navy" faction to curtail naval expansion. Hensley and Witherspoon renewed their efforts when the HCNA reported out the Appropriations Bill. With two colleagues, they filed a minority report, calling the measure "an inexcusably extravagant and criminal waste of public funds." They defended their views during debate on the House floor, where Padgett criticized their report as being "as full of inaccuracy and errors as is possible . . . It is as full of holes as a sieve." However, the most damaging blow to the chances of the "Little Navy" group came from representatives such as John Farr (R-Pennsylvania), who stated "I would rather be responsible for building one more ship than is necessary than one less than we need." Realizing that such attitudes all but crippled their efforts to amend the bill, Hensley and Witherspoon nonetheless delayed a final House vote until May. Part of the delay came because most House members did not understand the details of naval construction, including one member who continuously objected to authorizing work on a "building slip" until it was explained to him, in the midst of the debate on the House floor, exactly what a building slip was. He then gave his support to the authorization, wondering why it had not been approved before.⁸

The next year's debate followed similar lines, though "Big Navy" advocate Augustus Gardner (R-Massachusetts) testified before the HCNA and challenged the panel's refusal to authorize a massive construction program. This caused an irate Witherspoon to walk out of the hearings, and only a personal request from Padgett led him to return. Hensley's effort to replace battleship construction with the building of submarines was flatly rejected by Daniels, who also refused to be maneuvered into admitting the Navy sought to prepare in case the nation found itself involved in the war in Europe.⁹

⁷ Albion, *American Naval Policy*, 221; *NYT*, 11 April, 9 and 27 October, 28 November, and 1 December 1913; Vinson, *The Parchment Peace*, 11-14.

⁸ House Report 314, 63rd Congress, 48; *CR* 51: 6851-6853, 7041-7047, 7226, 7278, 7516, 8267.

⁹ Josephus Daniels, *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels, 1913-1921*, ed. E. David Cronon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 88; U.S. Congress, House of

By mid-1915 the “Little Navy” faction had achieved mixed results. Though unable to eliminate capital ship construction from naval appropriations bills, it had managed to prevent enactment of any major construction proposal. Of course, the administration’s desire to pursue a gradual expansion program played a major role in these developments. However, in the summer of 1915 the Wilson Administration radically shifted its stance.

With the war in Europe continuing and his domestic program enacted, President Wilson directed Daniels to survey “the best minds” within the Navy Department and develop a plan for a consistent and progressive long-term improvement of the service. By October, the Navy finalized a five-year, \$500 million program of sixteen capital ships and 180 other vessels. This marked the first time a multi-year construction program was presented, and it sought to escape the uncertainties of the annual appropriation and authorization process. With only minor changes, Wilson presented this program to Congress in December 1915 as part of his annual address. According to Wilson, by 1921 this program would make the United States one of the world’s most imposing naval powers with, in his words, a “Navy Second to None.”¹⁰

Congressional reaction to this proposal was, at best, mixed. Padgett, who until now had been in step with the Administration, expressed doubts and did not fully endorse the proposal. Republicans, including Gardner and his uncle, Senator Lodge, supported the plan while at the same time criticizing the Administration’s past performance. Some West Coast Senators supported the proposal mainly as a counter to perceived Japanese aggression.¹¹

On the other hand, the “Little Navy” faction saw the proposal as a threat. Many believed that advocates of preparedness sought to profit in some way from increased defense spending. These included Claude Kitchin (D-North Carolina), House majority leader-elect, who flatly refused to support the administration’s naval program. Kitchin had consistently opposed spending vast amounts on what he considered to be an already adequate Navy, believing limited construction programs of smaller combatants would be sufficient; so his opposition surprised no one. He feared this program would lead to a “nation given over to navalism and militarism,” forcing other nations to increase their armaments and, eventually, imposing an unreasonable burden on American taxpayers.¹²

Representatives, Committee on Naval Affairs, “Hearings on Estimates Submitted by the secretary of the Navy, 1915,” 63rd Congress, 596-597, 648, 1059-1097. When asked what nation the Navy was arming against, Daniels facetiously replied “Dahomey.”

¹⁰ Wilson to Daniels, 21 July 1915, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link et. al., 69 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976-1994), 34: 4-5; *NYT*, 24 July and 3 September 1915; Coletta, “Josephus Daniels,” 542; President, General Board to Secretary of the Navy, 30 July, 12 October, and 9 November 1915, General Board File 420-2, National Archives, Record Group 80; “An Annual Message on the State of the Union,” 7 December 1915, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 35: 299-300.

¹¹ *NYT*, 29 August, 3 and 24 October, and 17 November 1915; Lodge speech, 15 August 1915, Reel 118, Henry Cabot Lodge Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

¹² *NYT*, 2 and 17 October, 9, 16, 19, and 20 November, 10 December 1915; Kitchin to Daniels, 20 August 1915, Reel 67, Josephus Daniels Papers, Library of Congress; Alex Mathews

Together with Kitchin the opponents of the bill, notably Hensley, believed they had the strength to defeat, delay, or radically modify such an “extravagant and poorly conceived measure.” Marshalling their forces, they decided to wait until Padgett’s committee began hearings on the measure before openly attacking it.¹³

In late January 1916 seven prominent Democrats, including HCNA member Frank Buchanan (D-Illinois), attended an anti-preparedness mass meeting in New York. Martin Dies (D-Texas) claimed the United States had no need for naval expansion as it faced no threat of war and Clyde Tavenner (D-Illinois) blamed munitions makers for pressuring America for naval and military growth. Three months later, HCNA member Oscar Callaway (D-Texas) decried the call for new ships for a supposedly “defensive” fleet. Ironically, while these Democrats chastised Wilson for favoring naval expansion, “Big Navy” Republicans blasted him for not going far enough.¹⁴

While others stepped into the limelight on behalf of the “Little Navy” faction its most prominent member, Walter Hensley, remained active, returning to the theme of disarmament by example. He argued that the United States should set a moral example by being the first nation to cease capital ship construction. Assisted by the former president of the American Peace Society, Hensley drafted an amendment to the appropriations bill calling on the President to bring about, via a post-war conference, the creation of an international body to settle disputes and develop disarmament plans. During such a conference the United States would suspend combatant ship construction. Hensley hoped support for his amendment would lessen the chances of the construction proposal passing the House.¹⁵

The public and private maneuverings of the “Little Navy” faction bore fruit in late March 1916. Padgett, who had not yet publicly opined on the construction plan, now declared it to be an “ethereal dream.” He had become convinced it was unwise, if not illegal, to bind future Congresses with a multi-year program and favored continuing the year-to-year system heretofore used, albeit with a higher level of construction. To accomplish this, Padgett needed cooperation from Hensley and Buchanan. He reached a working agreement with Hensley and outvoted HCNA Republicans to report out a scaled-down construction program to the House. It “buried” the five-year program and its battleships and consisted of a one-year program for five battlecruisers and 37 smaller vessels, as well as a personnel increase of 13,500 men. The committee’s proposal, which in any other year would have been seen as the ultimate “Big Navy” program, was

Arnett, *Claude Kitchin and the Wilson War Policies* (Boston: Little, brown, & CO., 1937), 56-57, 66.

13 Warren Bailey to Kitchin, Box 8, Warren Bailey Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ; Arnett, *Claude Kitchin*, 70; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Naval Affairs, “Hearings on Estimates Submitted by the Secretary of the Navy, 1916,” 64th Congress, 3200 (hereafter cited as “Hearings on Estimates, 1916”).

14 *NYT*, 31 January, 18 and 23 February, 16 March, and 7 April 1916; “Hearings on Estimates, 1916,” 124, 3756.

15 “Hearings on Estimates, 1916,” 3756; Vinson, *The Parchment Peace*, 17.

defended by Padgett as “well considered and . . . supported by the best interests of the Navy [and] the welfare of the country.”¹⁶

The “Little Navy” faction realized this would be the best deal they could get and rallied behind the amended program. Kitchin announced he would vote for it, reserving special praise for the Hensley Amendment, and ordered all House Democrats to support the program. House Republicans, led by Thomas Butler, filed a vigorous minority report calling the Padgett plan “inadequate for the defense of the country” and alleged it “ignored . . . the Secretary of the Navy and set aside expert opinion. Apparently, the only explanation is that it is a compromise between those who wanted nothing . . . and those who wanted but little.”¹⁷

These strong words failed to overcome the alliance between Padgett and the “Little Navy” faction, and Butler’s efforts to restore the original program failed by six votes. It appeared as if the “Little Navy” faction had successfully derailed the Administration’s construction proposal.¹⁸

However, even as the amended bill passed the House events unfolded which would bring about defeat for Hensley and the “Little Navy” faction and secure passage of the original proposal. The Senate traditionally added on to naval bills coming out of the House, and this time proved to be no exception. A sub-committee of three “Big Navy” senators, including Lodge, restored the original proposal, in fact compressing it from a five-year to a three-year program. Even Progressive Republicans such as William Borah (R-Idaho) and Irvine Lenroot (R-Wisconsin), once and future opponents of naval expansion, supported this move. Borah feared that failing to strengthen the Navy at this time would be a sign of weakness and invite war. Though “Little Navy” Senators put up a brief fight, they soon acknowledged defeat. Senate approval of the measure led to a conference committee that would resolve the differences between the two versions of the bill.¹⁹

Both sides feared that whoever “lost” in conference would demand a quorum for approval of the conference report. With many House members home campaigning for reelection (it was now August 1916) this would further delay matters. In fact, this occurred on 6 August when the House conferees, led by Padgett and Butler, sought

¹⁶ *NYT*, 29 March and 18 May 1916; “Hearings on Estimates, 1916,” 3192; *CR* 53: 8783, 8870; House Report 743, 64th Congress, 2-10.

¹⁷ *NYT*, 19 and 20 May 1916; Arnett, *Claude Kitchin*, 97; House Report 743, part 2, 64th Congress, 1-6.

¹⁸ *CR* 53: 8891-8909, 8920-8922, 8998, 9188-9190; *NYT*, 30 and 31 May, 3 June 1916.

¹⁹ Coletta, “Josephus Daniels,” 544; *CR* 53: 10294, 10922-10928, 11166-11170, 11209, 11366-11384, 11697; Henry Ferrell, *Claude A. Swanson of Virginia: A Political Biography* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 114; Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1944), 511; Alfred Lief, *Democracy’s Norris: The Biography of a Lonely Crusade* (New York: Octagon Press, 1977), 172-175; Herbert F. Margalies, *Senator Lenroot of Wisconsin: A Political Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977), 191; *NYT*, 18, 22, 24, and 28 July 1916.

instructions from their colleagues. At this point Wilson intervened directly, meeting with Padgett and other House Democrats and informing them he favored the Senate bill.²⁰

Much to the dismay of Hensley, Kitchin, and the rest of the “Little Navy” faction, Padgett agreed to reverse his position and move for the House to agree with the Senate bill. However, his insistence that the matter be put to a vote gave opponents one more chance to derail the construction program. While Kitchin remained convinced the Senate bill represented a “stupendous and excessive” way to create an “outrageous naval program” the wind had gone out of the sails of the “Little Navy” faction. On a final vote of 283 to 51 the House on 15 August approved the three-year construction program, putting the United States on the road to having a “Navy Second to None.”²¹

When the United States entered World War I less than eight months later the Navy was forced to suspend this construction program, focusing on building escort vessels instead of capital ships to meet wartime realities. During the war, Congress granted nearly every Navy request in order to achieve victory, including an eventual resumption of the suspended construction program. However, post-war disillusionment combined with economic concerns led Congress to reexamine its position on naval expansion. Though Walter Hensley retired in 1919, over the following two years many of his views on naval matters achieved fruition, culminating in the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22 that ushered in an era of treaty-limited navies. While failing to halt naval expansion through 1916, in the long run the “Little Navy” position would achieve success.

²⁰ Ferrell, *Claude Swanson*, 115; Arnett, *Claude Kitchin*, 99; Coletta, “Josephus Daniels,” 544; *NYT*, 28 and 31 July, 7, 8, and 9 August 1916.

²¹ *CR* 53: 12669, 12784, 12830; Arnett, *Claude Kitchin*, 107; *NYT*, 8, 14, and 16 August 1916.