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Author(s): F. B. Maurice

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JULY, 1922

LORD ESHER'S PROPOSALS FOR THE LIMITATION
OF ARMAMENTS.

(Address given on May 11th, 1922.)

It is reputed that an Englishman always begins a speech with an apology. On this occasion I have to follow precedent. I have to ask your indulgence and your pardon. I have come here this evening at rather short notice to fill a gap in your programme, and I have not had time to do what your Chairman announced that I was going to do. I have not had time to write what I propose to say to you. I have also to ask your pardon for the fact that I have asked you to begin your proceedings somewhat later than the usual time, the reason being that I had to fulfil another engagement. I will endeavour to compensate for that by being as brief as possible in what I have to say, because I am particularly desirous that any discussion which may follow my remarks should not be curtailed. I have a very vivid recollection of the value of the discussion which followed my last address upon the subject of the "Limitation of Armaments."

Well, as I have got no peroration ready for you, may I as a prelude begin with a small toot on my own trumpet? When I last spoke on this subject I said :

"Now as to Naval Armaments. To begin with, as far as we are concerned at any rate, it has been accepted for generations that our naval standard has been relative to the standard of other Powers. We have had a two-Power standard, and we have now a one-Power standard. It does not seem to me that the problem here is as

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complicated as the land problem. It becomes a more or less simple matter of fixing a standard. Once the standard has been fixed the question of reduction becomes comparatively an easy matter. A distinguished Admiral has for some time past been asking what is the use of a battleship, and the only answer that satisfies him is that of the midshipman who says the battleship is no damned good. It occurs to me that the only use for a battleship is to fight a battleship. If there were no battleships in existence nobody would want any. The battleship is not required for the protection of commerce, or for surveying, or showing the flag, or any of the various duties which fall to a Navy in time of peace. The battleship is used as the main striking force in battle against the main striking force of the enemy. If the great naval Powers agree to a mutual reduction of battleships the relative battle strength will remain as before, and they will be relieved of a great deal of expenditure. Further, the construction of a battleship cannot be concealed, and there is no doubt but that any attempt to evade a bargain would be discovered. The question of arriving at an agreement on this matter does seem to me to be distinctly less difficult than the question of the reduction of land forces, and because it is less complicated, because the number of interests concerned are not so many, the intervention of the League of Nations in this matter is by no means essential. It is perfectly feasible for Great Britain, America, and Japan to settle this matter round the table."

I think I may congratulate myself that I made those remarks in this hall just three months before the President of the United States issued his invitation to the Washington Conference. I remember that in the discussion which followed, the distinguished Admiral who is now in the Chair, and certain other of my naval friends were a little inclined to demur to my proposition that the problem of the limitation of naval armaments was simpler than the problem of the limitation of land armaments. Their view was entirely justified, if you look upon it solely from the point of view of the British Empire. Whatever may be the outcome of the present controversy as to the possibilities of the destruction of battleships by aircraft, I do not think that there is any person with any knowledge who would not uphold the proposition that the life of our islands depends to-day upon the maintenance of our sea communication, and is likely to depend upon that for a good many years to come, and that those who have to bear the full burden of the responsibility of protecting these communications are not likely to regard the problem lightly. But if we follow Lord Grey's request to us, and if we try to think internationally, one does see at once that this problem of the limitation of naval armaments is certainly much the simpler of the two, and events have proved it to be so.

The effect of the Washington Conference has been, as far as we are concerned, to relieve us of a very considerable expenditure, and to leave us as far as Europe is concerned in the position, as regards the standard of battleships, of 5 to 3·5 to the next two naval Powers in Europe. That is a position which we have not held in Europe for the last seventy years. I find that a good number of speakers and writers upon the problems of Imperial defence in this country are rather apt to overlook that result of the Washington Conference. But I find also that it is very, very rare indeed to find a writer upon these subjects in Continental countries who does not put it in the front of his programme. The Washington Conference has done that, and it has done a good many other things. It has remedied what really was a very serious danger—conflict between the United States of America and Japan, and it has, at any rate, gone a very long way towards settling what is known as the problem of the Pacific. But as regards the immediate subject which I have to talk about to-night, it has also done something very important. It has provided a formula for the limitation of armaments. It has established the precedent of the limitation of armaments by fixing the ratio of a certain kind of armament—battleships. Everybody here who studies international affairs is aware that one of the first steps in attempting to solve any international problem is to arrive at some formula which is likely to be generally accepted, and in this matter of the limitation of armaments, the League of Nations in particular has been searching for a formula almost since its creation. The search began at the first meeting of the Assembly in 1921, when, by putting forward proposals for the limitation of armaments by limitation of expenditure, the League asked each of the Powers members of the League to agree that their expenditure upon armaments in the two years following the completion of the agreement should not exceed that expenditure of the year in which the agreement was formed. I have never thought that that was a very practical proposition. In the first place, Budgets' estimates for armaments have no common denominator. You cannot put the price of a British voluntary soldier in terms of a Continental conscript. Still less can you put the price of a British volunteer in terms of a Japanese soldier. You simply cannot bring those Budgets down to any common basis which is going to give you any adequate measure of relative strength. Further than that, there are a large number of problems which enter into this question which any limitation of expenditure does not solve in the least. It is impossible to

ask any Power which has great overseas possessions and responsibilities to enter into an undertaking that its expenditure upon armaments shall not be exceeded for any period ahead. How can we, for example, possibly say what is going to happen in India at the end of next year, or in thirty or forty other parts of the Empire? How can France say what expenditure she might need in North Africa or in many other parts of her possessions? You can carry that from the Great Powers down to the smaller ones. How can Spain say what she may need to spend in Morocco, or Greece in Asia Minor? The thing is simply not practicable, and I am not in the least surprised to find that France has definitely refused to agree to that proposal which has been put forward by the League of Nations.

The next attempt to get a formula was really made here in London by the League of Nations Union. I explained the details of it when I last spoke here on this subject. It was afterwards—last year, during the second meeting of the Assembly of the League of Nations—practically adopted by the League of Nations. The proposition was that all the members of the League should be asked to state what military forces they required for the maintenance of internal order, what for the defence of their colonial possessions, and what their total forces were, the idea being that when you had subtracted from the total that which is required for internal order and for colonial defence, there is left a residuum which can only be needed to meet foreign aggression. When you have got what everybody needs to meet possible foreign aggression you are approaching a basis on which a bargain can be struck. Obviously if the forces available for attack were limited, those of defence would be limited also. That proposition carried the search for a formula a great step forward, but it was not quite satisfactory because it was too complicated. If you have a formula it must be simple, and the great advantage of the Washington formula—proportionate battleship tonnage—is its simplicity. Washington, in finding this formula for the limitation of naval armaments, has helped forward the solution of the problem of the limitation of land armaments. It has also done a great deal by removing one of the prime difficulties—America's absence from the League. The naval question has been settled with America, and as far as land armaments are concerned, the United States army on the other side of the Atlantic—only 120,000 strong—does not really count as far as Europe is concerned. These, then, are the effects of the Washington decisions upon this problem.

Before going any further it is necessary to look for a moment at the present position of Europe as regards armaments. I do not think I could possibly do better in putting that before you than to read you a very short extract from that very remarkable maiden speech which was made by Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson in the House of Commons about a couple of months ago. He said :

“ There is another thing which, to me, shows a dangerous state of affairs in Europe. In 1914 we had these big Empires. People said at that time—and said truly—that it was because of these big Empires we had big armies; and we had big armies in 1914. As a result of the war, the German army, which stood in 1913 at 800,000 strong, is now 100,000 strong, and the Austrian army, which stood at 400,000 strong, is now 30,000 strong. Yet, in spite of that, there are as many armed men in Europe at the moment as there were in 1913. I have the figures of the armies of all the States, and the increase in the number of armed men in these small States is simply terrifying.”

Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, we may accept it that a statement of that kind, coming from such an authority, is fully substantiated. You have got at the present time this position; the armies of Poland, of Roumania, of Czecho-Slovakia and of Yugo-Slavia, two of them States created since the war, the other two before the war quite small Powers, with borders considerably enlarged as a consequence of the war, have at the present moment standing armies in round numbers amounting to 1,000,000 men. That is to say, they have armies which are practically equivalent to the standing armies of Great Britain, Belgium, France and Italy, if you subtract from the forces of France and Great Britain their overseas garrisons, but include the armies of occupation on the Rhine. I am aware that in comparing power it is necessary to do more than count heads, and I do not wish for a moment to support the proposition which has been put forward, that what is known as the Little Entente is militarily as powerful to-day as the Great Entente. That, of course, is rubbish. But you have the fact that these Powers which did not exist before the war, or were quite small Powers, have these very large military forces to-day. You have besides that, beyond the frontiers of Poland, a Russian army of approximately 1,200,000 men, and the position is at this day, that in the quadrilateral, bounded on the north by the Baltic, on the south by the Danube and the Black Sea, on the east by the Don, on the west by the Elbe—that is to say, the quadrilateral area, what you might call East-Central Europe—there are 400,000 more armed men to-day

than there were in 1913. You have, further, running through the centre of that quadrilateral, a frontier line which is undetermined, a line which contains within itself half a dozen international problems, any one of which may be a source of trouble at any moment. I am aware that as far as our army is concerned, its size is not regulated by any of these problems. The size of our regular army at home before the war was, and is now, regulated under the Cardwell system by the size of our foreign garrisons. But I do not think anybody will maintain that the equipment, the training and the organisation of our army had no relation to Continental problems, and I do not think anyone will maintain that we can look with indifferent eyes upon a situation, speaking only from the military point of view, which may lead to the disturbance of the peace of Europe. Within the last two years we have been carrying on very drastic reductions in our army, and we have been carrying out these reductions without any relation whatever to the size of Continental armies or to the Continental problems to which I have referred. Now I am quite unable to see that there is any sense in that method of procedure. Well, what is the alternative? You are faced with a situation to-day when any increase in our armaments is simply not within the bounds of practical politics. You have got the business world of this country and the ordinary taxpayer of this country into such a state of mind that he is saying to himself, "If you increase my taxation or go on taxing me like this, ruin is certain. Well, war cannot bring anything worse than ruin. I prefer to take the chance of ruin by war to the certainty of ruin by taxation." That being so, it seems to me that on military grounds alone the arguments are overwhelmingly in favour, as far as our interests are concerned, of bringing about a general reduction of armaments in Europe. When you come to the economic side the arguments are very much stronger. Of course it is a truism to say that the whole problem of our unemployment, the whole problem of our reconstruction, depends upon the reconstruction of Europe. You have got absurd situations in Europe to-day, such as that in Lithuania, where you have got a young State trying to get itself on its legs, with a population which is in the direst misery, spending 60 per cent. of its total revenue upon its armaments. That is an extreme instance, but there are a dozen others which are almost as serious.

I would like to say a word before I go any further as to what the League of Nations has been doing recently to try and solve

this problem. At the last Assembly of the League a Commission was appointed, of which Lord Robert Cecil was a very prominent member, to deal with this question of armaments. I may say that before that it had been found by experience that the Permanent Advisory Committee of the League, which consisted solely of representatives of the armies, navies and air forces, was not competent to solve problems involving political and financial questions, and that Commission was altered into the Temporary Mixed Commission by adding to it statesmen, financiers, representatives of labour, employers and other competent persons. At the last meeting of the Assembly of the League of Nations it was agreed : " That the Temporary Mixed Commission be asked to make proposals on general lines for the reduction of national armaments, which, in order to secure precision, should be in the form of a draft treaty or other equally definite plan. . . ." Before considering what sort of a plan is possible, it is necessary to consider what is, and what is not practical with regard to the limitation of land armaments. I have already explained that in my opinion the financial basis is no good. Similarly, it is not practicable for any body such as the League of Nations, or any International Conference, to dictate to any Power as to what it requires for the defence of its overseas possessions. As it is not possible for us, or for France, to say what may happen in a couple of years hence in any of our dependencies, it is impossible for us to say what force we may require in order to secure those dependencies. Then, again, it is an absolutely essential factor in the problem that any proposals must be such as cannot be readily evaded in secret. As I explained when I last spoke here, the great point about the limitation of battleships is that you cannot build a battleship in secret. We have got to find something in land armaments which corresponds to a battleship. It is no good trying to issue orders as to what types of armament may or may not be used. That is a thing which can at once be evaded, and in the case of those Powers which have great overseas responsibilities you cannot say that their armies are to go into the field against an enemy without the best possible equipment. Therefore that line of approach seems to be useless. Then, again, it is essential that the special circumstances of the various countries concerned as regards their history, their frontiers, their geographical position generally, be taken into account, and in that matter, of course, the chief concern is the geographical position and the political relations of France. Just as the Washington Conference recognised that it was absolutely essential

to us, to our life, that we should be navally supreme in Europe, any proposal for the limitation of land armaments in Europe must recognise that France should be relatively strong. Again, it is quite hopeless to attempt any limitation of the kind of forces, or of the number of forces to be used by a country in time of war. When a country is attacked it will use any and every means of defence. Therefore you come down to this. Having eliminated all these factors which are not possible, the one remaining possibility at the present time is to limit the size of standing armies—regular forces maintained in time of peace. That is what corresponds to your battleship. By doing that you attain two results. First of all, the economic result that you limit expenditure, enable Budgets to be balanced and thereby stabilise exchanges; and secondly, you obtain the result that you make it far more difficult than it was before for any one Power to put itself in such a position that, by rapidly expanding its forces by mobilisation, it can be in a position to overwhelm an enemy suddenly. The powers of immediate expansion of a regular army are limited. If you reduce the possibility of expansion, you reduce the temptation to strike an unexpected blow; for such a blow to be effective must be overwhelming. Air attack can be developed very swiftly, but at present it cannot be overwhelming. A Power will hesitate before it provokes a great war, unless it is reasonably sure that it can strike swiftly and decisively before its opponent can organise its full strength. Therefore by limiting the power of immediate expansion, the factor of delay is introduced, and negotiation is given a chance. Further, the risk that the military element in any country may become predominant is reduced.

Now this, then, brings me to the proposal which Lord Esher, the British representative on this Temporary Mixed Commission for the reduction of Armaments, put before the meeting of that Commission which was held in Paris last February. I have got Lord Esher's permission to read you his actual document. It has not yet been published (anyway in full) in England as far as I am aware, and it is of such importance that I think you will pardon me if I read it *in extenso*.

"In the report of the Third Committee (dated 27th September, 1921) of the Assembly of the League of Nations, the following recommendation was adopted:

‘That the Temporary Mixed Commission be asked to make proposals on general lines for the reduction of national armaments which, in order to secure precision, should be in the form of a

draft treaty or other equally definite plan to be presented to the Council if possible before the Assembly next year.'

"I do not believe that it would be profitable to draft a Treaty. The alternative, however, which is to draw up an 'equally definite plan,' is well within the competence of the Temporary Mixed Commission. The valuable information, statistical and other, collected by the Sub-Committee, enables this attempt to be made. Its urgency is manifest if the work of the Commission in a concrete and practical form is to be presented to the Assembly this year.

"In venturing to propose the following draft Resolutions as a basis of discussion, I have not thought it necessary to mention the suggestions—such, for example, as a Budget basis of comparison—which do not appear to be capable of practical application.

"The Resolutions which I desire to lay before the Commission for their consideration at their next session are as follows :

"(1) That the size of standing armies in time of peace should be restricted on a numerical basis.

"(2) That the restriction should be fixed by ratio, following the naval precedent at Washington.

"(3) That the ratio should be confined to metropolitan forces, leaving each country to fix the forces required by it for colonial and overseas defence.

"(4) That within six months of the ratification of a Treaty fixing the ratio, the High Contracting Parties shall reduce their standing military and air forces maintained within the metropolitan area in times of peace to the scale set forth in para. 9, and shall agree that the scale will not be exceeded for a period of ten years.

"(5) That the term 'standing military and air forces' shall be held to include all military and air personnel of all ranks serving either voluntarily or compulsorily in the metropolitan areas, with the regular military and air forces, all police forces permanently armed, and all permanent staffs of reserve or territorial forces, but shall not include the reserve or territorial forces.

"(6) That the Permanent Advisory Commission of the League shall be reconstituted and strengthened under a President to be appointed by the Government of the French Republic.

"(7) That it shall be the duty of the Permanent Advisory Commission to report to the League any infringement of the Treaty embodying these agreements, and to prepare such plans as may be necessary for its enforcement.

"(8) That the Permanent Advisory Commission be authorised to nominate naval, military and air attachés, who shall be given by the Governments to which they are accredited such facilities and information regarding armaments as may from time to time be required by the Commission.

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“(9) That the fixed ratio of the standing military and air forces shall be as follows, taking 30,000 men of all ranks as the unit.

Belgium	2
Czecho-Slovakia	3
Denmark	2
France	6
Great Britain	3
Greece	3
Italy	4
Jugo-Slavia	3
Netherlands	3
Norway	2
Poland	4
Portugal	1
Roumania	3
Spain	3
Sweden	2
Switzerland	2

The forces of Germany, Austria, Bulgaria and Hungary to remain as defined in the Treaty of Peace.”

Well, that is the memorandum. Now just a few words of comment. You will observe that there is a definite numerical ratio comparable to the 5·0, 3·0 and 1·75 of Washington. Thirty thousand regular soldiers and airmen maintained in time of peace correspond to the battleship. Lord Esher is an experienced diplomatist, and I should imagine that any diplomatist taking a problem of this kind would be very careful to put his ratio down to the lowest possible figure which would not produce ridicule. Therefore, in considering this actual ratio, I think we might be perfectly satisfied if, after discussion, the figures were slightly raised. But even if they are not, the reductions are not quite so terrible as they would appear at first glance. The unit taken is 30,000 men, so France is allowed six units, giving her an army of 180,000. When you realise that to-day the French army is 720,000 men that sounds a little drastic. But the 720,000 included all the colonial, foreign and native forces, and the army of occupation on the Rhine. This new figure of 180,000 only includes French troops—regular troops—within the frontiers of France. As a matter of fact, at a recent discussion of this question of the establishment of the French army in the French Chamber and Senate, a plan put forward by General de Maud'huy received a very great deal of support in both Houses, and that plan if adopted would have produced an army of Frenchmen inside

France of 210,000, which is not so very far from the figure which Lord Esher proposes. I will only take one other example, and that is our own. Great Britain is allowed three units, which will give us 90,000 men in Great Britain. Well, the detailed army estimates have not yet been produced, but I believe that the actual military forces inside our shores at the present time amount to approximately 130,000 men, again apparently a considerable reduction. But again the reduction is not, or need not be, quite so drastic as would appear here. Because at present, owing to a variety of circumstances, the Mediterranean garrisons have been very greatly reduced from what they were before the war, so obviously for our purposes, with at present what I may call our strategic centre of gravity in the East, it is a considerable advantage from our point of view to fill up these gaps. There is nothing in this scheme which would prevent us doing it. Therefore, the actual reduction which this scheme would enforce upon us is very much less than would appear on paper. At the same time, the general all-round reduction in Europe would be very great indeed. The general saving of money would be enormous: the reduction of possible causes of danger would be equally enormous. The proposal is not a complete solution of the problem, but I believe that the factors which I have maintained bring it well within the scope of practical politics, and make it a most valuable first step towards a complete solution.

Now you will notice two important factors about this schedule. One is that Russia is not mentioned. That, of course, is an absolutely vital fact. I imagine that the reason why it was left out had relation to the Genoa Conference. It was probably thought that the question of Russia had better be left in abeyance for the present. The other important factor is that you see that only Europe is concerned. That is in accordance with the general trend of thought at the present time with regard to many problems connected with the League of Nations. It is suggested that the powers of the League generally should be regional in their application; that they should be applied separately to Europe, Asia, Africa and America. Indeed there are a number of people who are suggesting that the regional division should be still further extended to include merely parts of Europe. But it is perfectly obvious that whether this proposal of Lord Esher as it stands is accepted by the League of Nations and recommended to the Powers, or not, there is something more required if this first step towards the limitation of armaments is to be effective. Any Power accepting a ratio of this kind must have

a precise assurance that any attempt of any other Power to exceed the agreed ratio shall be regarded as an act against the peace of Europe. Also, obviously if armed forces are to be limited, it is absolutely necessary that there shall be a general agreement that any Member of the League subjected to wanton aggression or to unprovoked attack should be assured of timely assistance from other Members. It is then essential to the carrying through of this scheme that there should be a general pact of non-aggression coupled with a general agreement as to mutual support in the event of aggression. If insurance by arms is to be reduced, insurance by agreement must be increased. "Safety first" is still the cry of highly civilised nations, and we who have secured a predominant fleet in Europe should be the last to gibe at those who persist in raising the cry. Such a pact, as I have already said, the Prime Minister is supposed to have ready at Genoa. Lord Robert Cecil has for a very long time past been advocating some such general agreement, and personally I must say that a general agreement of that kind appears to me to be infinitely preferable to the counter-proposition of a tripartite alliance of Great Britain, France and Belgium. An alliance of that kind must quite inevitably provoke a counter-alliance. The counter-alliance will almost certainly be Russia and Germany, and possibly eventually Turkey will join. If you get a situation of that kind, it is inevitable that in the lifetime of our sons the conditions of 1914 will be reproduced. I can see no way out of that impasse if we follow that policy. The alternative policy is the policy of a general pact, followed by a general agreement on disarmament. In no other way can I see it possible to help forward the work of financial reconstruction in Europe. In no other way can I see any hope of preventing, if not in our lifetime, certainly in the lifetime of our sons, another great European war.

F. B. MAURICE.