After the United States had entered World War I on the British side in April 1917, Washington and London were, formally speaking, close military allies. But this did not prevent acute tensions from developing over the issue of the size of the American battleship fleet and the threat it posed to British naval supremacy, which London had jealously defended against all comers since Lord Nelson's victory over the combined French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar in 1805.

The American threat to British supremacy in capital ships (battleships and battle cruisers, which at the time were the decisive weapons in any fleet action) had emerged in 1916, before the U.S. entry into the war. The U.S. naval construction bill that became law in 1916 called for building 156 new warships, including 16 capital ships (10 battleships and 6 battle cruisers). If these ships had been built, the United States would have achieved theoretical naval parity with Great Britain and would have enjoyed a defensive superiority over the British in any future confrontation because of the better qualities of the U.S. ships and because of the American geographical position. In 1918, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels proposed doubling the 1916 program, which would have been the *coup de grâce* for Britannia's rule of the waves.

The British were horrified by the prospect of seeing their battle fleet outclassed by the United States. Even U.S.-U.K. parity was abhorrent to Sir Winston Churchill, who told the House of Commons in November 1918: "Nothing in the world, nothing that you may think of, or dream of, or anyone may tell you; no arguments, however specious; no appeals however seductive, must lead you to abandon that naval supremacy on which the life of our country depends" (Buckley, p. 25).

The British argued that the United States ought to build destroyers and other convoy escort craft, along with freight-

Sims vs. Benson: U.S. admirals in policy clash

The debate over the role the U.S. Navy should play in World War I was prominently argued by two U.S. admirals, William S. Sims, the naval theater commander in London during the war, and William Benson, the first Chief of Naval Operations, appointed in 1915.

Sims was the naval counterpart to Gen. John Pershing, the commander of the U.S. expeditionary force of ground troops. Sims commanded the American Battle Squadron of the British Grand Fleet, a group of U.S. battleships under British control. Throughout the 20 months of the U.S. intervention, Sims was to side consistently with the British in their demands that the United States build only destroyers and merchant ships to get war supplies to England.

Benson, on the other side, argued that the United States must look after national interests as well as fighting the war in Europe. Among the interests he forcefully defended was freedom of navigation on the high seas, which was understood in London to be an attack on British naval supremacy.

Sims was sent to London in March 1917, a couple of weeks before the United States declared war on the Central Powers. Since his Anglophilia was well known, he was advised by Admiral Benson "not to let the English pull the wool over your eyes." Sims's pro-British sentiments had become notorious after a speech he had given at London's Guildhall in 1910, while serving as commander of the battleship *U.S.S. Minnesota*. His remarks were so blatantly pro-British that he received a reprimand from President William Howard Taft. Sims reported, in a letter to his wife, that he told his audience that "if ever the integrity of the British Empire should be seriously threatened by an external enemy, they [the British] might count upon the assistance of every man, every ship, and every dollar from their kinsmen across the seas."

Sims was born in Canada to an American father and a Canadian mother, and spent the first seven years of his life on the Ontario farm owned by his mother's English parents. During the first years of his sea duty, he studied the works of Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley, among other English authors. Later on, Sims served as naval aide to the Anglophile President Theodore Roosevelt; Roosevelt, he said, rescued him from "obscurity."

Benson was born on a Georgia plantation in 1855, and his father and older brother both joined the Confederate Army when the Civil War broke out. However, his experience with the Union Army's occupation was positive, and he sought appointment to the Naval Academy at the earliest possible moment. Born into a Protestant family, he converted to Catholicism at the age of 25, and 40 years later was decorated as a Knight of the Order of the Grand Cross of St. Gregory by Pope Benedict XV.

Will Britannia rule the waves?

Benson came into conflict with Sims almost immediately upon the United States entering World War I. Sims agreed with the British that the U.S. Navy should be totally subordinate to the needs of the British, and that the 1916 naval construction program should be suspended so that American shipyards could concentrate on building destroyers and merchant ships. Even President Woodrow

ers. These would be useful in the war against Germany, but of far less utility in a possible later showdown with London. Sir Eric Geddes, the First Lord of the Admiralty, came to the United States in October 1918 to agitate the threat of a German submarine offensive in the hopes of pushing the Wilson administration in the desired direction. In the event, only one battleship of those called for in the 1916 program was ever built, and Britain kept maritime domination until 1942-43.

The issue of naval supremacy generated a bitter U.S.-U.K. conflict at Versailles. The German High Seas fleet, previously the second most powerful navy in the world, was interned by the British at Scapa Flow. Elements of the London oligarchy wanted to incorporate the most powerful German units into the Royal Navy, thus reenforcing British predominance on the world's oceans, but this plan was opposed by parts of the U.S. government. The issue was settled when the German ships were scuttled by their own crews.

But with Germany eliminated as a naval contender, Washington was gripped by the uneasy awareness that there were now only two battle fleets left in the North Atlantic—the British and the American. American anxiety was heightened by the British alliance with Japan, the number three world naval power, which threatened the United States in the Pacific. Given the British track record, the stage was set for a possible U.S.-U.K. naval rivalry which might lead to war. A memo prepared for President Woodrow Wilson by the U.S. Navy in April 1919 recalled the ominous fact that "every commercial rival of the British Empire has eventually found itself at war with Great Britain—and has been defeated. . . . We are setting out to be the greatest commercial rival of Great Britain on the sea." Even the Anglophile Wilson wrote some time later that "it is evident to me that

Wilson commented in 1918 that Sims "should be wearing a British uniform." Even after the war, he opposed U.S. efforts to build up the Navy with large surface combat ships. Navy Secretary Daniels recorded in his diary in early 1920 that Sims had told a congressman, "America does not need a big Navy. We have always depended on England and can do so in the future."

Benson took into account the national interests of the United States during the debates of 1917. He understood that British proposals to the effect that the United States should stop building capital ships were meant for London not to have to face a strong challenge to its control of the oceans once the war was over. And while Benson eventually relented on continuing the 1916 construction program, he insisted that the protection of ships transporting American troops to France should receive a higher priority than convoys shipping war supplies to England, a policy Admiral Sims considered to be a "radical mistake."

Benson continued to fight for American interests after the Armistice of November 1918. In a meeting of American and British naval dignitaries in March 1919, the senior officer of the Royal Navy, First Sea Lord Wester Wemyss, asked the Americans to accept British naval supremacy and abort the 1916 program. Benson responded that this would amount to "treason to his own country" and further that the United States would "never agree to any nation having supremacy of the seas or the biggest navy in the world. The Navy of the United States must have equality with the British Navy." Benson retired from the Navy shortly afterwards and was appointed president of the U.S. Maritime Shipping Board, where he dedicated the next eight years of his life to building up the U.S. merchant marine.

Early in 1920, Sims used a controversy over the awarding of decorations to instigate a congressional investigation into the conduct of the Navy during the war. Benson was called out of retirement to answer Sims's charges that, because of a lack of preparedness, the Navy had failed "for at least six months, to throw our full weight against the enemy." Benson told the Senate investigating committee that his job as Chief of Naval Operations was "to safeguard American interests regardless of any duty to humanity or anything else."

Benson received his award from the pope during the naval investigation of 1920, a fact seized upon by some of his critics. James F. Daily of Philadelphia, in a letter to Navy Secretary Daniels, accused Benson of having attended retreats at the Roman Catholic cathedral in Philadelphia during the war. Daily believed that "Benson was then a Sinn Fein sympathizer if not an actual member of that organization of secret assassins. Every Sinn Fein is a Romanist sworn to aid the Vatican politicians and Benson is a Romanist."

In June 1921, Sims expressed agreement with such sentiments in a speech in London. He said of the Irish in America: "There are many in our country who technically are Americans, some of them naturalized and some born there but none of them Americans at all. They are Americans when they want money but Sinn Feiners when on the platform. . . . They are like zebras, either black horses with white stripes or white horses with black stripes. But we know they are not horses—they are asses." He concluded that he believed that the English-speaking peoples of the world "would come together in the bonds of comradeship, and that they would run this round globe."

—Carl Osgood