2 ‘We will get nothing from the Americans but words’

The war over, in 1920 Sir Auckland Geddes was appointed British Ambassador in Washington. He was not the first, nor was he a particularly good choice. Sir Auckland was felt to have a particular affinity for North America, having been Professor of Anatomy at McGill University in Canada and because his wife came from Staten Island. He had served as Minister for Manpower during the latter part of the war and, subsequently, as President of the Board of Trade. Geddes had a reputation for arrogance. President Wilson, when consulted, commented: ‘I instinctively dislike what I hear of this man, but I have no ground on which I can object.’ Wilson feared that America was on the verge of a commercial war with the British Empire.

Geddes, on his arrival in America, found much anti-British sentiment. Ireland was embroiled in the struggle for independence. Supporters of Sinn Fein threatened to kidnap or murder Geddes and his family. There was friction over colonial markets, naval armaments and the repayment of war debts. In private, Geddes showed his disdain for American politicians and parties, describing President Warren Harding as a party hack and the Republican party as chauvinistic and devoted to ‘America über alles’.

In January 1921, Geddes unwisely confided to American correspondents in Paris that Britain and America were ‘drifting towards war’. The American press, not surprisingly, printed this information which Curzon, then Foreign Secretary, was obliged to deny. Geddes was unrepentant: ‘I do not at present foresee an Anglo-American war, but I do picture a deadly struggle disguised as peace.’ He saw no reason, he added, why Britain should not win such a struggle in fifteen or twenty years. In April he wrote to Curzon: ‘I regret to inform you that the Secretary of State [Hughes] is, in my opinion, abnormal mentally and subject to attacks of very mild mania.’ This led Curzon to remark to Lloyd George that he, Curzon, suspected that it was Geddes who was suffering from a mild form of mania.

Geddes, however, was benefiting from the effects of Prohibition. On George Washington’s birthday in 1922, he entertained the entire United States Congress and their wives at the Embassy. The members of Congress suggested that this should become an annual event. This unprecedented attendance was explained by the fact that the Embassy, being extra-territorial, was not ‘dry’.

One of President Harding’s friends, recognising his predicament in these difficult times, sent him six bottles of the finest liqueur brandy from France. The case was intercepted by the New York Customs and seemed likely to provide the material for a first-class political scandal until a quick-witted aide in the White House told the customs officers that the case was incorrectly labelled. It
had been intended as a gift from the President to the British Ambassador. The case duly arrived at the Embassy with the President’s name crossed out and that of Geddes in its place. Enquiries were made at the White House to see if the President’s staff could throw any light on the matter. One of the President’s aides explained that a mistake had been made: they would have a car round to collect the case. But Geddes decided instead to keep the brandy and used it subsequently to celebrate his children’s weddings.2

A main cause of tension was the unresolved naval rivalry between Britain and the United States. The Royal Navy still was larger than that of the United States and well ahead of that of Japan, but the United States was determined to achieve parity with Britain and knew that they now had the wealth to outbuild Britain in the naval race. The Americans were concerned about growing Japanese strength in the Pacific and it was their objective to put an end to the alliance between Britain and Japan. In November 1921, President Harding convened the Washington Conference to consider the level of naval armaments. Secretary Hughes proposed the establishment of a 5:5:3 ratio of ships between America, Britain and Japan and proceeded to list the names of twenty-three ships that he said the Royal Navy must give up. Admiral Beattie, the First Sea Lord, reacted furiously to this impertinence, but was overruled by Lloyd George, who by now was convinced that Britain could not afford a naval race with the United States. The British also were obliged to agree not to renew the alliance with Japan.

The Washington Treaty covered capital ships over 10 000 tonnes. It did not cover cruisers, destroyers and submarines. In 1927 President Calvin Coolidge convened another conference of the world’s major sea powers. The British, concerned about the protection of their global trade, claimed the right to seventy cruisers. Winston Churchill, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, told the Cabinet that no doubt it was right in the interests of peace to go on talking about war with the United States as ‘unthinkable’. But, he added,

everyone knows that this is not true. However foolish and disastrous such a war would be . . . we do not wish to put ourselves in the power of the United States. We cannot tell what they might do if at some future date they were in a position to give us orders about our policy, say, in India, or Egypt, or Canada, or on any other great matter behind which their electioneering forces were marshalled.

In the following year, Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary of the Cabinet, complained that Britain had conceded to the United States over the League of Nations, the Japanese alliance, the Washington Treaty on naval forces, the debt settlement and Ireland, ‘always making concessions and always being told that the next step would change their attitude’. Yet the Americans in response were more overbearing and suspicious than ever.3

In 1930, at yet another naval conference in London, agreement was reached that the 5:5:3 ratio agreed for capital ships should now apply to cruisers as well.