10 Between Two Wars

What experience and history teach is this – that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it (G.W. F. Hegel, 1770–1831, cited in Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, 1979).

German philosophers are understandably inclined to pessimism. If the period 1919–39 covered by this chapter offers some remarkable exceptions to Hegel’s gloomy maxim, he might well have retorted that some of the lessons then learned later proved to have been misleading. In the early 1920s, for instance, one lesson very widely drawn from the history of the century’s first fourteen years was that ‘great armaments lead inevitably to war’. It was given early application in a proposal addressed in July 1921 by President Harding (1921–3) of the United States to the governments of Britain, France, Italy and Japan. Because the German High Seas Fleet had lain on the bottom of Scapa Flow since its scuttling on 21 June 1919, these four governments then represented the world’s leading naval powers and were invited to join the fifth, the United States, at a conference in Washington on the subject of naval limitation.

President Harding chose his moment well. As his Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt Jr (son of the former President), later remarked: ‘If we had attempted it before, our fleet would not have been large enough. If we had waited another year, Congress would have abandoned our building program on which our claim to this proposition is based.’ President Harding, in other words, had employed an implicit threat of superior naval force for the unique political purpose of pressing the world into naval disarmament. The trump in his diplomatic hand was the building programme sanctioned by Congress in 1916 for the express purpose of giving the United States a navy ‘second to none’. By 1924 that navy would be newer and stronger than Britain’s, hitherto the world’s largest. The carrot the President offered was the cessation of American naval building and the establishment of fixed ratios of naval strength among the world’s leading powers. What clinched the complete triumph of the President’s proposals was the economic equation. The Great War,
which had crippled and impoverished Britain, France and Italy, had made the United States an economic superpower, with a manufacturing output more than twice the combined production of the other three. As for Japan, whose participation in the war had permitted remarkable economic progress, her output was less than a twentieth of that of the United States. None of these countries could conceivably afford an arms race with the United States, let alone contemplate the risks of the war to which such a race might lead.

By the Washington Treaty of 1922, therefore, Britain, Japan and the United States abandoned their large building programmes and even scrapped some existing ships in order to establish a capital ship ratio of United States 5, Britain 5, Japan 3, France 1.75, Italy 1.75. A freeze on new building would maintain the relative levels of these fleets for ten years. Poverty compelled Britain to abandon her traditional insistence on naval supremacy and even, under pressure from the British Dominions as well as the United States, to relinquish the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. For the British Empire in Asia that would ultimately prove a fatal decision and even at the time it was ‘bitterly resented by the Japanese, who regarded the annulment as a national insult’. This reaction symbolised what was lacking in American policy. Naval disarmament, a lesson admirably learned from the past, promised a technical antidote for one of the known causes of war. It would nevertheless not suffice to keep the peace in future. That would have demanded an equally bold exercise of imaginative foresight. Instead the United States, having rejected in 1920 the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations, which President Wilson had done so much to shape, withdrew for the next decade into ‘isolation and laissez-faire’, leaving the international arena to the shell-shocked satisfied powers, who were intent only on licking their wounds, and to the embittered leaders of the defeated and dissatisfied nations then gathering strength for a new and violent challenge to the status quo.

The breathing space that exhaustion and the Washington Treaty helped to give the world after the Great War did not condemn navies to inactivity. On the contrary, the years between 1919, when the British Government told the British armed forces to base all their plans on the assumption that there would be no great war during the next ten years, and 1932, when that Ten Year Rule was abrogated, set new records in the frequent and widespread use of naval force for political purposes. Naturally the five navies whose