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Second Response by John W. Coogan to Nicholas A.

Lambert. *Planning Armageddon: British Economic*

Warfare and the First World War. Cambridge:

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Roundtable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XV-18.pdf>

Response by John W. Coogan, Michigan State University

My 11 February 2014 comment on H-Diplo stated that Nicholas Lambert's *Planning Armageddon* demonstrated "a fundamental misunderstanding of both British economic warfare and U.S. neutrality."¹ His response on 20 February claimed that I disputed "one endnote" concerning London's response to Washington's demarche of 28 Dec 14, a document my post did not mention.² In fact I disputed his assertion that "Coogan errs considerably in his analysis: [the] British did not 'seize' U.S. contraband."³ My concern is not a single document or endnote, but rather a series of dubious documentations and factual errors that raise questions about *Planning Armageddon's* credibility. I contest Lambert's account of British economic warfare before and during World War I. I also question whether a book that does not cite the U.S. National Archives has much to teach scholars about American neutrality, despite its claim to reveal and correct "serious shortcomings in the current interpretation of Anglo-American relations."⁴

Such concerns seem especially pertinent in light of Lambert's 20 February post. It abandons the book's original phrase, "[the] British did not 'seize' U.S. contraband" and replaces it with "British policy (both in intent and mostly in fact) was not to 'seize' and confiscate U.S. cargoes, but rather to 'detain' them while convincing the vendors to sell them in London at market price." According to the author, *Planning Armageddon* provides "ample evidence" to support the assertion that Britain did not intend to seize and confiscate the millions of dollars' worth of U.S. contraband it did in fact seize and

¹ <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XV-18-Coogan.pdf>

² *Ibid.*

³ Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, 598, note 127.

⁴ *Planning Armageddon*, 6.

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confiscate. Our differences are merely, as per Lambert's response to the H-Diplo roundtable, "a surface disagreement."

I beg to differ. *Planning Armageddon's* undocumented assertion that Britain seized no U.S. contraband and the post's undocumented assertion that Britain "mostly" did not "seize" U.S. contraband is contradicted by the evidence cited in my 11 February post. By July 1915 Britain had seized \$84,000,000 worth of U.S. meat (1915 value) on 42 neutral ships from six corporations alone. The State Department report in June 1916 on "thousands" of similar cases raises the magnitude of these losses exponentially. Had Britain seized no U.S. goods as *Planning Armageddon* claims, I would agree with its conclusion that "President Woodrow Wilson implemented measures that placed Britain and America on a diplomatic collision course."⁵ Since British seizures (even if re-labeled 'detentions') cost U.S. citizens many hundreds of millions of dollars,⁶ however, the assertion that Wilson initiated the maritime rights dispute is puzzling. Moreover, Lambert advances this claim without citing the U.S. archives.

The 20 February post offers an equally problematic definition of British "intent." The *Kim* trial transcript reports that Attorney General Sir Edward Carson asked the court to confiscate millions of dollars' worth of captured U.S. meat as contraband. Yet Lambert denies that this formal public statement by the Crown's senior Law Officer before the Admiralty Division of His Majesty's High Court of Justice reflected Britain's intent. Indeed, it contradicted that intent. Carson must have intended to ask the judge to authorize the Crown to "detain" the meat indefinitely without charges until the packers agreed to sell it in London. But one of Britain's most distinguished jurists asked the court instead to condemn the meat and consign to the British Treasury the proceeds of its forced auction to British merchants. His co-counsels Solicitor General Sir F.E. Smith and Contraband Committee Chair Sir George Cave (both future lord chancellors) repeated his error. No cabinet member noticed the Crown sought confiscation when it really meant detention. The judge, Sir Samuel Evans, condemned the meat with no protest from the Crown.⁷ Lambert does, as his post states, devote "considerable space to discussing the significance of the landmark 'Kim' case." I wish he had explained the contradiction between the trial transcript and his claim that Britain did not intend to seize and confiscate the millions of dollars' worth of U.S.

⁵ *Planning Armageddon*, 502-3.

⁶ Neither the British nor the U.S. government estimated the total losses the economic campaign inflicted on U.S. citizens. The fair market value of seized cargoes was difficult to calculate, as was the value of lost markets. Given the packer loss of \$84,000,000 by six firms in nine months, however, the total had to be enormous. The Crown charged innocent as well as guilty U.S. shippers all costs of detention, as in the case of 1,022 empty beer barrels documented in Procurator General to Admiralty Marshal, 14 Apr 15, Treasury Solicitor [TS], 13/335/1, UK National Archives [UKNA]. If one adds fees for enforced dockage, demurrage, etc., the total cost to Americans likely exceeded \$1 billion; in comparison the 1915 federal budget was \$3.4 billion. An indeterminable fraction of these losses was returned to U.S. firms, including the packers, to purchase future cooperation with Allied restrictions.

⁷ John B. Aspinall, ed., *Lloyd's Reports of Prize Cases*, 3:170-290; Evans's verdict is 291-373.

meat the navy did in fact seize and the court did in fact confiscate in this one “landmark” case alone.

Lambert’s definition of “British policy” in the 20 Feb post, “to ‘detain’ them [US cargoes] while convincing the vendors to sell them in London at market price,” is equally dubious. Britain’s Navigation Acts required American colonists to sell their goods to British merchants rather than directly to other nations. King George III abandoned this right to enforce such commercial restrictions on the independent United States in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. Yet Lambert’s post claims British policy during World War I was to “detain” U.S. property at the Crown’s convenience until the owner agreed that American exports to Europe must once again, as before the Revolution, pass through British middlemen. If British policy was indeed to reimpose the Navigation Acts--an overt act of war against a sovereign nation--surely the author needs to explain and document that remarkable conclusion. He also might explain why two million U.S. troops fought Germans in France during World War I rather than invading an essentially defenseless Canada while the Dominion’s own superb army chewed barbed wire in Flanders.

Scholars can debate whether British policy was to “detain” U.S. goods in transit to European neutrals in order to blackmail their owners into selling the goods in Britain, as Lambert’s post states, or whether “British authorities were stopping suspicious cargoes only when in possession of hard evidence...that a specific cargo was really intended for an enemy,” as *Planning Armageddon* states.⁸ But these two definitions of “British policy” are incompatible. Either Britain was intercepting U.S. goods in transit to European neutrals in order to force their sale in Britain, or Britain was allowing U.S. trade to proceed to its intended neutral destination unless the Crown cited “hard evidence” of enemy destination in court. It seems reasonable to expect the author to explain which of these contradictory definitions of “British policy” represents his current view.

The packer case would seem to support the neo-Navigation Acts thesis. The Royal Navy seized the meat in transit to neutral Denmark, the market chosen by the U.S. exporters because it offered a better profit than Britain. The Admiralty Marshal auctioned the meat in London without its owners’ consent, realizing half the sum the Crown had offered in a pre-trial settlement and a fraction of the contract price due the packers upon delivery in Denmark. The proceeds of this forced sale went to the naval prize fund, while the British merchants who bought the meat at well below its fair market value received War Trade Department export licenses and made huge profits selling the American meat in its original Danish market.⁹ U.S. merchants lost their goods and their market; British merchants and the prize fund made lots of money; and the Americans were responsible for the resulting

⁸ *Planning Armageddon*, 430.

⁹ Sir Frederick Leverton Harris (chair, Enemy Exports Committee) to Lord Robert Cecil (Parliamentary Undersecretary, Foreign Office [FO]), 16 Jul 15, FO 382/4, UKNA. For financial aspects of the packer case, see TS 13/15B, UKNA; the packer summary dated 30 Nov 15 in SD, Microfilm 367/198, USNA; and especially Chandler Anderson Papers, 31, Library of Congress.

collision. John Hancock, Boston's leading merchant in 1770, would have found Lambert's analysis of British policy in 1915 all too familiar.

The evidence is less supportive of *Planning Armageddon's* claim that Britain was "stopping" U.S. cargoes only when it possessed "hard evidence" of enemy destination. Rear-Admiral Dudley De Chair, commander of the cruisers that did most of the "stopping" in the North Sea, described a rather different procedure: "I determined that I would capture all neutral ships, put a prize crew on board, and send it [sic] into a British port."¹⁰ Unless he had "hard evidence" that "all neutral ships" carried contraband for Germany, evidence he never shared with his superiors or with the prize court, his words contradict Lambert's assertion that the Royal Navy stopped neutral ships only when it could prove enemy destination. Similarly, in the *Kim* case, the Contraband Committee that ordered the capture admitted in its minutes that it had "no adequate 'legal' ground." The committee had ordered the capture "as a matter of expediency and as a wholesome check to shipowners."¹¹ The Crown failed to present this doctrine of "expedient" piracy and "wholesome" blackmail during the trial; Lambert fails to explain how De Chair's words and the committee minutes are compatible with his analysis.

The *reductio ad absurdum* of *Planning Armageddon's* "hard evidence" claim is the Danish freighter Gunhild. The navy seized it after the British minister in Lisbon reported it had been chartered by a "Jew of very questionable character" to carry grain to Rotterdam for "German firms."¹² When the Procurator General began six weeks after capture to gather the "hard evidence" of contraband trade that Lambert insists was required before capture, the same diplomat explained: "I am unable to trace its source or guarantee its accuracy." A Foreign Office official suggested that the Crown ask condemnation because the shipper was "a conventional Hebrew trader with a keen eye to the main chance." The procurator general eventually ordered the ship released, after holding it for three months on "hard evidence" consisting of an unconfirmed rumor that the shipper was Jewish.¹³

Some of the citations in *Planning Armageddon* are questionable, as when the book documents the assertion that the British "cabinet had decided that the risk of rupture was worth taking" with the citation "Link, *Wilson*, 3:597-605."¹⁴ The third volume of Arthur Link's biography appeared in 1960, six years before the relevant British archives were

¹⁰ De Chair, draft memoirs, p. 40, De Chair Papers, Imperial War Museum.

¹¹ Contraband Committee, minutes, 4 Dec 14, FO 368/1195, UKNA.

¹² Carnegie to FO, 15 & 27 Mar 15, FO 382/186, UKNA.

¹³ Procurator General to Admiralty, etc., 18 May 15; Carnegie to FO, 26 May 15, with minute by HHS, 5 Jun 15; Procurator General to FO, 1 Jul 15, FO 382/186, UKNA.

¹⁴ *Planning Armageddon*, 440 & 623, note 192.

opened to scholars.¹⁵ Lambert's next endnote admits that "Link's narrative...is (understandably) weak on the British side," which did not stop him from citing Link as his sole authority for what the British "cabinet had decided."¹⁶ One wonders why, since the relevant archives have been available since 1966, the author chose such "weak" evidence.

Lambert's reference in both *Planning Armageddon*¹⁷ and the 20 February post to a 1951 article by Marion Siney as relevant current scholarship on British negotiations with the packers is similarly questionable. The relevant British archives on these negotiations were not opened until fifteen years after Siney's article appeared. The diary of packer Counsel Chandler Anderson in the Library of Congress is an especially rich source, detailing personal negotiations with Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, Minister of Blockade Lord Robert Cecil, Evans, Smith, Cave, and other British officials. Yet Lambert does not cite Anderson's diary, and recommends only Siney to "Readers interested in learning more about this story."¹⁸ Since Siney's article appeared 63 years ago, I would like to think scholars have learned something about the packer case since then.

Many of *Planning Armageddon*'s assertions are flawed. Britain did not enter World War I with a "national strategy of quick, decisive war comparable in function and objectives to Germany's infamous Schlieffen Plan."¹⁹ If such a plan existed, why did not a single copy survive in the public or private archives? I agree that "few papers have survived detailing subsequent [to January 1913] British preparations for waging economic warfare" and that "CID (Committee of Imperial Defence) files for 1913 and 1914 are almost empty." Yet from this vacuum Lambert writes that he was compelled to "infer" that "when war came on 4 August, the Admiralty and the prime minister thought a national strategy...was in place."²⁰ Thus a British economic warfare document comparable to the Schlieffen Plan existed, but every single copy of it has subsequently disappeared. I would suggest the reason there is so little in these files now is that there was little in them to begin with. There certainly is no evidence to document removal of anything remotely comparable to the Schlieffen Plan.

Is it not odd, given Lambert's thesis, that the First Sea Lord and Admiralty Chief of Staff--the senior officers responsible for naval planning and operations--were unaware that "the Admiralty...thought a national strategy" of economic *Blitzkrieg* "was in place" on August 16, 1914, when they opposed Grey's proposal to impose a commercial blockade of Germany's

¹⁵ Foreign Office, *The Records of the Foreign Office, 1782-1939*, 93.

¹⁶ *Planning Armageddon*, 440 & 623, note 192.

¹⁷ *Planning Armageddon*, 623, note 199.

¹⁸ "Lambert, H-Diplo post, 20 February 14.

¹⁹ *Planning Armageddon*, 1.

²⁰ *Planning Armageddon*, 180-1.

North Sea ports.²¹ Is it not odd that the British and French general staffs had a joint plan so detailed it specified where the British Expeditionary Force would halt for a cup of coffee on its way to the front,²² but there is no record of joint entente planning for the economic blitz the British government expected to bring quick victory with few casualties? The 1912-1913 CID resolutions Lambert cites did not bind the Cabinet. Indeed there is no evidence his “national strategy” was ever presented to the national political authority. Yet this plan of which no copy survives, this plan whose existence is inferred from an archival vacuum, is the foundation of the book’s historical edifice.

The same disparity between assertion and minimal documentation is evident in *Planning Armageddon*’s conclusion that British economic warfare through February 1916 was “ineffectual.”²³ Bitter Germans certainly did not call it the *Hungerblockade* in June 1915²⁴ to mock its ineffectiveness. The CID official history volume covering economic warfare completed in 1937--and immediately placed “under lock and key,” where it remained until declassified in 1961--contains a stunning chart of premature German deaths as a result of Allied economic warfare: 88,235 in 1915; 121,114 in 1916; 259,627 in 1917; and 293,760 in 1918.²⁵ Lambert asserts that the Foreign Office dictated this official history volume to the CID over Admiralty protests,²⁶ but makes no attempt to contest its conclusion that the economic campaign killed over 90,000 Germans during the months his book covers. Moreover, the most likely explanation for the decision to classify the volume was that publication of an official CID acknowledgement that British economic warfare killed 762,736 Germans would have hindered British efforts to appease Nazi Germany in 1937. Lambert instead claims that the failure to release the official blockade history was part of a plan by unnamed officials to conceal how wartime governments had sabotaged prewar economic warfare plans: “Some may have whispered of it, but none dared utter its name.”²⁷

This language is bold; its documentation minimal. *Planning Armageddon* neglects to explain why Prime Minister J. Ramsay MacDonald, who had opposed the war from its beginning, joined this postwar conspiracy to protect the reputations of men he despised. His Labour Party could not have invented a narrative of World War I more favorable to its postwar electoral interests than Lambert’s account of Liberals and Tories sacrificing the

²¹ Coogan, *End of Neutrality*, 156-7 at notes 31 & 32.

²² CID, minutes, 23 Aug 11, Cabinet 2/2, UKNA.

²³ *Planning Armageddon*, 5 et passim.

²⁴ E.g., Count von Bernstorff (German ambassador, Washington) to German Foreign Ministry, 2 Jun 15, Arthur Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 33:318.

²⁵ A.C. Bell, Historical Section, CID, *The Blockade of the Central Empires, 1914-1918*, 672, table LXXIV.

²⁶ *Planning Armageddon*, 12-4.

²⁷ *Planning Armageddon*, 15.

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working class in the trenches rather than winning a quick victory by restraining the greed of British and U.S. capitalists who sought to supply the enemy. MacDonald does not appear in *Planning Armageddon's* index. One wonders why Labour apparently surrendered this overwhelming political advantage.

Readers of *Planning Armageddon* are advised to also read Joseph Pease's heartrending account of Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith's reaction to the news that his son Raymond had been killed on the Somme: "he completely broke down....He cried for hours."²⁸ The Prime Minister lost one son in the war; Tory leader Andrew Bonar Law lost two. Two members of Asquith's first wartime Cabinet (Lords Lucas and Kitchener) were killed in action. Winston Churchill resigned from the Cabinet to serve in the trenches. Yet the book suggests that these men threw themselves, their children, and an entire generation into the slaughter of trench warfare despite believing they could win a quick, decisive victory by economic strangulation of Germany. *Planning Armageddon* concludes with a long quotation from the German strategic theorist Karl von Clausewitz.²⁹ Yet Asquith, Grey, and Wilson did not read Clausewitz. They read Walter Bagehot and William Wordsworth. This point is vital for anyone seeking to understand British economic warfare and U.S. neutrality during World War I.

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²⁸ Pease, diary, 15 Sep 16, Pease (Lord Gainford) Papers, 41, Nuffield College, Oxford.

²⁹ *Planning Armageddon* 504.

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