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Ship Shaping: How Congress and Industry Influenced U.S. Naval Acquisitions from 1933-1938

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Introduction

In the mid-to-late 1930s, the United States faced dueling realities as geopolitical tensions steadily rose while the American public remained resolutely opposed to rearmament. To square this circle, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a brilliant strategist with an understanding of the dangers soon to be facing his nation, needed to build the political will to rearm the country’s military. The United States Navy, critically important given the nation’s position behind two oceans, had few ships and many of them were outdated. Historians have traditionally focused on FDR’s indispensable role in preparing the nation for a second world war. However, Congress and the shipbuilding industry played an often-overlooked role in creating the political support needed to expand the Navy during the tumultuous late interwar period. By injecting domestic politics and parochial concerns into what is often considered a solely geopolitical issue, this legislative-industrial alliance helped prepare the nation and the Navy for World War II.

The geopolitical environment of the 1930s was precarious. The United States was faced with the aggressive actions of Germany and Japan, from the militaristic speeches of Hitler to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. FDR was confronted with the possibility of war with adversaries across both the Atlantic and the Pacific. At the same time, Britain and France, America’s allies from World War I, were still exhausted from the previous conflict and were barely clinging to their empires. Italy, another Entente power, seemed increasingly likely to align itself with the Germans and Japanese. American interwar naval planning was therefore an exercise in trying to achieve grand, ocean-spanning objectives with highly constrained domestic resources and few international partners.

Despite the looming geopolitical dangers, many in the interwar United States embraced isolationism and pacifism. After World War I and the protracted fight over membership in the
League of Nations, Americans became much more suspicious of the world at large and more pessimistic about the country’s need to fight wars to defeat militarism. In accordance with public opinion, Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover all made abstention from European affairs a core principle of their administrations.¹ A best-selling book in 1934 was *Merchants of Death*, which argued that the U.S. arms industry had pushed the nation into WWI. The book would lead to a two-year congressional investigation of war profiteers and widespread anti-military sentiment. A 1936 Gallup poll found that 82% of Americans supported banning the manufacture of war material for private profit – a pattern that remained true across party lines.² The public’s pacifism led to years of military decline, leaving the U.S. Navy in need of many improvements. Despite these political challenges, however, the Navy was able to rise to the challenge in the 1930s. From fiscal year (FY) 1932 to FY 1939, the Navy would grow from a force of 114 surface ships and 55 submarines to 242 ships and 125 subs, with another 105 combatants under construction.³ This success in the face of political headwinds deserves close consideration.

This thesis will explore how domestic political factors influenced U.S. naval acquisitions before World War II. Military policies in a democracy are the results of chaotic processes. The acquisition process during the interwar years was not the product of strategists operating in a vacuum to produce a theoretical “military ideal” solution, but rather a reflection of many outside influences, chiefly domestic politics and economic interest groups. The eventual success of U.S. interwar naval acquisition policy was due to complex interactions between rational actors in

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³ Albert A. Nofi, *To Train the Fleet for War: The U.S. Navy Fleet Problems* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2010), 41. Fiscal years are used by the U.S. government for its budgeting and planning process and are distinct from calendar years. Generally, the budget for a given fiscal year will be debated anywhere from a year to a year and a half in advance of the fiscal year’s corresponding calendar year. For example, the FY 1935 budget could be debated as early as 1933.
industry and Congress who were able to convert the grand concepts of American strategy into
everyday political compromises.

Congress played an active and constructive role in building the interwar navy. Unlike
what some historians have argued, Congress was far from being a roadblock to action or a mere
passive receiver of policy. Congress shaped not just naval appropriations – as was its
constitutional role – but also influenced what kind of ships were funded and where they were
built, thereby playing an important role in the nation’s strategic planning. Congressmen were
essential connectors of the parochial needs of local communities to the U.S.’s national interests
and ultimately to the geopolitical situation of the interwar years. All politics, even naval politics,
are fundamentally local.

The role played by the shipbuilding industry has also been overlooked or misunderstood.
Industry, through its interactions with regulators and Congress, helped make clear the local
benefits of greater military spending and ensured the survival of necessary defense production
capacity. While private shipbuilders have often been presented as either warmongers or war
heroes, this thesis aims to demonstrate the constructive role that industry played in national
defense policymaking. The nascent military-industrial complex, which grew in part out of private
firms’ greater reliance on government contracts during the Great Depression, would help protect
both its bottom line and the nation. The domestic interests of congressmen in gaining
employment in their districts dovetailed with the Navy and shipbuilding industry’s desire to
construct ships, creating a Navy-Congress-industry alliance that was an essential component of
the United States’ preparation for World War II.
Historiography

Scholarship on the rebuilding of the United States Navy in the late interwar period often focuses on the efforts of FDR and the Navy Department. A particularly useful collection is the published proceedings from the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute-sponsored conference “Franklin D. Roosevelt and the U.S. Navy,” which occurred in October 1996. Edited by Edward J. Marolda, the resulting book includes perspectives from eleven historians on how FDR’s interactions with the Navy shaped policy preceding WWII. Thomas C. Hone argues that FDR frequently meddled with the Navy via his powers to spend the government’s money, select naval leaders, and set the nation’s foreign policy goals, but that the course he charted for it was correct. On the other hand, Jonathan G. Utley argues that FDR was not a satisfactory manager of strategic policy as he did not align means and ends, he did not communicate his strategic vision with the bureaucracy, and he did not align the various elements of the national security apparatus to carry out a strategic plan. Despite their disagreements, both Hone and Utley typify a strain of historical analysis that, because of a focus on grand strategy and leadership, pays closer attention to the executive branch than other aspects of national power.

Studies of interwar geopolitics, when they touch on shipbuilding, also concentrate on the president’s role in naval policymaking. In The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900-1941, Robert Kagan explains how global affairs interacted with American domestic politics during the early 20th century. He explores how previous presidential administrations addressed (or ignored) the uniquely American requirement for a long range, two-ocean navy. John Gaddis’ On Grand Strategy offers a more general account of FDR’s strategic

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5 Kagan, 266.
vision for American grand strategy. Other historians have examined interwar naval rearmament from a geopolitical or diplomatic history perspective, generally focusing on FDR as a visionary leader who foresaw the coming crisis but was constrained by domestic political forces, though their analyses of those forces is often not the focus of their work.

Another strain of historical analysis of interwar naval shipbuilding focuses on the role of the Navy Department in shaping policy and strategic thinking. Alfred Nofi’s excellent work, *To Train the Fleet for War: The U.S. Navy Fleet Problems, 1923-1940*, analyses the Navy’s annual exercises to test its ships, exercise and train its crews, and develop new tactics and strategies. While Nofi does not tackle any procurement policy advocacy arising from these learning processes, he provides a comprehensive and clear analysis of the Navy’s thinking about requirements leading into WWII.

Thomas and Trent Hone’s work, *Battle Line: The United States Navy, 1919-1939* provides a ship-centric view of the Navy in the interwar years, with a focus on tactical and cultural changes within the Navy.

Despite its constitutionally defined role at the center of defense spending, Congress has received relatively little attention in past analyses of interwar naval spending. Where it is considered, Congress is often presented as a murky amalgamation of political interests that must be overcome to obtain the funding that the Navy and the administration have decided upon. Only a few major works have made their core focus the legislative element of naval acquisitions.

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7 These works often examine FDR’s naval policies with regards to a specific region or foreign policy issue. Ian Cowman’s *Dominion or Decline: Anglo-American Naval Relations on the Pacific, 1937-1941* explores FDR’s efforts to encourage Anglo-American cooperation in East Asia. Other works examine FDR’s naval policies as part of broader U.S.-Soviet diplomatic histories, such as Edward Bennet’s *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Search for Security* and Thomas. R. Maddux’s *Years of Estrangement: American Relations with the Soviet Union, 1933-1941*. Many scholars focus on presidential involvement with the naval arms control efforts of the interwar era, for example Christopher Hall in *Britain, America, & Arms Control, 1921-37*.
8 Nofi, 4.
Robert H. Levine’s *Politics of American Naval Rearmament, 1930-1938*, examines the Navy’s relationship with the New Deal shipbuilding funds provided by Congress.\(^\text{10}\) Another essential source is Michael A. West’s PhD dissertation “Laying the Legislative Foundation: The House Naval Affairs Committee and The Construction of The Treaty Navy, 1926-1934” which provides close analysis of the legislative machinations behind the key bill of interwar naval rearmament, the Vinson-Trammell Act.\(^\text{11}\) A useful work for background on Congress’s naval policy role is Paul Pedisich’s *Congress Buys a Navy: Politics, Economics, and the Rise of American Naval Power, 1881-1921*.\(^\text{12}\)

Historians contest the role of industry in shaping naval policy in the interwar years, split between advocates of private industry, those who view private war manufacturing as dangerous, and those who emphasize the role of the public sector. Arthur Herman’s book *Freedom’s Forge* lionizes U.S. industrialists as the forgotten heroes of WWII, especially Henry Kaiser who made great efforts to expand the scale of commercial shipbuilding during the war.\(^\text{13}\) Industry-wide studies, such as Clinton Whitehurst Jr.’s *The U.S. Shipbuilding Industry: Past, Present, and Future*, tend to align with the advocates of private industry.\(^\text{14}\) On the other side, Paul A. C. Koistinen’s *Planning War, Pursuing Peace: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1920-1939* offers a foundational critique of private industry’s role before and during WWII.\(^\text{15}\)

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Unlike the boosters and critics of private industry, Mark Wilson’s *Destructive Creation: American Business and the Winning of World War II* centers the role of the public investment and public management in war preparation across the US military and offers historical context for Navy’s balancing act between government and private construction.\(^{16}\) In a similar line is Thomas Heinrich’s *Warship Builders: An Industrial History of U.S. Naval Shipbuilding, 1922-1945*, whose analysis straddles both the public and private role in warship construction during interwar years.\(^{17}\) The literature on the shipbuilding industry also intersects with a more general literature on the development of the military-industrial complex. While its focus is the Cold War period, Michael Brenes’ *For Might and Right: Cold War Defense Spending and the Remaking of American Democracy* notes that the reliance of FDR’s New Deal on private defense companies helped lay the groundwork for the emerging Cold War security state.\(^{18}\) Building on these works, this thesis explores the dynamics of the nascent military-industrial complex of the interwar years and demonstrates how it connected domestic concerns to geopolitical ends.

**FDR’s Navy? The National Industrial Recovery Act**

The need for additional naval spending was painfully clear when FDR’s first term began in 1933. In the previous administrations’ search for efficiency, funding for fleet operations and maintenance had not risen even as the Navy’s needs had increased. Only in 1933 did the money spent on fleet maintenance and operation begin to approach its 1922 levels of $192 million.\(^{19}\) A Navy memo to FDR from April 1933 notes that without sufficient maintenance funding “the

\(^{16}\) Wilson, 32.
\(^{19}\) Marolda, 77.
material condition [of the fleet] steadily goes down.” Shipbuilding orders also cratered during the interwar years. The Washington and London Naval Treaties – international naval arms control agreements signed in 1922 and 1930 in response to global anti-war sentiment – created nation-specific limits on naval tonnage in certain warship categories and a 15-year freeze on new battleship construction. However, in 1933 the U.S. was not close to its treaty tonnage maximums across many ship classes.

As a result of reduced ship orders, the shipyards which built and repaired the fleet suffered during the interwar years. The peacetime Navy relied heavily on both private shipyards and government-owned shipyards, which had to compete for contracts and their survival. This competition led to many political disputes, which will be explored in length later. Many of the shipyards which started up to meet the increased demands of WWI did not survive the interwar years. High competition for a limited number of contracts led many shipbuilders to begin taking contracts at a loss. Only 6 out of 54 of these new shipyards remained active in the interwar period. Even the shipyard established before WWI suffered. Half of them ceased building new ships or closed during the interwar years. The Great Depression placed even greater stress on shipyards as orders for civilian vessels – which many naval contractors also built – collapsed. Unemployment at private shipyards soared and shipbuilding capacity withered away as shipyards closed or converted to other industries like railcar manufacturing. The public shipyards were also under pressure. A Navy memo to FDR from April 1933 stated that without major

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20 “Expenditure 1934 - Proposed reduction or Appropriations,” April 12, 1933, Navy Department 1933-1940, Box 7, Series 2: Confidential File, President’s Secretary’s File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York (hereafter cited as PSF, FDRL).
22 Kennedy, 20.
23 Heinrich, 7.
24 Heinrich, 11.
shipbuilding activities there is “no justification for the great number of Navy stations and yards now kept open.”26 By 1933, the nation’s shipyards were in desperate need of support.

High unemployment, common across the country during the Great Depression, was especially dangerous in shipyards as it compromised American defense capacity. Building warships is a specialized art that requires highly skilled workers and management teams.27 The dearth of shipbuilding orders during the interwar years made it difficult for shipyards to retain their painstakingly assembled workforces. This was an issue of national security – without an existing shipyard industrial base, the nation could not be effectively mobilized for naval warfare in the event of a conflict.

In the face of this shipbuilding crisis, domestic politics impacted the foreign and military policies FDR was willing to support. While FDR had campaigned for president in 1932 as no more of an internationalist than his Republican predecessors, he had a clear vision of the geopolitical situation facing the United States and was aware of the need for the United States to be strong in a dangerous world.28 Despite FDR’s internationalist instincts, many of the senators that Roosevelt relied on for his congressional coalition in his first term were progressive Republicans, who were dedicated anti-internationalists.29 As a result, FDR was extremely reluctant to make himself seem like a militarist and risk losing support for his legislative priority of domestic economic recovery.30

FDR was nonetheless deeply involved in Navy affairs. FDR’s naval focus dated back to his years as President Woodrow Wilson’s Assistant Secretary of the Navy, which followed in the

26 “Expenditure 1934 - Proposed reduction or Appropriations,” PSF, FDRL, 7.
27 Heinrich, 8.
28 Gaddis, 281.
30 Kagan, 357.
footsteps of Teddy Roosevelt serving the same role for President McKinley. FDR’s hands-on management was enabled by dysfunction at the top levels of military and civilian leadership in the Navy. During his presidency, FDR called himself “my own Secretary of the Navy” and, due to his desire to micromanage the Navy, selected a sickly 70-year-old, Claude Swanson, to be the official Secretary. FDR appointed Henry Roosevelt, a distant cousin who was also in poor health, to be Assistant Secretary of the Navy. FDR also worked closely with the officers in the Navy Department. Rear Admiral Emory “Jerry” Land notes in his memoir that FDR had ordered him, as Chief Constructor of the Navy, to confer with FDR before awarding any major shipbuilding contract.

FDR played a major role in shaping naval acquisitions in the interwar years by incorporating naval shipbuilding into his New Deal recovery plan. Supporting a major naval buildup was FDR’s most controversial first-term foreign policy move. In May 1933, FDR submitted the legislation that would become the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) to Congress. Among many economic relief efforts, the legislation also stipulated that public works funding could be used for the construction of naval vessels for the purposes of reducing unemployment in areas around shipyards. On June 17, 1933, the day after NIRA’s passage, FDR allocated $238 million for the construction of thirty-two warships, including twenty-two destroyers and two aircraft carriers, with a later additional allocation of a further $40 million for more shipbuilding. Some historians credit FDR’s use of NIRA funding as the key impetus

31 Marolda, 4.
32 Heinrich, 31.
33 Levine, 70.
36 Marolda, 78.
behind the rebuilding of the Navy in the interwar period.\textsuperscript{37} FDR’s support for the Navy undoubtedly enhanced its ability to rebuild its readiness and was an act of political bravery in an isolationist political environment.

However, the idea to classify naval shipbuilding as public works did not originate in FDR’s administration but instead with pro-shipbuilding members of the Navy Department and Congress. Officers within the Navy Department had begun discussing making the case that shipbuilding had an unemployment relief function as early as 1932, but the Hoover Administration rejected this initiative.\textsuperscript{38} During his 1932 presidential campaign, FDR had blamed the decline of the Navy on Hoover’s pacifism, giving pro-Navy advocates great hopes for working with FDR.\textsuperscript{39} After FDR assumed office in 1933, the shipbuilding-as-public-works idea was revived by ADM. Land, at the time the chief of the Navy Department’s Bureau of Construction & Repair, and his congressional allies. ADM. Land worried that private shipyards were at the “starvation point” and that East Coast yards were going to fall apart leading to loss of precious shipbuilding expertise and a rise in unemployment.\textsuperscript{40} In his memoir, ADM. Land states that he was “directly responsible” for FDR allocated the $238 million of NIRA funding to the Navy for ship construction. He notes that he, other naval personnel, and the Chief Clerk of the House Naval Affairs Committee were responsible for having the words “ships and aircraft” written into the public works bills of the New Deal, thereby authorizing the money to be used for naval construction.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{37} McGrath, 89. 
\textsuperscript{38} Heinrich, 32. 
\textsuperscript{39} Heinrich, 31. 
\textsuperscript{40} Heinrich, 32. 
\textsuperscript{41} Land, 145.
ADM. Land’s policy advocacy reflected the internal politics and disagreements which influenced the Navy Department’s recommendations on fleet composition and shipbuilding. The Navy Department was not particularly unified in the 1930s. Including ADM. Land, few bureau chiefs – the heads of the functional units of the Navy bureaucracy – wanted to yield their independence or authorities to the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), who was charged by law with preparing the Navy for war.⁴² Roosevelt’s first appointed CNO was Admiral William H. Standley, who served in the role from July 1933 until January 1937. ADM. Standley made it his mission to strengthen the power of the CNO’s office. Under ADM. Standley, the CNO’s office would eventually become central to all aspects of the planning, programing, and budgeting process, but this took time and encountered great deal of resistance.⁴³ This lack of unity on planning, especially early in FDR’s tenure, allowed for greater individual activism on policymaking from naval officers like ADM. Land, who was not necessarily always speaking for the Department at large.

On the other side of the Navy-Congress alliance, the main legislative advocate of public works funding for the Navy was Representative Carl Vinson (Democrat of Georgia), the chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee and a longtime advocate of naval spending.⁴⁴ In December 1932, Vinson lobbied President-elect FDR to consider shipbuilding as a form of public works. He told FDR that some “unproductive overhead” in the form of minimal operational status for all industrial yards should be considered part of the cost of national defense.⁴⁵ Vinson also argued that extending the public works program to include shipbuilding would help stimulate the economy and create new jobs. He urged FDR to build Navy up to treaty

⁴² Marolda, 84.
⁴³ Marolda, 85.
⁴⁵ Levine, 371.
strength, the necessity of maintaining private shipyards in an active status by awarding them most of the construction contracts, and the need to retain the east coast navy yards in at least an “active by minimum” state of commission.\textsuperscript{46} Vinson took the critical step of folding the argument about the defense necessity of giving the shipyards work into the prevailing political movement for economic recovery.

This joint Navy-Congress push was successful in driving FDR’s New Deal to include significant funding for naval construction. With Vinson’s help, both the Economy Act for 1934 and the Credit Act for 1934 – parts of the New Deal reform package– classified ships and aircraft as public works.\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, the Navy Department leveraged its personal relationships with FDR to push for pro-Navy positions within the Executive Branch.\textsuperscript{48} ADM. Land knew FDR well from FDR’s time as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in WW1.\textsuperscript{49} Personal appeals, which allowed the Navy to skirt the gatekeepers of presidential attention and time, combined with FDR’s own personal inclinations to ensure that FDR allocated a significant chunk of the NIRA funding to the Navy. Before any other NIRA allocations had been made, and before the economy-minded Director of the Budget Lewis Douglas could intervene, pro-shipbuilding figures from the Navy Department and Congress convinced FDR to give the Navy the aforementioned $238 million to build 32 naval vessels.\textsuperscript{50} While FDR obviously played a critical role in funding the Navy via NIRA, the pro-Navy alliance deserves more credit than they often receive for coming up with the idea, laying the legislative and political groundwork for its implementation, and pushing FDR to support it once in office.

\textsuperscript{46} Levine, 371.
\textsuperscript{47} Levine, 75.
\textsuperscript{48} Levine, 72.
\textsuperscript{49} Land, 4.
\textsuperscript{50} Levine, 93.
Congress’s Formal Influence: The Vinson-Trammel Act

Congress had a large degree of constitutionally granted influence over the levels of naval funding. The precise amounts authorized to be spent on the Navy’s various expenses were decided by the House and Senate Naval Affairs Committees. However, funding authorized by the Naval Affairs Committees had to be appropriated by the House Ways and Means Committee as well as the Senate Appropriations Committee. The whole of Congress then voted on authorization and appropriation bills. The legislature served as a conduit for public opinion to affect shipbuilding funding levels. Often in the interwar period this meant keeping spending down. The impact of the complex currents of public opinion on naval spending can best be seen in the almost simultaneous passage of the Vinson-Trammel Act and the commencement of the Special Committee on Investigation of the Munitions Industry, often called the Nye Committee.

The Vinson-Trammel Act of 1934 was the critical piece of naval funding legislation of FDR’s first term. Sponsored by Vinson and introduced as H.R. 6604 in January 1934, the bill provided a blanket and long-term authorization for the Navy to build up to current Washington Naval Treaty limits – well above the Navy’s current levels – and replace the fleet’s rapidly ageing ships with newer and more powerful vessels. The Vinson-Trammell Act did not technically fund these new ships, but as Vinson said “this act is not a mere piece of paper. It means real fighting ships.”

51 Marolda, 78.
52 Marolda, 78.
53 U.S. Congress, House, An Act to Establish the Composition of The United States Navy with Respect to the Categories of Vessels Limited by the Treaties Signed at Washington, February, 1922, and at London, April 22, 1930, at the Limits Prescribed by Those Treaties; to Authorize the Construction of Certain Naval Vessels, and for Other Purposes, H.R. 6604, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., introduced in House January 9, 1934, https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t03.d04.73hr6604
54 Cook, 84.
Much like the NIRA shipbuilding funding, the Vinson-Trammel Act was the creation of
Vinson, his congressional allies, and high-ranking members of the Navy Department. Vinson and
ADM. Land, supported by CNO Standley, worked closely together to capitalize on the
momentum created by the NIRA funding. There is some historical dispute over the original
source of the bill. Did Vinson’s staff write it with ADM. Land’s help, as ADM. Land claimed, or
was the whole thing written by the Navy Department staff for CNO Standley then co-opted by
Vinson, as CNO Standley maintained?\textsuperscript{55} The weight of evidence, including an analysis in a
recent biography of Carl Vinson, supports CNO Standley’s claim that the Navy wrote the whole
bill.\textsuperscript{56} Regardless, it certainly originated out of an alliance between pro-Navy congressmen and
the top brass of the Navy department. There is some irony, therefore, in the remarks with which
Vinson introduced the Vinson-Trammel Act: “In this country the Army and Navy have
practically nothing to do with shaping our national policies.”\textsuperscript{57}

Vinson introduced the bill instead of the Navy Department to maneuver around anti-naval
spending officials within FDR’s administration. Budget Bureau Director Douglas was opposed to
any additional spending that would damage the administration’s financial footing. Any legislative
proposal from the Navy Department to Congress had to first be approved by Douglas. However,
the Navy circumvented that requirement by encouraging Vinson to submit the bill as his own.
Vinson, as chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee, submitted the bill to Congress and
then requested a Budget Bureau review, which forced the administration to stop prevaricating
and announce its approval of a new shipbuilding authorization.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} West, 349.
\textsuperscript{56} Cook, 87
\textsuperscript{57} Representative Vinson, speaking on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., \textit{Congressional Record}
78, pt. 2: 1598.
\textsuperscript{58} West, 372.
FDR generally declined to intervene in factional disputes within his administration until absolutely required. FDR did not support the Navy Department when they pushed for additional appropriations to be placed within the draft of the Vinson-Trammel Act to fund the authorized ships. Roosevelt was wary of backing them due to continuing strength of the congressional isolationist and anti-armaments factions and the anti-spending personalities within his own administration. Douglas wanted a balanced budget for FY 1935 and so opposed supplemental funding for more ship construction. The Budget Bureau suggested delaying the start of some ships or reducing the overall ship numbers while the Navy suggested starting all the ships immediately.\textsuperscript{59} FDR let the bureaucracies clash while the bill was being considered until finally siding with the budget-conscious faction to avoid being seen as a warmonger.\textsuperscript{60}

FDR was largely a passive player in the creation of the Vinson-Trammell Act. In addition to staying above the factional disputes over the writing of the bill, he also declined to offer much public support for the legislation during its consideration. When asked by the press about the legislation right before it was introduced, FDR responded that “I never heard of it at all, except what I read in the papers. The Secretary of the Navy said nothing, the Assistant Secretary said nothing, and neither did the Chief of Operations.”\textsuperscript{61} This was quite close to an outright lie, as FDR knew that legislation was being developed. In private, FDR played both sides and expressed approval for authorizing new funding, but he stayed silent on new appropriations and a shipbuilding schedule.\textsuperscript{62} FDR stressed that the bill was just an authorization to mollify the

\textsuperscript{59} Levine, 240.
\textsuperscript{60} West, 373.
\textsuperscript{62} West, 372.
isolationists. He simultaneously reiterated his commitment to arms control by expressing hope for a naval conference to be held in 1935 to extend existing limitations and create new ones.63

FDR wanted Vinson to lead the charge on the shipbuilding bill because the early investigations of the Nye Committee were already underway. The recent publication of Merchants of Death, which argued that the private arms industry were warmongers who caused WWI, had stoked isolationist and anti-armaments attitudes.64 On February 8, 1934, Senator Gerald Nye (Republican of North Dakota) asked the Senate to investigate the role of the armaments industry in causing WWI and other conflicts. The Senate authorized this committee, with Nye as its chairman, on April 12, 1934 – a mere two weeks after Vinson-Trammell Act was signed into law by the President.65 FDR did not want to be seen as a booster of the military in this political climate. Historian Mark Wilson convincingly argues in Destructive Creation that the Nye Committee was not the creation of naïve isolationism but rather was a concerted effort to reign in private industry’s role in defense production with the goal of the nationalization of the defense industry.66 Members of the Nye Committee were devoted opponents of private military industry, including shipbuilding.

Opposition to the Vinson-Trammell Act came from isolationist and anti-war congressmen influenced by the Nye Committee. As the bill was being considered, the Nye Committee announced that their finding that major private shipbuilders had coordinated their bids on NIRA naval contracts to increase their profits.67 During debates on the Vinson-Trammell Act, opponents repeatedly referred to the Nye Committee’s discovery of a shipbuilding cartel that

63 Heinrich, 41.
64 Kagan, 353.
65 Discussion on Nye Committee, on April 12, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 6: 6476; Levine 233.
66 Wilson, 41.
67 West, 413.
dated back to the 1928 heavy cruiser contracts. A group of congressmen led by Nye proposed several amendments to attack private shipbuilders. Nye wanted to bring back a clause from earlier shipbuilding measures which would force the Navy to order half of its warships from government shipyards. The Navy opposed this measure as they thought it would wreak havoc with their production schedules. They believed that government yards did not have the capacity to handle half of the upcoming shipbuilding program. Nye wanted a similar 50-50 split for naval aircraft. Nye and his allies also pushed for a profit limitation clause which would cap private shipbuilder profits on government contracts at 10%. The eventual adoption of all three packages of amendments reflected the strength of the anti-private military industry coalition.

The opposition to the Vinson-Trammell Act predominately came from congressmen whose districts were far from the sea and did not contain maritime industries. Representative Charles W. Tobey (Republican of New Hampshire) introduced the amendment to create a 10% profit cap, a number which he seems to have pulled from thin air. Tobey’s 2nd District was not within commuting range of any naval shipyard. The other anti-private industry amendments and verbal attacks came from Nye’s congressional allies from Oklahoma, Illinois, and Iowa, all areas which were unconnected from naval industries. The exception to this rule was Senator Homer T. Bone (Democrat of Washington) who argued forcefully for the adoption of the amendment guaranteeing a 50-50 split between private and government shipyards. Senator

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68 Discussion on H.R. 6604, on March 6, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 4: 3814.
69 Levine, 234.
70 Levine, 234.
71 Discussion of H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 2: 1624.
72 West, 403.
73 See map “Congressional Districts and Commuting Distance to Shipyard (Northeast Focus)” in a later section, “NIRA Funding is Dead, Long Live Congressional Funding.” While Tobey’s 2nd district was not within commuting distance of any major shipyard, New Hampshire’s 1st district was close to Bath Iron Works in Maine and its representatives often supported naval acquisitions funding.
74 Discussion of H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 2: 1602.
Bone’s district was home to a government shipyard, Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. Senator Bone, seeing his constituent’s interests with a high degree of precision, wanted to ensure his district would benefit from the Vinson-Trammell Act and was willing to elbow the private shipyards out of his district’s way.  

By contrast, the proponents of the Vinson-Trammel Act were largely connected to the Navy or naval industries. Rep. Drewry (Democrat of Virginia) was at the time the representative-at-large of Virginia and later was the representative of Virginia’s 4th district. His interests were aligned with the nearby private shipyard Newport News. Congressmen representing shipyards would cross party lines to support key employers in their districts. Charles Wolverton (Republican of New Jersey) gave an impassioned speech in favor of the bill that explicitly mentioned that New York Shipyard in Camden, New Jersey lay within his district. Rep. Wolverton spoke about the importance of the health of the shipbuilding industry to the national defense and the economy. Politicians unconnected to naval industries also supported the Vinson-Trammel Act for ideological (pro-Navy) or party (Democrat alignment) reasons. Perhaps the most prominent ideological supporter of the Navy was Carl Vinson himself, whose district in Georgia had few ties to the Navy but nevertheless was the Navy’s most prominent supporter due to his profound belief in the importance of military preparedness.

The passage of the Vinson-Trammel Act was also facilitated by path-dependency. The Navy had already started construction on new ships in 1933 with NIRA funding, creating around

75 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Naval Affairs, *Hearings on S. 2493*, 73rd Congress, 2nd sess., 1934, 12.
76 New York Ship was in Camden, NJ, across the river from New York proper. The shipyard was named New York Ship because it was originally intended to be in Staten Island.
77 Representative Wolverton, speaking on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 78, pt. 2: 1612.
78 Cook, 26.
20,000 jobs in shipbuilding districts. The Vinson-Trammell Act was designed to supersede and expand upon this program. If the Vinson-Trammell Act did not pass to authorize the construction of even more ships, these new jobs would vanish and congressmen facing reelection in these districts would face unhappy constituents. Advocates of shipbuilding benefitted greatly from shipbuilding’s ability to create its own momentum.

Geopolitical concerns also influenced congressional debates on the Vinson-Trammell Act. Opponents of the bill repeatedly demanded to know who exactly the U.S. intended to fight with an enlarged navy. Japan was the focus of both sides of the debate. Many congressmen said a naval buildup would provoke an arms race. Others – including some isolationists and pacifists – insisted that parity with Japan was the best way to ensure peace. Supporters of the bill argued that Japan’s current de facto near-parity with the U.S. Navy would encourage them to take aggressive actions in the Pacific. Representative John Dockweiler (Democrat of California) said Japan’s conquest of Manchuria could have been prevented if the U.S. Navy had been built up to treaty limits. The Washington and London Treaties loomed large over these geopolitical discussions, with many Congressmen expressing both frustration with limits on American naval power and others supporting the principles of disarmament.

The Vinson-Trammell Act curtailed the powers of Vinson’s own House Naval Affairs Committee (HNAC). The bill gave a blanket authorization for shipbuilding up to treaty limits, which meant that HNAC would no longer need to propose new shipbuilding authorizations annually. Only the appropriations committees of the House and Senate would have any direct say

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79 West, 445.
80 Discussion on H.R. 6604, on March 6, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 4: 3812.
81 Discussion on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 2: 1620.
83 Representative Dockweiler, speaking on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 2: 1615.
84 Discussion on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 2: 1610.
on naval shipbuilding, via their naval subcommittees’ role of funding authorized programs. Historian Michael Allen West argues that HNAC took itself out of the annual congressional review process because it wanted decisive action on naval spending, it expected that the basic conservatism of appropriations would ensure authorizations were mostly funded each year, and because Carl Vinson thought removing HNAC from the process would give him greater personal sway in the legislative implementation of the Vinson-Trammel Act.85

In addition to West’s reasons, Vinson was arguably making calculated decision to move naval appropriations out of an unfavorable political environment in Congress. HNAC abrogating its authorizing prerogative also sidelined the general membership of the House as they would not need to vote annually to approve (or reject) new shipbuilding authorizations. The general membership was less inclined to support the Navy than the members of the naval affairs or appropriation committees, especially after the Nye Committee’s revelations. Vinson could well have been anticipating a hostile environment for naval spending in the next few years in Congress, and perhaps was maximizing his gains while he still had support for shipbuilding. Moreover, Congress had already approved the use of NIRA funds for shipbuilding. FDR’s allotment of $238 million of public works funding for shipbuilding was controlled by the executive branch via the public works agencies. Some naval appropriations were therefore outside of Congress’s direct control – at least until new funding for public works programs was needed.86 When combined, the Vinson-Trammell Act and NIRA funding were able to remove some elements of shipbuilding authorization and appropriation from Congress’s control – at least for a while. The Navy and its congressional backers were thus able to minimize public scrutiny

85 West, 488.
86 Levine, 160.
of the naval buildup to treaty limits, which had been an issue in the past and was looking troublesome again.\(^87\)

Indeed, the passage of the Vinson-Trammel Act was the high point of congressional involvement with the Navy for the next several years. Through 1936, funding from regular appropriations for naval construction would take second place to funding from NIRA. Immediately after the passage of the bill, Congress appropriated funds for Navy’s Bureau of Construction & Repair for FY 1935. It gave the Bureau a mere $11.7 million – less than half of FDR’s request, less than the previous year’s appropriation, and far less than the funding made available from NIRA.\(^88\)

Navy Expenditures on Fleet Replacement and Expansion, FY 1934 to FY 1937, in Dollars\(^89\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FY 1934</th>
<th>FY 1935</th>
<th>FY 1936</th>
<th>FY 1937</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regular Funding</strong></td>
<td>42,999,865</td>
<td>38,909,527</td>
<td>78,878,274</td>
<td>152,815,953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emergency Funding</strong></td>
<td>28,457,056</td>
<td>98,829,106</td>
<td>108,017,106</td>
<td>35,094,576</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pro-Navy faction’s maneuvers to cut Congress out of its constitutionally given role as the holder of the military’s purse strings did not go unnoticed. During the debate over the

\(^87\) Levine, 163.


\(^89\) United States, Bureau of the Budget and United States, Office of Management and Budget, Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1939," *Budget of the United States Government* (January 3, 1938), 859. https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/title/54#18986. This line item is alternatively called Increase of the Navy or later Replacement of Naval Vessels. It was the main line for funding to build the Navy up to the strength authorized by the Vinson-Trammell Act, though it did not capture all funding spent on naval construction during these years. Additionally, some of these figures may not align with other noted shipbuilding appropriations in this paper as the table tracks expenditures by their original funding type, which can be slightly out of sync with appropriations for the same fiscal year as funding is not always instantaneously spent.
Vinson-Trammell Act, Rep. Gerald Boileau (Republican of Wisconsin) declared that if the bill passed, “Congress at least will never again have anything to say about the number of ships that shall be in the Navy.”\(^90\) Rep. Wirt Hastings (Democrat of Oklahoma) made an explicit appeal to the Western progressives who were both key Roosevelt supporters and staunch isolationists, saying “let me say to you people who live out West… [if the Act passes] there is no further need of a legislative Naval Affairs Committee.”\(^91\) While both of these accusations were slight exaggerations, the opposition did force Vinson to admit that if his bill were to pass, the “legislative committee is delegating its authority to the President to make his recommendation to the Bureau of the Budget, and the Congress will make the appropriation.”\(^92\) Vinson’s admission that Congress’s ability to scrutinize naval appropriations would be reduced by the bill did not stop its passage, however.

Lost in this congressional debate, remarkably, was the insight that the pro-Navy faction had already provided a source of funding independent of congressional appropriations via NIRA. FDR’s Executive Order 6174 of June 1933 – almost a year earlier – had already publicly allotted $238 million of NIRA funding for shipbuilding. This demonstrated that the Navy had a mechanism to circumvent the requirement to go the appropriations committees to build some of its ships. Any further public works funding could be similarly diverted. Vinson and his pro-Navy allies who had argued for this provision of funding certainly were aware of this. However, the main mention of this from the congressional opposition came from Rep. Francis Shoemaker (Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota) who attacked the amount of NIRA money being allocated to

\(^{90}\) Representative Boileau, speaking on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 78, pt. 2: 1622.

\(^{91}\) Representative Hastings, speaking on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 78, pt. 2: 1622.

\(^{92}\) Representative Vinson, speaking on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 78, pt. 2: 1622.
the Navy but did not make an explicit connection between this type of funding and a loss of congressional influence.93 Outside of Congress, the Mid-West Institute of International Relations sent a letter to the Navy Department arguing that funding naval construction with public works emergency funding was contrary to the “assurance” made by the Vinson-Trammell Act that “construction depends on future Congresses.”94 This minor peace advocacy group’s complaint was upsetting enough to the Navy that it began an investigation into the group’s membership and possible radical connections.95 The Navy stood to gain greatly from an increasingly hostile Congress being sidelined.

**The NIRA Navy: Free From Congress but Not Politics**

NIRA and the Vinson-Trammell Act may have altered where shipbuilding funding decisions were made, but they did not take the politics out of the process. After all, shipbuilding and other kinds of big-ticket military spending are inherently political questions. When policymakers decide where to spend major amounts of taxpayer money, their choices create winners and losers. Politics will inevitably occur when a limited resource is distributed across different groups. After much of the Navy’s construction funding stream moved out of Congress and into the hands of the NIRA public works administrators, the pro-Navy faction thought the new political environment for funding would be more sympathetic to naval construction.96 However, this optimism in naval circles did not last long.

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93 Representative Shoemaker, speaking on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 78, pt. 2: 1623.
94 Dean E. Raymond Wilson to the Navy Department, July 3, 1934, Navy - Swanson, Claude A., Box 64, Series 4: Departmental Correspondence, President’s Secretary’s File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
95 Claude Swanson to FDR, “Concerning the Mid-West Institute of International Relations Letter of 3 July 1934,” 1934, Navy - Swanson, Claude A., Box 64, Series 4: Departmental Correspondence, President’s Secretary’s File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
96 Levine, 94.
The unshackling of Navy funding from congressional oversight did not free the Navy from skeptical paymasters, it just switched their antagonists. The overseeing entity of the Navy’s new NIRA funding stream was the Public Works Administration (PWA). The Navy had an initial advantage when dealing with the PWA. FDR had personally approved the $238 million allocation to the Navy before he installed the Permanent Administrator for Public Works, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. Ickes did not want to give the PWA’s money to the armed forces as he felt it did not solve unemployment and favored the civilian workers of the military over everyone else.\(^97\) In his memoir, ADM. Land states that he felt that Ickes simply hated giving money to the Navy.\(^98\)

Robert H. Levine’s *Politics of American Naval Rearmament, 1930-1938* masterfully illuminates the many problems the Navy faced in trying to squeeze money from the parsimonious Ickes and the PWA. Ickes and the administrators of the various work relief programs – for the PWA was just one of many of the “alphabet soup” work relief agencies – were reluctant to grant money for naval construction as it would not help alleviate unemployment in the general population. Shipbuilding is a trade requiring high degree of worker skill which cannot be taught overnight and is an especially capital-intensive industry. The work relief agencies generally sought to fund work programs which could employ a lot of people quickly and were labor, not capital, intensive.\(^99\) Where the agencies did allocate funding to the Navy, it was typically for labor intensive but relatively low military value efforts like clearing the grass on naval bases or painting dormitories.\(^100\) The Navy and PWA wanted to alleviate different kinds

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\(^98\) Land, 145.

\(^99\) Levine, 205.

\(^100\) Levine, 191.
of unemployment: the former wanted to keep its skilled artisans employed and the latter wanted to employ as much of the general public as possible.

FDR’s influence on naval spending during this era is most visible in his direct interventions with the PWA over naval construction funding. After FDR allocated the first burst of $238 million for ships in the FY34 program, the Navy repeatedly asked FDR to intercede again with the PWA to convince it to give the Navy more funding. Instead of from the reluctant Ickes, the next major round of PWA funding to go to shipbuilding was again approved directly by FDR. On June 29, 1934, he allocated $40 million for naval shipbuilding in FY35 from the public works funding in the FY35 emergency budget. These funds paid for the commencement of construction of the first twenty ships and 225 aircraft authorized in the Vinson-Trammell Act. These contracts were advertised in June 1934 and awarded by November 1934, with nine going to private yards and eleven going to government yards. FDR had promised this additional funding to the Navy during the consideration of the Vinson-Trammell Act and announced it a month after the bill’s passage. The funding was compensation for FDR not backing the Navy in the dispute with Budget Director Lewis over including new appropriations within the Vinson-Trammell Act. The Navy would continue to ask for FDR to intercede with the PWA, though without much success after the first two allotments. A typical request of this kind is the Navy’s January 1935 memo to FDR asking for his help getting the PWA to allocate

101 Cook, 102.
102 West, 440.
103 Claude Swanson to FDR, “Naval Construction Program, 1934,” 1934, Navy - Swanson, Claude A., Box 64, Series 4: Departmental Correspondence, President’s Secretary’s File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; McGrath, 90.
105 Levine, 240.
funding for an expansion of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard.\textsuperscript{106} Having directly allocated money for the major elements of the naval construction programs of FY34 and FY35, FDR was a major reason for the initial naval buildup of 1933-1934, but he hardly accomplished this alone.

**The Congress-Industry Symbiosis**

Congressmen were very active in influencing naval acquisitions occurring under NIRA auspices, despite these acquisitions being under the executive branch’s authority. Congressmen with an economic or ideological interest in naval affairs routinely participated in the new political arena of shipbuilding from 1933-1935 by lobbying the PWA and Navy officials. A lack of formal control over NIRA allocations did not stop congressmen from pressuring Navy or PWA officials to get their desired policy outcomes, especially as these congressmen could credibly tie Navy or PWA actions on shipbuilding to their votes on other legislative issues in the present or future.

Congressmen were keenly aware of how specific appropriations and regulations could benefit their districts’ shipyards and workers. Past studies of shipbuilding politics have presented qualitative anecdotes of the presence of a shipyard in a congressman’s district leading them to use their influence to support naval funding bills. Building on these works, this thesis argues that these shipyard-linked congressmen exerted influence on naval shipbuilding policy with a degree of precision that has been previously overlooked and used informal influence methods such as lobbying Navy and PWA officials that have not been fully explored. One kind of funding decision that would influence congressmen’s behavior was the class of ship being funded. As shipyard sizes varied, districts would benefit only if the ships ordered by Congress could be built

\textsuperscript{106} Henry Roosevelt to FDR, January 2, 1935, Navy 1933-September 1936, Box 57, Series 4: Departmental Correspondence, President’s Secretary’s File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
in their yards. If the shipyard in a member’s district was too small to construct heavy cruisers or battleships, they would therefore be far more willing to support funding for destroyers, for example. Another kind of funding disparity that would incentivize congressional intervention was funding clauses which would determine if the contract would go to a private or government shipyard. Spending distortions like these manipulated the composition of the fleet and where U.S. shipbuilding capacity was located. However, they also ensured that higher levels of naval funding could pass through the penny-pinching Congress by widening shipbuilding’s base of political support.

Congressional lobbying was particularly pronounced with regards to the Boston and Charleston Navy Yards. The Navy Department believed it had too much shipbuilding capacity on the East Coast and viewed these two shipyards as excess to its requirements. However, both shipyards were championed by powerful congressional delegations. These congressmen lobbied the Navy to get more shipbuilding assigned to their local yards to keep high-paying jobs in their districts, and the Navy responded by asking them to help with the Navy’s political problems with the uncooperative Ickes and the PWA. Rep. John McCormick (Democrat of Massachusetts) wrote the Navy Department in 1933 asking for additional shipbuilding work for the Boston Navy Yard, which was in his district. McCormick was a powerful Democratic congressman on the House Ways and Means committee, and his request carried the weight of a congressman who would vote on all future Navy appropriations. Even if allocating NIRA funding was not technically under his jurisdiction, he could still throw his weight around. The Navy told

107 “Expenditure 1934 - Proposed reduction or Appropriations,” PSF, FDRL, 7.
108 Levine, 166.
McCormick that he could help obtain work for the Boston Navy Yard by pressuring the PWA to approve funds for shipbuilding projects there.  

The Charleston Navy Yard is a particularly striking example of the influence of powerful congressmen over NIRA funding allocations and the Navy’s fleet composition. Charleston Navy Yard had not constructed many ships since WWI. However, both of South Carolina’s senators were Democrats with influential committee positions. Senator Ellison Smith was the chairman of the Agriculture and Forestry Committee and was a committed pro-Navy member of Congress. He had pushed for PWA funding for the construction of additional ship ways in Charleston over both Navy and Budget Bureau objections. Senator James Byrnes was the chairman of the naval subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee, which was hugely influential over the Navy’s regular budget. Byrnes was also a close congressional ally of Vinson. As a result of the senators’ influence, NIRA funding was assigned to be spent at the Charleston yard. At this time, Charleston Navy Yard was not capable of building ships larger than destroyers, even with the improvements Senator Smith had forced through the PWA. As a result, the Navy ordered the construction of a gunboat, a type of ship it had generally turned away from since the turn of the 20th century and which would be of little use in a Pacific war, to satisfy its political

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109 Levine, 167.
110 Henry H. Carroll, "US Interwar Shipbuilding Data," (GitHub, 2023). https://github.com/hcarroll6/US-Interwar-Shipbuilding. The author compiled and validated a dataset that includes all major surface combatants acquired by the U.S. Navy from 1930-1940, as well as the locations and ownership status of all active naval shipyards during this period. The original data source for the shipbuilding information is http://shipbuildinghistory.com/navalships.htm. The data was validated using primary sources from the FDR Library. For more detailed information on data sources and methods, see the ReadMe file in the linked GitHub repository.
111 Levine, 375.
112 West, 496.
113 Levine, 376.
114 Carroll, "US Interwar Shipbuilding Data."
supporters.\textsuperscript{115} From 1933-1937, the Navy would go on to allocate six destroyers and additional small craft to be constructed at the yard.\textsuperscript{116}

Congressmen were attentive of the minute differences in funding bills which could determine whether contracts went to the shipyards in their districts or not. In addition to the above examples of congressmen supporting the government-owned shipyards in their districts, congressmen also fought to promote local private shipyards, occasionally at the expense of government yards. In January 1934, during the House Naval Affairs Committee hearing on the Vinson-Trammell Act, Rep. John McGrath (Democrat of California) repeatedly asked the testifying Navy officials “why should the two yards in San Francisco be left idle?”\textsuperscript{117} McGrath expressed his displeasure that private shipyards near his district, especially the Hunter Point plant of Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation, had not received NIRA naval contracts. Vinson tried to ameliorate McGrath by reminding him that the Navy had allocated several ships to Mare Island Naval Shipyard, which was also in San Francisco.\textsuperscript{118} McGrath was not swayed. He represented California’s 8\textsuperscript{th} district, which was comprised of the counties to the south of San Francisco. Mare Island was in Vallejo, to the north of San Francisco, and was therefore less relevant to jobs in the congressman’s district as it was not within commutable distance (see map below).\textsuperscript{119} The level of

\textsuperscript{115} J. M. Caiella, “‘Well There Was No Hope . . .’”, Naval History Magazine, August 1, 2020, https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2020/august/well-there-was-no-hope.
\textsuperscript{116} Carroll, “US Interwar Shipbuilding Data.”
\textsuperscript{117} U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Naval Affairs. \textit{Hearings on H.R. 6604}, 73rd Congress, 2nd sess., 1934, 184.
\textsuperscript{118} U.S. Congress, House, Committee, \textit{Hearings on H.R. 6604}, 184.
\textsuperscript{119} Bethlehem’s San Francisco plant was not actually located in Rep. McGrath’s 8\textsuperscript{th} district, but rather the nearby 5\textsuperscript{th} district. Given its proximity to the 8\textsuperscript{th} district, workers from Rep. McGrath’s district would have been able to easily commute to Bethlehem San Francisco. On the other hand, Mare Island Naval Shipyard was in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} district, on the opposite side of the bay from the 8\textsuperscript{th} district and out of the typical commuting distance of a worker at the time. This thesis has assessed the influence of shipyards by examining commuting radii, rather than purely along district lines, because work patterns do not neatly align with district borders. Congressmen at the time also thought about political influence in terms of their constituents’ jobs, not district lines. Rep. William P. Connery Jr (Democrat of Massachusetts), responding to a comment that he supported public shipyards because he had one in his district, said “I have many constituents who work in the Charlestown Navy Yard at Boston. The Charlestown Navy Yard is in the
fine-grained attention paid by congressmen to naval shipbuilding policy could be refined down to a matter of mere miles.

Shipyards Building U.S. Naval Vessels in California, 1930-1939

Congressional complaints about the Navy not giving contracts to shipyards in their districts could lead to acquisitions results. In the same HNAC hearing, Vinson would later say “I

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district of my friend and colleague, Mr. Douglass.” Representative Connery, speaking on H.R. 6604, on January 30, 1934, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record 78, pt. 2: 1626.

think, Mr. McGrath, we can trust the Navy Department to try to allocate whatever building is
done in a fair and in a liberal manner.”

121 Vinson commented this in front of the testifying Navy
officials, and his comment could be read as carrying some considerable subtext. Given
McGrath’s prominent role on HNAC, and Vinson’s prodding, it is perhaps unsurprising that
Bethlehem San Francisco received contracts for two destroyers, DD-400 McCall and DD-401
Maury, in 1936 – the next possible appropriations cycle.122 This is all the more remarkable given
that Navy Secretary Claude Swanson had argued in early 1934 that “there are very few private
shipbuilding plants on the West Coast capable of doing satisfactory work.”

123 Efforts to divert
naval shipbuilding contracts to home districts were hardly isolated incidents. Other West Coast
congressmen tried to direct naval contracts to the private shipyards in their districts by
introducing a legislative measure in the spring of 1936 to permit Pacific coast private shipyards
to add 6% to their Navy bids to “account for transportation costs” – another blatant attempt at
local favoritism.124

The pork-barrel politics of these powerful congressmen, while not costless for the
nation’s defense capacity, were critical in preparing the United States for a naval conflict.
Keeping these yards and distributing production across the country led to inherently higher cost
per ship, a fact that the Navy was aware of at the time.125 Domestic politics impacted the
implementation of American geostrategic goals by, at least on the margins, forcing the Navy to

121 U.S. Congress, House, Committee, Hearings on H.R. 6604, 184.
122 Carroll, “US Interwar Shipbuilding Data.”
124 Levine, 395
125 Charles Edison to FDR, “Memorandum for the President,” 30 July 1937, Navy, October 1936-
1937, Box 57, Series 4: Departmental Correspondence, President’s Secretary’s File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library,
Hyde Park, New York. This document presents the Navy’s analysis of the various construction capacities of the
government-owned naval shipyards. Assistant Secretary Edison notes the high cost of making some of government
shipyards capable of producing various ship types, which resulted in higher per-unit costs at these less-developed
shipyards than at the more capable shipyards like Philadelphia Naval Shipyards.
purchase ships it did not need in shipyards it did not want to operate just to keep its political supporters happy. However, much as modern defense or space contracts are spread across the country to ensure congressional buy-in, this cost inefficiency was not necessarily a negative nor was it unintended. Distributing expenditures across a wider area may have sacrificed the benefits of greater economies of scale but also ensured that the political environment was permissive of funding a large – albeit more expensive – navy. Another key side effect of distributing contracts across more shipyards than would have been optimal for purchasing costs was the preservation of those shipyards, which could then be mobilized for surging wartime production. Pork-barrel politics in the interwar years were cost inefficient but politically necessary for implementing an American grand strategy that anticipated a two-ocean war.

**Private Shipbuilders and the Effects of Lobbying**

The shipbuilding industry played a major role in determining the distribution of naval contracts. Shipbuilders influenced acquisitions in this period by shaping legislation via their connections with local politicians and by leaning on the Navy to adopt favorable regulations. The shipbuilding industry’s interest in manipulating naval contracts was driven by market conditions. When compared to other defense firms like gun and ammunition manufacturers, which sold most of their wares abroad, shipbuilders were especially reliant on the federal government as their primary customer.\textsuperscript{126} The government had also played a key role in shaping the creation of the shipbuilding industry in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, and the industry remained overwhelmingly reliant upon and intertwined with the federal government.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{126} Koistinen, 258. \\
\textsuperscript{127} Pedisich, 4.
Private shipbuilders had a vested interest in lobbying for ship construction due to the product-driven nature of the naval shipbuilding market. Product-driven markets are distinct from sustainment-driven markets, wherein the industry has lucrative, long-term contracts to support a product once its sold. While the modern defense industry derives much of its profit from long-run sustainment contracts, and therefore has an incentive to support existing systems with contracts for upgrades and routine maintenance, the interwar naval industry was not able benefit from sustainment sales.\textsuperscript{128} From 1920 to 1939, the volume of naval repair work across all private yards was a mere $1,870,000 – around 0.3% of the shipyards total commercial and naval repair work.\textsuperscript{129} The Washington Naval Treaty created a premium on modernization programs as new battleship construction was impossible. However, the funds allocated to modernization programs were minor. Furthermore, the Navy’s own yards took on most of the naval repair and modernization work during the interwar period.\textsuperscript{130} Due to a lack of other forms of military sales, private shipbuilders in the interwar period continually lobbied for new ship construction.

Major shipbuilders played an outsized role in this lobbying effort due to their dominance of the naval construction market and their powerful industry association. Major shipbuilders are defined here as the core group of contractors which the Navy relied on throughout the interwar period for major surface combatant construction. The largest of the contractors were known as the “Big Three” of Fore River, Newport News, and New York Ship. The next largest set of yards were the “Little Three” of Bath Iron Works, Federal Shipbuilding, and United Shipyard (later Bethlehem Staten Island after its acquisition). These six, along with a small handful of other major shipbuilders, were the core members of the National Council of American Shipbuilders

\textsuperscript{128} VADM. David H. Lewis (ret.), video interview with author, September 29, 2023.
\textsuperscript{130} Levine, 373.
The actions of this industry association, alongside individual lobbying efforts by shipyards, played a major role in shaping naval procurement from 1933-1938. Major shipbuilders worked to get new shipbuilding contracts created and allocated to the private sector, but also made concerted efforts to discourage the Navy from branching out and working with new, upstart shipbuilders. \(^{132}\)

Shipyards were supported by local groups at all levels of politics. New York Ship’s response to its 1938 financial crisis is a prime example of the multi-pronged lobbying approach taken by private shipyards. Having failed to secure several commercial shipbuilding contracts in 1936 and 1937, New York Ship was in dire financial straits. \(^{133}\) The firm had not received a major surface combatant order from the Navy since it was assigned the two cruisers CL-43 Nashville and CL-46 Phoenix in 1933. Construction on these ships lasted from keel laying in 1935 until their launches in 1937 and 1938, respectively. \(^{134}\) Facing a dearth of orders and with its expensive and well-trained workforce about to be scattered, New York Ship leaned on the entire political and civic establishment of its hometown of Camden, New Jersey. Senator Harry Moore (Democrat of New Jersey) wrote directly to FDR stressing that New York Ship employed 5300 men and was in danger of closing without getting new business from the government. \(^{135}\) New York Ship also got local groups involved in shipyard politics. The Camden Country Chamber of Commerce wrote to FDR blaming the economic collapse of New York Ship on the federal government allegedly hating private enterprise. New York Ship even sponsored a petition from Camden school children asking for a Navy contract for the company. \(^{136}\) Eventually, though not

\(^{131}\) Levine, 96.
\(^{132}\) Levine, 96.
\(^{133}\) Heinrich, 44.
\(^{134}\) Carroll, "US Interwar Shipbuilding Data."
\(^{135}\) Heinrich, 44.
\(^{136}\) Heinrich, 44.
necessarily solely because of this lobbying, New York Ship was allocated the lead ship of the
*South Dakota* class of battleships in FY39, which helped repair its economic prospects before it
entered the boom period of World War Two.\(^{137}\)

In addition to relying on favorable political dynamics with local congressmen, the
National Council of American Shipbuilders conducted persistent campaigns to shape public
discourse on naval rearmament policy. The end goal of these campaigns, like many modern
lobbying efforts, was to shape public and expert opinion to influence policy outcomes in
Congress or other regulatory bodies. NCAS officials would give interviews and advocate for its
policy positions in major newspapers like the *New York Times*. On January 19th, 1932, the *New
York Times* published an article based on an interview with NCAS president, H. Gerrish Smith,
which notes NCAS’s endorsement of Vinson’s naval appropriations bill.\(^{138}\) A subsequent January
1933 article quoted Smith sounding an alarmist note about the future of the shipbuilding industry
without further government spending. Smith was potentially seeking to bolster the campaign to
have naval construction included in NIRA, which was being considered at the time.\(^{139}\) After
NIRA had been signed into law and funding had started to flow to private shipbuilders, Smith
was quoted in the *New York Times* in August 1933, stating, “$105,000,000 of the of
$130,000,000 to be received by the private yards would be expended for labor … every State in
the Union eventually would received [sic] a share of the income.”\(^{140}\) Smith and NCAS
participated in public discourse to make the advantages of shipbuilding clear to those who might

\(^{137}\) Carroll, "US Interwar Shipbuilding Data."
https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1932/01/19/105769945.html?pageNumber=43
https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/01/20/105898673.html?pageNumber=37
\(^{140}\) “JOBS FOR 30,000 ON NEW WAR SHIPS,” The New York Times, August 5, 1933.
https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/08/05/106036391.html?pageNumber=25
not normally understand the benefits it could bring them, like Midwesterners and the general population of workers.

NCAS also defended the reputation of the private shipbuilders in the public eye. After the Nye Commission publicly revealed the cartel behavior of the Big Three shipbuilders, Smith was cited in a *New York Times* article claiming the Nye Commission’s figures were incorrect, trying to cast doubt on the anti-Navy politicians in the public sphere and reinforce the perception of private shipbuilders as honest, cost-effective contractors.\(^{141}\) In 1937, NCAS self-published a book, *Commercial Shipyards and the Navy*. The book attacked the Nye Committee’s recommendation of government ownership of all naval construction facilities and cast doubt on the Nye Committee’s methodology and impartiality.\(^{142}\) Some of NCAS’s claims stretch credulity, especially the statement that NCAS “has never, in fact, urged upon Congress the construction of a single naval vessel.”\(^{143}\)

The major shipbuilders also relied on their close relationships with Navy officials to ensure the Navy represented their interests in intragovernmental fights over contract terms, regulation, and legislation. The Nye Committee argued that concerns about the economic welfare of shipbuilding corporations were given disproportionate weight in the Navy Department’s decision-making process for deciding its fleet architecture – in terms of ship count and location of construction.\(^{144}\) The Committee found that the Big Three’s cartel coordination on the 1928 cruisers was done with the knowledge and even encouragement of the officials of the Navy Department who were more interested in preserving shipbuilding capacity than keeping costs


\(^{143}\) *Commercial Shipyards and the Navy*, 9.

\(^{144}\) Koistinen, 258.
honest and low.\textsuperscript{145} Navy officials also had a revolving-door relationship with figures at the top of the shipbuilding industry. The interwar president of the Big Three shipbuilder Newport News, Homer L. Ferguson, was a former naval officer.\textsuperscript{146}

The Navy Department’s exceptionally cooperative attitude towards the major shipbuilders is clearest in the fight that erupted over labor rights in shipyards. Title I of NIRA had allowed the administration to require federal contractors adhere to labor codes which regulated worker hours and pay. In May 1935, Title I was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.\textsuperscript{147} Labor advocates within the FDR administration, alongside union activists in the shipbuilding industry, pressured the Navy Department to implement new labor codes in the 1935 contracting cycle.\textsuperscript{148} A subsequent labor bill, the Walsh-Healey Government Contracts Act, passed in June 1936 and permitted the government to mandate that its contractors adopt 40-hour workweeks and pay minimum prevailing wages.\textsuperscript{149} Shipbuilders vehemently opposed labor codes as they believed they would raise labor costs and introduce regulatory difficulties. NCAS stated that none of its members would submit bids that agreed to new contract terms which demanded a commitment to arbitration for certain labor issues and adherence to future federal labor laws.\textsuperscript{150}

The private shipbuilders tried to subvert labor regulations by appealing to Navy officials. These contractors submitted bids conditioned on being exempted from the Walsh-Healey Act, or dual bids with prices estimated with and without labor code enforcement, or simply notified the Navy that they would not submit any bids at all.\textsuperscript{151} In the \textit{New York Times}, H. Gerrish Smith

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{145} Koistinen, 259.
\item \textsuperscript{146} Koistinen, 261.
\item \textsuperscript{147} Levine, 434.
\item \textsuperscript{148} Levine, 437.
\item \textsuperscript{149} Government Contracts Act, Pub. L. No. 74-846, 49 Stat. 2036 (1936).
\item \textsuperscript{150} Levine, 443.
\item \textsuperscript{151} Levine, 455.
\end{itemize}
attributed the need for dual bids in 1936 to higher labor costs and the costs of new worker regulations.\textsuperscript{152} The Navy was not pleased with the labor advocates’ meddling and used shipbuilder complaints as a cudgel. ADM. Land called the Walsh-Healey Act “a labor racket” and ADM. William D. Leahy, an influential naval officer would eventually replace Standley as CNO, called it “radicalism.”\textsuperscript{153} The Navy’s geopolitical focus and industry’s profit motive to get as many ships built as quickly as possible conflicted with labor’s interest in worker compensation. The Navy Department conducted a long-running campaign against implementing labor regulations in the defense industry. The Navy complained about the difficulty of contracting ships and the resultant decline of defense readiness to the Labor Department and other administration officials. The labor conflict was eventually solved by an agreement with the unions.\textsuperscript{154} The incident showed how successful the shipbuilders could be in lobbying the Navy, as they effectively mobilized one department of the government against another.

The Navy’s willingness to cater to the desires of the major shipbuilders arose from the indisputable value these firms provided for national defense. While the major shipbuilders were reliant on the government for much of their business, without these contractors the Navy could not build its warships. The more ships the Navy ordered at any given time, the more that the major contractors could charge because of the Navy’s dependence on such a limited number of firms.\textsuperscript{155} Shipbuilders had an additional source of leverage when dealing with the federal government in times of relative economic prosperity. Shipyards’ appetite for government contracts was inversely related to overall economic conditions. In times of economic upheaval

\textsuperscript{153} Levine, 459.
\textsuperscript{154} Levine, 466.
\textsuperscript{155} Koistinen, 259.
like the peak of the Great Depression, businesses sought out government contracts for a source of income. In boom times, however, shipbuilders would avoid taking government contracts due to onerous requirements like labor regulations and profit caps.\(^{156}\) As the 1935-1936 labor fight coincided with a general recovery of economic conditions and resurgent commercial shipbuilding demand, shipbuilders felt empowered to submit dual bids rejecting the labor regulations or send in no bids at all. Shipbuilders claimed that industrial activity had flooded their shops with orders, so they had no capacity for naval shipbuilding.\(^{157}\) The economic mini-boom was over by 1937, when a deep recession in the spring – derisively called the “Roosevelt recession” – occurred.\(^{158}\) FDR then announced that both *North Carolina*-class battleships would be built in government yards, leading to the crisis at New York Ship mentioned above. The Navy would eventually revert to its usual 50-50 arrangement, but private shipbuilders had seen the power of government contracting during an economic downturn when they had limited commercial options.\(^{159}\)

In addition to direct lobbying, NCAS also shaped the opinions of Navy officials by entering the discourse on shipbuilding within Navy circles. To persuade naval officers to adopt pro-shipbuilder policies, H. Gerrish Smith wrote opinion pieces for the United States Naval Institute’s prestigious magazine, *Proceedings*. In 1938, Smith authored “The Necessity for a Definite Shipping Replacement Program,” which argued for a program of continuous replacement of aged commercial shipping vessels. The article notes the importance of maintaining a nucleus of trained shipbuilding workers and argues that “a shipbuilding boom that would bring into the industry a large number of employees that could not be continuously

\(^{156}\) Levine, 450.  
\(^{157}\) Levine, 451.  
\(^{158}\) Kagan, 364.  
\(^{159}\) Wilson, 42.
employed is most undesirable.” NCAS advocated for policies that favored existing shipbuilders over those that would allow new competitors to enter the shipbuilding market. NCAS leveraged its favorable relations with Navy officials to get into Proceedings, where it could influence a readership primarily composed of Navy officers of all ranks.

NCAS made use of its information asymmetry advantage to enable more effective lobbying for its member’s interests. NCAS had better information on shipbuilding statistics than any other public group due to its data collection from its member shipyards. NCAS had state-by-state data on the materials, machinery, or services produced by each state that were purchased by the shipbuilding industry. This data covered a wide range of goods from major elements like “machinery” and “structural iron and steel” to items as minute as “gallery and pantry outfit” and “bedding linen and drapes.” State-by-state data enabled NCAS to more effectively lobby individual members of Congress by making clear the connections between their state industries – in places as far from the sea as South Dakota, which produced brass, lead, zinc, paint, and interior decorations for ships – and the construction of more naval vessels. The Navy Department (and later the Department of Defense) struggled greatly to map its own subcontractor and supplier network until well after World War II had been won.

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161 The extent of this information asymmetry is clear in The Shipbuilding Industry of the United States, a 1948 publication compiling chapters on the history and business dynamics of shipbuilding from prominent figures within the industry. H. Gerrish Smith, who was still of president of what had by then been renamed the Shipbuilders Council of America, wrote a chapter aptly titled “Shipyard Statistics.” While much of NCAS’s data is from government bodies such as the U.S. Maritime Commission, a substantial portion is from their own independent research and surveys of their member firms. NCAS’s data captures production and consumption of naval industries on a state-by-state basis, as opposed to the government data which shows only overall production levels.
NCAS also made use of its information asymmetry to shape the information space of debates over shipbuilding in Congress. NCAS provided its shipbuilding statistics to the Navy informally and via publication in *Proceedings* and other industry-aligned journals.\(^\text{165}\) The Nye Committee found that the Navy, in turn, made little to no effort to collect its own information. This active disinterest was especially pronounced with regards to the costs and profits of the shipbuilders. Instead of calculating its own profit estimates, the Navy provided NCAS’s figures to Congress. These figures were far from neutral – one set of NCAS statistics estimated private shipyard profits at one third of the level that the Nye Committee found using its own sources.\(^\text{166}\) By shaping the information on which shipbuilding debates were based, NCAS was able to subtly advance its members’ pro-construction agenda.

**NIRA Funding is Dead, Long Live Congressional Funding**

The era of the NIRA navy ended not long after it began. After 1936, shifting political winds and adverse Supreme Court decisions had dismantled much of the First New Deal and the primacy of the PWA as a source of funding for naval shipbuilding along with it. By the end, the Navy was not terribly sad to see the public works funding vehicle go.\(^\text{167}\) Despite its initial appreciation at being unshackled from Congress, the Navy had realized NIRA funding came with new unfriendly paymasters at the PWA, continued informal influence from congressmen, and constant pressure from industry. Regular budget appropriations from Congress, which had still

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\(^\text{165}\) Smith, “The Necessity for a Definite Shipping Replacement Program.” The tables Smith included in his article on employment, capacity, and tonnage built at private shipbuilding facilities would not have otherwise been publicly available at the time. Only with the onset of WWII did the government begin to fully develop its own capacity to rival NCAS’s data collection on shipbuilding.

\(^\text{166}\) Koistinen, 260.

\(^\text{167}\) Levine, 490.
provided a major source of funding for naval construction even while NIRA funding was predominant from 1934 to 1936, returned to the center stage of naval acquisitions.

Regular naval acquisitions from the years 1934-1938 saw few surprises. A basic pattern emerged for the regular budget in these years: the Navy would present its requests for building new ships in accordance with its long-range plan to hit treaty limits by 1942, FDR’s Budget Bureau would lop some substantial but survivable amount off the top for the sake of demonstrating FDR’s commitment to the economy, and the appropriations committees would knock off another small amount to show they too were serious about economizing. As Vinson had predicted in 1934, once Congress had authorized building up to the treaty limits, the appropriations committees were unwilling to rock the institutional boat and regularly provided most of the needed funding. The spring 1935 congressional hearings on the Navy budget for FY 1937 exemplify this dynamic. Despite Democrats increasing their control in both chambers in the 1934 elections, and three new nominally pro-FDR Democrats being added to the naval subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee, the committee still cut $11 million from the Navy’s $100 million request for shipbuilding. These were unfortunate but survivable cuts. From 1934-1938, the Navy’s shipbuilding budget requests steadily increased and were – albeit at a slightly reduced level – consistently approved by the appropriations committees.

Naval arms control treaties had few lasting impacts on shipbuilding after 1936. The 1935-1936 London Naval Conference negotiations had provided an additional incentive for the United States to surge shipbuilding in 1934-1935 to enter the conference with a strong hand. However, this was one cause among many for the initial U.S. rearmament. Had the 1935-1936

\[\text{West, 489.}\]
\[\text{West, 490.}\]
\[\text{Levine, 310.}\]
\[\text{Levine, 489.}\]
London Conference obtained Japan’s consent to new naval limitations, U.S. shipbuilding would have been hampered afterwards in tonnage – but Japan was unwilling to be constrained.172 After 1936, U.S. shipbuilding steadily continued to pick up speed without tonnage limits.

The speed of U.S. rearmament and exceeding of treaty limits was spurred by the aggressive actions and major naval rearmament programs of Japan, Italy, and Germany. Senior naval officials like ADM. Leahy warned in January 1938 that these nations were “engaged in an extravagant naval building program… which must be taken into consideration by American’s sea defense.”173 FDR had been growing more concerned himself, as evidenced by his “three bandit nations” speech on October 5, 1937 denouncing – without naming – the future Axis powers.174 Nevertheless, FDR remained concerned about presenting himself as too aggressive. In response to the Panay incident, wherein Japanese planes attacked a U.S. gunboat in China during a broader attack on Chinese Nationalist forces, FDR resisted senior cabinet officials’ calls to respond forcefully.175

Vinson again took the lead in pushing forward naval shipbuilding. After steering the regular FY 1939 budget through Congress in January 1938 to provide funding for an overall Navy budget of $553 million, Vinson began to call for “a Navy second to none.”176 The Second Vinson Bill originated in a conference on January 28th with FDR and other congressional leaders. FDR went to Congress to ask for more naval shipbuilding expenditures for 1939 and requested a 20% increase in authorized tonnage above the treaty levels authorized by the Vinson-Trammell

172 Levine, 364.
176 Representative Vinson, speaking on H.R. 9218, on January 19, 1938, 75th Cong., 3rd sess., Congressional Record 83, pt. 1: 780.
Act.\textsuperscript{177} By 1938, the treaty system was a relic of the past and its limits had been broached by almost all major navies. FDR’s direct involvement was nonetheless a major development in the U.S. political climate and a marked changed from FDR’s distance from the Vinson-Trammell Act of 1934. After FDR’s call to action, Vinson immediately introduced H.R. 9218, the Second Vinson Bill.\textsuperscript{178}

In H.R. 9218, Vinson refused to take sides on the brewing aircraft carriers versus battleships debate which consumed many of his contemporaries. Rep. Gerald Boileau (Republican of Wisconsin) tried to amend the Second Vinson Bill to spend an equal amount of money on aircraft as battleships as part of a broader anti-battleship effort.\textsuperscript{179} Vinson simply said both aircraft and battleships are necessary and fought for the Navy to have sufficient numbers of both.\textsuperscript{180} This position was also held by many major shipbuilders, as both private shipyards (Bethlehem Quincy and Newport News) with the capacity to build an aircraft carrier could – and did – also build battleships.\textsuperscript{181} Nor was the supremacy of carriers in battle an accepted fact from 1933-1939.\textsuperscript{182} Vinson bullied through his committee hearings on the bill and brought the bill to the floor with the help of sympathetic House leadership. Despite impassioned speeches against the bill from liberal Democrats and isolationist Republicans, the bill passed 294-100.\textsuperscript{183}

Much as with the Vinson-Trammell Bill, voting on the Second Vinson Bill can be examined through the lens of the political gravity exerted by shipyards. As the first map below shows, supporters of the bill included both Democratic and Republican congressmen. The bill’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{177} Heinrich, 46.
\item \textsuperscript{178} U.S. Congress, House, Committee, \textit{Hearings on H.R. 9218}, 1937-1939.
\item \textsuperscript{180} Cook, 130.
\item \textsuperscript{181} Carroll, “US Interwar Shipbuilding Data.”
\item \textsuperscript{182} Kennedy, 58.
\item \textsuperscript{183} Cook, 138.
\end{itemize}
Democratic support came from across the country, with some Democratic naysayers concentrated in the isolationist and land-locked Midwest. Broad Democratic support for naval spending is not surprising given FDR’s influence over his own party. Interestingly, the bill’s Republican supporters were highly concentrated on the coasts. Looking at the second and third maps which focus on the Northeast, a fascinating trend is revealed: proximity to a naval shipyard is a key indicator of congressmen crossing party lines to support the bill. The Republican congressmen in New Hampshire and Massachusetts who voted in favor of naval spending were almost universally representing the districts that were within commuting range of shipyards, while the Republicans opposing the bill were generally outside of shipyard commuting range. While this dynamic has been described before in anecdotal terms by Levine, the below maps show visually and on a national scale the power of naval shipyards to influence their congressional representation’s voting patterns.

Voting on the Second Vinson Bill\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{184} “75th Congress House Vote 115 Member Vote Map," UCLA Department of Political Science, accessed December 3, 2023, https://voteview.com/rollcall/RH0750115. This map records the House vote on the Second Vinson Bill.
Voting on the Second Vinson Bill (Northeast Focus)\textsuperscript{185}

Commuting Distance to Shipyard (Northeast Focus)\textsuperscript{186}

\textsuperscript{185} Lewis, "75th Congress House Vote 115 Member Vote Map."

\textsuperscript{186} This map was generated by the author using congressional district data from Lewis et. al, Digital Boundary Definitions of United States Congressional Districts, 1789-2012. The map shows in black dots the locations of all shipyards in the Northeast that built naval vessels from 1930-1939. The map colors blue any congressional district within commuting distance – and therefore within the political gravitational pull – of these shipyards.
The Second Vinson Bill was arguably the final major naval acquisitions legislation of the resource-constrained era of interwar shipbuilding. The Second Vinson Bill authorized 46 ships, 22 auxiliaries, and 950 airplanes. It was the largest U.S. peacetime naval shipbuilding program to date, and the last major surface combatant authorization before the outbreak of World War II in Europe.  

While there are subsequent major shipbuilding bills signed while the United States itself was technically at peace, these were signed after the resource constraints that typify the 1933-1938 era had ended. By November 1938, polls showed that 88% of Americans thought the United States needed a larger navy and 53% said they would support raising taxes to pay for a larger military. The 1938 midterm elections further strengthened congressional support for an interventionist foreign policy that included major military spending. The era of resource constraints and political squabbling over limited shipbuilding funds was over, replaced by whole-of-nation efforts to prepare for wartime. The foundation for these preparations, however, was laid by the political compromises forged by the Navy, Congress, and industry from 1933-1938.

**Conclusion**

The conventional view of history portrays FDR as a great leader guiding the United States through one of the most turbulent times in its history. This perception has influenced how historians have written about naval shipbuilding policy. However, studying the politics of shipbuilding reveals that this leader-driven portrayal of policy formation is exaggerated. Self-interested domestic actors like congressmen and industry executives profoundly shaped U.S. interwar naval shipbuilding. In this messy, contentious, and occasionally even corrupt backroom

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187 Cook, 142.
188 Cook, 142.
dealing process they distorted the composition of the U.S. fleet and manipulated where Navy ships were produced. All of this pushed the Navy away from what could be thought of as the “military ideal” policy that the Navy might have preferred.

This is the frustration and excellence of democratic politics. The Navy welcomed and worked with these special interests via the loose Navy-Congress-industry alliance because these domestic actors provided key information and support which enabled a sustainable naval strategy. Grand strategy is the adaptation of inherently limited means to accomplish potentially unlimited ends. The Navy accommodated these domestic influences to forge a realistic, if not theoretically ideal, strategic position. Naval shipbuilding in the interwar years is a story of disparate actors making rational choices, using all available information, to build toward their ambitious goal of creating a navy second to none. In the end, the self-interested behavior of these players – naval officers, congressmen, and business executives – worked together to produce something greater than the sum of its parts. By tying geostrategy to parochial interests, they were able to build political support in Congress and across the country for massively expanding the Navy. Thanks to these efforts, the United States entered World War II with the nucleus of what would become a world-beating navy.

The policy outcomes generated by the cooperation of pro-Navy congressmen, business executives, and naval officers suggests that further study of the origins of the military-industrial complex (MIC) may prove fruitful. Historians have described the interwar years as laying the groundwork for the post-WWII MIC. As this thesis has shown, the interwar pro-shipbuilding coalition cut across many of the domains of the Cold War MIC and featured many of the same interactions, albeit in a less formalized manner. The scholarship on rearmament in the interwar

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190 Gaddis, 21.
191 Brenes, 10.
period would benefit greatly from having the rigorous tools of analysis from the study of the Cold War MIC formally applied to the dynamics of the 1930s. This could shed greater light on how military-industrial complexes develop over time and how policymakers can harness them to create positive outcomes.

The story of interwar shipbuilding remains relevant today. The United States is again facing an increasingly dangerous geopolitical climate, with rival naval powers like China challenging its control of the seas. In the past few decades, the United States has lost much of its remaining commercial and military shipbuilding capacity. The timeless dynamics of shipbuilding politics, as illuminated by the interwar years, can guide decisionmakers in thinking about whole-of-economy maritime mobilization in the event of great power conflict. Currently, policymakers are considering radical solutions such as off-shoring naval production to low-production-cost allies like South Korea and Japan. Naval advocates during the interwar period struggled to build a domestic political environment favorable to shipbuilding by spreading its economic and political benefits across the country. Modern efforts to consolidate shipbuilding capabilities have had the opposite effect by eroding the geographic reach of shipbuilding’s remaining political base. Offshoring naval production would accelerate this loss of political buy-in as shipyards in yet more districts lose their production contracts and become defunct. Shipbuilding can build its own political momentum – or it can fall apart when this momentum is squandered or deliberately given away. The world has changed since 1933, but it is worth remembering the lessons of the past.

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Bibliographic Essay

I was inspired to study the politics of naval acquisitions after seeing the impact of defense lobbying first-hand. The summer before I started the senior essay, I worked for a government relations firm. One of the firm’s clients built and repaired a notoriously poor class of ships for the United States Navy. I know very well that military necessity and qualifications are hardly the primary driver of what ships the Navy buys today. I could not help but wonder how much these same politicized dynamics affects that most-discussed of fleets, the United States Navy at the start of World War II. I therefore wanted to write a thesis about the influence of non-military factors (domestic politics, industrial lobbying, geopolitical concerns) on U.S. interwar naval spending. However, as I was unsure about how to best do this, my research was driven by continual exploration and changed focus several times.

I began my research exploration by reviewing secondary literature that addressed the geopolitics of the 1930s to put United States Navy (USN) acquisitions in a broader context. Robert Kagan’s excellent work *Ghost at the Feast* provided a clear overview of the United States’ place in the world from 1900-1941 and offered some details on the political constraints that FDR faced in passing legislation for national defense. Paul Kennedy’s *Victory at Sea* includes several chapters on the interwar years which offered an insightful geopolitical framing of naval issues and provided global comparisons for the USN. I next read a series of papers on FDR’s relationship with the USN from leading scholars, helpfully compiled by Edward Marolda in *FDR and the U.S. Navy*. This work was a good introduction to the historiographical debate about FDR’s complicated relationship with the USN. FDR is portrayed very differently by the various authors, either as a brilliant but micromanaging leader or as a poor manager who allowed his subordinates to clash without clearly elucidating his strategic vision.
The scholarship on FDR’s political constraints and his leadership role in naval policy led me to want to explore what these scholars were treating as more of a backdrop: the role of Congress and the shipbuilding industry itself. I hoped to contribute to the field by examining how external factors may have influenced or constrained FDR’s decision-making space. I began my study of congressional influences on shipbuilding by searching for secondary material. However, despite Congress’s role as the authorizer and appropriator for naval shipbuilding, most historical works on naval spending that I found focused instead on the developments within the Navy Department or the Navy as a part of FDR’s geostrategic planning. In these works, Congress was an inscrutable barrier to be overcome which would deny naval funds for murky political reasons. I thought Congress’s political backroom dealings deserved a closer look. A key work was Robert Levine’s *The Politics of American Naval Rearmament, 1930-38*. Levine primarily focused on the Navy and the New Deal administrative state but also offered some useful analysis of the Navy and Congress’s interwar interactions. Michael West’s Ph.D. dissertation, “Laying the Legislative Foundation: The House Naval Affairs Committee and The Construction of The Treaty Navy, 1926-1934,” also offered an excellent close analysis of one of the key bills of this period, the Vinson-Trammel Act, and was a useful jumping-off point for my own research.

To dive into the political calculus of the Congress, I examined archival records. I spoke with the librarians at the Library of Congress about how to best access the Navy budget documents and the archives of the relevant committees from the 1930s. With their advice, I was able to use digital tools (a mix of ProQuest Congressional for the *Congressional Record*, the St. Louis Fed’s repository of U.S. federal budgets, and Navy Department files from the FDR Presidential Library at Hyde Park) to explore congressional activity on naval shipbuilding.
Having identified key bills related to naval funding, I analyzed the *Congressional Record* to see voting records, amendments, and what language congressmen used when discussing naval bills. I found that, as the secondary literature had mentioned, congressmen in areas with shipyards tended to support naval spending bills with their votes and speeches. However, my research also yielded the insight that congressmen had highly tuned perceptions of whether their district would benefit from naval spending. I searched through the *Congressional Record* to identify examples of congressmen advocating for policies which would only benefit their own districts. I decided to examine data on naval ship contracting and construction – as well as Navy Department memos from the FDR Library – to see if their lobbying efforts had any impact, as this had not been conclusively shown in the literature.

To add further validity to my archival findings, I turned to quantitative methods and mapping. Combining several online data sources and cross-checking this data with contemporary primary source records on shipbuilding from the FDR Library, I made a database of every major combat ship built for the U.S. Navy from 1930-1940. The data included their date of contracting and keel laying as well as the location of the shipyard which built them. Using this database, I identified the 17 public and private shipyards that the Navy contracted with during this period and classified each by the types of ship it could build. I then contacted Professor Jeffrey Lewis at UCLA, who had published digitized mapping data of all the historical congressional district boundaries. With his advice on software, I taught myself how to make digital maps using the R coding language. Using Professor Lewis’ Congressional District repository and my own database, I mapped the shipyard locations onto the congressional district boundaries. In a key addition, I used a distance-finding algorithm to group all districts that were within commuting distance of a shipyard – and therefore, likely politically linked to these yards in the eyes of their
representatives – into a category called “shipyard influenced.” When comparing the maps of how different congressional districts voted on the Second Vinson Act to the map I generated of “shipyard influenced” congressional districts, the alignment was striking. The maps revealed that proximity to a shipyard was a major factor in Republicans crossing party lines to support the FDR administration’s navy budget proposals – another element discussed in some of the literature but not yet to my knowledge visualized or examined across the whole country.

The next major area of research I dove into was the role of industry. I was driven to look at this topic in part because of my summer job working in the Defense-Industrial Initiatives Group of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where I analyzed the work of present-day military contractors. Thomas Heinrich’s *Warship Builders* was an invaluable source for understanding naval construction in the 1930s. It painted a more nuanced picture of the political and economic dynamics of shipbuilding than Arthur Herman’s *Freedom’s Forge*, which is written like a love letter to industry executives. I also interviewed Vice Admiral David H. Lewis (ret.), who managed several DOD acquisition programs, is a naval historian, and leads a shipbuilding division at Leidos. He helped me understand the fascinating connections between the dynamics of acquisitions in the 1930s and issues facing the naval industry today. This spurred me to briefly touch on contemporary naval issues at the end of the thesis.

My research process has not been linear. I struggled to determine exactly what research question I wanted to answer. I considered studying FDR’s leadership via naval acquisitions, looking at U.S.-British relations through naval negotiations, and other variants exploring the same core subject area. I have also come to some unfortunate dead ends in my research. I had been fascinated by the story of the Soviet Union trying to acquire a U.S.-built battleship in 1937-1938 that was featured briefly in John Gaddis’ *On Grand Strategy*. I researched the story of the
Soviet battleship using primary and secondary methods, including diving into the State Department's Foreign Relations of the United States series. Sadly, I eventually realized that the Soviet battleship story just could not be made to fit into the scope of this thesis. I had also hoped to gain access to the Gibbs & Cox corporate archives, as they were the major naval designers in the interwar years who also happened to be the firm contracted by the USSR to design its battleship in 1937. However, despite helpful exchanges with members of the G&C corporate team, it seems they did not keep many records from the interwar period. I had also hoped to use the advertisements pages from 1930s editions of *Jane’s Fighting Ships* to identify naval subcontractors. Adding subcontractors to my map of naval shipyards would have more fully captured the political base of shipbuilding, but I ran into time and scope issues before I could complete this project. I also was disappointed to learn that several key votes taken in the Congress on certain naval spending bills were done as voice votes, wherein the way each member voted is not recorded. This hampered the breadth of my data-driven work.

The material I have explored has had a strong breadth of coverage and is deep in certain areas, but also suffers from some problems of ongoing historical uncertainty. I feel that the primary research I conducted in the *Congressional Record*, the FDR Presidential Library files, and the Foreign Relations of the United States series gave me great insights into the workings of complex institutions and the individuals who ran them. Unfortunately, it has been hard to develop the “characters” of key players to make the story more personal and grounded. I have been able to spotlight a few interesting people at different points but was not able to center them throughout the narrative. This is in part due to scope. As my focus is spread over six years and multiple institutions, the sheer number of players and the constant shifting of new officials into different roles makes character-driven storytelling difficult. I think this is perhaps a somewhat
unavoidable trade-off of not focusing exclusively on the big, omnipresent personalities like FDR or Representative Carl Vinson of the House Naval Affairs Committee.

I also think a weakness of my research is that it touches on many areas of ongoing historical debate – like FDR’s leadership style or legacy – without being able to fully dive into them. As a result, I chose sources which seemed to be the cutting edge or the best available interpretation, like Robert Kagan’s *Ghost at the Feast*, but this does mean some statements I rely upon as assumptions could be challenged by those subscribing to different views on the same history. Overall, given the broad scope of the project, I am proud of the insights my research has generated. Like every other history major I know, I can only wish I had more time to chase down every other lead or historical debate I ran into during this process.

Lastly, I would like to express my deepest thanks to the many people who made researching and writing this thesis possible. My advisor, Professor John Gaddis, was incredibly supportive and helpful throughout this process. He ensured that I connected my rather unlimited aspirations for this thesis to my time-limited means. Professor Paul Kennedy’s advice on my paper for his Origins of WWII seminar helped shape the intellectual currents that underpin this thesis. I would also like to thank my bosses at CSIS, Cynthia Cook and Greg Sanders, who could not have been more encouraging of my research over the past six months. They connected me with countless experts and helped shape the data-driven elements of this work. I would like to thank VADM. Lewis for offering his insights into my topic and the naval industry at large during our interview. And finally, my apologies to my family and the many friends who have endured hours of discussion of naval shipbuilding and my excited displays of almost imperceptibly different maps over the past year. It won’t happen again – for a while.