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# Fleet Street Colossus: The Rise and Fall of Northcliffe, 1896–1922

J. LEE THOMPSON

The political influence and power wielded by Alfred Charles William Harmsworth, Viscount Northcliffe, remains one of the lurid little secrets of British history. From the 1890s, Northcliffe used a formidable array of press weapons to bludgeon the ruling classes of Britain over a wide variety of national issues. Northcliffe's power reached its peak in the Great War and, over the intervening years, his important role has been largely overlooked in part because three years after the signing of the Versailles treaty the press lord was dead at age 57. This premature end ensured that the history of his turbulent times would be written by a long list of other notable figures, including Lloyd George, Winston Churchill and Lord Beaverbrook, most of whom were, to varying degrees, the targets of the press lord's stinging criticisms. It became convenient for his many opponents to forget just how influential and feared Northcliffe was, particularly between 1914 and 1918. Until recently Northcliffe's substantial role had gone unnoticed or else relegated to narrow studies of the press and propaganda.<sup>1</sup>

As the pre-eminent journalistic force in Britain, by 1914 Northcliffe controlled roughly 40 per cent of the morning, 45 per cent of the evening and 15 per cent of the Sunday total newspaper circulations.<sup>2</sup> By far the two most important weapons in his press arsenal were *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*.<sup>3</sup> Created by Northcliffe in 1896, within a few years the *Daily Mail* reached a million, mainly lower and middle-class, readers. The paper was the end product of more than a decade of press innovations that have come to be called the 'new journalism' and, as the most successful practitioners, the paper and its owner Alfred Harmsworth became the symbols of this new commercial style. The *Daily Mail* used interviews, photographs, and typographical features, such as bold headlines, to break up a page. The sub-editors were instructed to construct their stories of many brief paragraphs to 'explain, simplify and clarify'.<sup>4</sup> Though priced at only a halfpenny the *Daily Mail* distinguished itself from

<sup>1</sup> The most attention paid to Northcliffe has come in the many biographies published since William Carson's *Northcliffe. Britain's Man of Power* (New York, 1918). For the most recent assessment, see J. Lee Thompson, *Northcliffe. Press Baron in Politics* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> John M. McEwen, 'The National Press During the First World War: Ownership and Circulation,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, XVII (1982), 466–7, 470–1, 474.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*, the other mass circulation journals controlled by Northcliffe included the *Evening News* and the *Sunday Weekly Dispatch*. This unmatched collection of morning, evening and Sunday newspapers gave the Northcliffe press a strong daily presence in almost all news markets, from the elite political audience of *The Times* to the national readership of the *Daily Mail*.

<sup>4</sup> Reginald Pound and Geoffrey Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (1959), p. 200.

the competition by being printed on more expensive white newsprint, its front page devoted to advertisements, in the style of the penny journals. The paper deliberately courted the aspirations of a new readership who envisioned themselves 'tomorrow's £1000 a year men'.<sup>5</sup> In its pages attention shifted away from parliamentary politics, with abridgments of speeches rather than the traditional unbroken verbatim columns, now relegated to the pages of *Hansard*. The abridged leaders on parliamentary affairs appealed to the new voters created by the Third Reform Act of 1884 and the political power wielded from the offices at Carmelite House in the articles and editorials of the mass circulation *Daily Mail* are often overlooked in favour of the pronouncements of *The Times*.

Though in shaky financial condition when Northcliffe acquired controlling interest in 1908, *The Times* remained the most politically influential newspaper among the élite classes of Britain and continued to be viewed by foreign powers as a voice of official Government opinion.<sup>6</sup> By adding *The Times* to his newspaper regiments, the press lord gained control of what was considered to be a key organ of the British establishment, much to the fury of his Liberal critics. Many feared Northcliffe would destroy the paper that he had coveted for years. Instead, his reorganization at Printing House Square brought *The Times* up to date and, in March 1914, tripled sales from 50,000 to 150,000 copies by dropping the price from three pence to a penny. The paper was also left a large degree of editorial independence, in part because of the respect the new chief proprietor held for both *The Times* as a British institution and for its editor from 1912, Geoffrey Robinson (later Dawson).<sup>7</sup> However, after the acquisition of *The Times*, Northcliffe continued to use the *Daily Mail* as his personal voice to the masses of Britain, supporting conscription, army modernization and a stronger navy.

Alfred Harmsworth and his newspapers were also at the very centre of another phenomena of the time, the rise of the political press.<sup>8</sup> From the mid-Victorian period, British parties recognized the need for newspaper publicity. The press became a tool of party management, used to communicate with the public, foreign powers and other politicians. In the new age of mass politics, party funds often paid for expensive modern equipment, which printed an unparalleled volume of attractive and affordable news. Newspapers supported the party programs, as well as the strategies and personal aims of the politicians and their press allies. The influence of the press on the public has been questioned, but its strong effect on the parties and their leaders was clear. By the decade preceding 1914, a handful of newspaper proprietors, editors and reporters reached positions of unprecedented influence in the political decision-making process. Men such as C.P. Scott at the *Manchester Guardian*, W.T. Stead at the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Review of Reviews*, J.L. Garvin at the *Outlook* and the *Observer* and Lord

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (2 vols, 1984–6), I, 369.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the different segments of the British press up to 1914, see James D. Startt, *Journalists for Empire. The Imperial Debate in the Edwardian Stately Press, 1903–1913* (New York, 1991), pp. 6–7.

<sup>7</sup> The journalist Robinson changed his name to Dawson in July 1917 as a condition of an inheritance. He was a protégé of Lord Milner and a graduate of what is called Milner's South African 'kindergarten'. For Dawson, see John Evelyn Wrench, *Geoffrey Dawson and Our Times* (1955).

<sup>8</sup> For this see Koss, *Political Press*.

Northcliffe were consulted for their advice and counsel by the most powerful political leaders of the day.<sup>9</sup>

Two years before the creation of the *Daily Mail* Harmsworth had already forged a link with the Conservative party by saving one of its papers, the London *Evening News*, from falling into Liberal hands. Alfred's Liberal brother Harold (the future Lord Rothermere) had been hesitant to become associated with it, although the bargain price appealed to him. Alfred, not as inclined to Liberalism as the rest of the family, forged ahead. The Harmsworth publishing team transformed the *Evening News* into a prototype for their future newspaper endeavours, substituting new type, a more open format, simplified news reporting and a woman's column. New advertisers soon flocked to the publication. The rehabilitation of the *Evening News* enabled Alfred Harmsworth to report this success for the Conservative party to its leader, Lord Salisbury, a few months before he replaced the Liberal Lord Rosebery as prime minister.

Though his sympathies were Conservative, and he made his one try for parliament in 1895 under that flag, Alfred Harmsworth refused to follow any party line. His political philosophy combined tory populism, Disraelian imperialism and a firm belief in the 'Anglo-Saxon future'. Consequently, some aspects of the Liberal Unionist and Liberal imperialist programs also appealed to the budding press magnate and were reflected in his newspapers. The *Evening News* promoted Joseph Chamberlain's idea of a bigger and better Britain and Harmsworth, for a time, was captivated by Rosebery's Liberal imperialism. He described the *Daily Mail* to Rosebery, his neighbour in Berkeley Square, as 'independent and imperial'.<sup>10</sup> At a shareholders' meeting soon after, Harmsworth announced that he had no use for 'old-fashioned Conservatism, which was as dead as old-fashioned Radicalism'. He described his press as 'Unionist and Imperialist', continuing that his papers supported 'the unwritten alliance of the English speaking peoples' and the 'advocacy of a big navy' to protect Britain's interests against threats, particularly from Germany.<sup>11</sup>

Alfred Harmsworth's success brought him into contact with the political and social *élite*. He was presented to the prince of Wales and made the acquaintance of dukes. However, though he had attained a ducal income by 1900, as a *nouveau riche*, soiled by his self-made money, he was never accepted by the ruling class of his time. He in turn failed to be ensnared by the allure of 'smart society'. Though he was elected to memberships in clubs such as the Carlton and Beefsteak, he had little patience for or skill at drawing room repartee. The historian Alfred Gollin noted perceptively that because of his power, his influence, his ability, and most of all his refusal to conform to their standards, the established classes were hostile to Northcliffe because he came from a different background, because he had clawed his way to the top, because he was required, as an outsider, to have recourse to different methods when he sought to clutch at authority and grasp for power. The ordinary rulers of Britain were ruthless enough but a man of Northcliffe's type had to be harder, tougher, more openly brutal, or he would perish. He had no traditional base to stand upon. The essence of his

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 1, 3, 9; David Ayerst, *Garvin of the Observer* (1985), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 220. For a brief time it appeared Rosebery might be 'the man' of imperial vision for the nation (and Harmsworth) to follow, but his indecision disillusioned the many prospective adherents.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 230–1.

success lay in the fact that he always avoided the ordinary course; he had beaten his way to a prominent position by novel means, and he was not prepared to abandon them.<sup>12</sup>

The most aristocratic among the ruling class especially viewed the young press magnate as hungry for power. Lord Esher, a confidant of kings and an influential figure in these years, described him as 'a clever vain man – not very intelligent about anything except organization and money-making; but full of aspirations for power'.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the Harmsworth press was recognized by all but the most hidebound reactionaries among the Conservative *élite* as too valuable a party asset to alienate completely. Salisbury has been credited with the disdainful remark that the *Daily Mail* was 'run by office boys for other office boys', however, the marquess had been one of the many who sent a telegram of good wishes to its owner on the publication of the first edition.<sup>14</sup> The problem lay in how to control a man like Alfred Harmsworth, who grew too wealthy to need party funding and began to steer an independent course. In 1902 Salisbury's nephew, Arthur Balfour, succeeded to the prime ministership. Balfour liked to pretend that he did not pay attention to the press, but he realized full well the value of its publicity. After the first edition of the *Daily Mail* was published, he had sent a private note to its owner praising the 'new undertaking'.<sup>15</sup> The careers of these two very different men continued to intersect through the following years. In June 1904 Balfour rewarded Alfred Harmsworth's impressive achievements, and his monetary and newspaper support of the party, with a baronetcy. A year and a half later Sir Alfred was further repaid with a peerage, becoming Baron Northcliffe.<sup>16</sup> Balfour's premiership was plagued by the tariff reform controversy, which dominated the political landscape. Northcliffe supported the idea of imperial preference and tariff protection; however, his early ardour for Joseph Chamberlain's plan for imperial unity cooled in the face of the widespread unpopularity of the 'stomach taxes' on food which were an integral part of the scheme and which spelt electoral disaster for the Unionist party.<sup>17</sup>

With the Liberals in power after 1906, Northcliffe and the Conservatives feared military preparations would be neglected. The pressing need for readiness against the Teutonic menace became a constant theme in the press lord's publications and correspondence.<sup>18</sup> Liberal press critics accused him of exaggerating the German threat and spreading fear to sell newspapers. They labelled the *Daily Mail* efforts as

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Gollin, *Proconsul in Politics. A Study of Lord Milner in Opposition and Power* (New York, 1964), p. 575.

<sup>13</sup> Esher to Maurice Brett, 29 Oct. 1901, in *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher*, ed. Maurice Brett (4 vols, 1934–8), I, 311.

<sup>14</sup> Koss, *Political Press*, I, 368–9. This phrase was reputedly a play on the newspaper described in Thackeray's *Pendennis* as 'written by gentlemen for gentlemen'.

<sup>15</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62153, Balfour to Harmsworth, 7 May 1896.

<sup>16</sup> The name is taken from a part of the coast near his favourite home Elmwood, St Peters, Kent.

<sup>17</sup> A lack of enthusiasm in Canada, which the press lord considered the key to any plan of imperial co-operation, also limited his support. The best efforts of the most influential Conservative journalist of the period, J. L. Garvin, failed to persuade the press lord to pledge his newspapers wholeheartedly to the tariff reform cause. For this see Alfred Gollin, *The Observer and J. L. Garvin 1908–1914. A Study in Great Editorship* (1960).

<sup>18</sup> The warnings had begun years before in an 1891 article, 'Why the Germans come to England', in *Answers*, the periodical which made the success of the Harmsworth publishing empire.

merely 'scaremongering'. To build a British counter to the German 'nation in arms', Northcliffe and his publications supported the efforts of Lord Roberts, president of the National Service League, in his unsuccessful agitation for compulsory service.<sup>19</sup> In 1908 and 1909 the *Daily Mail*, aided by J. L. Garvin at the *Observer* and Robert Blatchford of the *Clarion*, attacked the chancellor of the exchequer, David Lloyd George, and his radical budget plans which, they felt, did not include enough funding for the navy.<sup>20</sup> The *Daily Mail* demanded in February 1908 to be told whether Britain was going to 'surrender her maritime supremacy to provide old age pensions?'<sup>21</sup> The newspaper's owner visited Germany the next year, ostensibly to see a specialist about his worrisome eyesight, but also personally to appraise the situation. He reported to H.W. Wilson, on the *Daily Mail* staff, that 'every one of the new factory chimneys here is a gun pointed at England'.<sup>22</sup> Aided by inside information provided by Sir John Fisher, the controversial first sea lord, that year's newspaper campaign culminated in the 'Naval Scare' of 1909, considered the high-water mark of pre-war scaremongering.<sup>23</sup>

During the 1909 controversy the press lord was first introduced to Lloyd George, who was to prove both an ally and foe in the following years. This noteworthy encounter came in the house of commons on 3 August 1909, with the intermediary being Northcliffe's brother, the Liberal M.P., Cecil Harmsworth.<sup>24</sup> On this occasion, which one historian described as the beginning of 'an important but uneasy association between the two men', Lloyd George gave the keen motorist Northcliffe a preview of the Development of Roads Bill before it was submitted to parliament.<sup>25</sup> This application of his famous charm helped to temper the press attacks on Lloyd George. Besides the Welshman's powers of persuasion, another factor at work was Northcliffe's sensitivity to swings in public opinion. His own intuition, as it had over the tariff reform issue, brought him to dampen his attacks on the people's budget and also brought a break with Garvin.<sup>26</sup>

Despite continuing differences between the press lord and the chancellor of the exchequer, particularly over issues on national defence, during the Agadir crisis of 1911, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* supported Lloyd George's Mansion House warning to Germany. Otherwise, in this crisis, the Northcliffe press was subdued in tone, in part because the fleet was not believed to be ready for war. Two years later Northcliffe and his press also supported Lloyd George and others against the charges

<sup>19</sup> For views of both the compulsory service issue and the role of Lord Roberts, see R. J. Q. Adams and Philip P. Poirier, *The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain, 1900–1918* (1987).

<sup>20</sup> Northcliffe owned the *Observer* (one of the most respected London Sunday newspapers) briefly, from 1905 to 1911. Blatchford was a former army sergeant, whose *Clarion* reflected a unique blend of socialism and jingo patriotism.

<sup>21</sup> A. J. A. Morris, *The Scaremonger. The Advocacy of War and Rearmament 1896–1914* (1984), p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 367.

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, afraid too much was being spent on the army, had been feeding information to Garvin since 1904. After the outbreak of the war in 1914, Blatchford published the 1909 articles he wrote for the *Daily Mail* as *Germany and England. The War That Was Foretold*.

<sup>24</sup> John Grigg, *Lloyd George. The People's Champion 1902–1911* (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 214–15.

<sup>25</sup> Bentley Brinkerhoff Gilbert, *David Lloyd George, a Political Life. The Architect of Change 1863–1912* (Columbus, Ohio, 1987), p. 387.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388; Morris, *Scaremongers*, p. 205.

of official impropriety stemming from the Marconi shares scandal.<sup>27</sup> The Welshman sent thanks to the press lord for 'the chivalrous manner in which you have treated the Advocate-General and myself over the case . . . I feel grateful for a great kindness done to me for I know the power you wield'.<sup>28</sup> Northcliffe replied that 'I adopted my line about this Marconi business because five minutes' lucid explanation showed me that it was the fairest one . . . I am not personally hostile to you . . . You gave me some shrewd blows and I replied to them . . . A weekend glance at the French and German newspapers, convinces me that this country has more urgent business before it than personal or party issues'.<sup>29</sup>

In the immediate pre-war years the attention of the public and the newspapers stayed close to home with continual crises arising from striking workers, marching suffragettes, or the unrest over Irish home rule, both in Ireland and parliament. Though sympathetic to working men and to women, the press lord decried violent methods and strikes. He flatly opposed the extremes of the suffragettes. Northcliffe did not wish to see bloodshed in his native Ireland, but leaned toward Sir Edward Carson and the Ulster cause against a forced settlement.<sup>30</sup> His high regard for the M.P. for Trinity College, Dublin, carried on into the war years. In the spring and summer of 1914 the United Kingdom seemed literally on the verge of disintegration as the impending passage of Irish home rule threatened civil war in Ulster and sympathetic political revolt at home. Northcliffe made a personal visit to Ulster, ostensibly to ensure the quality of the press coverage of the emergency, in which he met with Irish leaders.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, attempted to find a peaceful solution for the Irish unrest, which would also keep his Liberal government in office. Asquith's 'wait and see', compromising style maddened his opponents, including Northcliffe, who wanted decisive action.<sup>32</sup> The prime minister was not an admirer of newspapers, even those of sympathetic persuasion.<sup>33</sup> Unquestionably,

<sup>27</sup> The British government had let a contract to the British Marconi Company to build a series of transmitting stations to link the empire. Reports soon surfaced that the attorney general, Sir Rufus Isaacs (later Lord Reading), Lloyd George and others had traded in the shares of the American Marconi Company, which was not, at least directly, involved in the contract.

<sup>28</sup> House of Lords R.O. (H.L.R.O.), Lloyd George Papers, C/6/8/2: Lloyd George, 24 Mar. 1913.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, C/6/8/1a: Northcliffe to Lloyd George, 24 Mar. 1913. The 'lucid explanation' apparently came from Winston Churchill.

<sup>30</sup> Northcliffe was born at Chapelizod, near Dublin, on 15 July 1865. His family moved to London while he was an infant. Though from the south, Sir Edward Carson was the leader of the Irish Unionist party. Ever since the 1801 Act of Union failed to include catholic emancipation for Ireland, the mostly catholic southern portion of the country had carried on a running battle with England which culminated in the late 19th century with several failed attempts to carry home rule for Ireland. In the spring of 1914, yet another Home Rule Bill finally was about to be passed, to the extreme displeasure of the protestant Ulster counties of Northern Ireland who wished the union to continue. In the summer of 1914 both sides were armed and, according to some accounts of the period, perhaps at the brink of civil war.

<sup>31</sup> Pound and Harnsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 456.

<sup>32</sup> The Conservative journalist L. S. Amery wrote anonymously of Asquith that: 'for twenty years he had held a season ticket on the line of least resistance and has gone wherever the train of events has taken him, lucidly justifying his position at whatever point he has happened to find himself . . . And if Civil War breaks out . . . next month, or the month after, he will still be found letting things take their course, and justifying himself with dignity, conciseness and lucidity.' 'The Home Rule Crisis', *Quarterly Review*, CCXXI, No. 440 (1914), 276.

<sup>33</sup> Two years before he had remarked that 'the Liberal press was written by boobies for boobies'. Koss, *Political Press*, II, 191.

Asquith reserved a special antipathy for the *parvenu* Northcliffe, whose newspapers had condemned the Liberals throughout their eight years of power. The premier wrote on 10 July to his confidant Venetia Stanley that

Northcliffe, who has been spending a week in Ulster, and has been well fed up by the Orangemen with every species of lurid lie, has returned in a panic. The Master [Lord Murray of Elibank] . . . is anxious that I should see him. I hate & distrust the fellow & all his works . . . so I merely said that if he chose to ask me directly to see him, & he had anything really new to communicate, I would not refuse. I know of few men in this world who are responsible for more mischief, and deserve a longer punishment in the next.<sup>34</sup>

However contemptuous Asquith was of Northcliffe, he did meet with him about the Irish situation. Another letter to Miss Stanley on 13 July revealed this clandestine conference at Lord Murray's London flat, reporting that the press lord had 'been doing Ulster, & is much struck with the Covenanters, whom he regards . . . as a very formidable tho' most unattractive crew. I talked over the question . . . with him, & tried to impress upon him the importance of making *The Times* a responsible newspaper.'<sup>35</sup> Three days later, the *Daily Mail* editorial, 'Time to Make Peace', reflected a change in course brought on by Asquith's plea and Northcliffe's own reading of the situation. Still, much to the premier's annoyance, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* of 20 July revealed his secret plan to bring the king into the Irish settlement.<sup>36</sup> As the king's exertions toward an Irish settlement failed, the crisis in Europe for the first time merited extensive space in the *Daily Mail*.<sup>37</sup>

The July 1914 European crisis caught all of Britain, including the foreign office, Northcliffe and his newspapers, by surprise. On the last day of July 1914 the *Daily Mail* proclaimed that the British people were united behind the king and the government and that the opposition leaders Bonar Law and Carson had announced they would support the nation.<sup>38</sup> However, in a first discordant note even before the entrance of Britain into the conflict, the paper also made it clear that, in its opinion, it was the government's previous neglect of defence that has brought England to this perilous position. Most portentously, a '*Daily Mail* eyewitness' reported the 'Shelling

<sup>34</sup> H. H. Asquith, *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, ed. Michael and Eleanor Brock (Oxford, 1982), pp. 99–100. Asquith's biographer, Roy Jenkins, considers these letters to Miss Stanley to be the most truly representative record of Asquith's innermost thoughts.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100–1. The Covenanters were the supporters of Sir Edward Carson who had signed the Ulster Covenant on 28 Sept. 1912 and pledged to use any methods necessary to maintain the union of Ulster and Britain against attempts to force home rule.

<sup>36</sup> He wrote to Venetia Stanley that 'it is annoying on every ground, & puts the whole Liberal press in the worst of tempers: they are as jealous as cats & naturally resent the notion that *The Times* has been preferred to them'. H. H. Asquith, *Letters*, ed. Brock and Brock, p. 107.

<sup>37</sup> Its report on the 'Austrian Note' told of the demands on Serbia of 'no more plots' and a reply by the following day concerning the other Austrian conditions, including the suppression of societies in Bosnia which had preached revolt. In the writer's opinion, Serbia was not likely to comply, even in the face of seven Austrian army corps marshaled for battle on the frontier. A section giving the text of the note and background on the crisis again predicted that Russia would support Serbia and pointed out that President Poincaré and Premier Viviani of France happened to be in St Petersburg at present for consultation.

<sup>38</sup> 'A United Front', *Daily Mail*, 31 July 1914.



of Belgrade' in the first of countless news stories from the war fronts that would follow in the next four years.

The owner of the *Daily Mail* expected an immediate German attack on Britain from the air, followed by invasion.<sup>39</sup> His pre-war entreaties for a stronger British air defence had fallen largely on deaf ears and he feared that the country lay literally at the enemy's mercy. The 5 August appointment of Lord Kitchener as secretary of state for war was viewed as a triumph for the Northcliffe press.<sup>40</sup> Press idolization of Kitchener over the preceding decades, in which Northcliffe's newspapers had been prominent, made any other choice unthinkable.<sup>41</sup> Whatever Asquith privately might have wished to do, public and press opinion forced him to the 'hazardous experiment' of bringing a soldier into the cabinet to direct the war.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the fanfare on his behalf, Kitchener found dealing with the press distasteful and felt his reputation had been sullied by past reports, both in the aftermath of Omdurman and during the Boer War. Once in place at the war office, he throttled Northcliffe's 1914 plans for battlefield coverage of the war by proclaiming a total ban on correspondents.<sup>43</sup> To control news further a British Press Bureau was set up under F.E. Smith (later Lord Birkenhead), a Conservative M.P.<sup>44</sup> Smith remarked that 'Kitchener cannot understand that he is working in a democratic country. He rather thinks he is in Egypt where the press is represented by a dozen mangy newspaper correspondents whom he can throw in the Nile if they object to the way they are treated.'<sup>45</sup> Rather than authorize press correspondents, it was announced that army news would be supplied by an official 'Eyewitness', Major Ernest Swinton.<sup>46</sup> Soon after, the national attention was diverted to the battle of the Marne where the misfortunes of the allies were reversed. This victory convinced Northcliffe that Germany would be defeated provided Britain could be persuaded to exert her full strength.<sup>47</sup> The press lord spent the next four years working to open the eyes of the nation to the war's grim realities.

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed examination of Northcliffe in the war, see J. Lee Thompson, *Politicians, the Press and Propaganda. Lord Northcliffe and the Great War* (Kent, Ohio, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> One biographer credited 'the persistence of Lord Northcliffe and the insistence of the public' with making sure Kitchener was appointed. Sir George Arthur, *Lord Kitchener* (3 vols, New York, 1920), III, 3. Charles à Court Repington, military correspondent of *The Times*, called for his installation at the war office on 3 August and had been campaigning for Kitchener to be named imperial commander since 1902. W. Michael Ryan, *Lieutenant-Colonel Charles à Court Repington. A Study in the Interaction of Personality, the Press, and Power* (New York, 1987), p. 147.

<sup>41</sup> For one example, see G. W. Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartoum* (1898). Steevens, a sometimes *Daily Mail* correspondent, died of enteric fever in the Boer War.

<sup>42</sup> Earl of Oxford and Asquith, *Memories and Reflections, 1852–1927* (2 vols, Boston, 1928), II, 30; Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (1964), p. 342.

<sup>43</sup> George Cassar, *Kitchener. Architect of Victory* (1977), pp. 350–1; J. M. McEwen, "'Brass Hats" and the British Press During the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, XVII (1983), 45–6.

<sup>44</sup> Lord Riddell, *Lord Riddell's War Diary 1914–1918* (1933), p. 9. The Press Bureau, staffed with overaged officers, opened in a decrepit admiralty building in Charing Cross on 10 August.

<sup>45</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62974, ff. 155–7: Riddell diary, 25 Aug. 1914.

<sup>46</sup> Swinton's name was not announced, but soon became common knowledge. He was recommended to Kitchener by Churchill and was later better known as a father of the tank. For his account of the assignment see Major General Sir Ernest Swinton, *Eyewitness. Being Personal Reminiscences of Certain Phases of the Great War, Including the Genesis of the Tank* (1932).

<sup>47</sup> R. Macnair Wilson, *Lord Northcliffe* (Philadelphia, 1927), p. 205.

The completely novel circumstances of a stalemated total war which dragged on for long and bitter years without significant victories to sustain the national will or to bolster its leaders brought many well-documented changes to Britain. One significant shift, which has gone largely unexamined, was the major rise in the power of the press, particularly in regard to its relationship with the political leaders, who feared defeat and groped for any path to victory. Northcliffe, already a force to be reckoned with before 1914, became the chief beneficiary of the wartime intensification of press influence.<sup>48</sup> During the war years the press lord intruded himself into British decision-making concerning the most urgent issues that faced the nation, from recruiting and press censorship in 1914 to propaganda and the approaching peace settlement in 1918. He was perhaps more in touch with and concerned by the 'Home Front' during the war than any other figure, and the *Daily Mail* targeted this reservoir of future political power. Northcliffe particularly objected to what he considered the muddle that plagued Britain's wartime governments and saw it as his duty as a British patriot to prod the wobbling politicians to new efforts and at all costs to ensure that the war would be won.

Well aware of his unique position, Northcliffe made his press support available to the British government, but at a price—a place in deciding the life and death issues involved in winning the war. The politicians paid this levy only grudgingly and in the end withdrew as quickly as possible from what they considered something of a partnership with the devil. Asquith failed to come to an arrangement with his chief newspaper critic, but his successor, Lloyd George, was much more canny in his relations with the press. This was in part by necessity, as the Welshman was a premier without a party and the press formed one of the pillars which kept him in office. Lloyd George brought several newspaper lords into his government, including Beaverbrook, Rothermere and Northcliffe. Only a few notable figures, such as Austen Chamberlain, openly attacked what they considered the undue and corrupting influence on Lloyd George of Northcliffe and his brethren. The great majority, fearful of the power of the press in the novel circumstances of the war, kept silent.

Before the war had progressed many months, Northcliffe's absolute frustration with Kitchener over army censorship was overtaken by a more vital issue: the dangerous shortage of shells brought on by the war secretary's stubborn adherence to old methods of procurement.<sup>49</sup> By March 1915 providing high explosive shells for the British army overshadowed all other considerations.<sup>50</sup> Because he was directing a global war and had to protect the British empire, Kitchener was one of the few army figures amenable

<sup>48</sup> In his personal chronicle of the conflict, Winston Churchill, hardly a friend of Northcliffe, wrote of the press in the Great War that 'no account which excluded its influence would be true'. *The World Crisis, 1916–1918* (2 vols, 1927), I, 246.

<sup>49</sup> Rather than try new channels of ordering and procurement, Kitchener continued to support the unimaginative methods of his master-general of ordnance, Sir Stanley Von Donop, who was responsible for munitions supplies. Some attempts have been made to rehabilitate Kitchener's reputation against what has been seen as a bias toward Lloyd George's version of events. See Cassar, *Kitchener*, and Peter Fraser, 'The British "Shells Scandal" of 1915', *Canadian Journal of History*, XVII (1983), 69–86.

<sup>50</sup> The need for an increased supply of munitions had become apparent to the British by October 1914. That month a shells committee, including Lloyd George, had been created to examine and propose solutions to the problem. The shortage of heavy artillery was also examined. R. J. Q. Adams, *Arms and the Wizard. Lloyd George and the Ministry of Munitions* (1978), p. 19.

to a diversion of men and munitions away from the western front.<sup>51</sup> Russian pleas for assistance in early 1915 made him even more open to Winston Churchill's admiralty plan to breach the Dardanelles, especially if, as Churchill insisted, troops would not be required. After the scheme failed, Kitchener's decision to reinforce the Dardanelles, rather than face a humiliating withdrawal, infuriated the British commander in France, Sir John French, who continued to plead for resources.<sup>52</sup> Since the first months of the war French had complained about shortages, which often forced miserly rationing of shells. The battle of Neuve Chappelle (10–13 March) once again demonstrated the futility of using shrapnel shells against heavily entrenched German positions and underlined the lack of high explosive shells.<sup>53</sup> Faced with an unsympathetic war office, French appealed for outside help, including politicians and the press.

For Northcliffe, this munitions muddle exemplified the failure of the 'wait and see' Liberal administration to organize the nation for total war. Even before Neuve Chappelle, he was in contact with Sir John French about the problem. A 3 March letter expressed the hope that the field marshal would shortly receive the munitions for his 'great enterprise'.<sup>54</sup> French and Northcliffe also agreed that the division of British forces created by the Dardanelles expedition was lamentable and the press lord promised the field marshal that his newspapers would not 'cease to urge the sending of men to your army'.<sup>55</sup> The failure of the naval bombardment to breach the straits on 18 March added to the criticism of the government and exacerbated the shells problem. Kitchener had already broken the silence and admitted his worries over munitions in the house of lords on 15 March 1915, yet he told Asquith two weeks later that he would resign if another shells committee was appointed to look into the matter.<sup>56</sup>

After one of many visits to the front, Northcliffe ordered his newspapers to step up the pressure on the government.<sup>57</sup> The *Daily Mail* called for the publication of French's Neuve Chappelle dispatches and blamed the government that 'did not see the war coming' for the mounting casualties because it failed to 'see that shells would be wanted in such quantities'.<sup>58</sup> Based on conversations with French, Kitchener

<sup>51</sup> David French, *British Strategy and War Aims 1914–1916* (1986), pp. 80–3.

<sup>52</sup> Field-Marshal French's fear that Kitchener would take personal command in France further complicated the situation. It had been arranged that the war secretary was also serving field-marshal with seniority. Richard Holmes, *The Little Field-Marshal, Sir John French* (1981), p. 275; Valentine Williams, *World of Action* (Boston, 1938), p. 242.

<sup>53</sup> Kitchener's frugal habits led him to call the use of shells at Neuve Chappelle 'recklessly extravagant'. Philip Magnus, *Kitchener. Portrait of an Imperialist* (1959), p. 332.

<sup>54</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62159, ff. 47–9: Northcliffe to French, 3 March 1915. French dispatched Colonel Brinsley Fitzgerald, his secretary, to England for discussions with his newspaper ally while Repington crossed to Flanders in order to concentrate British attention on the 'real battle-line'. Valentine Williams, a *Daily Mail* war correspondent, was sent to write the story of Neuve Chappelle. His article was not published until 19 April. He and Repington visited French as his 'private guests' to circumvent the rules against correspondents.

<sup>55</sup> Imperial War Museum, French papers: Northcliffe to French, 20 Mar. 1915.

<sup>56</sup> Magnus, *Kitchener*, p. 334.

<sup>57</sup> In addition to Field-Marshal French, Northcliffe also met with General Joffre, France's army commander. The conference with Joffre increased the press lord's dissatisfaction with his government's prosecution of the war.

<sup>58</sup> *Daily Mail*, 13 Apr. 1915.

assured Asquith that the supply of shells was adequate. Eager to reveal the wickedness of Northcliffe, the prime minister declared at Newcasttle on 20 April 1915 that there was not a word of truth in statements 'that the operations ... of our army ... were being crippled, or at any rate, hampered, by our failure to provide the necessary ammunition'.<sup>59</sup> In response, *The Times* and *Daily Mail* asked how Asquith's declaration could be reconciled with statements by Lloyd George and Kitchener.<sup>60</sup> The former's revelations prompted Northcliffe to warn French that he would soon be held responsible for the failures.<sup>61</sup>

This advice to French plainly revealed Northcliffe's role in the 1915 'Shells Scandal' two weeks before the 14 May newspaper revelations of Charles à Court Repington, the military correspondent of *The Times*, usually marked as its high point. It also places the episode into the larger strategic controversy. Soon after the battle of Festubert began on 9 May, Kitchener notified an already frustrated Sir John French that 20,000 rounds (20 per cent of his reserve) were to be earmarked for the Dardanelles.<sup>62</sup> This development, coupled with failure on the battlefield, led French to share with Repington the war office correspondence over the shells.<sup>63</sup> His 14 May account in *The Times* of the failed attack five days before on the Aubers Ridge charged that 'the want of an unlimited supply of high explosives was a fatal bar to our success'.<sup>64</sup> The article was the culmination of months of newspaper demands for more shells and a reorganization of the country's munitions production.

The shells controversy was also one of the factors which forced the creation of a coalition government in May 1915.<sup>65</sup> In the reorganization, at a minimum Northcliffe wished Lloyd George to replace Kitchener at the war office.<sup>66</sup> When it became apparent Kitchener would remain, the press lord felt he had to take drastic action.<sup>67</sup> Driven by his fear for the nation and his personal grief over the recent loss

<sup>59</sup> *Daily Mail*, 21 Apr. 1915; H. H. Asquith, *Letters*, ed. Brock and Brock, p. 540; George Cassar, *Asquith As War Leader* (1994), p. 88.

<sup>60</sup> The premier told his confidant Venetia Stanley, who praised his speech, 'I don't care a twopenny damn what anyone else thinks about it – let alone Northcliffe & his obscene crew. I don't think we shall hear much more now on this particular line of attack, as after a very curious rapprochement between K & L1. G ... the latter was allowed – for the first time – to give a number of most convincing figures to the House yesterday.'

<sup>61</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62159, ff. 67–9: Northcliffe to French, 1 May 1915.

<sup>62</sup> Magnus, *Kitchener*, p. 335.

<sup>63</sup> At the same time he sent Fitzgerald and his A.D.C., Captain Frederick Guest, to London to show the same material to Lloyd George, Andrew Bonar Law and Arthur Balfour. Holmes, *Little Field-Marshal*, pp. 287–8; Magnus, *Kitchener*, p. 336.

<sup>64</sup> Repington had previously pointed out the shells problem on 27 April. After the 14 May disclosure, he claimed not to have known about Northcliffe's correspondence with French. Repington's biographer, W. Michael Ryan, thinks this possible. *Repington*, p. 155.

<sup>65</sup> The historian John Grigg finds credible Repington's claim in *The First World War 1914–1918* (2 vols, Boston, 1920), I, 39, that *The Times* piece was also the final straw which prompted Lloyd George, already furious at being misled by Kitchener, to inform Asquith he could not go on in the government. *Lloyd George. From Peace to War, 1912–1916* (1985), p. 248.

<sup>66</sup> This was apparently Lloyd George's first aim as well; however, in the face of Kitchener's tremendous popularity he soon confined himself to taking control of munitions.

<sup>67</sup> 'I don't care what they do to me, the circulation of the *Daily Mail* may go down to two and *The Times* to one – I don't care', he told W. G. Wilson. 'The thing has to be done! Better to lose circulation than to lose the war.' Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, pp. 477–8.

of a favourite nephew, Lucas King, in battle, Northcliffe composed the 'Tragedy of the Shells – Lord Kitchener's Grave Error' for the 21 May *Daily Mail*. The piece was an open indictment, charging that 'Lord Kitchener has starved the army in France of high explosive shells' and had compounded the error by ordering antiquated shrapnel shells, useless in trench warfare, despite repeated warnings that 'the kind of shell required was a violently explosive bomb which would dynamite its way through the German trenches and entanglements and enable our brave men to advance safely'. Northcliffe went on that the 'kind of shell our poor soldiers have has caused the death of thousands of them' and, incidentally, had 'brought about a Cabinet crisis and the formation of what we hope is going to be a National Government'.

This editorial had exactly the opposite effect from that which Northcliffe wished. An affronted nation condemned the press lord and rose as one in defence of Kitchener. *Daily Mail* circulation and advertising plummeted and papers were burnt in the street and at the stock exchange. The army also rallied to the war secretary. From France, General Haig wrote to Kitchener's secretary, Colonel Oswald Fitzgerald, how 'thoroughly disgusted we all are here at the attacks which the Harmsworth reptile press have made on Lord Kitchener'.<sup>68</sup> Northcliffe's army ally, Sir John French, was aghast at the newspaper assault. Though he had wished to publicize the munitions shortage in defence of his own role, he worried that he would be held responsible. It was already widely considered that his disclosures to Repington were most disloyal.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, after the press attack, Sir John's relations with Northcliffe cooled.<sup>70</sup> Battlefield blunders later in the year led to his being replaced as commander-in-chief by Sir Douglas Haig. Although Kitchener remained in place at the war office, Lloyd George successfully took on the new job of minister for munitions, with the whole-hearted support of Northcliffe and his newspapers.

In response to charges in the house of commons by John Dillon, an Irish Nationalist M.P., that the actions of the *Daily Mail* had led to the downfall of the government, the paper responded on 9 June that 'what caused the formation of the new Government was the revelation that our men were hampered by the lack of an unlimited supply of high explosive shells ... not any articles in the *Daily Mail*'. Nevertheless, the newspaper campaign Northcliffe carried out against Asquith and various members of his government from the beginning of the war to May 1915 must be given some credit for shaping the new situation. It has been suggested by several historians that the press campaign over the shells cleared the way for Lloyd George and the new ministry of munitions.<sup>71</sup> If there was a 'conspiracy' to unseat Asquith, the historian Bentley Gilbert has written, it was Northcliffe that began it, not Lloyd George.<sup>72</sup> Although

<sup>68</sup> He continued that past indiscretions in *The Times* by Repington had cost lives and that in any other country those responsible would have been shot. The National Archives (Public Record Office), Kitchener papers, PRO 30/57/53: Haig to Fitzgerald, 24 May 1915.

<sup>69</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62975, f. 211: Riddell diary, 16 May 1915.

<sup>70</sup> For example, the salutation 'Dear Sir John' had become 'Dear Sir John French'. French's lengthy correspondence and personal discussions with Northcliffe and Repington constitute conclusive evidence of his role in the press campaign. To protect his position, the commander-in-chief undoubtedly used the shells shortage as a screen for his own blunders.

<sup>71</sup> Adams, *Arms and the Wizard*, p. 35; Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 480; *The History of the Times*, IV, pt. 1, 275.

<sup>72</sup> Gilbert, *David Lloyd George. Organizer of Victory*, p. 192.

not the most important factor, continuing press revelations in the months leading up to May 1915 fostered a climate of unrest which made a government change possible, and, when added to the continuing military setbacks, inevitable.

Over the summer of 1915 it became increasingly apparent that Northcliffe had been accurate in his attack on Kitchener.<sup>73</sup> The press lord's newspaper circulations and personal prestige rebounded at the same time the war secretary's stock plummeted, particularly among the politicians, with whom he had never had fond relations. Winston Churchill later wrote of this enhanced stature:

The furious onslaughts of the Northcliffe Press had been accompanied by the collapse of the Administration. To the minds of the public the two events presented themselves broadly as cause and effect. Henceforth Lord Northcliffe felt himself to be possessed of formidable power. Armed with the solemn prestige of *The Times* in one hand and the ubiquity of the *Daily Mail* in the other, he aspired to exercise a commanding influence on events. The inherent instability and obvious infirmity of the First Coalition Government offered favourable conditions for the advancement of these claims. The recurring crises on the subject of conscription presented numerous occasions for their assertion.<sup>74</sup>

The *Daily Mail*, which now declared itself '*THE PAPER THAT REVEALED THE SHELL TRAGEDY*', began to call for compulsion during the spring press agitation over munitions. Northcliffe believed conscription to be the fairest course and the one that would prove Britain's resolve to her allies and forestall France and Russia from making a separate peace with Germany. Lloyd George shared this view and both men believed there must be a more vigorous effort to mobilize the nation's resources. To that end the press lord fed information to the Welshman, whom he saw as a dynamic alternative to Asquith.<sup>75</sup> The two men also shared the belief that some sort of compulsory national service must be instituted.

The final months of 1915 marked the death throes of British voluntarism. By October 1915 recruiting was almost exhausted. Asquith and Kitchener managed to convince Lord Derby to lead a final voluntary push to demonstrate to the working classes that all alternative methods had been tried. Derby was a great landed aristocrat, a remnant of a previous era, whose record in recruiting stood second only to Kitchener's. On 5 October 1915 he was put in charge of what would prove to be the last government effort to raise the men needed by the army before resorting to compulsion.<sup>76</sup> Since the spring of 1915 Northcliffe had been in touch with Derby on manpower questions. Though the press lord wanted conscription, Derby's pledge to

<sup>73</sup> Holmes, *Little Field-Marshal*, p. 275.

<sup>74</sup> Churchill, *The World Crisis*, I, pp. 250–1.

<sup>75</sup> In August his intelligence resources obtained information which Lloyd George requested about Swedish iron and coal going to Germany. A flow of censored letters from the front continued as well. H.L.R.O., Lloyd George Papers, D/18/1/27: Northcliffe to Lloyd George, 19 Aug. 1915; see extract of a letter of an English officer at the front censored by Press Bureau dated 15 June 1915, *ibid.*, D/18/1/13.

<sup>76</sup> Under the 'Derby Scheme' all men between the ages of 18 and 41 whose names appeared on the recent National Register would be asked either to enlist or to 'attest' their willingness to serve with the armed forces when called. Adams and Poirier, *Conscription Controversy*, pp. 112–15, 119–20; Randolph S. Churchill, *Lord Derby. King of Lancashire* (New York, 1959), pp. 187, 194.

seek out the remaining unmarried men prompted him to offer his assistance to this final voluntary effort which both likely believed would ultimately fail. Their goal was to supply badly needed men for the army, by whatever method possible, and they realized that the campaign brought conscription closer, no matter the result. The 18 October *Daily Mail* profiled Derby and congratulated him for his 'Single Men First' declaration. Northcliffe wrote to him 'I am going to help your scheme as much as I can – and I think I can help it.'<sup>77</sup> Derby gladly accepted the offer.

Derby's 'Great Campaign' proved a failure. Despite the best efforts of many people, including Northcliffe, it ultimately produced only 340,000 men, well short of the goal of 500,000. The disappointing results made it evident that voluntarism could no longer fill the manpower needs of the nation. Also, for the government to keep its pledge to the married, compulsion would have to be aimed first at single men.<sup>78</sup> In the ensuing weeks of political turmoil over this issue, Northcliffe stayed in close touch with Lloyd George, to the decided discomfort of many of those around the minister for munitions. C.P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, recorded that on Sunday, 12 December, he met Northcliffe and his wife before lunch at Walton heath, Lloyd George's residence. Scott agreed with Garvin of the *Observer*, who felt the Welshman had 'suffered from his recent intimate association with Lord Northcliffe'.<sup>79</sup> A cabinet crisis, which included a resignation threat from Lloyd George if compulsion was not brought in, came to a climax in the last few days of December. Kitchener agreed at last that unmarried men should be conscripted and a bill to that effect passed in January 1916. Asquith once again proved his political skill by holding together the coalition – with the sole resignation of the home secretary, Sir John Simon, who had more than once in the previous year attempted to have the government rein in or prosecute the Northcliffe papers.<sup>80</sup> The *Daily Mail* declared 'The End of the Voluntary System. And Sir John Simon.'<sup>81</sup>

The following spring Northcliffe campaigned to extend compulsion to married men, supporting the position of Sir William Robertson, the chief of the imperial general staff (C.I.G.S.), who called for action on the manpower question. The *Daily Mail* accused the government of 'Fiddling While Rome Burns.'<sup>82</sup> In this latest political crisis Asquith once again conceded and survived in office.<sup>83</sup> The 3 May *Daily Mail* hailed 'Compulsion At Last.' The next month the problem of Lord Kitchener was

<sup>77</sup> The same letter listed several suggestions: stop emigration to the colonies and the escape of men to Ireland and Jersey; shame men into the ranks by requiring an armlet to be worn (under penalty of law) which would identify their status; advertise the scheme, especially in the provinces; have a definite statement made by the cabinet that if the scheme fails, compulsion is inevitable; and finally, tell 'more truth', so that young men cannot say, 'What is the use of all this boresome drilling only to find the war is over.' Times Archive, Northcliffe Papers, WDM/2/98: Northcliffe to Derby, 20 Oct. 1915.

<sup>78</sup> Churchill, *Lord Derby*, pp. 201–2.

<sup>79</sup> *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott 1911–1928*, ed. Trevor Wilson (Ithaca, N. Y., 1970), p. 160. Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's secretary and mistress, wrote in her diary that the 'chief thing that these Liberals objected to was D.'s [Lloyd George] association with Lord Northcliffe ... for Northcliffe is not trusted'. *Lloyd George. A Diary by Frances Stevenson*, ed. A. J. P. Taylor (1971), p. 90.

<sup>80</sup> Adams and Poirer, *Conscription Controversy*, pp. 135–8. See also the 27–30 December *Daily Mail*.

<sup>81</sup> *Daily Mail*, 6 Jan. 1916.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 Apr. 1916.

<sup>83</sup> Compulsion was extended to all able-bodied men between 18 and 41 in May 1916.

settled by the fortunes of war. On hearing the news that Kitchener's cruiser had been lost, Northcliffe reportedly proclaimed, 'Providence is on the side of the British Empire after all.'<sup>84</sup> Lloyd George succeeded as secretary for war in July 1916. Maurice Hankey, secretary of the cabinet war committee, recorded in his diary that Northcliffe and Churchill were among the first to call at the war office.<sup>85</sup>

Robertson and Haig made a powerful military combination with which Lloyd George had to contend. The C.I.G.S. fed information to Repington in support of his western strategy and the idea that politicians should not meddle in army affairs.<sup>86</sup> The commander-in-chief was more resistant to newspaper aid. Since his experience in the Sudan in 1898 with Kitchener, Haig had felt only disdain and revulsion for the press. He likened Sir John French's 1915 alliance with the newspapers and Northcliffe to 'carrying on with a whore'.<sup>87</sup> The Somme campaign, however, marked a new direction in Haig's relations with the press, which, he realized, could be useful in explaining that the campaign was not a failure, despite the dreadful human wastage.<sup>88</sup> Northcliffe's second 1916 trip to the front, three weeks into the battle, marked his first substantial discussions with Sir Douglas, who recorded in his diary that he was favourably impressed with the press lord's 'desire to do his best to help win the war. He was most anxious not to make a mistake in anything he advocated in his newspapers, and for this he was desirous of seeing what was taking place. I am therefore letting him see everything and talk to anyone he pleases.'<sup>89</sup>

Enthralled both by Haig and by the improved conditions he saw on his visit, Northcliffe pledged his complete support.<sup>90</sup> He promptly sent the new war secretary a glowing report of a demoralized enemy and renewed British confidence. He urged Lloyd George 'to spend at least two weeks with the army . . . You will find yourself in the midst of an organization which . . . is as well nigh perfect as it can be.'<sup>91</sup> The Welshman did not agree. He viewed the Somme as a more costly repetition of the Neuve Chappelle and Loos failures and he aimed to reduce the carnage in France and Flanders – if necessary by diverting troops elsewhere or holding them in Britain. Against the advice of the C.I.G.S., Lloyd George called for more troops for Arabia and the Balkans, particularly for the support of Romania, which had joined

<sup>84</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (1965), p. 58.

<sup>85</sup> Hankey diary, 8 July 1916, quoted in Stephen Roskill, *Hankey. Man of Secrets* (3 vols, 1970–4), I, 283. Hankey distrusted Northcliffe as an enemy of the government and felt Lloyd George's close association with him very unwise.

<sup>86</sup> McEwen, "'Brass-Hats' and the British Press', pp. 51–2.

<sup>87</sup> Gerard De Groot, *Douglas Haig, 1861–1928* (1988), p. 193.

<sup>88</sup> McEwen, "'Brass-Hats' and the British Press', p. 52; De Groot, *Haig*, pp. 258–60.

<sup>89</sup> Duff Cooper, *Haig* (New York, 1936) p. 109. Although Northcliffe later stated that he did not know Haig before this visit and Pound and Harmsworth called this their first meeting, General Charteris later wrote that the two men first met in 1915 while Haig was commander of the First Army in France. John Charteris, *Field-Marshal Earl Haig* (New York, 1929), p. 155; National Library of Scotland (N.L.S.), ACCS. 3155/97: Haig diary, 21 July 1916.

<sup>90</sup> His diary of the visit reported that Haig 'showed me his plans. Each time I see him I am convinced of his qualities. We talked of the wobble of politicians.' Harmsworth Archive (H.A.), Northcliffe papers: 2 Aug. 1916, 'Lord Northcliffe's Visit to the War'.

<sup>91</sup> H.L.R.O., Lloyd George papers, E/2/21/1: Northcliffe to Lloyd George, 6 Aug. 1916. At Northcliffe's request, the war secretary had Arthur Lee forward a copy of this letter to Robertson. King's College, London, Liddell Hart Centre (L.H.C.), Robertson Papers, I/35/70/1: Lee to Robertson, 10 Aug. 1916.



the allies in August and whose position was dire.<sup>92</sup> Northcliffe supported the generals. He advised Sir Philip Sassoon, Haig's private secretary, that, 'You are dealing with people, some of whom are very thick-skinned, others very unscrupulous, but all afraid of newspapers. It was urgently necessary that they should be told . . . "Hands off the army"'.<sup>93</sup> On 4 October Northcliffe had Repington assure Robertson of his support. The following day's *Daily Mail* editorial, 'Comb Out or 45. The Chief of Staff Speaks Out', backed Robertson's call for 'more men now'.

Five days later the strategic differences between the secretary for war and his military advisors developed into an open branch. Completely out of patience, on 10 October an angry Lloyd George called for an allied conference to save Britain's prestige and honour and to keep Rumania from becoming another disaster like the fall of Serbia.<sup>94</sup> Robertson notified the Welshman in writing that if his views were ignored he 'could not be responsible for conducting this very difficult war under these conditions'.<sup>95</sup> In this crisis Northcliffe personally offered the C.I.G.S. his aid and urged him to take his case to the prime minister. The chief of staff replied, 'The Boche gives me no trouble compared with what I meet in London. So any help you can give me will be of Imperial value'.<sup>96</sup> After he heard from Repington that Robertson could not sleep because of Lloyd George's latest 'interference', Northcliffe made a personal visit to the war office in which he told J.T. Davies, Lloyd George's secretary, that he could no longer support the Welshman and that if further interference took place he was going to lay matters before the world in the house of lords and in his newspapers.<sup>97</sup> The press lord also secured support in the Commons, through his brother Cecil, and sent word to Asquith that he could not support the government unless the military chiefs were allowed a free hand.<sup>98</sup> Coining the alliterative slogan 'Ministerial meddling means military muddling', the 13 October *Daily Mail* reminded the country of the Antwerp and Gallipoli blunders and declared that the government should limit itself to supplying men. A week after his visit to the war office, Northcliffe reported to Sassoon, 'I have heard nothing since, because I am in the country, but Geoffrey Robinson tells me that General Robertson says that matters are better. I also heard that Winston has been going about libeling me in extra vigorous style, which is a good sign . . . I am a believer in the War Secretary of State to a very great extent, but he is always being egged on by Churchill . . . and other little but venomous people'.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>92</sup> David Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (1983), pp. 108–9.

<sup>93</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62160, f. 35: Northcliffe to Sassoon, 2 Oct. 1916.

<sup>94</sup> Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, p. 110.

<sup>95</sup> L.H.C., Robertson Papers, I/19/7A: Robertson to Lloyd George, 11 Oct. 1916.

<sup>96</sup> Robertson to Northcliffe, 11 Oct. 1916, quoted in *The Military Correspondence of Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, December 1915–February 1918*, ed. David R. Woodward (1989), p. 91.

<sup>97</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62160, ff. 45–8: Northcliffe to Sassoon, 18 Oct. 1916. Lord Beaverbrook's more melodramatic version of this story has Northcliffe telling Davies 'You can tell him that I hear he has been interfering with strategy, and that if he goes on I will break him.' *Politicians and the War* (1960), p. 323. Frances Stevenson's diary entry for 12 October recorded a version closer to Northcliffe's. *Lloyd George: A Diary by Frances Stevenson*, ed. Taylor, p. 115.

<sup>98</sup> Repington, *The First World War*, II, pp. 359–61.

<sup>99</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62160, ff. 45–8: Northcliffe to Sassoon, 18 Oct. 1916. Robinson was editor of *The Times*.

Lloyd George used Northcliffe's outburst as an opportunity for a counterstroke against Robertson over the issue of official leaks to the press.<sup>100</sup> His reply to Robertson's ultimatum stated that he refused to play the part of a 'mere dummy' and made particular reference to Northcliffe's confrontation with Davies.<sup>101</sup> Though the war council did agree to limit communications with the press, Lloyd George found himself fighting a losing battle over strategy. He was forced to bide his time in his conflict with the generals and their press allies. Haig, despite mounting criticism over his seeming disregard of British lives on the Somme, survived as commander. Northcliffe's support helped ensure that he stayed in place. Asquith was not so fortunate.

Largely because of his feud with the Welshman over strategy, during November 1916 Northcliffe was shut out of the inner circle of political intrigue which aimed to replace or move aside the prime minister, but at the end of the month Geoffrey Robinson worked to involve him.<sup>102</sup> In the first days of December, Robinson's chief regularly visited the war office while, at the same time, Lloyd George attempted to persuade Asquith to agree to a small war committee. *The Times* of 2 December 1916 called the political crisis 'The Turning-point of the War' and demanded a small cabinet which would rid the country of 'worn and weary' men such as Balfour, Sir Edward Grey and Lords Crewe and Lansdowne. Another meeting between the Welshman and Northcliffe resulted in *Evening News* placards which proclaimed 'Lloyd George Packing Up!' On Sunday 3 December Lloyd George and Asquith met and, in the war secretary's view at least, came to a suitable agreement about a small war committee. Unlike Northcliffe, the Welshman did not wish Asquith to resign. That day's *Weekly Dispatch* revealed 'Mr. Lloyd George's Proposal for a Small War Council', the interviews and meetings of the day before and the positions of Asquith, Balfour and the Conservative leader, Andrew Bonar Law. Cecil Harmsworth recorded in his diary that 'Alfred has been actively at work with L1.G. with a view to bringing a change.'<sup>103</sup>

Other newspapers may have been better informed in the first week of December, but none carried the weight of *The Times*, whose editorial of the fourth, 'Towards Reconstruction', contained delicate information which seemed to point to Lloyd George as the source. This was widely believed to have been written by Northcliffe, but was actually penned by Geoffrey Robinson with information from Sir Edward

<sup>100</sup> Lloyd George. *A Diary by Frances Stevenson*, ed. Taylor, p. 117.

<sup>101</sup> L.H.C., Robertson Papers, I/19/6A: Lloyd George to Robertson, 11 Oct. 1916.

<sup>102</sup> Robinson visited Arthur Lee, one of Lloyd George's parliamentary secretaries in 1916, with the aim of patching up the differences between their chiefs. The efforts of Robinson and Lee succeeded; however, Lee complained at the time to his wife, Ruth, of the danger of being caught between Lloyd George and Northcliffe, that 'It is all very well this going about like a Dove of Peace, with an olive branch in one's beak, but one is apt to get taken for a bloody pigeon and get shot by both sides'. 'A Good Innings': *The Private Papers of Viscount Lee of Fareham*, ed. Alan Clark (1974), p. 158. In *Politicians and the War*, p. 360, Beaverbrook claimed that he also tried to bring Northcliffe and Lloyd George together around this time, but with no success.

<sup>103</sup> 3 Dec. 1916 entry, in Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 513. Apparently on 3 December other matters, including a possible lucrative writing contract for Lloyd George, were discussed as well, although both men later denied this. See J. M. McEwen, 'Northcliffe and Lloyd George at War, 1914-1918', *Historical Journal*, XXIV (1981), 664.

Carson.<sup>104</sup> Regardless, the press lord must have seen and approved it in advance. *The Times* disclosure, written with what has been called a 'calculated offensiveness', discussed the ongoing negotiations and revealed the prime minister's capitulation, in the face of 'Mr. Lloyd George's stand', to create a war council.<sup>105</sup> Infuriated, the prime minister wrote to Lloyd George that: 'Such productions as the first leading article in today's "Times," showing the infinite possibilities for misunderstanding and misrepresentation of such an arrangement as we discussed yesterday, make me at least doubtful of its feasibility. Unless the impression is at once corrected that I am being relegated to the position of an irresponsible spectator of the War, I cannot go on.'<sup>106</sup> Lloyd George responded that he had not seen *The Times* article, but hoped Asquith would: 'not attach undue importance to these effusions. I have had these misrepresentations to put up with for months. Northcliffe frankly wants a smash. Derby and I do not. Northcliffe would like to make this or any other arrangement under your Premiership impossible. Derby and I attach great importance to your retaining your present position – effectively. I cannot restrain, nor I fear influence Northcliffe.'<sup>107</sup>

After consulting with Reginald McKenna and others hostile to Lloyd George, the prime minister decided to test his strength by attempting to reconstruct the government, rather than give in to the Welshman's demands. Before Asquith called on the king, Edwin Montagu, the minister of munitions, found him very angry about the 'Northcliffe article'. Montagu had seen the press lord at the war office the day before *The Times* assault, assumed he had obtained the information from Lloyd George, and almost certainly shared this with the prime minister.<sup>108</sup> He urged Asquith 'not to be put off by the Northcliffe article; he had never paid any attention to newspapers, why should he give up now because of Northcliffe?' Asquith replied that it was because the article 'showed quite clearly the spirit in which the arrangement was going to be worked by its authors'.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Wrench, *Geoffrey Dawson*, p. 140. Robinson flatly stated that, without Northcliffe's knowledge or advice, he wrote the editorial after talking to Carson, although Lloyd George may well have been Carson's source. Tom Clarke reported in *My Northcliffe Diary*, p. 95, that Northcliffe wrote a two-column article on the political crisis, giving some the impression he had written *The Times* piece. This may be a 4 December *Daily Mail* article called for 'A War Council That Will Act'.

<sup>105</sup> J. M. McEwen, 'The Press and the Fall of Asquith', *Historical Journal*, XXI (1978), 881.

<sup>106</sup> Bodl., Asquith MS 31, f. 20: Asquith to Lloyd George, 4 Dec. 1916.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Montagu Memo, quoted in Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 448.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* On 5 December Montagu again pleaded with the prime minister not to give a victory to Northcliffe. He listed three factors which had led to Asquith's changed position. First was Northcliffe and *The Times* article, then the advice of McKenna, Runciman and Grey and, finally, disagreements with Lloyd George as to personnel – particularly Carson. About Northcliffe he wrote: 'It is lamentable to think that you should let him achieve the victory that he has long sought. He wanted to drive you out; he alone is fool enough not to believe in you. His efforts were resisted by Lloyd George, by Bonar Law, by Derby, by Carson, by Robertson. Using information that he had no right to obtain, he sees a chance of success, takes it and is successful. He published that article to wreck the arrangement and you have had to let him do it. I do not say that this was avoidable, but I say that his personal victory in this matter is a matter of the deepest possible chagrin to me.' The plea continued, 'Lloyd George sent for me this afternoon and I spent some time with him . . . he wanted to work with you. He did not want a victory for Northcliffe.' Bodl., Asquith MS 27, f. 186: Montagu to Asquith, 5 Dec. 1916.

Despite the advice of Lloyd George and Montagu, Asquith continued in a stubborn attempt at reconstruction which was destined to fail. He resigned on 5 December and the king turned first to Bonar Law, as leader of the opposition, to form a government. When this proved impossible, Lloyd George, who had overcome his own reluctance in the face of Asquith's affronted change of heart, began negotiations with the disparate political groupings whose support was needed to form a government. *The Times* described the situation as being 'in the melting pot'.<sup>110</sup> During a visit to the war office, Lloyd George asked Robinson to tell Northcliffe 'that it did not help him when the *Daily Mail* and the *Evening News* assumed too intimate a knowledge of his actions and intentions. Also that too much vituperation of individuals was not so useful as insistence that the whole system of Government was unsound and could not win the war.'<sup>111</sup> Cecil Harmsworth recorded on 6 December that: 'the London Liberal daily papers are full of denunciations of Northcliffe, whom they regard as the arch-wrecker of the Asquith Govt. There is truth in this of course, but not all the truth'.<sup>112</sup>

While a war of headlines was carried out, the political negotiations continued. In Northcliffe's view, the foreign office and its blockade policy were in need of new leadership. He was disturbed to hear that Balfour might be removed from the admiralty – only to be made foreign secretary. The *Daily Mail* and the *Evening News* called for the exclusion of Balfour and his cousin, Lord Robert Cecil, from the new government. The press campaign failed. Lloyd George needed Balfour to cement Unionist support and he accepted the foreign office. Lord Robert remained in place as under-secretary and blockade minister. The press lord, however, was not completely without influence. He was instrumental in ensuring that the businessman Sir Albert Stanley was appointed to the board of trade. Northcliffe also aided Lord Devonport in attaining the new position of food controller. The historian Alfred Gollin viewed Milner's inclusion in the inner war cabinet as, in part, a friendly gesture to the press lord.<sup>113</sup> In order to form a government, it was necessary for Lloyd George to give assurances concerning his relationship with Northcliffe. He promised the Unionists that the press lord (and Churchill) would not be included. One of Lloyd George's

<sup>110</sup> *The Times*, 6 Dec. 1916.

<sup>111</sup> Bodl., Dawson MS 66, ff. 181–4; Dawson diary, 5 Dec. 1916.

<sup>112</sup> Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 514. A. G. Gardiner's *Daily News* and other Liberal journals had trumpeted warnings of Northcliffe's evil influence from the beginning of the cabinet crisis. The 2 December edition foresaw doom for 'any Government which lives by the sanction of a press dictator'. On the 5th it stated that the enemy was 'looking for a rupture not less cheerfully than Lord Northcliffe is working for one, and if that gentleman were the ally of the enemy he could not be doing more priceless service to them than he is doing at this moment'. A 7 December *Daily Chronicle* article, 'The Press Vendetta, Tyranny and Torture', claimed Asquith had been too lenient in allowing the yellow press to attack him and his allies and now, the 'new Ministry, however constituted, will have to deal with the Press menace as well as the submarine menace; otherwise Ministries will be subject to tyranny and torture by daily attacks impugning their patriotism and earnestness to win the war'.

<sup>113</sup> A page of photographs showed the outgoing ministers with accompanying captions across their chests, including Asquith ('Wait and See'), Sir Edward Grey ('Belgium, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Rumania') and Reginald McKenna ('German Banks Still "Winding Up"'). Though Sir John Simon had left office over conscription in early 1916, he was also displayed with a 'No Compulsion, Down with *Daily Mail*' slogan. R. B. Haldane ('My Spiritual Home is Germany') and Churchill ('Antwerp & Gallipoli') were also presented. Northcliffe ordered this feature and congratulated the newspaper's picture department, with which he was often at loggerheads, on the results. Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary*, p. 98.

pledges to a Labour party delegation was that he and his government would not give large newspapers preferential treatment and that he would treat 'Lord Northcliffe in exactly the same way as he would treat a labourer'.<sup>114</sup> On 7 December Lloyd George became prime minister and the next day moved to 10 Downing Street. The new five-member war cabinet comprised the prime minister, Lords Milner and Curzon, Bonar Law and a Labour party representative, Arthur Henderson.

From the evidence it appears that Northcliffe and his newspapers should be given more credit than they have generally received for the demise of the Asquith government in December 1916. Whether or not the press lord wrote *The Times* article of 4 December, the belief of his involvement proved decisive. Asquith's anger over the supposed collusion with Northcliffe combined with Reginald McKenna's advice to provoke the prime minister to fight the humiliating terms Lloyd George presented. In the longer view, more important than *The Times* piece was the 18-month campaign the Northcliffe press had carried out against the government, practically acting as the opposition since the spring 1915 shells agitation. Unlike the many voices that deserted Asquith only at the end, their condemnations in early December were only marginally more strident than they had been since early in the war. The cumulative effect of Northcliffe's personal and newspaper campaign against the government helped to wear down Asquith's resistance and left him a bitter man who, in a speech to a Liberal party meeting at the Reform Club on 8 December, openly admitted that *The Times* article had been a precipitating factor. Asquith's refusal either to compromise with Northcliffe (as Lloyd George did) or to have the government muzzle his attacks finally proved his undoing.

The new prime minister found himself in the precarious position of ruling without a party. The support of the press, and particularly Northcliffe, became central to his political survival. Despite hurt feelings over not being at least offered a position in the government, Northcliffe was ready to aid the new regime. His belief that Lloyd George was the best available man outweighed their differences over strategy. The 9 December *Daily Mail* proclaimed the new government, 'A Ministry of Action At Last' and revelled in 'The Passing of the Failures'.<sup>115</sup> The same day's liberal *Daily News* countered that the country must choose between newspaper 'Placards or Parliament'. The editor, A.G. Gardiner, noted, however, that there was 'one advantage which Mr. Lloyd George's Government will have over its predecessor. It will be subject to a friendly organized and responsible criticism which will aim at sustaining it and not destroying it. The fall of the late Government and most of its failure were due to the absence of such a criticism. It became the target . . . of a ruthless and uncritical press campaign which appealed directly to the passions of the mob against the authority of Parliament.' Northcliffe instructed his employees at Printing House Square, 'We must do our best to get the new ministers known, and thus strengthen their position in the country.'<sup>116</sup> How long the press lord would continue his support became the question.

<sup>114</sup> Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, pp. 521, 526.

<sup>115</sup> Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary*, p. 98.

<sup>116</sup> *History of The Times*, IV, pt. 1, 307.

As the war ground on in 1917, the army came under increased criticism for the horrendous casualty toll and its perceived failure to use civilian and dominion talent. However, with Lord Derby at the war office, military strategy remained securely in the hands of Robertson and Haig. Northcliffe visited G.H.Q. on New Year's day and heard Haig complain again of the drain of men and material from France.<sup>117</sup> The press lord promptly travelled to Paris, where he met with Lloyd George and Lord Milner and threatened to turn his papers against the government.<sup>118</sup> He reported to Haig on 5 January that although he had confidence in Milner and thought the latter held sound views on strategy, he was 'determined to keep Lloyd George on right lines or force him to resign the Premiership'.<sup>119</sup> Another letter to Haig revealed that Northcliffe also had doubts about Sir William Robertson. 'You call him Wully', he told Haig, 'I think "Wooley" [sic] would suit him better because he is not firm enough'.<sup>120</sup> In mid-January Northcliffe and Repington rejoiced at news from Robertson that, at the Rome allied conference, General Cadorna and the Italians refused to send any men to Salonika in the face of strong French pressure.<sup>121</sup> This decision, at least temporarily, halted efforts to reinforce the Balkans. Northcliffe continued his personal and newspaper support of Robertson and Haig until May 1917 when, to the total surprise (and dismay) of many, he agreed to head the British war mission to the United States.<sup>122</sup>

Northcliffe was well aware that by sending him to America the prime minister hoped to muzzle the criticism of his newspapers and their support of the army. Before he left, the press lord instructed his editors to 'back the soldiers' and the *Daily Mail* kept Haig's name before the public.<sup>123</sup> Sending Northcliffe to the U.S.A. did secure Lloyd George a partial respite; however, during the press lord's five-month absence the stand-off between the premier and his contumacious generals continued, partly because continuing press support made it politically impossible to replace them. Northcliffe made a major and little appreciated contribution to the British war effort

<sup>117</sup> N.L.S., ACCS. 3155/97: Haig diary, 4 Jan. 1917; *Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914–1919*, ed. Robert Blake p. 189.

<sup>118</sup> He also urged Clemenceau, the opposition leader, not to allow Briand, the French premier, to divert more men to the Balkans. N.L.S., ACCS. 3155/97: Haig diary, 4 Jan. 1917; *Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, ed. Blake, p. 189; McEwen, "'Brass-Hats" and the British Press', pp. 57–8.

<sup>119</sup> N.L.S., Haig papers, ACCS. 3155/97: Haig diary, 5 Jan. 1917; Blake, *Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, p. 189.

<sup>120</sup> N.L.S., ACCS. 3155/97: Haig diary, 7 Jan. 1917. Haig commented that, 'there seems to be some truth in this opinion because the British forces are not yet being concentrated at the decisive front, i.e., France'. *Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, ed. Blake p. 190.

<sup>121</sup> Repington, *First World War*, I, pp. 428–30.

<sup>122</sup> Rumours had been circulating since the beginning of the year that he might be asked to go on some sort of American mission, and in April an offer apparently was made by the prime minister, who wished both to harness Northcliffe's talents and to contain his criticism. Northcliffe's long held belief that the war would be won with American aid, coupled with his frustration at not being able to take a more active role in the war, made him receptive to Lloyd George's blandishment that he was the only man suitable for this 'vital' mission. In a 9 June 1917 circular letter home, Northcliffe reported that six weeks before he had refused an offer from Lloyd George to go to America as ambassador to replace Sir Cecil Spring Rice. H.A., Northcliffe papers.

<sup>123</sup> Henry Wickham Steed, *Through Thirty Years* (2 vols, 1924), II, 140–1. For example, the 9 June editorial celebrated 'Haig's Triumph, the Victory at Messines'.

in the U.S.A., not only in his official duties co-ordinating supplies and loans, but also as an unofficial propagandist for the British.<sup>124</sup>

Soon after Northcliffe returned to London from the United States on 12 November 1917, battlefield developments in France, after appearing bright, once again floundered. In the first few days following the 20 November push at Cambrai, the British army had made impressive gains. Two days later, the *Daily Mail* called the assault a 'Splendid Success' and a full-page headline proclaimed, 'HAIG THROUGH THE HINDENBURG LINE.' Unfortunately, by the time Northcliffe once again visited G.H.Q. the gain was lost, although Haig apparently did not share this information. A national celebration of ringing church bells prompted by overenthusiastic reports of victory soon turned into anger and disillusionment at the suppression of news on the following reversals.<sup>125</sup> Cambrai proved the final straw which broke Northcliffe's previous solid support of Robertson and Haig. He complained to Sassoon that, 'in some quarters it is asked, what is the use of sending out men to be "Cambrai-sed"'.<sup>126</sup> The press lord's pent-up frustration with Robertson since the beginning of the year was now reflected in a newspaper campaign aimed at the C.I.G.S. and his strategy of attrition. *The Times* of 12 December featured the article, 'A Case for Inquiry', which called for the punishment of those culpable for Cambrai. The next day the *Daily Mail* followed suit. Though accused of attacking the commander-in-chief, Northcliffe attempted to shield Haig's reputation. For example, the *précis* the writer Lovat Fraser sent Northcliffe of his article, 'Things Hidden', which called for the truth about Cambrai, noted that Fraser had 'completely eliminated points which tell against Haig'.<sup>127</sup> This blow aimed at Robertson (but still perceived by many as an assault on Haig) described western strategy as, 'the strategy of the stone age' and called the theory of attrition 'ridiculous'.<sup>128</sup> Articles in the following week asked more questions about Cambrai and, for the first time, accused the general staff of blaming the politicians or a lack of men for their own failures.<sup>129</sup>

The prime minister wished to replace both Haig and Robertson and was incensed at Northcliffe's attack because he correctly feared it would only rally support for them.<sup>130</sup> In parliament, the Unionist war committee passed a resolution which called on the government to condemn the Northcliffe press. Lloyd George was also considering shifting Milner from the war cabinet to the war office in place of

<sup>124</sup> For this, see J. Lee Thompson, "'To Tell the People of America the Truth": Lord Northcliffe in the USA, Unofficial British Propaganda, June–November 1917', *Journal of Contemporary History*, XXIV (1999).

<sup>125</sup> In his biography of Haig, Charteris attempted to shift some of the blame for the national depression after Cambrai to Northcliffe and his reporters for exaggerating the initial successes and then turning against Haig after the reversals. He also speculated that Northcliffe's vanity, wounded during his 7 December visit to G.H.Q., was a contributing factor. *Field-Marshal Earl Haig*, pp. 292–4. Duff Cooper also follows this line in *Haig*, pp. 199–200. Both these works consider Northcliffe hostile to Haig in his newspapers from December 1917.

<sup>126</sup> Northcliffe to Sassoon, 13 Dec. 1917, in Keith Grieves, *The Politics of Manpower, 1914–1918* (Manchester, 1988), p. 165.

<sup>127</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62251, f. 143: Lovat Fraser, 'Private Notes for Lord Northcliffe', n.d.

<sup>128</sup> *Daily Mail*, 21 Jan. 1918.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 28 Jan. 1918.

<sup>130</sup> General Smuts, in France testing the waters for a change, noted the renewed support for Haig. Lloyd George urged Northcliffe to suspend his campaign and told Lord Stamfordham on 22 January that he 'could have taken him out and shot him'. Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, p. 246.

Derby, who remained staunch in his defence of Robertson. The Welshman told Leo Amery, on Hankey's staff in the war cabinet secretariat, that Northcliffe's clamour had made it 'impossible to sack Robertson or Derby for some time to come'.<sup>131</sup> In part to keep him too busy to meddle elsewhere, in February 1917 the prime minister turned Northcliffe's energies against the Austrians and Germans, appointing him head of propaganda in enemy countries.<sup>132</sup> The day after he accepted his new position, the press lord urged a 'bold stroke' by the prime minister to settle the army question.<sup>133</sup> A few days later Robertson was replaced by Sir Henry Wilson.<sup>134</sup> Haig, unwilling to sacrifice his own career for Robertson, supported the change.<sup>135</sup> The commander-in-chief, like his predecessors in the press lord's esteem, found he could not control his troublesome newspaper ally.

In the second half of 1918, Northcliffe turned more and more to propaganda as a bloodless method to stem the German tide until sufficient American force arrived to ensure victory. Though he put more faith in propaganda and less in Haig, the press lord continued to support the army because he believed that the Germans must be destroyed on the ground before the war could be safely concluded. In his view, a compromise peace would merely interrupt, not end, the conflict. On 16 August Northcliffe hosted a Printing House Square luncheon at which he addressed 150 overseas press representatives. The *Daily Mail* reported that he spoke 'the plain truth' that the 'only peace worth having, the only peace that can be durable and effective, is a peace imposed on Berlin, and in Berlin, by the Allies'.<sup>136</sup> Despite the fact that his propaganda efforts hastened the end, the press lord was as surprised as the rest of the nation at the ensuing rapid collapse of the enemy, beginning with Bulgaria in September 1918 and climaxing with the November Armistice with Germany. Bolstered by victory in the field, Lloyd George reasserted the traditional power of the government against outside influences such as the press. The prime minister bluntly refused Northcliffe's request for an official role in the peace process and he and his newspapers played relatively minor roles in the following election and peace settlement. However, diminished influence at the end should not mask his importance, and that of the press in general, to the British effort in the Great War, which, for good or bad, was considerable.

Rising as a political force in the 1890s, Northcliffe's star was at its highest in the years after 1914 and his activities graphically demonstrated the magnified power of

<sup>131</sup> Leo Amery, *My Political Life* (2 vols, 1953), II, 138.

<sup>132</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62161, f. 24: Northcliffe to Beaverbrook, 13 Feb. 1918. Northcliffe had also remained head of the London end of the British war mission to the United States after his return.

<sup>133</sup> B.L., Add. MS 62157, f. 102: Northcliffe to prime minister, 14 Feb. 1918. Though he longed to rid himself of Robertson, Lloyd George told Hankey that the press campaign had made it impossible, as 'all the world would say that it was done at Northcliffe's dictation'. Hankey diary, 13 Feb. 1918, in Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command 1914-1918* (2 vols, 1965), II, 777.

<sup>134</sup> Lloyd George finally had all he could take of Robertson's intransigence and gave the king a choice between himself and the C.I.G.S. Frank Owen, *Tempestuous Journey. Lloyd George and His Times* (1955), p. 461.

<sup>135</sup> When Lord Derby, out of loyalty to Robertson, threatened to resign, Haig advised him to stay in office. Haig recorded that: 'If he left, Lord Northcliffe would probably succeed him. This would be fatal to the Army and the Empire.' Haig diary, 17 Feb. 1918, in Churchill, *Lord Derby*, p. 332.

<sup>136</sup> 'To Berlin', *Daily Mail*, 19 Aug. 1918.



the press in the new conditions of total war. Without significant victories to balance Britain's sacrifices, both the generals and their political adversaries needed publicity to bolster their own shortcomings and, reluctantly, sought newspaper support. Once the muddling Asquith had been toppled and the Welshman became premier, the support of the Northcliffe press for the generals was a constant thorn in his side and an impediment both to his eastern plans and to dismissing the troublesome Haig and Robertson. Had the press lord still been supporting the C.I.G.S. in February 1918, his dismissal would have been that much more difficult. By early 1918 Northcliffe welcomed Lloyd George's invitation to direct propaganda against the enemy as an alternative to battles of attrition. In the end, it took Britain's final victory and the following 1918 election to confirm the transitory nature of Northcliffe's influence in comparison to the formidable power Lloyd George was able to exert as the 'Man Who Won the War'. Even then, the prime minister found himself unmercifully harried by his former press ally from the 1919 peace making until Northcliffe's death in 1922.