**The Lurch Into War**

[Simon Adams](http://historytoday.prod.acquia-sites.com/author/simon-adams), 30 April 1988

400 years ago this May, Spain's great Armada set sail, bent on the invasion and conquest of Elizabethan England. Simon Adams re-examines the strategic considerations that underpinned the actions of both England and Spain before and after the Armada.

Early in the present century the American historian Conyers Read drew attention to the prolonged debate in the Elizabethan Privy Council over the Revolt of the Netherlands in the late 1570s and early 1580s. The debate, he discovered, split the councillors into distinct 'war' and 'peace' parties. Both were ostensibly Protestant, but one was radical, the other conservative.

The war party – inspired by a sense of international Protestant solidarity' – supported military intervention to assist the Dutch even though it would lead to war with Spain. The peace party, less affected by religious enthusiasm, more insular and traditional in outlook, and more concerned with financial prudence, sought to avoid the major conflict that would ensue. The war party (led by the Earl of Leicester and Sir Francis Walsingham) finally achieved their aim of military intervention in the Netherlands in 1585. Elizabeth was now committed to a confrontation with Spain. If the lurch into war represented a political defeat for the peace party – led by Lord Burghley and (until his death in 1583) the Earl of Sussex – they were still able to curb the proposals of their rivals. It was Burghley's caution and careful management that enabled the country to withstand the Armada successfully.

Underlying this now conventional picture of Elizabethan politics is one of the most enduring images of the defeat of the Armada – that of Sir Francis Drake phlegmatically receiving the news of the Spanish fleet's arrival in the mouth of the Channel, secure in the knowledge that there would be time enough to beat it. Yet lost in both legend and historical orthodoxy is a major and underappreciated fact: the English were taken by surprise by the Armada. By July 29th they had reached the conclusion that it would not sail so late in the summer. They were preparing to depart for the Azores to intercept the expected annual silver fleet from the Spanish Americas. Not only did the surprise cause many English ships to leave Plymouth hastily be- fore they could load adequate supplies of food and ammunition, but they had never intended to fight the Armada where they did in the first place. The running battle up the Channel was both unplanned and unexpected.

What in fact was the English fleet doing at Plymouth? Drake himself had been there since the previous autumn with the fleet he had brought back from the attack on Cadiz. In May 1588 Lord Howard of Effingham, the Lord Admiral, brought the great majority of the remainder of the queen's ships from their bases in the Thames to join him. With the exception of a squadron of between thirty and forty ships left to guard the Narrows under Lord Henry Seymour, almost all the ships mobilised by the queen (nearly 100 of all sizes) were now concentrated at Plymouth. The purpose of the assembly was offensive rather than defensive; the fleet was to intercept the Armada in Spanish waters. Only the bad weather that drove it back to Plymouth on two occasions in June and July prevented it from doing so.

If the defeat of the Armada was not the product of a cautious naval strategy, intended to win a defensive battle in home waters, then it suggests that an offensive war against Spain commanded more widespread support than previously thought. If this was the case, then there is good reason to reappraise both Elizabethan strategy and the conventional division between the war and the peace party. This involves posing some fundamental questions: why did England go to war with Spain in the first place, how was this war to be fought, and what were its aims? Here we should remember that at no stage prior to the peace treaty of 1604 was a state of war ever formally declared. The absence of a declaration did not escape contemporaries, and the issue was raised in Parliament in both 1589 and 1593. Nevertheless hostilities did very definitely break out in 1585 in the form of the dispatch of the military force sent to assist the United Provinces (albeit a small one of 7,500 men), and Drake's raid on the West Indies (with an equally small fleet) in the winter of 1585-86. These 'provocations' led Philip II in turn to conclude that the 'Enterprise of England' (as the Armada was known) was both necessary and justified.

No little confusion has been caused by attempts to argue that the Nether- lands expedition and the West Indies voyage were the products of alternative or even rival strategies. Rather, they formed a combined strategy that would survive long into the seventeenth century – one of 'self- sustained war', in which military expeditions on the Continent would be financed by the profits of maritime raiding in the Spanish empire. On the success of Drake's voyage, wrote Walsingham on the eve of his return in July 1586, 'dependeth the life and death of the cause'. The strategy (as we shall see) had first been outlined a decade earlier – Drake's circumnavigation voyage may have been in- tended to support an abortive intervention in the Netherlands in 1577-78. The sea war and the Netherlands intervention were not separate strands in the conflict between England and Spain. Unless a satisfactory settlement could be made in the Netherlands, a wider war with Spain would result.

The threat of a wider war had been present since the Netherlands revolt began in earnest in 1572. It was this danger that had inspired the debates over the Netherlands question. What made it so prolonged was the complex commercial and political relationship between England, Spain and the Netherlands. Here the central figure was less Philip II than Charles V, for it was the latter who had created the dynastic link between England's main trading partner – the Burgundian Netherlands – and Spain. The commercial relationship between England and the Netherlands – the Antwerp cloth trade, in essence – was both one of the most important in sixteenth- century Europe, and a central issue of English politics. Not only did it involve the English landed classes (the producers of wool), provincial clothiers and the London merchant community; but the terms of the great commercial treaty (the famous Intercursus Magnus of 1495-96) that regulated the trade were very favourable to the customs revenues of the English Crown, which therefore had a vested interest in its success. The sudden slump in 1551 that brought the great boom of the first half of the century to a halt therefore caused a major reappraisal of English commercial policy. After a major debate in both governmental and commercial circles throughout the 1550s a new (but not entirely successful) approach was adopted. On the one hand the Crown increased its customs revenues (by the Book of Rates of 1558), on the other it encouraged a more aggressive stance in foreign trade. The first Parliament of Elizabeth I passed a 'Navigation Act', restricting cloth exports to English
ships, a search for fresh markets was initiated, and commercial penetration of the Portuguese and Spanish colonial empires tolerated.

By 1585 the new policy had brought about a greater diversity of English commerce, but the older cloth trade had not been replaced. For the Crown as well as the merchant community as a whole this posed an awkward dilemma. The 1558 revaluation of the customs had not only doubled the receipts in the following year from 40,000 pounds to 80,000 pounds, but it initiated a steady increase in value that made customs the one expanding source of the Crown's ordinary revenue. Elizabeth was thus as dependent as Philip on international commerce. She had an obvious vested interest in the expansion of peaceful trade, but against this there were the possibly spectacular profits of more aggressive activities. The two, of course, were not always compatible.

During the first half of the sixteenth century the commercial relationship between England and the Netherlands had, if anything, inhibited political tension between Charles V and Henry VIII. Both had too much at stake in the trade to see it disrupted for any period of time. Things only turned nasty after 1559. Partly in response to the new English aggressiveness, Philip II's ministers sought on two occasions (1563-65 and 1568-74) to use commercial embargoes as a means of forcing political concessions from Elizabeth. In the short term the English were able to find more or less suitable alternatives to Antwerp, as they did again after the city's destruction by Spanish troops in 1576, but the establishment of a friendly government in the Netherlands would henceforward be very much in their interests.

Taking the place of the traditional cloth trade as a hostage to fortune in Anglo-Spanish relations was one of the success stories of the recent commercial expansion, a thriving Anglo-Iberian trade, in which even so prominent a spokesman for the 'war party' as the Earl of Leicester was active. This trade now became the most vulnerable to retaliation for piratical exploits overseas, and the Spanish merchants were among the strongest advocates of the return of the booty from Drake's circumnavigation voyage. Therefore, one of the crucial (and still unexplained) turning points on 'the road to the Armada' was Philip's decision to seize English and other Protestant shipping in Spain in May 1585 – the more so since it was largely rescinded several weeks later after the damage had been done. Walsingham saw in the embargo a 'manifest argument of secret intelligence and mutual concurrency likely to be between the French and the Spaniard for the ruin and overthrow of the professors of the Gospel'. Not only did it inspire Elizabeth's government to issue privateering commissions against Spanish shipping in great numbers (which included Drake's West Indies voyage), but it also undercut possible opposition to hostilities by the Spanish merchants, for they now had a direct interest in the privateering war.

The old theory that the Anglo- Spanish war was commercial in origin is thus true only to a limited extent. The English Crown had as much to lose by war as the Spanish. The general paralysing of trade during the year preceeding the Armada had serious effects on both countries. Both governments welcomed a decision in the summer of 1588, for neither could maintain the degree of naval mobilisation involved for an indefinite period of time. Burghley's prayer on the very day of the Armada's arrival in the Channel (July 29th) that 'if peace cannot be had, that the enemy would not longer delay... for... these expectations do consume us' would have been understood with sympathy in Spain. If both sides saw advantages in the conducting of economic warfare, it was not least because both were equally vulnerable to it.

The overlap between commercial and other issues is revealed by two areas of tension to which considerable attention has been given: the Spanish-Portuguese monopoly of extra-European commerce and the harassment of English merchants and seamen by the Inquisition. The publicising of an English overseas empire by men like John Dee or Richard Hackluyt is well-known, but in the 1580s colonisation was very much a minority interest whose only prominent patron was Sir Walter Raleigh. The Crown's attitude was governed less by claims to North America based on the Cabot voyages of the 1490s than by its declaration early in Elizabeth's reign that it did not consider itself bound by the papal mediation that had divided the New World between Spain and Portugal. The activities of the Inquisition created controversy less for their effects on trade (which was sporadic) than because they raised the issue of reciprocity. Since Spanish seamen were not treated similarly in England, Philip's refusal to make diplomatic concessions was seen as evidence that he accepted Elizabeth's government as no more than a de facto one.

The religious tension between England and Spain was central to the deterioration in relations in the second half of the sixteenth century. It should not, however, be seen in the crude terms of two antagonistic crusading ideologies. For Charles V the appeals of English Catholics for liberation from the schismatic Henry VIII had to be weighed against the commercial and diplomatic necessities of an English alliance. What shifted the balance was the growing suspicion in Spanish circles after 1559 that London was the centre for heresy and subversion in the Netherlands. From this premise followed one of the most powerful arguments for the Enterprise of England – so long as England was free to inspire rebellion in the Netherlands the Dutch would never be pacified. If the king was to restore authority in his own dominions, Elizabeth would have to be deposed first.

The 'international Protestant conspiracy' provided for Philip's government the central link between the revolt of the Netherlands and the Enterprise of England. For Elizabeth's councillors a similar conspiracy theory – that of the Catholic League – forged a similar connection. Given the aim of the League to extirpate Protestantism, England could not afford to see the Netherlands crushed, for she would be next. Both sides saw the fate of the Netherlands as crucial. There was, however, a moderate solution – ceaselessly advanced by Elizabeth, for which she deserves more credit than she has received. This involved the retention of Philip's sovereignty, but evacuation of Spanish troops, provincial self-government, and freedom of conscience. The latter did not mean the establishment of a Protestant Church, but simply the prohibition of both an Inquisition and the punishment of orthodox Protestant beliefs as heresy. But – as has been the fate of many future moderate solutions – it was unacceptable to those involved. Philip would not concede freedom of conscience (despite a few deliberately deceptive gestures), while the States-General would not compromise on a Protestant Church in Holland and Zealand or (after 1580) accept restoration of Philip's sovereignty.

The debate in the Privy Council that Conyers Read discovered was in essence one over the practicability of the queen's solution. None of her councillors (even Walsingham) denied that it would be the best form of settlement, but the war party argued that it was naive to believe Philip would agree to freedom of conscience. Negotiations were therefore a waste of time, and Elizabeth had no alternative but to support the rebel cause. Since the Catholic League made a war with Spain inevitable, it was better to fight it in alliance with the Dutch than after they were crushed. In this respect a peace party (with the possible exception of Sir James Croft) did not exist. Lord Burghley was not prepared to make a settlement in the Netherlands that would deny freedom of conscience. The Earl of Sussex did not believe in the Catholic League, but also did not feel that the Dutch could be abandoned, since only a military stalemate in the Netherlands would make the queen's solution possible.

What embittered the debate was the question of French intervention. Between 1578, when Henry III's brother the Duke of Anjou offered himself as governor-general of an independent Netherlands, and the beginning of 1585, when the French king finally refused to become their sovereign, how to deal with France perplexed Elizabeth's council. Should Elizabeth outbid Anjou; co-operate with him; or use a possible Franco-Spanish conflict over the Netherlands as a means of forcing Philip to accept her compromise? The issue was further complicated by the proposed marriage between Anjou and Elizabeth, doubts about Anjou's motives, and the question of whether Anjou would be supported by Henry III, which alone would make the French intervention a serious proposition. Anjou was the real source of tension on the council: the war party was generally suspicious of and hostile to him, while the peace party was ready to give the French option a chance.

In 1580 the deadlock over the Netherlands was transformed. Drake's return from the circumnavigation voyage and the Spanish occupation of Portugal added a new dimension to the potential confrontation with Spain. Drake's success revealed the vulnerability of the Spanish empire, the vast booty to be won, and the apparent superiority of English ships and mariners. The self- sustaining war now seemed a practicable way to redress the balance of resources between England and Spain. The central scheme (first proposed by John Hawkins to the Earl of Leicester as early as 1570) involved the interception of the annual silver fleet from Spanish America at the Azores, where it would have to stop to replenish its supplies of water. Alternatively the West Indies could be attacked directly. In 1586 Lord Burghley recalled that 'it is a matter that many years past I did project to the Prince of Orange's ministers to have been attempted'.

Drake had also discovered something else on his voyage – the Portuguese empire in the East Indies was open to English commercial penetration. The flight of the Portuguese pretender, Dom Antonio, to France and England in 1581 offered an opportunity to put these ambitious schemes into practice. The conquest of Portugal may have dramatically increased Philip II's resources, but it also extended the area he would have to defend. English support for Dom Antonio could bring about the capture of the Azores, penetration of the Portuguese Indies, and even a revolt in Portugal itself. In the short term the various schemes for assisting Dorn Antonio became enmeshed in the complicated Anglo-French negotiations and came to nothing. By 1585, however, they had inspired a wide ranging maritime strategy to which Drake, Hawkins and the other leading naval commanders were all deeply committed.

The actual English decision to intervene in the Netherlands in 1585 was a consequence of the assassination of William of Orange in July 1584. In October 1584 the Privy Council considered intervention unavoidable, although Elizabeth tried one last time during the winter of 1584-85 to persuade Henry III to do so instead. When his refusal became known early in 1585, Elizabeth had finally run out of alternatives. There was at this time no real debate over intervention, because the council believed the Netherlands to be on the brink of a complete political breakdown that would lead to the total victory of Spanish arms. The aim of intervention was therefore not so much military (in the sense of trying to defeat Parma's army) as political. A military stalemate in the Netherlands could only be obtained if a strong Dutch government was created.

Elizabeth did not see intervention as changing the fundamental aim of her policy, which was still to bring Philip to accept her compromise settlement. She saw no conflict between providing limited military assistance to the Dutch and continuing to entertain peace proposals. Thus contacts were maintained throughout 1586 and 1587, and culminated in the conference at Bourbourg in Flanders in the spring of 1588. Since it was doubtful that Philip would be forced to the conference table by the English military intervention in the Netherlands alone, Elizabeth had no alternative but to apply pressure at sea. In this respect, Philip's seizure of English shipping in May 1585 was a major boon, for it enabled her to justify not only the issuing of privateering commissions, but also a widespread counter-embargo on trade with Spain. Yet this blockade was almost impossible to enforce (not the least on the Dutch) and only a more direct form of naval attack would be effective.

The process by which the naval strategy evolved is exceedingly murky, as can easily be seen in the controversies surrounding the instructions for Drake's West Indies and Cadiz voyages. During the winter of 1584-85 Drake had been planning a voyage to the East Indies, possibly in connection with Dom Antonio. In the summer of 1585 this was changed to one under a royal commission to free the English ships held in Spain. Yet Drake clearly left England in September 1585 intending to raid the West Indies – how much Elizabeth and her councillors knew of this is a moot point. In the spring of 1586 a larger Anglo-Dutch naval attack on Spain was discussed. Nothing came of it, however, except possibly a little-publicised attempt by Hawkins to intercept the 1586 silver fleet that summer.

In fact the naval war of 1586 was anything but a success. Drake's West Indies voyage, for all its flamboyance, had failed even to pay for itself. Walsingham, who in March 1586 had felt that if the queen 'would put on a good countenance for only four months' Philip would seek peace, was clearly disappointed. In the autumn a more ambitious and potentially more decisive enterprise involving Dom Antonio, who had arrived in England from France the year before, appears to have taken shape. In October 1586 Drake went to see the Earl of Leicester in the Netherlands and an Anglo-Dutch fleet to raise a revolt in Portugal was proposed. The fate of these discussions remains mysterious, for the next few months were dominated by the question of the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, while news of Elizabeth's peace negotiations with Spain had alienated the Dutch. In the event this expedition became the voyage to Cadiz in March 1587.

As with the West Indies voyage the original purpose of the Cadiz voyage remains unclear. All that survives of Drake's instructions is the counter-manding order of April 19th 1587 (which Drake never received) ordering him not to enter a Spanish port, since Elizabeth had just been given to believe that Philip was willing to entertain serious peace talks. It would appear that Elizabeth's main desire was the destruction of the shipping that Philip was reportedly assembling for the Armada. Cadiz itself may not have been named as a target. Unlike the West Indies voyage, however, the Cadiz expedition was a dramatic success. Drake caught the Spaniards in the process of assembling the Armada, and their widely dispersed squadrons were unable to combine against him. If reinforced, he claimed, he would be able to operate off the Portuguese coast throughout the summer. Although he missed the silver fleet, he returned to England very impressed by the possibilities for a successful invasion of Portugal – something more substantial than merely singeing the King of Spain's beard.

Drake's fleet was kept together in Plymouth during the winter of 1587-88, with the intention in mounting a major expedition in 1588. By October 1587, the threat of the Armada had to be taken seriously, yet it is striking how self-confident the English were. Not only did they under-estimate the Armada's strength both in the number and effectiveness of its ships, but it seemed inconceivable that the Spaniards would actually attempt to sail up the Channel and rendezvous with Parma, Philip's generalissimo in the Netherlands, in the Narrow Seas. Given Parma's well-deserved reputation for deception, a more devious plan seemed more likely. Ireland and Scotland, where the Armada would be difficult to intercept, were obvious targets. Did Parma's willingness to entertain negotiations at Bourbourg suggest that Philip had found the task too great, or were they also a deception? Was the Armada actually a complete bluff, seeking to break England economically by forcing her to suspend trade and remain at full mobilisation?

It is no surprise that at the beginning of 1588 potentially decisive measures looked more attractive than remaining on the defensive. Burghley proposed two expeditions, one to the Azores to intercept the silver fleet in the summer – 'the execution therof will be very profitable for the maintenance of the wars' – the other to 'make a voyage to Portugal to put comfort in the Portingals when the Spanish army is come to the seas'. Drake himself proposed intercepting the Armada off Lisbon, and to this end Howard was instructed to assemble the majority of fleet at Plymouth in May – although without Dom Antonio, to Howard's later regret. As in 1587, Elizabeth's main concern appears to have been that of destroying Spanish shipping; the threat to Ireland or Scotland made it too risky to wait for the Armada in home waters.

The near 100 ships at Plymouth was the largest fleet the Elizabethan government had yet assembled. Supplying it was extremely difficult, and the combination of logistical delays and bad weather prevented the offensive campaign from taking place. Instead, it was the Armada that made its way safely to the Channel and forced an encounter in home waters. However, as soon as the Armada battle was over, Walsingham wanted the expedition to the Azores underway. Howard answered that the state of the ships made it impossible, but in the autumn the preparation of a major expedition to Portugal, now including the Dutch began. The failure of Drake and Sir John Norris' Portugal voyage in 1589 would suggest that the whole idea was a chimera. Not only was Dom Antonio's popular support limited in the extreme, but the English ability to conduct a major amphibious expedition less than impressive. Yet the ill-success of the 1589 voyage should not lead to the dismissal of the Portuguese venture as a mere sideshow to the Armada. Philip II's memoranda reveal precisely how important his fears that Drake may have been planning exactly this kind of expedition to Portugal were to his plans. Not the least of the advantages of assembling the Armada at Lisbon was that it would provide a permanent naval presence on the Portuguese coast. In the instructions for the conduct of the post-invasion government of England, more attention was given to the capture of Dom Antonio than (it would seem) of Elizabeth herself.

To claim that the Armada campaign was really fought over the fate of Portugal would be a gross exaggeration. But it is an equal distortion to overlook the offensive element in Elizabethan planning. Dom Antonio's cause offered a major opportunity to strike at Philip II's empire at one of its most vulnerable points. The war of attrition with Spain that the intervention in the Netherlands had begun might have been avoided. In this sense a debate between an aggressive and a cautious strategy was an illusion. By 1585 there was no real disagreement over the Netherlands; a full Spanish reconquest had to be prevented. The real debate was over whether Philip could be brought to compromise. Since the defeat of his armies in the Netherlands was almost impossible, only the sea offered the means of applying sufficient pressure to force him to the conference table. Of the possible uses of Elizabethan naval power, no other offered the strategic possibilities of the Portuguese campaign.

The defeat of the Armada, immense propaganda and moral victory though it was, was in this sense irrelevant to the real problems of Elizabethan strategy. The failure of the 1589 Portugal voyage was more significant for it eliminated the possibility of a decisive stroke that would bring hostilities to a speedy end. The 1590s revealed that increased Spanish attention to Atlantic and imperial naval defence made easy victories at sea a doubtful proposition. The English were never successful in capturing a silver fleet. The decade produced the very war of maritime attrition that both sides had sought to avoid. But by then the strategic picture had changed once again. Philip II's decision to intervene in France, following the death of Henry III in 1589, had caused a major diversion of Spanish resources. The Anglo-Spanish war had become a European one.