

A 1937 US proposal to lease destroyers to the Latin American Republics

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Under Article XVIII of the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty, each of the contracting powers undertook 'not to dispose by gift, sale or any mode of transfer of any vessel of war in such a manner that such vessel may become a vessel of war in the navy of any foreign power'. While this might have seemed like a fairly straight forward provision when it was written, over the life of the Treaty there were a surprising number of proposals to export second-hand warships, a few of which actually came to fruition. Whilst undertaking research associated with his thesis on interwar naval arms control, David Chessum compiled a set of case studies covering these various proposals, which he is now reformatting into a series of short articles for Warships, the first of which is published in this issue.

By the early 1930s, the warships of the Brazilian Navy were largely obsolescent, and Brazil's naval power had fallen behind that of Argentina. A new naval programme was drafted and approved in 1932, and revised in 1934, which included the acquisition of two heavy cruisers, nine destroyers, six submarines, and a number of minor and support vessels. Sometime between 1934 and 1936 the Brazilian Government approached the US with a request to lease a number of over-age USN destroyers for use as training ships to prepare the personnel who would be needed to man the new construction vessels on their completion.¹ Over time this idea crystallised into a request for six destroyers specifically for training purposes, although the claim that they would only be used for training purposes would subsequently be contradicted in a report from the Brazilian Ministry of Finance that the six destroyers would be assigned to patrol the Brazilian coast.²

President Roosevelt was in favour of this proposal as it was considered preferable for the South American Republics to obtain such military support from the US than from other sources. The President also saw the loan of the destroyers providing leverage in his desire to obtain naval and air bases in Brazil for anti-submarine patrols in any

¹ HB Hinton, Destroyer-Leasing is Quickly Dropped, *New York Times*, 15 Aug 1937, p58. C de Saint Hubert, 1991, Question 34/88, *Warship International*, 28 (2), p198.

² Brazil wants U.S. ships for Patrol, *The Washington Post*, 10 Aug 1937, p5.

future trans-Atlantic emergency,³ and arranged (with the support of the Navy and State Departments)⁴ for a resolution to be introduced in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 7 August 1937 authorising the President to lease destroyers to the Governments of the American Republics.

In response to stories in the press giving the impression that this resolution was solely concerned with leasing destroyers to Brazil, the US Secretary of State wrote to the US Diplomatic Missions in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela on 9 August 1937 asking that the Minister of Foreign Affairs in each nation be advised:

That the President will make destroyers available on equal terms to all of the American republics possessing naval forces should they desire to avail themselves of them;

That any contracts for the lease of destroyers will contain a recapture clause enabling the US to obtain the return of the destroyers so leased at any moment. Upon the signature of the contract, the US would declare it to be its policy that it would immediately request the return of such vessels in the event that hostilities should break out between the republic leasing the destroyers and any foreign government with which the US is at peace, or if the continued use of the destroyers by the Government leasing them would in any other way be contrary to the domestic neutrality legislation or the international obligations of the US; and

In view of the stipulations put forward above, the US did not consider that the lease of destroyers would be in contravention of London Naval Treaty of 1936 (LNT36).

The proposal was greeted with hostility from Argentina both through official diplomatic channels⁵ and the press,⁶ primarily on the grounds that it would upset the existing naval equilibrium in the Western hemisphere, but also because of the inequality that would arise because the supply of available ships would be limited, and the first to apply would get the

³ AE Schwartz, 2008, *Man of Vision: Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Naval, Maritime and Air Preparations for World War II*, Honors thesis, Brandeis University, p78.

⁴ RL Scheina, 1976, *Indigenous Latin American Sea Power, 1890-1974*, PhD thesis, Catholic University of America, p34.

⁵ The Ambassador in Argentina to the Secretary of State, 10 Aug 1937, *FRUS*, 1937, Vol. 5, pp153-154

⁶ As reported in Argentine Press Opposes Leasing Ships to Brazil, *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 Aug 1937, and Argentina flays U.S. plan to rent Navy to Brazil, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 Aug 1937, p3.

available vessels. Subsequent US press reports⁷ that this last complaint was not valid because there were 158 such destroyers available failed to take into consideration the fact that not all of these would be surplus to requirements in the immediate future, and that these obsolescent vessels would remain a significant proportion of USN destroyer strength through to World War Two.

On 12 August the Argentine Foreign Minister issued a ten-page statement on the proposal asserting the following points:⁸
Naval power had previously been based on the 'economic' power of nations, enabling other nations to set their own requirements accordingly; the lease plan would permit 'surprising augmentation' of a country's power;
The US announcement that they would confer with signatories of LNT36 on the question implied uncertainty in the US commitment to the American republics;
Leasing warships constituted a judicial problem;
The proposed action would violate the Hague, Havana and Buenos Aires conventions;
It contradicted the US neutrality policy;
It would encourage a naval race in South America; and
Naval problems should be solved by a 'system of naval alliances' which Argentina wished to adjust through agreements with neighbour nations.

The Argentine reaction was followed in short order by representation from the British Ambassador⁹ to the US that the proposed leasing of destroyers would be a violation of LNT36 Article 22, and that a new and dangerous practice of loaning naval war vessels from one government to another would be introduced. The US Secretary of State responded to this by stating that it had been a practice of the US to permit students of South American governments to come to the US and receive training on US naval vessels, and that there was not conceived to be any difference in principle between sending groups of students to this country to be trained in US naval vessels, and sending a US naval vessel to another country solely for the training of their students.

Chile also rejected the opportunity to lease the destroyers, although the press in Santiago favoured acceptance. The Chilean naval attaché, in conveying the rejection, added that if an over-age cruiser became

⁷ WV Nessly, Hull, Welles Defend Ship Rental Plan, *The Washington Post*, 12 Aug 1937, p1.

⁸ Argentina Fights Warships' Leasing, *New York Times*, 13 Aug 1937, p7.

⁹ Memo by the Secretary of State of a Conversation with the British Ambassador, 12 Aug 1937, *FRUS*, 1937, Vol. 5, pp156-157.

available, the Chileans would make great efforts to purchase the vessel in order to replace the Chilean training ship BAQUEDANO.¹⁰

Within the US, editorial comment was initially positive, for example the *Chicago Daily Tribune* described the proposal as “a fundamental sanity which contrasts refreshingly with the armament madness of Europe,”¹¹ but as the storm of protest erupted from Argentina, the attitude of the press changed. The *Christian Science Monitor* asked why the US had not considered this contingency before it committed itself to LNT36, and expressed concern about the precedent that was being set.¹² The *New York Times* questioned the practicability of enforcing the recapture terms of the lease, and questioned how the US could implement this policy without being seen to take sides in intra-South American rivalries.¹³ The *Washington Post* highlighted the incompatibility of the proposal with US claims to be a leader in disarmament, and described its effect upon the spirit of LNT36 as destructive.¹⁴ The *Wall Street Journal* described the proposal as a regrettable error, and questioned how the US could extricate itself from its predicament without antagonizing Brazil, or further irritating Argentina.¹⁵ Finally the *New York Times* questioned the lack of foresight in the State Department for initiating a proposal which was bound to create controversy, and questioned the effectiveness of the recapture clause on the grounds of the grey area that existed as to when a war was really a war, and the dilemmas the US would face if a leasing nation declined to return the ships when requested.¹⁶ There was also some negative domestic reaction in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when the draft enabling legislation was debated. Senator Johnson described the proposal as providing one of America’s friends in South America with the means to blow their neighbours out of the water, or prepare their young men for war,¹⁷ and Senator Vandenburg described the proposal as an amazing and unprecedented innovation that was “unwise, unsound, untenable and impossible.”¹⁸

¹⁰ JW Wise, 2011, *The Anglo-Chilean naval association as a case to illustrate the Royal Navy's contribution to British peacetime foreign policy, 1925-1970*, PhD thesis, University of Exeter, p113.

¹¹ Destroyers for Brazil, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 Aug 1937, p10.

¹² Treaty Destroyers?, *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 Aug 1937, p18.

¹³ Leasing Naval Vessels, *New York Times*, 12 Aug 1937, p18.

¹⁴ Rented Warships, *The Washington Post*, 12 Aug 1937, p8.

¹⁵ The State Department Slips, *Wall St Journal*, 12 Aug 1937, p4.

¹⁶ AO McCormick, Elderly Destroyers will Probably Stay at Home, *New York Times*, 14 Aug 1937, p12.

¹⁷ WV Nessler, Hull, Welles Defend Ship Rental Plan, *The Washington Post*, 12 Aug 1937, p1.

¹⁸ Hull Declares Ship Loan vital to Latin Policy, *The Washington Post*, 13 Aug 1937, p1.

Press reaction elsewhere in the world was summarised by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* as:¹⁹

Berlin newspapers saw the proposal as bringing the Latin American nations closer to the US than the Dominions are to England; The French press interpreted the project as a move to block German penetration of South America, and British naval circles express approval of the programme, but suggested such leases should be limited to nations which do not have a belligerent attitude.

After Brazil and Argentina had finished trading accusations,²⁰ Brazil and the US issued a joint declaration defending the validity of their planned transaction, and stating that neither country was disposed to 'enter into any controversy with respect to the pending proposal, nor to modify their understanding with regard to it.'²¹ Notwithstanding this statement, the enabling legislation was quietly dropped by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the proposal allowed to die.

As a post-script to this issue, Britain followed up on 13 September 1937 with a formal statement placing on record their views on the matter.²² Specifically the British charged that if loans of vessels had been regarded as practical politics when the terms of the Treaty had been framed, then provisions to cover that contingency would have been inserted – thus the loaning of ships was considered to violate the spirit of LNT36 Article 22. With regards to the intention to employ the loaned destroyers as training ships, the British stated that such ships would still be bound to retain their fighting qualities and potentialities, and must therefore become a service vessel of war in the foreign navy. Apart from these considerations, the British also expressed apprehension regarding the serious consequences which might result in the event of such a practice becoming widespread. They were concerned that the whole balance of naval power might be upset and it might become impossible

¹⁹ Argentina flays U.S. plan to rent Navy to Brazil, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 Aug 1937, p3.

²⁰ The Argentine Minister of Foreign Affairs alleged that the destroyer leasing proposal was a plot hatched by the US Secretary of State, the Brazilian Ambassador to the US (Aranha), and President Vargas of Brazil as part of a far-reaching scheme to dominate the American continent. The Ambassador in Brazil to the Secretary of State, 17 Aug 1937, *FRUS*, 1937, Vol. 5, p160. The Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs alluded to an attempt by one man in Argentina (The Foreign Minister Saavedra Lamas) to dominate the rest of the Continent. The Charge in Brazil to the Secretary of State, 14 Aug 1937, *FRUS*, 1937, Vol. 5, pp159-160.

²¹ Department of State, Press Release, 21 Aug 1937, *FRUS*, 1937, Vol. 5, pp163-164.

²² Eden to Mallet, 30 Aug 1937, *BDFA, Part II, Series C, Vol. 22*, pp307-308. British Embassy to Department of State, 13 Sep 1937, *FRUS*, 1937, Vol. 5, p172.

to calculate the effective strength of any given country's fleet. The British contended that it was precisely such a sudden alteration of naval strength that the Treaty provisions had been intended to avert.

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Tom Adams MBE

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