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Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet that Defeated the Japanese Navy

John T. Kuehn

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Agents of Innovation examines the influence of the General Board of the Navy as agents of innovation during the period between World Wars I and II. The General Board, a formal body established by the Secretary of the Navy to advise him on both strategic matters with respect to the fleet, served as the organizational nexus for the interaction between fleet design and the naval limitations imposed on the Navy by treaty during the period. Particularly important was the General Board's role in implementing the Washington Naval Treaty that limited naval armaments after 1922. The General Board orchestrated the efforts by the principal Naval Bureaus, the Naval War College, and the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in ensuring that the designs adopted for the warships built and modified during the period of the Washington and London Naval Treaties both met treaty requirements while attempting to meet strategic needs. The leadership of the Navy at large, and the General Board in particular, felt themselves especially constrained by Article XIX (the fortification clause) of the Washington Naval Treaty that implemented a status quo on naval fortifications in the Western Pacific. The treaty system led the Navy to design a measurably different fleet than it might otherwise have in the absence of naval limitations. Despite these limitations, the fleet that fought the Japanese to a standstill in 1942 was predominately composed of ships and concepts developed and fostered by the General Board prior to the outbreak of war.

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