SUBMARINE TELEGRAPHIC CABLES IN THEIR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS. LECTURES DELIVERED AT THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, AUGUST, 1901

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649198559

Submarine telegraphic cables in their international relations. Lectures delivered at the Naval War College, August, 1901 by George Grafton Wilson

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

GEORGE GRAFTON WILSON

SUBMARINE TELEGRAPHIC CABLES IN THEIR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS. LECTURES DELIVERED AT THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, AUGUST, 1901

Trieste

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE.

SUBMARINE TELEGRAPHIC CABLES

IN THEIR

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.

LECTURES DELIVERED
AT THE
NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, AUGUST, 1901,
BY
GEORGE GRAFTON WILSON, PH. D.,
PROFESSOR IN BROWN UNIVERSITY.

WASHINGTON:
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
1901.

SUBMARINE TELEGRAPHIC CABLES

IN THEIR

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.

(*A*) SUBMARINE CABLE SERVICE.

(*a*) NATURE.

Among the great achievements of the nineteenth century was the practical elimination of the elements of time and space in the transmission of thought. This brought about changes in the relations of men to which the people of the world have hardly had time to adjust themselves in the affairs of every day and much less in the time of hostilities between states, which is such an exceptional condition of affairs. Business, and particularly the financial transactions of the world, are now almost wholly dependent on some means of communication that will reduce the influence of time and space to the minimum. Other relations of men have followed the lead of business and commerce and have come to depend upon the telegraph in some form. The diplomatic relations between most states are now directed from a central office at the seat of government, and the personal initiative of the diplomat is of much less importance than in the days before the middle of the nineteenth century. It is not often necessary for him to decide a question on his own responsibility, but merely to wire for instructions. The officers of the army are now usually in easy telegraphic communication with their headquarters. The naval officers are, however, liable to be cut off for a considerable time from this means of communication and in many cases, therefore, must continue to be able to determine their course of action without reference to any central authority.

There is both danger and advantage in the great use and reliance upon the telegraph. This tendency to rely upon the telegraph has led to a centralization of authority at the seat of government, a point often so remote from the scene of military or diplomatic action as to make it impossible for those at that center to intelligently give directions. There are still some features to recommend the old system of choosing a man fitted for a duty and holding him responsible for its performance. In the stock market, in transportation, in business of all kinds, in politics, in diplomacy, in military campaigns, the news of the wire determines the course of action. With all its advantages, this system of relying upon others has its disadvantages in the time of crisis, and the time of crisis is most liable to come in the time of war, so that, while the telegraph may be of the greatest service in the time of war, it at the same time, if too exclusively relied upon, may become a source of the greatest danger, being the means through which all the movements of a force are disclosed to a large number of persons who may be influential in determining the nature of subsequent orders from the central bureau. There is also the grave danger which would naturally follow when one who has been accustomed to rely upon others is cut off from their direction, as might happen through the interruption of telegraphic communication. The tendency of the reliance upon the telegraph has been to centralize everything, often mixing in a sad way tactics and politics. It has been held that, except in matters of general state policy, the central bureau should not interfere in the conduct of a war. This recognizes the fact that the state must declare war and that the central government is the best judge of the time when it should make peace, but that the conduct of the details of the campaign should be left to those upon the field of action. It may be said, therefore, that the telegraphic service may or may not be a blessing in the time of war, according as it is the servant of those conducting the military

operations and the means of making the cooperation of all who are engaged in the campaign more effective or the master depriving the commanders of initiative.

(*b*) EXTENT.

It is necessary to say something in regard to the extent of the submarine cable service in order that some of the propositions which will be made later may be more plain.

The growth of submarine telegraphy has been phenomenal. It was only sixty years ago that Professor Morse demonstrated the possibility of transmitting electric signals under water from Castle Garden to Governors Island in New York Harbor. It was fifty years ago that the first successful cable was operated in the English Channel. From the time of the elaborate report of the British Board of Trade in regard to submarine telegraphy in 1860 the progress was rapid and soon there was the long distance line connecting Great Britain and India. The success of the Atlantic cable in 1866 removed all doubt as to the feasibility of great cable projects. The far East was opened to the world by the connections of 1871.

The number of submarine telegraphic cables in the world is now about fifteen hundred. The length of the cables is about 170,000 miles. The commercial cable companies, about thirty-five in number, operate about 150,000 miles of this total. The various governments operate about twelve hundred lines, mainly short, with a total mileage of 20,000 miles. The mileage will shortly be increased by Pacific cables for which both the British and the United States Governments are preparing. At present the United States does not own and operate cables. Whether the policy of extension of jurisdiction will make it necessary to undertake such work is still a matter of debate. It was fortunate for the United States that the cable from New York to Haiti was laid in 1896, as it formed the chief line of telegraphic

communication between the Departments at Washington and the representatives at Santiago and in other parts of the West Indies during the Spanish-American war. Messages were exchanged within so short a time as twelve minutes. Not so direct is the line from Washington to Manila, however. This is Washington to New York by land; to Ireland by cable; to Brighton, England, cable and land; to Havre, cable; to Marseilles, land; to Alexandria, cable; to Suez, land; to Aden, cable; to Bombay, cable; to Madras, land; to Singapore, cable; to Saigon, cable; to Hongkong, cable; to Manila, cable, a distance of about 14,000 miles and passing through various jurisdictions.

It is estimated that about six million messages are annually sent along these lines. This gives some faint idea of the service performed by this species of the world's property which, as yet, has only an indefinite international status. The cables also represent an investment of about $250,000,000. The International Bureau of Telegraph Administration has done much to make the operation of the cables most beneficial to the world at large, but much remains to be done which is outside the province of this bureau.

(*B*) PRESENT SIGNIFICANCE.

(*a*) SOCIAL.

From the nature and extent of the submarine telegraphic service, it is easily seen that any interruption of the service would greatly disturb the relations existing among the peoples of the world. Their daily action is in many ways dependent upon the news which the telegraph may bring. The suffering in the famine districts of India may be a matter of as vital importance to many American citizens as the destitution in a neighboring alley. It is a serious matter to interpose the old barriers of time and space between the members of the human family after they have once been removed.

(*b*) COMMERCIAL.

The economic activity of the world is even more disturbed by any interruption of the cable service, for it was originally for this field of the world's activity that the cable was laid. The fact that the interruption of the cable service during hostilities may do a great amount of damage to the citizens of a state which has no relations to the war itself and no concern in its issue, complicates matters at such a time. The ownership may be in the hands of persons who belong to a neutral state and while, by the strict letter of the law, the property of a neutral in a belligerent territory (and under certain circumstances outside of it) is liable to hostile treatment, yet it is not always wise to subject it to such treatment in the practical operations of war. This fact has led to attempts to define the limits of allowable interruption in the time of war.

(*c*) MILITARY AND STRATEGIC.

It needs but a glance to see upon the map of the cables of the world that the state which possesses the lines connecting with many points has a vast advantage in time of war over a state which possesses few such connecting lines. If these lines of the more favorably conditioned state are so located as to be wholly within its jurisdiction the advantage is still further enhanced.

England has been compared to a spider whose web enmeshes the world and vibrates and reports at once at London if in a slight degree disturbed in the remotest regions. This web, running to all divisions of the realm, has done more than any one thing to solve the difficulties of imperialism. The imperialistic policy of Great Britain has also done much to change the character of telegraph connections. Originally planned with a view to financial returns to the constructing companies, recent lay outs have been with a view to military and strategic usefulness, and the plans for future cables are made with still greater reference to their adaptableness for war

purposes. Great Britain is now considering a proposition to acquire one of the Cape Verde Islands with a view to bringing a cable direct from the Island of Ascension to English soil without entering Portuguese territory. Those who are objecting to it raise the point that Great Britain now has all the territory at remote points that she can defend in the time of war with a first-class power. The cable from Halifax to Jamaica via Bermuda was constructed particularly upon strategic grounds. This policy of construction on imperialistic instead of commercial grounds has arisen mainly within the last ten years.

London is now the great cable center. Aden is the center of the control for strategic purposes in the East and Bathurst for Western Africa. The wars in South Africa and the Spanish-American war have called attention to these facts. Spain could not reach her colonies except at second hand. The lines passing through Aden or other English stations were the only ones by which France and some of the other European states could reach the far East in the times of the recent troubles there. This has aroused the liveliest debate in France, and recent papers have many articles upon the absence of a "cable policy" in that Republic. Germany feels the necessity of meeting Great Britain by lines of cable defense, and in April began to show her purpose to push measures for such a line of defense by the launching of a great cable ship. (For description see *Scientific American*, Supplement 50, p. 20639.) Propositions for new Pacific Ocean cables under national control of the respective powers have recently been made in Great Britain and in the United States. Both Governments seem inclined to support these cables with ample subsidies, if not to undertake them directly.

Perhaps something can be learned from the fact that from her isolated position Great Britain for many years has been compelled to take measures to care for herself without reference to any other state. It may be wise for