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NORTHCLIFFE AND LLOYD GEORGE AT WAR, 1914–1918

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A decade ago there appeared a volume of twelve essays on Lloyd George, written by a dozen young historians and edited by A. J. P. Taylor. These pieces, of varying merit and degree of interest, ranged widely from pre-1914 social reform to the Greek question and even to the Second World War.¹ Yet strangely enough one of the most colourful patches of the huge canvas that was Lloyd George's life did not receive so much as a passing glance – namely his relations with the press. Taylor had hinted at the possibilities in that sphere when preparing a volume of his own essays a few years earlier. There he placed in sequence two entertaining chapters of quite unequal length and importance, one entitled 'Lloyd George: rise and fall' and the other 'The Chief'.² The latter requires a little explanation, for 'Chief' was the style of address beloved of Alfred Harmsworth, Viscount Northcliffe, the man who owned *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Evening News*, and a host of other newspapers and journals. Quite simply he was the greatest press lord of them all, and Fleet Street has known many. While it is manifestly impossible in a few pages to explore in detail the full story of Lloyd George and the press, we can profitably follow his relations with Lord Northcliffe during the years 1914 to 1918 when these two giants were at the peak of their power and their fortunes were intertwined in many and strange ways. During the war Northcliffe was frequently called (and with utmost seriousness) 'The Most Powerful Man in the Country',³ while at the end Lloyd George was 'The Man Who Won the War'. Often it seemed that the stage was not big enough for both and the British people must choose between them. Not until 1918 did two events – the 'Maurice debate' and the 'Coupon election' – prove conclusively that in the final analysis Lloyd George's power was real while Northcliffe's was largely illusory. Perhaps none was more surprised at this outcome, certainly none was more relieved, than Lloyd George himself. The reasons will become apparent as the history of their wartime relationship unfolds.

Prior to 1914 these two celebrated figures were on distant but not unfriendly terms. They met only for the first time in 1909, the year of the 'People's budget'. This is surprising, considering that Lloyd George was by then a stormy figure

¹ A. J. P. Taylor, ed., *Lloyd George: twelve essays* (London, 1971).

² A. J. P. Taylor, *Politics in wartime and other essays* (London, 1964).

³ One quip ran: 'The Cabinet has resigned and Lord Northcliffe has sent for the King.'

at the exchequer and one who had developed a great respect for the world of the press, while Northcliffe had already acquired total control of a vast publishing empire. The meeting came about accidentally at the House of Commons when Northcliffe was espied in the peer's gallery by his brother Cecil, a Liberal M.P., who mentioned to a fellow Liberal member, Sir Henry Dalziel, proprietor of *Reynolds's Newspaper* and a friend of Lloyd George, that the two famous men were unknown to each other personally. It took but a few minutes for Dalziel to locate Lloyd George and return with a message that the chancellor was 'very keen' to meet Northcliffe in his private room. Cecil Harmsworth described the occasion in his diary, how 'during the whole of this time L.I.G. devoted all his powers to capturing N. It was a dazzling performance.' Though Northcliffe 'delighted in L.I.G.'s spendid imprudence' in showing him certain draft proposals he was to submit to the House next day, the impact of Lloyd George's effort was neither as profound nor as lasting as he had hoped.⁴ Before long the *Daily Mail* (which was Northcliffe's real mouthpiece, not *The Times*) had joined the chorus of outraged protests against the Parliament Bill, and shortly afterwards the Harmsworth newspapers attacked furiously the National Insurance scheme, Lloyd George's special creation. On the other hand Lloyd George's famous Mansion House speech of warning to Germany at the time of the Agadir crisis received a warm welcome, for Northcliffe by now was full of the German menace and determined to awaken England. Perhaps this softened somewhat his attitude towards Lloyd George over the Marconi affair, although the pleading of Winston Churchill and Northcliffe's brother Harold (soon to be Lord Rothermere) on behalf of the offending Liberal ministers helped somewhat. But presently Lloyd George was in Northcliffe's bad books again when he made pacific speeches in early 1914 that seemed to minimize the German threat. So matters went until the outbreak of the war – to quote Taylor, 'a curious on-and-off relationship'.

The relationship became more curious still as the war developed into the most dreadful mass experience the British public had ever known. Inevitably when a people are adrift, suffering, and in the dark, there occurs a crisis of leadership. This came early in Britain's first encounter with total war and it lasted late, indeed to the end. The response of men and women varied greatly, and where Lloyd George and Northcliffe were concerned the war served to bring out the best and the worst in both men. To their credit they strove from first to last, with all the resources at their command, to win the war. Nothing else mattered. Impatient with convention, frequently infuriated by the inertia of ministers and mandarins alike, and with frank disdain for rank and custom and red tape, their confidence in the ultimate result was never seriously shaken. But it was the methods necessary to achieve victory that brought them into conflict again and again. It has been said that Lloyd George was 'a politician from first to last and nothing else'.⁵ With equal truth it might be added that Northcliffe was 'a newspaperman from first to last and nothing else'. In

⁴ Reginald Pound and Geoffrey Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (London, 1959), pp. 376–7.

⁵ Taylor, *Politics in wartime*, p. 125.

different ways the strength of each depended heavily on public opinion, but whereas Lloyd George was content to ride the crest of popular support, Northcliffe believed that he created and controlled the wave. Lloyd George in fact came to possess greater power than any Englishman since Cromwell, though few, including he himself, could quite believe it. Northcliffe on the other hand early reached the conclusion that his weight and influence were at least the equal of any in the land; and it added to the perils of politicians that in the darkest days of the war many people were only too willing to take him at his own assessment. This was the crux of the problem of their relationship: an underlying sense of insecurity in the one man as opposed to overweening vanity in the other.

In the first few months of the war they had little enough to do with each other. Yet events conspired to bring them closer together before long. While Lloyd George was shedding his peacetime image and emerging as a dynamic war leader, Northcliffe's newspapers stepped up their attacks on the Liberal government of Herbert Henry Asquith, which was castigated as unfit to fight a war. Lesser matters also foreshadowed the shape of things to come. Northcliffe's ego, already showing signs of reaching the diseased proportions of megalomania, was flattered in the spring of 1915 when Lloyd George sought assistance in waging a campaign for national sobriety, his great enthusiasm at that moment. He wrote to Northcliffe on 15 April: 'We cannot act unless we have practically the unanimous support of the leaders of the nation. Your influence is essential.'⁶ Northcliffe saw in this the recognition that was his due. A few days later he was remarking to Sir George Riddell, proprietor of *News of the World* and one who was on intimate terms with Lloyd George: 'L.G. may be the man [to win the war]. He is the best of the lot.' This had been preceded by harsh denigration of Prime Minister Asquith as 'indolent, weak, and apathetic'.⁷

Civilian and military leaders alike were baffled by the stalemate on the Western Front, and a political crisis could not be postponed for long. This occurred in May 1915, yet the replacement of a Liberal government by a coalition that included Unionists and Labour was far from a perfect solution and won few plaudits. In particular the Harmsworth press attacked bitterly the retention of Lord Kitchener at the War Office, which brought down the wrath of countless thousands to whom Kitchener was virtually a demigod. The one redeeming feature of the new government, the *Daily Mail* commented, was that Kitchener 'has, added to him, a Minister of Munitions in the powerful and energetic person of Mr. Lloyd George'. This was Northcliffe speaking publicly. At the personal level he wrote to Lloyd George at the end of May, thanking him for his 'great self-sacrifice' in cheerfully accepting 'the weightiest burden of them all'.⁸ To Sir William Robertson Nicoll, editor of the *British Weekly* and the voice of Nonconformity, Northcliffe wrote on 3 June that Lloyd

⁶ Frank Owen, *Tempestuous journey: Lloyd George, his life and times* (London, 1954), p. 286.

⁷ *Lord Riddell's war diary, 1914-1918* (London, 1933), p. 78.

⁸ Northcliffe to Lloyd George, 29 May 1915. Lloyd George papers, D/18/1/4, House of Lords Record Office.

George 'had taken his courage in both hands and shown himself to be a real man'. The praise was not all in one direction. Nicoll replied to Northcliffe a few days later that he had had a long conversation with Lloyd George who remarked that 'you had performed and are performing an eminent service to the country' (i.e. in attacking through his newspapers the Kitchener regime at the War Office). A fortnight later Northcliffe was repeating to Nicoll his admiration for Lloyd George: 'He has risked everything, including health, in an endeavour to save the armies of Flanders and the Dardanelles.'⁹ This was fulsome stuff, but hardly justified by Lloyd George's first month at munitions.

Through the summer and autumn of 1915 the new minister received a steady flow of advice and encouragement from Printing House Square (*The Times*) and Carmelite House (*Daily Mail*). Some of it was public, some private;¹⁰ some of it, too, was gratuitous. Did Lloyd George feel he was being patronized by Lord Northcliffe? If so he gave no sign, for he knew better than any other politician in Britain the potential of the media, meaning Fleet Street, at a time of national peril. After more than a year of war parliament appeared to be almost moribund, or at least irrelevant, and for better or worse the press rushed in to fill the resultant vacuum. At this moment the goals of the two men were substantially the same in general terms – a more vigorous war effort, full mobilization of the nation's resources at a faster pace, dynamic leadership. Occasionally there was some collaboration, as in September 1915 when they helped the Australian journalist Keith Murdoch to place before the cabinet his report on the Dardanelles campaign. Northcliffe soon lost faith in that unhappy venture of British arms, and by October he was urging Lloyd George to resist in cabinet further commitments of manpower to a hopeless cause. He believed moreover that it was not just enough to cut losses. The chief author of the disaster must be identified and pilloried. This presented Northcliffe with no problem at all, for the culprit was highly visible and constantly audible in the person of Winston Churchill.¹¹ While this caused Lloyd George no particular distress, Churchill's opinions on Allied strategy and British military leadership were going to weigh heavily when Lloyd George became secretary of state for war in mid-1916. The repercussions for his relations with Northcliffe would shake the very foundations of the Asquith coalition government and contribute measurably to its collapse.

Before that happened, however, the issue of military conscription dwarfed all else in British politics. On this awesome question the Asquith cabinet, like the nation as a whole, had powerful differences of opinion. While Unionist ministers leaned heavily in favour of such a step, Lloyd George alone of the Liberals came out strongly for compulsion and almost resigned in consequence. Among the press lords Northcliffe had long been a determined advocate of national service, and though he supported the Derby scheme which briefly

⁹ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 481.

¹⁰ See, for example, the many items of Northcliffe correspondence for the period 24 May to 9 September 1915, in the Lloyd George papers, D/18/1.

¹¹ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 493.

postponed the inevitable, he had no doubt that conscription was the right and proper answer to the manpower needs of the army. Here was a fresh reason for Lloyd George and Northcliffe to draw closer together. On a related matter they also saw eye to eye, as can be seen in Northcliffe's note of 30 December 1915 to Geoffrey Dawson, editor of *The Times*: 'Lloyd George assures me that this man [Kitchener] is the curse of the country. He gave me example after example on Sunday night of the loss of life due to this man's ineptitude.' Yet in Lloyd George's entourage the Northcliffe link was beginning to cause some concern. Frances Stevenson, his devoted secretary and mistress, confided to her diary on 31 January 1916:

the chief thing which these [anti-conscription] Liberals objected to was D.s association with Lord Northcliffe. Of course Northcliffe's few harmless visits to D. have been magnified in the City into endless secret conclaves, & I must say I think has done D. a little harm with his Liberal friends, for Northcliffe is not trusted, nor does he deserve to be.¹²

Prior to the conscription crisis Northcliffe had seen himself merely as the greatest newspaper mogul of the age, possessor of an extraordinary capacity for sensing the public mood. As the politicians continued to fumble unavailingly for the key to victory, however, he became increasingly obsessed with their incompetence and faint-heartedness. From early 1916 onwards visions of a new role for himself began to flit across that turbulent mind. He received encouragement from Robertson Nicoll, who startled his readers in February with a leader in the *British Weekly* entitled 'Work for Lord Northcliffe' which urged that he should be appointed 'air minister' to deal with the German air-raid menace. This caused a great flurry of speculation and raised many fears. Riddell for one did not hide his alarm about a possible Northcliffe appointment. Frances Stevenson noted: 'Sir G. [Riddell] says that if Lord N. once gets a footing inside the Government, he will not rest until he is made Dictator. . . Lord N. is unscrupulous, & a dangerous man.' She added, blithely unconscious of the humour in her words: 'I do feel that D. [Lloyd George] should not have much to do with him. N. will use him for his own ends, & throw him over when he has no further use for him.'¹³ But Lloyd George's interest and curiosity were aroused by the 'air minister' suggestion, and he discussed it with Nicoll and Riddell. His assessment was realistic:

Northcliffe would not be a success. He has no experience of acting with equals. He would be specially handicapped in a Cabinet of twenty-two. . . He is best where he is. . . A Minister cannot threaten resignation every day, and, unless he is strong and well supported, no threat would have much effect.¹⁴

This was not Northcliffe's own conclusion, though he scarcely dared admit even to himself as yet that he might venture beyond Fleet Street. When the

¹² A. J. P. Taylor, ed., *Lloyd George. A diary by Frances Stevenson* (1971), p. 90.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 98.

¹⁴ *Riddell's war diary*, p. 153.

Daily Mail attacked Lord Derby, that affable but ineffective Tory aristocrat, for his part in the conscription crisis and for accepting the chairmanship of a new air committee, readers were quick to see this as a reflexion of Northcliffe's own desire for high office. Personal letters caused him to think furiously, such as one from Austin Harrison (editor of the *English Review*) who angrily insisted that Asquith and other ministers kept the Coalition together only because of dislike of Northcliffe: 'They fear that if the Coalition falls you may be asked to form or join a Government and they would rather lose the war than see you in office.'¹⁵ An extreme and cranky view, of course, but close to the estimate Northcliffe by now was forming of himself and his capabilities. The *Daily Mail* of 14 February gave his official response to the 'air minister' suggestion: 'Lord Northcliffe's reply is that there are men better able than he is to undertake the task; and, furthermore, that he could not conscientiously take part in a Government that is fighting a defensive rather than an offensive war.' On 22 April he went a little further when writing to Sir John Willison in Canada:

I have no anxiety to enter the Government. I believe that the rotary press is more powerful than the portfolio. If I can be of any service at any time and am invited I will enter the Cabinet, but not such a Cabinet as the existing one.¹⁶

Each time there was the disclaimer, quickly followed by the implication that in certain circumstances he might feel it his duty to assume the role of saviour of the nation. Little wonder Geoffrey Dawson thought that Northcliffe was having a 'bad bout' of megalomania at this time. Dawson felt compelled to tell his employer that the way he attacked the government in the *Daily Mail*, and thereby advertised himself, drove people to conclude that he wanted nothing less than a large share of political power. To this Northcliffe replied that on no account would he be a minister. Again there was a significant qualification, for he added that he wanted 'no job except to take part in the final Peace Conference'.¹⁷ This was the first that Dawson or anyone else had heard of such an idea. Much later Lloyd George would hear a great deal about it.

While Northcliffe alternately brooded and roared, Lloyd George's career entered a new phase. By May 1916 he had been minister of munitions for a full year and his great accomplishments there were a matter of record. Suddenly he was caught up in the Irish question when Asquith, in the aftermath of the Easter uprising in Dublin, asked him to tackle the problem of a lasting settlement. Lloyd George accepted the challenge, to the loud and enthusiastic applause of the *Daily Mail*. 'Send For Mr. Lloyd George' began the leading article of 26 May, while on the opposite page appeared an extra large headline: 'ALWAYS MR. LLOYD GEORGE!' This betokened activity behind the scenes. In fact at this juncture Northcliffe was seeing more of Lloyd

¹⁵ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 498.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The history of The Times*. IV: *The 150th anniversary and beyond, 1912-1948*, part 1 (London, 1952), 316.

George than ever before, somewhat to the irritation of Riddell who regarded himself as the leading confidant: 'L.G. never tells me about his meetings with Northcliffe, but I am sure they are in daily contact.'¹⁸ This was confirmed by Cecil Harmsworth, who remembered the early summer of 1916 as 'a period of something like real friendship between them – they were collaborating for a settlement of the Irish problem'.¹⁹ Northcliffe's biographers have pointed out that Cecil neglected to mention the fact that this collaboration had been initiated by Northcliffe, not by Lloyd George. Yet it was doomed to be short-lived and for two reasons, one predictable and the other fortuitous. The miracle Lloyd George hoped to effect in Ireland fell just short of accomplishment, thanks to the intransigence of the Unionist landowners of Southern Ireland and their ungenerous supporters. And a German mine off the Orkneys ended the Kitchener regime at the War Office.

Northcliffe was sorely disappointed at the one, but unashamedly elated over the other. 'Providence is on the side of the British Empire after all', he exulted on hearing of Kitchener's death.²⁰ Who would succeed to the troubled inheritance at the War Office? There was ample time for speculation, as Asquith did not rush to fill the post. Though there was but one obvious candidate – notwithstanding Geoffrey Dawson's constant urgings in *The Times* that the mantle should fall on his hero, the unemployed proconsul Lord Milner – the prime minister's intuition (and still more that of his wife Margot) warned that a Lloyd George appointment must have heavy consequences. A month was to pass before the inevitable happened, and during that time Lloyd George and Northcliffe mysteriously drifted apart. It is impossible to know what happened, only that the *Daily Mail* for 7 July greeted Lloyd George's appointment as secretary of state for war in the most muted way imaginable. The leading article said nothing, a very strange omission, while the news story merely outlined the ministerial changes under a small heading 'Earldom for Sir E. Grey' (the foreign secretary, who was not one of Northcliffe's heroes) and a still smaller one 'Mr. Lloyd George War Minister'. The contrast to the exuberant reporting of 26 May could scarcely have been greater.

Possibly Northcliffe sensed what soon would come to pass. Hitherto it had been easy to support Lloyd George, for as minister of munitions he was a refreshing contrast to Kitchener at the War Office. Northcliffe had welcomed the diminution of Kitchener's authority when the new ministry was established, still more when General Sir William Robertson became chief of the imperial general staff with full control of strategy. Kitchener had been reduced to little more than a cipher, a mere shadow of a once-dominant figure. Now things were certain to change in the higher direction of the war. Lloyd George let this be known to Geoffrey Dawson in mid-June, when he said he had no desire to go to the War Office if it meant being as powerless as Kitchener. Dawson concluded from this remark that Lloyd George intended to be a 'war minister'

¹⁸ *Riddell's war diary*, p. 185.

¹⁹ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 500.

²⁰ A. J. P. Taylor, *English history, 1914–1945* (London, 1965), p. 58.

in the European sense.²¹ This could only mean that he would not be content, as secretary for war, to leave all the big decisions to Robertson and Sir Douglas Haig, commander-in-chief of the British armies in France. Yet they were the two generals whom Northcliffe trusted, implicitly and explicitly, to organize and direct the land forces of the Empire.

On 8 July 1916 the secretary of the War Committee, Maurice Hankey, wrote in his diary:

Ll. George took up duty at the War Office today. His first visitor was Lord Northcliffe; his second Churchill with a big box of papers. Absit omen. I fear they are trying to get at him over the Dardanelles papers, Churchill's object being to clear his own character, and Northcliffe's to get in a back-hander at the Prime Minister.²²

Hankey missed the real significance of the fact that Northcliffe was first across the threshold. No doubt Lloyd George guessed the true purpose of this call, soon to be confirmed by Northcliffe's actions. Within a fortnight he was on his way to visit Sir Douglas Haig at his headquarters in France. The momentous battle of the Somme had begun on 1 July, and as the staggering losses mounted, the chiefs of staff were extremely anxious to put the best face on a bad situation. The press, or most of it, co-operated willingly, with *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* among the most aggressively optimistic newspapers. Northcliffe's view of war was the simplistic one accepted by most civilians: leave it to the service chiefs to decide strategy and the soldiers to die in battle. In consequence Haig found it child's play to convince Northcliffe that all was well. He wrote in his diary on 23 July: 'Lord N. was, he said, much pleased with his visit, and asked me to let Sassoon send him a line should anything appear in *The Times* which was not altogether to my liking.'²³ Nothing Northcliffe saw in the next few weeks diminished by one whit his faith in the British generals. He wrote home how Haig 'showed me his plans. Each time I see him I am convinced of his qualities. We talked of the wobble of politicians.'²⁴ Haig at the same time noted complacently that Northcliffe 'is most enthusiastic on all he had seen, and is very anxious to do all he can to help win'.²⁵

A few men in England were not deluded into thinking that the Somme was a success. One was Winston Churchill, now a private member of parliament but desperately anxious to share again in running the war. On 1 August he wrote a strongly critical memorandum on British strategy which his good friend F. E. Smith (the attorney-general) placed before the cabinet. Hankey thought that Lloyd George had a hand in this. Whether he did or not, the new secretary for war also was becoming rapidly disillusioned with the Haig offensive, and for the added reason that the war was not going to be won quickly during his tenure at the War Office. This caused the gulf between himself and Northcliffe

²¹ *History of The Times*, iv, part 1, 285.

²² Hankey papers, Diary, HNKY 1/1, Churchill College, Cambridge.

²³ Robert Blake (ed.), *The private papers of Douglas Haig* (London, 1953), p. 155. Sir Philip Sassoon was a wealthy young Unionist M.P. serving as private secretary to Haig.

²⁴ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 503.

²⁵ *Private papers of Douglas Haig*, p. 157.

to widen appreciably. The day Churchill was drafting his memorandum, Lloyd George received this warning from Northcliffe in France: 'Any wavering now will cost us eventual losses beyond calculation, alarm France, and hearten a depressed Germany.'²⁶ On the 6th he followed with an account of his tour of the Front, saying that morale was good and losses not heavy in light of the results achieved. At the same time Dawson was being ordered to keep *The Times* straight, and the editor willingly complied. Accordingly Churchill's criticisms were ignored in those columns, while Northcliffe himself weighed in with an article in *The Times* (8 August) describing the state of affairs behind the British lines in France as 'perfect' and insisting that nothing should be done which might hamper Haig's strategy.

Lloyd George now began to appreciate the strength of the forces arrayed against him, for *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* together were a voice to reckon with. On 9 August he breakfasted with Riddell and Lord Burnham (owner of the *Daily Telegraph*) and expressed himself strongly on Northcliffe's article: 'He is all wrong this time. Things behind the line require to be vastly improved.' When a worried Arthur Lee arrived with two letters from Northcliffe in Paris, Lloyd George repeated emphatically that he was 'all wrong'. At once he asked Lee to arrange a meeting with Northcliffe in France, where he was going next day: 'I must put him straight'.²⁷ There is no record that such a meeting took place, but if it did the result can scarcely have pleased either party. Lloyd George continued to see Winston Churchill and listen attentively to his warnings about the military situation, while Northcliffe in his newspapers and privately resolutely supported Haig and Robertson. It was bad enough that the generals were strengthened in the conviction that they were omnipotent and omniscient. Worse, Northcliffe was coming to believe that he had a considerable hold over Lloyd George and could make him dance to the *Daily Mail's* piping. He was back at Haig's headquarters on 9 September after a holiday trip to Italy, Switzerland and Spain. After this visit Haig wrote to his wife with evident relish: 'Lord Northcliffe calls him [Lloyd George] a "shirt-sleeve politician", and he told me that L.G. does whatever he (Lord N.) advises!'²⁸

An open clash between the two could not be postponed for long. Matters heated up in the early autumn when Lloyd George made an official trip to B.E.F. headquarters. He was virtually challenged to do so by Northcliffe, who had told Arthur Lee that Lloyd George was almost as unpopular with the army as Winston Churchill. In any event Lloyd George made no effort while in the presence of Haig and the French commander Foch to conceal his feelings about British generalship. Afterwards Philip Sassoon reported privately to Northcliffe that the secretary for war obviously 'had no liking for Haig' and that

²⁶ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 503. This does not appear to be in the Lloyd George papers.

²⁷ *Riddell's war diary*, p. 208. Lee (later Lord Lee of Fareham) was a wealthy Unionist M.P. on Lloyd George's staff at the War Office.

²⁸ *Private papers of Douglas Haig*, p. 166.

'Churchill's subtle poison was responsible'. Northcliffe replied to Sassoon in this fashion, confident that his words would reach Haig:

You are dealing with people, some of whom are very thick-skinned, others very unscrupulous, but all afraid of newspapers. It is urgently necessary that they should be told, and more than once: 'Hands off the Army.' They are now definitely aware that any interference will lead to exposure...

You may have noticed that directly the tanks were successful, Lloyd George issued a notice through the Press Bureau that they were due to Churchill. You will find that unless we watch these people they will claim that the great Battle of the Somme is due to the politicians. That would not matter if it were not for the fact that it is the politicians who will make peace. Personally I dread a peace made by these tricky people.²⁹

Understandably Northcliffe's popularity at British headquarters in France continued high. And not just there, either. Soon he was throwing himself into a serious quarrel that had developed at the War Office between Lloyd George and General Robertson. This of course concerned strategy, for Lloyd George favoured breaking off the Somme offensive and trying a diversion at Salonika to aid Serbia and come at the Central Powers from behind. But Robertson remained stubbornly and unrepentantly a 'Westerner' and would not look at anything else. Colonel Repington, military correspondent of *The Times* and on close terms with Robertson, noted after seeing Northcliffe on 4 October: 'He asked me to tell Robertson that he would support him.' Repington added: 'His chief fear was that L.G. would give Winston some appointment at the War Office.'³⁰ A secret meeting between Lloyd George and Northcliffe two days later did nothing to help matters, and on the 9th Northcliffe spoke his mind freely to a large gathering of advertising men at the Aldwych Club. He received a great ovation when he warned of two principal dangers – political interference with the army, and the possibility that the government might make an early and unfavourable peace. As Lloyd George had given his celebrated 'Knock-out Blow' interview only a fortnight earlier, there was no disagreement between the two men on the latter subject. On strategy, however, they remained poles apart. Lloyd George warned Robertson on 12 October, but doubtless with Northcliffe also in mind: 'You must not ask me to play the part of a mere dummy. I am not in the least suited for the part.'³¹

Repington kept Northcliffe well informed about the Lloyd George–Robertson quarrel, which showed signs of reaching the proportions of a major power struggle. To Robertson's support there came, in addition to the Northcliffe press, other newspapers such as the ultra-Tory *Morning Post*, edited by the fiery and outspoken H. A. Gwynne, whose hero was Sir Edward Carson, de facto leader of the opposition in the House of Commons. Gwynne now proceeded to write Asquith (though he heartily disliked and distrusted the prime minister) a letter of warning about 'a sort of plot':

²⁹ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, pp. 506–7.

³⁰ C.à C. Repington, *The First World War* (2 vols., London, 1920), I, 354.

³¹ Owen, *Tempestuous journey*, p. 325.

There seems to be on the part of the War Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill, Sir F. E. Smith, and Lord French [Haig's predecessor], a common agreement in regard to the capabilities of the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in France; ... the form which this understanding is taking is that of exalting the French system of tactics and strategy at the expense of our own.³²

To one of the British generals Gwynne was much blunter: 'Lloyd George is, I think, merely trying to get the Army in the hollow of his hand, and be able to order it about as he did at the Ministry of Munitions. The others want to get rid of DH [Haig].'³³ This was precisely Northcliffe's own conviction, and he was determined to thwart any such nefarious scheme. Robertson he encouraged to stand firm, which won him this singular letter of thanks from a chief of the imperial general staff: 'It is very hard work trying to win this war. The Boche give me no trouble compared with what I meet in London. So any help you can give me will be of Imperial value.'³⁴ Northcliffe was only too willing to help. Tom Clarke of the editorial staff of the *Daily Mail* recorded in his diary on 12 October:

The Chief is getting a bit restive about Lloyd George. He thinks L.G. is getting too friendly with Winston Churchill, whom he will not forgive for what he calls the Antwerp and Gallipoli blunders, and he is telling us to drive into the public mind the fact that political interference means increasing the death-roll of our army.³⁵

Northcliffe was more than 'a bit restive'. Through Lloyd George's secretary he sent the secretary for war a warning that was staggering in its insolence and assumptions: 'You can tell him that I hear he has been interfering with strategy, and that if he goes on I will break him.'³⁶ To his *Daily Mail* staff Northcliffe poured scorn on 'mad, wild expeditions to distant places', meaning Salonika. They had but one essential message for the public at this time of crisis: Sir Douglas Haig and Sir William Robertson must not be distracted from their task by meddling politicians. Accordingly the *Daily Mail* of 13 October delivered its most violent attack yet on those who dared question the wisdom of the high command. Under the heading 'Politicians and Casualties. Hands Off the Army!' the leading article proclaimed (in italics for good measure) that the work of ministers and parliament was '*the supply of More Men*'. It continued:

There is no Cabinet Minister or ex-Cabinet Minister, not even the most eminent, the most gifted, the most eloquent, the most energetic and most popular, whom the country would allow at this time of day to interfere with the plans of these two men [Haig and Robertson]. We have had more than enough of that sort of thing in the present war...

³² Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, III (London, 1971), 811.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 508.

³⁵ Tom Clarke, *My Northcliffe diary* (London, 1931), p. 102.

³⁶ Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War* (one-volume edition, London, 1960), p. 323. The story in this form, frequently repeated, seems to have originated with Beaverbrook, but Pound and Harmsworth doubt that Northcliffe used those precise words. Certainly Northcliffe passed on a warning to Lloyd George about interfering with strategy, and told both Cecil Harmsworth and Sassoon that he had done so.

Ministerial meddling means military muddling... 'Never again!' to quote Mr. Lloyd George's phrase [in reference to Gallipoli] must be the motto for Ministers – and particularly for War Ministers.

This was the authentic voice of Northcliffe – loud, strident, in tune with the popular mood of the moment but unaware of the long-term implications. Little did he suspect that he was helping to goad Lloyd George to the point of breaking the Asquith coalition. Even less did he perceive that a final rupture between Asquith and Lloyd George would leave one or the other of the two statesmen much more powerful than before and consequently better placed to ignore the press, especially the Northcliffe press. Admittedly Lloyd George had reason to feel uncertain about the future and his role in winning the war. Riddell came to dinner on 16 October and warned of a conspiracy between Northcliffe and the generals to get rid of him. Lloyd George's mood can be judged from a conversation with Repington on the 25th, when he burst out that 'we were all asked to keep silent and bow the knee to this military Moloch, but that he was responsible, and as he would have to take the blame, he meant to have his own way'.³⁷ Riddell noted a few days later, after another conversation with the secretary for war: 'L.G. strongly resents Northcliffe's attitude, and says he does not intend to allow him to dictate his policy.'³⁸ But Northcliffe's tune did not change, either publicly or privately. Frances Stevenson entered in her diary on 14 November that 'Northcliffe has been bragging that the War Office has broken everyone who went there, & that D. [Lloyd George] will be no exception to the rule'. And on the 18th Sir Max Aitken told J. T. Davies how Northcliffe 'had been to him & told him that he was out to destroy L.G. "I want your help, too," he said. "I am going to get as many newspapers as possible to help me."' Aitken refused.³⁹

This was not the way Geoffrey Dawson at *The Times* saw matters. The leading article of 7 November praised Lloyd George as 'a great driving force and an invaluable leader of democracy in war'. Others might be expendable; he was not. And unbeknownst to Northcliffe the wheels of change already were in motion. Next day there occurred in the House of Commons the celebrated Nigeria debate, which began the train of events that culminated within a month in Lloyd George's accession to the premiership. The part played by the press in this 'revolution, British-style' has been described elsewhere,⁴⁰ but the fall of Asquith and his coalition ministry marked a new stage in the relationship between Northcliffe and Lloyd George. As the political crisis developed in the closing days of November there were those who were anxious to arrange, if not a partnership, then some kind of alliance between the two men at least for the purpose of ending the Asquith system. Dawson and Arthur Lee were the chief projectors here. After some discussion as to ways and means, they

³⁷ Repington, *First World War*, 1, 374.

³⁸ Riddell's war diary, p. 216.

³⁹ Lloyd George. *A diary by Frances Stevenson*, pp. 122, 125.

⁴⁰ J. M. McEwen, 'The Press and the fall of Asquith', *The Historical Journal*, xxi, 4 (1978), 863–83.

succeeded in arranging for Northcliffe to meet Lloyd George on Friday, 1 December.

Already it was too late for Northcliffe to play a major part in destroying Asquith. Though his newspapers, the *Daily Mail* in particular, made loud noises off, the forming of a triumvirate consisting of Lloyd George, the Unionist leader Bonar Law and Sir Edward Carson (with Max Aitken acting as go-between) ensured that great changes would take place even without his aid. Northcliffe only discovered this at the eleventh hour though he tried to be *au courant* throughout the crisis. When he saw Lloyd George at Lee's house on the morning of 1 December he got little satisfaction and even less inkling as to the other's real intentions on the great question of resignation or reconciliation with Asquith. Irritated by this he pursued Lloyd George to the War Office a little later in the day and fared only slightly better. Lloyd George would not divulge how matters really stood in high politics at that moment, telling his pertinacious visitor just enough to ensure the support of *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* in the days immediately ahead. Looking back on these events Lord Beaverbrook (Sir Max Aitken in a new incarnation) was quite disdainful of Northcliffe's failure to grasp what was happening at the centre: 'Northcliffe had not the capacity for understanding from a hint when a political situation was serious. He had to be told in so many words.'⁴¹ Lloyd George was even more contemptuous, judging by Frances Stevenson's diary: 'Northcliffe has turned up again, grovelling, and trying to be friends with D. again.'⁴² Perhaps, but Lloyd George could not risk having Northcliffe as a public enemy at this stage.

Next day's editions of *The Times* and *Daily Mail* as usual disparaged the Asquith government while finding some words of praise for Lloyd George and Carson, but they were sketchy and inaccurate about events. True to form Northcliffe's effectiveness was diminished by the extravagance of the *Daily Mail* language. On this Saturday afternoon he visited the War Office yet again; and yet again Lloyd George fobbed him off with partial answers. Northcliffe gleaned just enough to put his *Evening News* to work placarding London with contents bills reading 'Lloyd George Packing Up', but he remained in the dark about the war minister's allies or plan of action. He knew that Lloyd George was holding back and this angered him, both as a newspaperman and as one aspiring to cut a big figure at a critical moment in Britain's history. The brunt of his wrath fell on the unoffending and unsuspecting Arthur Lee and Tom Clarke, whose records testify eloquently to the state of Northcliffe's temper. While he fumed, Lloyd George proceeded to prepare for the impending storm at the top.

Matters took a very different turn the following day (Sunday, 3 December), which led to one of the most curious episodes in the whole history of the Northcliffe-Lloyd George relationship. After much discussion among leading politicians it appeared by late afternoon that Asquith and Lloyd George had

⁴¹ Beaverbrook's draft 'History of the Crisis'. Beaverbrook papers, deed box 4, folder xxi. House of Lords Record Office. London.

⁴² *Lloyd George. A diary by Frances Stevenson*, p. 130.

patched up their differences. But soon afterwards on this same day Northcliffe called upon Lloyd George at the War Office once more and discussed a lucrative contract for political articles which would appear in the *Daily Mail*. Quite clearly this assumed that Lloyd George shortly would be out of the government and in need of money to make up for the loss of his salary as a minister. Was he merely indulging in a little fun and pulling Northcliffe's leg? If so, it was a strange moment for humour. More likely Lloyd George was hedging his bets in the event that the political crisis had not been resolved after all. In retrospect the incident does him little credit. To negotiate with Northcliffe on the subject of political articles immediately after his putative reconciliation with Asquith suggests only too clearly that he did not act in the best of faith towards his prime minister and party chief. If on the other hand he did intend to strike out on his own and challenge for supreme power, the *Daily Mail* proposal was not redolent of great confidence in the outcome. Later Lloyd George preferred to forget that it had ever happened. Years afterwards in a sharp exchange with the editor of the *Spectator* he flatly denied ever having seen Northcliffe at all on this Sunday evening.⁴³ Northcliffe likewise attempted to draw a curtain over the affair, doubtless because his attempt to catch Lloyd George had failed and failures were to be erased from memory.

What helped both men forget their projected arrangement about newspaper articles was the speedy collapse of the *rapprochement* between Asquith and Lloyd George. By Tuesday, 5 December, Asquith had resigned and within forty-eight hours Lloyd George was prime minister. Indisputably the Northcliffe press aided Lloyd George's cause enormously during this fateful week. The leading article in *The Times* on Monday morning precipitated a fresh breach between the two Liberal chieftains, and until the dust settled, the *Daily Mail*, on Northcliffe's express instructions, spared no effort to make impossible either reconciliation or Asquith's return. It was journalism of a particularly low order, but the ethics and tactics of Carmelite House are of no concern here. What matters is whether Northcliffe placed Lloyd George under an obligation to him. If he thought so, he was soon undeceived. The new prime minister had been forced to accept most of the Unionist 'Old Gang' (who had served under Asquith), and they stipulated that neither Winston Churchill nor Lord Northcliffe was to be included in the new government. This condition Lloyd George found easy to swallow; the proscription of Northcliffe was even more welcome than Churchill's exclusion. The same day, 7 December, Lloyd George received a deputation of Labour leaders whom he persuaded almost effortlessly to support his administration – the famous 'doping séance' of Professor Marwick's trenchant phrase. When asked if small newspapers might be prosecuted while Fleet Street giants enjoyed immunity from government attack, Lloyd George replied without hesitation that 'he personally would treat Lord Northcliffe in exactly the same way as he would treat a labourer'.⁴⁴ It cannot have taken long for this to reach Northcliffe's ears. Now that Asquith

⁴³ See *Spectator*, 30 June 1933.

⁴⁴ Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War*, p. 512.

had been destroyed it looked as if the antagonism of the past few months was quickly reasserting itself. The story is told that Lloyd George extended the olive branch, only to be rudely rebuffed.⁴⁵ But this probably belongs in the list of Beaverbrook apocrypha.

Lloyd George's accession to power changed the type of political leadership in Britain but left untouched some things that were basic. Military strategy had been at the heart of his frustration while secretary for war, yet strategy remained firmly in the grip of Robertson and Haig. And with one such as Derby now at the War Office, that grip was not likely to be shaken easily. The generals wasted no time in reaffirming their conviction that the Western Front was the one theatre that mattered. And Lord Northcliffe was only too willing to be their agent in Fleet Street. Lloyd George's feelings on this can be judged from his *War memoirs* where he wrote how Northcliffe had become 'the mere kettledrum of Sir Douglas Haig and the mouth-organ of Sir William Robertson'.⁴⁶ On New Year's Day, 1917, Haig saw Northcliffe and stressed that no time should be lost in bringing all possible Allied resources to France, meaning abandonment of any notion of a Balkan offensive via Salonika. The other man responded at once by setting off for Paris, there to encourage Clemenceau to resist with might and main Briand's proposal to send more troops to the Balkans. This pleased Haig immensely, and he wrote in his diary with evident satisfaction: 'He [Northcliffe] is fully alive to his responsibility for putting Lloyd George into power, and means to do his utmost to insist on his taking the advice of the General Staff.'⁴⁷ Northcliffe for his part had no doubts about his power over the new regime and the duty he had to perform. The permanent under-secretary for war, Sir Reginald Brade, wrote to Beaverbrook on 6 January: 'You ought to know, but not from me, that L.G. and Northcliffe quarrelled in Paris when they met during this week and the latter threatened to break the former. Salonika was the matter in dispute.'⁴⁸ Clearly Lloyd George could look forward to nothing but trouble with Northcliffe and the generals over strategy. Unless he gave in to their convictions, which he distrusted profoundly and with good reason, he must meet them in a head-on clash or find a way round. In fact there was no choice, for he would not do the first and dared not risk the second; only circumvention remained.

There was no question of mounting a winter offensive in France after the Somme failure, so Lloyd George could concentrate on detaching Northcliffe

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 544, where Beaverbrook says that at Lloyd George's request he rang up Northcliffe, only to receive the cold reply: 'Lord Northcliffe sees no advantage in any interview between him and the Prime Minister at the present juncture'. But see A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London, 1972), pp. 120-7, where the evidence points to the unlikelihood of Beaverbrook having been with Lloyd George at any time during the first few days of the new administration. Probably Beaverbrook sought to improve upon the story in the *Daily Chronicle* of 8 December 1916 where Northcliffe was quoted as saying: 'I prefer to sit in Printing House Square and Carmelite House'.

⁴⁶ David Lloyd George, *War memoirs* (6 vols., London, 1933-6), iv, 2228.

⁴⁷ *Private papers of Douglas Haig*, p. 190.

⁴⁸ Lord Beaverbrook, *Men and power, 1917-1918* (London, 1956), p. 47.

from the generals and perhaps disarming him. He wasted little time. On 1 February Northcliffe wrote to Philip Sassoon: 'I saw Lloyd George the night before last about various things – chiefly in regard to propaganda in the United States, more and more essential in view of the fact that the war is now really starting.'⁴⁹ The tactic of diverting Northcliffe to the American scene became increasingly attractive as that nation inched its way towards entry into the war. It was a matter of some urgency, too, for Northcliffe was behaving like a rogue elephant once more. Before the new government had been in office two months he was telling Riddell that 'unless L.G. displays greater powers of organization, he will be displaced before the war ends'.⁵⁰ On 29 April, Frances Stevenson noted that Lloyd George was 'rather depressed ... for Northcliffe had been to see him ... and told him that this Gov. is even more unpopular than the last!'.⁵¹ A typical Northcliffe gesture occurred on 12 May, when, to a press luncheon at the Mansion House with Sir William Robertson as guest of honour, he advocated what sounded like a high command dictatorship. Since he could not be squashed – no one knew how great was the might of the Harmsworth empire – he must be squared. So on the eve of the United States declaration of war Lloyd George broached the question of Northcliffe heading a strong deputation to the New World. The subject kept recurring in the next few weeks, notwithstanding that the foreign secretary, A. J. Balfour, already had crossed the ocean at the head of a large British mission. The astute Hankey wrote in his diary on 24 May:

Interesting discussion at morning War Cabinet on subject of the articles on the submarine question in *The Times* and *Daily Mail* and all the Northcliffe press, which supply most valuable propaganda to the enemy, who makes full use of it. L.G. very angry about it, which amuses me, as before he became Prime Minister he could talk of nothing except 'telling the people the truth'. He is now trying to persuade the War Cabinet to send Northcliffe to America to co-ordinate the purchases, transport arrangements, etc. of the various Depts. This, of course, is really a dodge to get rid of Northcliffe, of whom he is afraid. I am certain N. will not accept it, even if he is asked.⁵²

But Hankey underestimated both Northcliffe's patriotism and his vanity. Despite disclaimers, the idea appealed to him immensely. Lloyd George summoned him to Downing Street on 30 May and Northcliffe at once accepted the offer which he had declined but a short time earlier. From the prime minister's standpoint one improvement was evident immediately. Northcliffe lunched at Downing Street next day and Hankey noted that he was 'very quiet and restrained'. Not so restrained, however, was the reaction that greeted the news of this sensational appointment. At Westminster, along Whitehall, in Fleet Street, from the clubs of St James's Street to the haunts of City men, there was astonishment, anger, dismay. Or as Lloyd George remarked later, 'the appointment of such a person ... shocked many people of conventional outlook'.

⁴⁹ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 520.

⁵⁰ *Riddell's war diary*, p. 238.

⁵¹ *Lloyd George. A diary by Frances Stevenson*, p. 157.

⁵² Stephen Roskill, *Hankey, Man of secrets* (3 vols., London, 1970-4), 1, 390-1.

The Times fanned the excitement with a bold headline: 'Successor to Mr. Balfour', for Balfour was regarded with peculiar affection in certain Tory circles where the implied slur was keenly resented. Even a member of Lloyd George's entourage, the Liberal M.P. Colonel David Davies, had the temerity to call it 'a damn bad appointment. . . Here it will be said that you are afraid of the Harmsworth Press.' The shot went home and an angry Lloyd George speedily humiliated the honest if foolish Davies. It was more serious that C. P. Scott, owner and editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, had strong misgivings. Scott dined with Lloyd George on 27 June and noted afterwards:

I told him my allegiance had been severely shaken by his appointment of Lord Northcliffe but he defended himself with vigour . . . partly and quite frankly on the ground . . . that it was essential to get rid of him. He had become so 'jumpy' as to be really a public danger and it was necessary to 'harness' him in order to find occupation for his superfluous energies. I had to do this, said Lloyd George, 'if I was to avoid a public quarrel with him.'⁵³

While some raged, others laughed. Robertson and Repington were greatly amused by a cartoon in *London Opinion* showing Lloyd George and Carson gleefully discussing Northcliffe's absence in America. Carson was made to say: 'If Asquith had conceived such a splendid idea, he would have been Prime Minister still!' Whatever the reaction, the fact remained that it was a clever move on Lloyd George's part. Later in the summer of 1917 when he faced serious trouble over ousting Carson from his post as first lord of the Admiralty, Beaverbrook remarked: 'What about the Press? A sure source of trouble! One good thing, Northcliffe was three thousand miles away and he [Lloyd George] could rely on Milner to look after Geoffrey Dawson, editor of *The Times*.'⁵⁴ Churchill summed it up most succinctly: 'Lord Northcliffe was on a mission to the United States and appeased'.⁵⁵ An eminently satisfactory state of affairs while it lasted.

It has long been accepted that Northcliffe achieved much by his mission to America. Certainly many in England who had been vociferous critics in June of 1917 were silenced by November; some even acknowledged that he had done well. This posed a fresh problem for Lloyd George. Northcliffe was returning, if not exactly to a hero's welcome, at least with enhanced prestige and added consciousness of his powers. Would he resume his old ways, or perhaps do worse? The weakened Allied position in 1917 made it unlikely that Northcliffe would spare the lash where British political leadership was concerned. To his mother on 7 September he wrote: 'Many people now write to me [in America] . . . who think I ought to return to ginger up our very limp government.' A short time later he heard from Wickham Steed, foreign editor of *The Times*, that he (Steed) was glad to hear of Northcliffe's imminent return because 'I am sure your influence here is needed'.⁵⁶ No one felt this more strongly than

⁵³ Trevor Wilson (ed.), *The political diaries of C. P. Scott, 1911-1928* (London, 1970), p. 296.

⁵⁴ Beaverbrook, *Men and power*, p. 172.

⁵⁵ Winston Churchill, *The world crisis* (6 vols., London, 1923-31), II, 293.

⁵⁶ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, pp. 580, 585.

Northcliffe himself. On 12 November he arrived back in England; and that same day *The Times* gave a cautious welcome to the new Allied War Council but warned that it must not affect the positions of Haig and Robertson or provide a vehicle for 'armchair strategists'. So after several months of freedom from serious press attacks, Lloyd George saw his most formidable critic stride back on to the stage once more.

This time he had a solution ready at hand. There existed an air board which the government proposed to raise to the status of air ministry. The chairman of this body was the wealthy and influential Liberal peer, Lord Cowdray, who not unnaturally assumed that he would be made first minister of air. But on 15 November another peer lunched at Downing Street with the prime minister to discuss a quite different scenario. Lloyd George's guest was Lord Northcliffe and the two men proceeded to discuss the new air ministry, indeed they may even have reached some kind of understanding, although this will never be known. It does seem certain, however, that Northcliffe departed with the impression that he would be offered the post. What happened thereafter became one of the more celebrated incidents of wartime politics. Next morning there appeared in the press a letter from Northcliffe to Lloyd George, declining the air ministry, and in terms certain to injure the government, humiliate Cowdray, and put the prime minister in a very bad light. The letter began with a reference to Lloyd George's 'repeated invitation' that Northcliffe become air minister, proceeded to dwell at some length on the deficiencies of the British war effort, and concluded by saying: 'I can do better work if I maintain my independence and am not gagged by a loyalty that I do not feel towards the whole of your Administration'. Lloyd George of course read the letter for the first time in the morning newspapers.

In Beaverbrook's view, 'Northcliffe's action in publishing this letter was the grossest breach of political etiquette', while Lloyd George termed it 'one of those lapses into blundering brutality to which his passion for the startling gesture sometimes led him'.⁵⁷ From all sides Northcliffe's enemies declaimed against such conduct. Even the king, who had no especial love for Lloyd George, tut-tutted privately. But more important than Northcliffe's manners is the question why he behaved so. There is no single answer. He was beginning to suspect the government of going soft, for in his opinion an inconclusive peace would be fatal to the cause of British and Allied arms. If the Harmsworth Press were nobbled, Lloyd George and his associates (particularly the Milnerites, whom Northcliffe sensed before long to be not averse to a deal with Germany) might not keep in the straight path. Secondly, Northcliffe did not trust parliamentary government, least of all in wartime, and he did not trust Lloyd George. To become part of that system would be anathema to him, a newspaperman through and through, no matter how strong the temptation to have authority where he could make great decisions affecting the war. Perhaps too his instinct warned that an individualist like himself could never

⁵⁷ Beaverbrook, *Men and power*, p. 84; Lloyd George, *War memoirs*, iv, 1871.

fit into a cabinet of equals, even a small war cabinet, where decisions were reached through discussion. Finally, there was the satisfying knowledge that Lloyd George seemed to walk in fear of him and that others perceived this. Colonel House, a shrewd American observer of the British scene, dined with Lloyd George about this time and entered in his diary: 'We talked of Northcliffe. He (Lloyd George) evidently is afraid of him, and, unfortunately, Northcliffe knows it.'⁵⁸ This was an advantage not to be tossed away lightly. There were two amusing sequels to the air ministry affair. Eight days after the celebrated rebuff to Lloyd George, Northcliffe was elevated in the peerage to the rank of viscount. And within another forty-eight hours his brother, Lord Rothermere, was made minister for air. This seemed proof beyond a doubt of Northcliffe's power in the land.

Had he wished, Lloyd George could have stopped this honour at the last moment. Yet he did nothing. It was not cowardice, however, that stayed his hand; rather he was behaving as always like a political realist. He perceived that the Northcliffe letter need not destroy for ever relations between Downing Street and Carmelite House. On the contrary, Northcliffe had left the door open for Lloyd George to make use of his talents in perhaps the best possible way, namely propaganda against enemy countries. This idea had much to commend it, given Britain's poor record in this sphere, but there still remained the obstacle of Northcliffe's continuing and well-known support for Haig and Robertson. The high command were chained to the Western Front, with all that that implied. At this moment in late 1917 Lloyd George had an unexpected stroke of luck: Cambrai. The breakthrough with tanks had raised to impossible heights British hopes of speedy and complete victory over Germany, hopes that were soon dashed by the successful enemy counter-attack. Northcliffe, hitherto one of Haig's staunchest supporters, was as disillusioned as any man in the street and said so. On 12 December the leading article in *The Times* began with the heading 'A Case for Inquiry', which reflected Northcliffe's memorandum to *The Times's* staff calling Cambrai 'one of the most ghastly stories in English history'. Next day he wrote to Sassoon, in words meant for Haig's eyes, that the British people were 'at the end of their patience' and that there was 'intense resentment here about Cambrai'.⁵⁹ Lloyd George could now rejoice that the Northcliffe-Haig-Robertson axis was broken.

Let it not be imagined, however, that this inaugurated a lasting era of peace and good-will between Lloyd George and Lord Northcliffe. Their relations continued to oscillate between amity and hostility, sometimes unconcealed. At the end of November, for instance, Lloyd George led a large British delegation to a war conference in Paris, and Northcliffe was one of the party. And he carried on as head of the London end of the war mission to the United States. Yet early in January 1918 the Harmsworth press launched a fierce attack on the government over the U-boat danger and the threat of starvation, which

⁵⁸ Beaverbrook, *Men and power*, p. 86.

⁵⁹ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 598.

forced Lloyd George to remonstrate with Northcliffe and Dawson. A month later when the prime minister tried to sack Sir William Robertson his task was complicated by the *Daily Mail*'s outspoken attack on the War Office. This, as Lloyd George observed to Hankey, 'made it impossible . . . to get rid of him [Robertson], as all the world would say it was done at Northcliffe's dictation'.⁶⁰ Robertson went, nevertheless, and Lloyd George survived the storm that ensued. At this point there occurred the opportunity, envisaged in November, to channel Northcliffe's energies into more constructive work. In February the war cabinet responded to growing pressure by creating a Ministry of Information with Lord Beaverbrook in charge, and he immediately asked that Northcliffe assist him in a key area of his responsibilities. Lloyd George agreed quite willingly and on the 18th the following item appeared in *The Times*: 'Lord Northcliffe has consented to accept the position of Director of Propaganda in Enemy Countries'. All that was lacking, in the opinion of some people, was the word 'graciously'. Once again Lloyd George admitted privately to C. P. Scott that it 'was necessary to find occupation for his abounding energies if they were not to run into mischief'.⁶¹

Yet Northcliffe continued to believe and to proclaim that he was in no way compromised by accepting such a post. To the editor of the *Daily Mail* he wrote on 19 February: 'As a Minister I should be a member of the Government, which, with this present wobbly ministry in power, would mean the virtual extinction of the *Daily Mail* as an independent newspaper, for you would be obliged to support me in this Government.'⁶² The implication of this was clear enough, as soon emerged. When Austen Chamberlain, an important Unionist ex-minister, spearheaded a powerful challenge over the Beaverbrook and Northcliffe appointments, which soon broadened into a general parliamentary scolding over 'press lords' in high office, the government was distinctly unhappy and defensive. The hubbub quickly subsided as the more pressing matter of Germany's great March offensive supervened, yet Lloyd George shortly afterwards invited Chamberlain back into the government and with a seat in the war cabinet. Northcliffe was outraged. To the staff of *The Times* he wrote: 'If this be true a more cynical job could hardly be perpetrated.'⁶³ He added that it might mean withdrawing the support of his newspapers from the government, and that he had so informed Downing Street. But Lloyd George was too busy with more urgent questions to pay much attention. Probably he sensed that at this stage of the war he need worry less than formerly about what Northcliffe might or might not do. Events presently were to prove conclusively that in the final analysis Lloyd George's hold on power depended after all on the House of Commons, not Fleet Street and certainly not the Northcliffe press. On 9 May there took place the celebrated 'Maurice debate', indisputably the greatest wartime trial of strength between Lloyd George and

⁶⁰ Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command* (2 vols., London, 1961), II, 777.

⁶¹ *Political diaries of C. P. Scott*, p. 336.

⁶² Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 613.

⁶³ *History of The Times*, IV, part 1, 357.

his critics. Defeat in the lobbies would certainly have meant resignation, but he obtained a large majority and in consequence was secure from further serious attack until the armistice. Northcliffe perforce had to accept Westminster's decision.

The fact was that Lord Northcliffe's ability to influence both government and nation had gone into decline by 1918. From being something like a sovereign power in his own right, he was sinking rapidly to the level of an annoyance which Lloyd George could ignore with comparatively little risk. Though he continued from time to time to make loud and threatening noises, they signified sound and fury but little else. A troubled mind was showing signs of the ravages that were hastening him towards insanity and death, and increasingly the element of fantasy clouded his words and actions. Thus to Beaverbrook on 23 April: 'I want to get away from any connection whatever with this alleged War Cabinet, in order that I may say what I think of it.'⁶⁴ On the 28th he wrote to Lloyd George that he could only continue with the propaganda work if fully informed and consulted about British policy towards the Habsburg subject races. Lloyd George did not reply. Northcliffe wrote again on 22 May pointing this out. Again there was no reply. Lloyd George's growing indifference to Northcliffe can also be seen in his conversations with Riddell. By early autumn of 1918 the Allied tide had turned and in Britain election talk was in the air. Northcliffe took a high line. Riddell reported to Lloyd George that Northcliffe was determined not to support the administration 'unless he knows definitely and in writing, and can approve, the personal constitution of the Government'.⁶⁵ A dozen years later his brother Rothermere would use almost identical words, which provoked Stanley Baldwin's devastating 'prerogative of the harlot' speech. It needed no public rebuke from Lloyd George, however, to accomplish the discomfiture of Northcliffe. The prime minister's leadership was triumphantly vindicated at the general election of 1918, though Northcliffe newspapers did their best to dissuade the electorate. The politician beat the newspaperman with almost ridiculous ease; alienation was complete and final. The level-headed Auckland Geddes (Minister of National Service) saw both men on the eve of the election and noted: 'Each described the other as impossible and intolerable. They were both very tired men and had been getting on one another's nerves for some time.'⁶⁶

So Lloyd George and Lord Northcliffe enjoyed their own private war between 1914 and 1918, which accounts for the apparent ambiguity in our title. What effect this had upon Britain's war effort does not admit of easy answer, but their relationship was always a matter of public importance. The First World War involved the whole population as no previous struggle ever had done, and to sustain the will of the people through the long, harsh ordeal it

⁶⁴ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 634.

⁶⁵ *Riddell's war diary*, p. 366.

⁶⁶ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, p. 682.

was necessary for governments to rely heavily upon the press. This exalted Fleet Street to an unprecedented degree. And it enhanced the position of the press still further when an organized parliamentary opposition virtually ceased to exist at Westminster. In this context Lord Northcliffe, as unchallenged king in the strange world of newspapers, believed, and not without reason, that he had a heavy responsibility. Never was there much danger that Asquith as prime minister might turn into another Cromwell, indeed there was too little in him of the Lord Protector, but Lloyd George was something else. Very familiar is the story how at the Carlton Club meeting in 1922 which destroyed Lloyd George's premiership, Baldwin called him 'a dynamic force', adding: 'A dynamic force is a very terrible thing; it may crush you, but it is not necessarily right.' Northcliffe was another such dynamic force. Unrestrained, Lloyd George and Northcliffe equally were capable of terrible deeds. The nation needed the toughness of both men as it struggled through the black years of 1914-18; perhaps they needed each other even more.

Walter Roch, a clever back-bench Liberal M.P. and sometime admirer of Lloyd George, remarked apropos the curious story of this remarkable and historic relationship:

It is possibly one more instance of the good luck which never deserted Mr. Lloyd George throughout the war, that Lord Northcliffe, unlike M. Clemenceau, did not combine the ambitions of a politician with those of a journalist!⁶⁷

On the other hand, had Northcliffe aspired to be a politician in the usual sense, Lloyd George almost certainly would have swept him aside much earlier than happened. And, it may be added, to the certain advantage of arbitrary power in Downing Street, which reached new heights as it was. So from Lloyd George's standpoint it was a somewhat mixed blessing that Northcliffe remained essentially a newspaperman. Arguably Northcliffe's decision to limit his activities in the main to Printing House Square and Carmelite House served the interests of the British people better than Walter Roch or anyone else could have imagined at the time. It may even have saved Lloyd George from himself.

⁶⁷ Walter Roch, *Life of David Lloyd George* (4 vols., London, 1920), IV, 164.