With the increasing size and importance of his oil holdings in Mexico and the United States, Doheny found his political influence growing in proportion to his economic power. Although he did not emerge as a figure of national importance until 1920, he had been a prominent Democrat on the West Coast since the late 1890s. From the beginning, Doheny's devotion to the party was rooted in his Irish-American heritage, faith in the Catholic church, and his long years on the Western frontier, which had made him a sympathetic follower of William Jennings Bryan. Over time, however, his financial success eroded the logic, if not the sentiment, behind those positions, and, by the early 1920s, he found himself at a political crossroads. Had his ideas been totally mercenary, Doheny would probably have given up on the Democrats in 1916, when Republican presidential candidate Charles Evans Hughes emphasized the Mexican crisis as a major campaign issue in opposition to Woodrow Wilson. Instead, Doheny's significant financial support in California helped Wilson achieve an improbable victory in his bid for reelection.

At the end of the war, however, Wilson's internationalism and his refusal to entertain the Mexican question at the Paris Peace Conference angered Doheny to no end. Thereafter, although he played a prominent role at the Democratic convention in 1920, he broke with the party on a number of fronts. Much of his disaffection came from his growing friendship with Albert B. Fall, one of Wilson's harshest critics and the newly appointed secretary of the interior under Republican Warren Harding. As an intensely private individual, Doheny did not aspire to elected office, but, in the early 1920s, he allowed himself to be seduced by the idea that he
could play a large role in shaping national and international events beyond his immediate interests in Mexican affairs. And it was his own patriotic commitment to Ireland and the United States, coupled neatly with his financial interests, which led him along a circuitous path into the controversy over the naval oil reserve in California. Ironically, when the details of those supposedly corrupt dealings became public knowledge in 1924, both political parties abandoned him.

Prior to 1920, Doheny was known for having “strong convictions on the questions of the day,” but he usually kept them to himself, and his only forays into the political limelight were brief and largely ceremonial. For instance, in 1912, Doheny tried unsuccessfully to become a presidential elector for Woodrow Wilson after supporting conservative Democrat Champ Clark through the state primary. Then, in 1916, Doheny was chosen as an elector and earned the praise of state officials for pushing the Wilson campaign to victory in California. There was even a brief mention of Doheny as a suitable candidate for the Senate in 1916. Apparently, believing that the next Senator would come from the southern part of the state, northern California Democrats suggested Doheny as a compromise candidate. But, as one political observer pointed out, Doheny’s only real qualification for the job was a “pocketbook [that measured] up to Bourbon expectations.” Whether Doheny had such aspirations is doubtful, but his wealth made him an attractive, if unlikely, prospect nonetheless.¹

A few years later, after having spent almost all of his time in Washington and New York during the war, Doheny enjoyed a solid reputation among many admirers. In 1920, he went to the Democratic national convention in San Francisco as a delegate at large from California and served as a member of the resolutions committee. And in return for his previous efforts, Doheny was nominated as the state’s choice for vice-president. According to Isidore Dockweiler, California’s representative on the national committee, this was intended as “a graceful tribute by the party in return for California’s electoral vote in 1916, when Doheny headed the ticket.”²

More than a favorite son, however, Doheny had support from a number of state delegations, and, according to a party leader from Missouri, his name had “been persistently mentioned in Washington” as a candidate for the office. One unnamed Californian in Washington, most likely Franklin Lane, Wilson’s former secretary of the interior who had gone to work for Doheny after leaving the cabinet in 1919, believed that “the Presidential campaign with Doheny on the ticket would doubtless develop the fact that during the war he was one of the world’s most useful citizens.” This individual also predicted that both national conventions would be full of
surprises and considered it “within the realm of probability that this many-sided man . . . might emerge from the San Francisco convention as its nominee for president of the United States.”

At the convention, itself, rather than basking in the glory of past achievements, Doheny became involved in a struggle over the issue of Irish nationalism, which compromised his position among many delegates. At the center of this controversy was Eamon De Valera, the newly elected president of the Irish Republic, formed in January 1919 after Irish nationalists declared their independence in defiance of British control. Shortly thereafter, as the situation in Ireland erupted into another civil war, De Valera fled to the United States seeking financial and political support for the cause. He found an overwhelmingly receptive audience almost everywhere he went, especially among the Irish-American community in California. Having been a major financial contributor to the nationalist movement all along, Doheny also supported De Valera’s mission in America.

During the summer of 1920, De Valera presented proposals to both political parties for a plank in their respective platforms recognizing the Irish Republic. Not surprisingly, the Republicans turned him down, but he hoped for better luck in San Francisco. Appearing before the resolutions committee, De Valera asked for a straight vote in favor of Irish recognition, but the members rejected the Irish plank by thirty-one votes to seventeen. Initially, no one among the group who voted for the measure, including Doheny, was willing to take up the issue as a minority statement to be presented to the full convention. But after a meeting of Irish supporters outside the convention hall got so heated that the police had to be called in, De Valera accepted a compromise resolution that stood some chance of success. Although seven members of the committee signed the amended plank as a minority report, Doheny was the only one willing to present it to the delegates.

Under the circumstances, this was a brave act, since Doheny not only faced an unsympathetic audience but had to speak on the heels of the venerable William Jennings Bryan himself. Having never before addressed a mass audience, Doheny showed his nervousness as he proceeded haltingly into his speech and even forgot part of the text. He began by asking the members to indulge his “weak voice and inexperience,” but he made no excuse for his intention to speak in favor of Ireland’s struggle for freedom. One sympathetic observer thought he did better than that when he reported that Doheny “went through like a Sinn Fein soldier and proudly marched up to the speaker’s platform and presented the document.” The task at hand, Doheny said, was to firm up the party’s weak statement of
sympathy for the "aspirations of Ireland for self-government." The revised plank read that "mindful of the circumstances of birth of our own nation," the party would support "recognition without intervention in all cases where the people of a nation have by the free vote of the people set up a republic and chosen a government to which they yield willing obedience." In the end, the delegates refused to endorse the Irish cause and voted down the minority plank 665 votes to 402. For Doheny, however, the experience at the convention took him deeper into the Irish nationalist movement, where he started to see himself as a statesman as well as a businessman.6

And so, Doheny must have felt an even greater sense of accomplishment in his subsequent nomination as a vice-presidential candidate. After choosing James M. Cox of Ohio to be their standard-bearer, the convention accepted suggestions for the second place on the ticket, and Lorin Handley, a delegate from Los Angeles, offered Doheny's name for consideration. Still boasting of the state's role in the last election, Handley remarked that California was "perfectly willing to yield the Presidency to Ohio, but not the glory of electing the last Democratic President of the United States." Their reward, Handley asserted, would come through the vice-presidency, since California wanted not only to elect Governor Cox but "to elect with him a great patriot to stand by his side to make humanity's fight." Because Doheny's life was "a typical romance of American improved opportunity," Handley believed that it was an example of success that every citizen could appreciate. Thus, Doheny was put forward as "the man out of the West who can reach the hearts and the souls, not only of the Democrats of the West, but of the great free-thinking people of the West." When Handley finished, a representative from Massachusetts came forward to second the nomination, believing that, if the party wanted to win in November, it needed to balance Cox's political record with Doheny's success in business, and portraying Doheny as "a self-made man . . . who is needed in this hour of reconstruction."7

As far as political parties and their conventions are concerned, there was really nothing exceptional in Doheny's nomination; scores of other individuals—of greater and lesser utility—had been given similar moments of glory. Certainly, there was limited support for putting a sixty-four-year-old oil magnate on the ticket; the prize ultimately went to the much younger, and far more charismatic, Franklin D. Roosevelt. For Doheny, however, this was another indication that he had some unique qualities to offer and that there were people willing to make use of his potential in both subtle and overt ways.8

One of the most influential of these was Franklin Lane, who now
worked as a legal advisor for the Pan American Petroleum & Transport Company. As the head of the Interior Department, Lane had been a lonely voice for private enterprise among a choir of strict conservationists. And because of internal conflicts and the inadequacy of his government salary, Lane had contemplated resigning his office several times during the war years but promised Wilson he would see the crisis through. Then, having been "literally forced out of public life by my lack of resources," as Lane put it, he accepted a $50,000-a-year position with Doheny, hoping he could at least make enough before retirement to get out of debt and remove the financial burden from his family.

As it turned out, Lane had little more than a year to live and spent most of his months on the Doheny payroll seeking treatment for a heart condition that ultimately caused his death. He also spent time in the Pan American Petroleum offices in New York and at Doheny's home and ranch in Los Angeles getting to know his benefactor. Although Lane had always been a staunch advocate of the oil industry and wanted to see the federal government give the oilmen free rein to manage the nation's petroleum resources, he was an ambivalent cheerleader for big business. As his career revealed, he gave little thought to personal wealth and admitted to having spent the years since his boyhood fighting "Wall Street rascals." But for some reason, he felt that Doheny was different, if no less wealthy, than his Eastern counterparts.

Lane, who described himself as a "wild cross between a crazy Irishman, with dreams, desires, fancies, and a dour Scot," was not an active member of the Irish-American community and often lamented the less charitable aspects of the Irish temperament. But he understood the power of the Irish independence movement in the United States and almost certainly had a hand in supporting Doheny's appearance at the Democratic convention on behalf of the cause. Sometime later, Lane presented Doheny with an Irish flag, noting that it stood as a symbol for the divine aspirations of a people "to whom most of the arts were known when England and America were forest wastes, whose women have made the world beautiful by their virtue, and whose men have made the world free by their courage." No doubt inspired by Lane's faith and encouragement, Doheny seemed more willing than ever to live up to that ideal.

At the same time, during the fall of 1920, De Valera broke with the leading members of the Irish nationalist movement in America, the Friends of Irish Freedom, to form his own group called the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic. The divisive issue was whether the money collected in the United States ought to be used to in-
fluence American politicians to support a diplomatic solution for Ireland or whether the funds should be sent directly to Ireland to support the revolutionaries in the civil war. De Valera advocated the latter strategy and forced the break with the existing nationalist party. On November 17, the members of the AARIR elected Doheny national president of the new organization.\textsuperscript{11}

Lane obviously paid a good deal of attention to the Irish situation and must have been alarmed at Doheny’s prominent role in the more radical organization. Within a few weeks of Doheny’s taking office as the head of the AARIR, Lane wrote him with a plan designed to put some distance between Doheny and the armed struggle in Ireland. Lane claimed to see an opportunity for Doheny to bridge the ideological gap between the Irish and British leaders by offering to mediate a peaceful end to the conflict. Lane began by claiming that the time was ripe “for some practical man, preferably an outsider, to do something for Ireland—and why should you not be that man?” Then he continued:

You have made a great fortune and achieved a great name in the business world. You would have done great things for Mexico, altogether unselfishly, if the chance had come—and may be it will come yet. But there is no reason why you might not do something internationally for your Father’s land which you love so dearly. Service for Ireland cannot be rendered by stirring up the Irish here or embittering our people further against England. Hatred will not solve this problem . . . Lloyd George is willing to talk terms now. There must be a go-between. He must have the confidence of the Irish. You have that. He must also have access to the British Ministry. You have that, or easily can get it. Isn’t it worth trying? . . . You would have to speak to Lloyd George as a known partisan of the Irish cause, but not as one committed to a program. You would be the vehicle through which the Irish would learn the best they could hope for, this side of war. You would go on oil business. No one in the world would have the slightest idea, either here or there, what you were trying to do until something was done. It would be fatal to the English and to Irish pride to have it thought that they could not speak together. But we know that they cannot. Both need a friend.\textsuperscript{12}

The effect of this kind of an appeal can hardly be overstated. And Doheny seemed to be heeding Lane’s advice when, over the next few months, he subsidized a national fund-raising drive for the relief of Ireland. In this instance, Doheny advanced the group $250,000 to set up collection committees across the country, and he contributed heavily thereafter.
Ultimately, the effort generated over $5 million to alleviate suffering in Ireland caused by the ongoing political conflict. As the state chairman for the American Committee for the Relief of Ireland, Doheny appealed to the citizens of Los Angeles to meet their quota. He asked them to forget politics and religion for the moment so that they could see the real situation in Ireland, where thousands of "hungry, naked, sick women and children and old people . . . [looked] to the United States as their last hope." Any who had the means, but was unwilling, to help would have "no excuse to give his conscience for turning a deaf ear to weak humans in terrible distress."13

While the move to provide humanitarian relief to Ireland produced an unqualified success in the United States in the spring of 1921, there were also secret, high-level talks, of the type Lane envisioned, going on between De Valera and Lloyd George to put an end to the fighting. Soon after forming his new American organization in December 1920, De Valera had returned to Ireland and was eventually arrested by the British authorities in June 1921. The British, however, knew that there was no way to sue for peace with the Irish leader in jail, so De Valera was granted an unexpected release and an invitation to meet with Lloyd George. Over the course of several months, the two men hashed out their respective goals for Ireland, with De Valera holding out for something more than dominion status.14

Doheny's link to the truce between the combatants in July 1921, and the subsequent signing of an Anglo-Irish Treaty in December, can only be surmised. Certainly, there is no evidence to suggest that Doheny participated in any of these talks. But if he followed Lane's advice to act discreetly as a bridge between the two leaders, there is room to speculate about his influence. If nothing else, Doheny must have had some method of contacting De Valera because of his position as president of the AARIR. Along those lines, Lloyd George's biographer notes that, in the early months of 1921, the prime minister "secretly attempted, through several intermediaries, to reach some common ground with De Valera," although the effort failed at the time. And in at least one instance, the British ambassador to the United States, Sir Auckland Geddes, wrote to the foreign office on December 8, 1921, two days after the signing of the treaty, that Doheny "was attempting to take credit for creating the conditions which made it possible."15

The Anglo-Irish Treaty and the subsequent creation of the Irish Free State granted a degree of independence and self-determination for Ireland great enough to satisfy the desires of most of the moderate nationalists. Indeed, the principal leaders of the AARIR, especially Doheny, considered the Irish Free State to be as close to a republic as Ireland was going to get
for some time and celebrated its creation as the logical end of their own movement in the United States. Upon hearing the news of an agreement, Doheny noted that Ireland's friends in America had been working to "get them not to be too extreme. . . . The accomplishment of the Irish Free State is what I have hoped for. I have had the utmost faith that the conference would result in it. I have believed that Lloyd George and his Ministry were sincerely working for a settlement, and knew that the aims of De Valera and his associates were the same."16

In the days that followed, however, Doheny's position led De Valera to make an angry and permanent break with him. Once having negotiated the truce, De Valera would have nothing to do with the treaty, which he considered a weak-willed surrender to the British Government. Instead, De Valera called for a resumption of the civil war in Ireland. Believing that the treaty was the right solution, Doheny resigned his position as the head of the AARIR early in 1922, in a clash with a more militant faction within the organization.17

On a completely different level, the negotiations over the Anglo-Irish Treaty introduced other issues concerning American security in the North Atlantic and the naval rivalry between Britain and the United States. In fact, while the Irish question was being negotiated, the world's major naval powers prepared to meet in Washington, D.C., at a disarmament conference to determine the balance of naval power for the postwar decade. In advance of that meeting, in September 1921, the executive committee of the AARIR met in Chicago to discuss a proposed clause in the Irish treaty giving Britain the right to install naval and air force stations in Ireland. Seeing a hidden agenda in the British plans, the committee sent a letter to President Harding, with a copy to be delivered to the members of the American delegation, warning them of the danger. The committee saw no defensive component to these demands and believed that recent comments by British military and government officials indicated that the North Atlantic would be the battlefield of the future. "Against what nation or nations," the committee asked, "are these aggressive naval and aerial plans and provisions directed?" In their minds, the British scheme for Ireland constituted "a menace to the security of the United States."18

It is interesting to note that the head of the anti-De Valera faction in Boston wrote a letter to the secretary of state claiming that Doheny's share of the British-Mexican Petroleum Company made him a partner, and co-conspirator, with the British Government. And his large fuel oil contracts based on Mexican oil production made him a vital link to any British naval operation in the Atlantic. "Undoubtedly," the letter continued, "through
Mr. Doheny's activities, England has been given an advantage over America,” which constituted a “serious menace” to American security. The writer even called for a congressional investigation of this relationship so that, in case of war, the United States could nullify Doheny's contract with British shipping companies.19

The American government had, in fact, been using the Irish situation as a wedge to achieve concessions from Britain all along, but this had little to do with any planned military installations in Ireland. Rather, the State Department used the civil unrest in Ireland as a lens to focus attention on their desire to force Great Britain to relinquish its strategic alliance with Japan. The real potential threat to American security came from the direction of the Pacific Ocean not the Atlantic. Thus, Secretary of State Hughes linked the Irish question to the latter issue and told the British ambassador that a resumption of the Anglo-Japanese alliance would bring together anti-British elements in the United States calling for the support of the insurrection in Ireland and possible congressional action to recognize the Irish Republic. Looking years into the future, the British were unwilling to gamble against America’s rise as the preeminent Western power, and they acquiesced to Hughes' demands.20

Doheny’s role as the head of the AARIR and that organization’s concerns over British naval policy also provided him with an indirect link to the larger issues of American security beyond his concerns with Mexico, and his position as a prominent Californian carried him into the debate over various plans to offset the Japanese threat in the Pacific. All of these elements converged after the election of Republican Warren Harding in 1921 as the new president of the United States. Despite having been briefly considered as a possible member of the opposing ticket, Doheny was warmly received by the new administration, with Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall being the most conspicuous of his Republican friends. Two days after the election, Doheny wrote to Fall that “it is in sackcloth and ashes that I come to your feet to beg forgiveness and admission among the ranks of the sane people of the Country.” He asked Fall to understand, “as most of my friends do, why I thought it best to remain regular.” What those reasons were Doheny did not say, but he had obviously come to despise the Democratic candidate, James Cox. According to Doheny, Harding won because he “undoubtedly convinced the people that he was a safe man to be the country’s president.” On the other hand, Doheny continued, “the vituperative and dastardly dishonest campaign of Cox surely had the reverse effect.”21

Doheny was referring here to an incident that happened late in the
campaign, when one of Harding's nastier critics dredged up an old rumor about the Republican candidate's ancestry. Essentially, the claim was that, several generations back, the Hardings had come from the West Indies and that Warren Harding was, therefore, a mestizo. Although Cox and the Democratic National Committee denounced the information as slanderous, pamphlets detailing the race issue found their way by the thousands underneath voters' doors, onto commuter trains, and into hotel lobbies through the efforts of energetic, and anonymous, volunteers. Having stated that he "never heard a dirtier argument," Doheny gave $25,000 to the Republican party to have the pictures of Harding's parents printed in all of the New York City newspapers to dispute the claim.

Aside from the underhanded tactics, Doheny noted that the voters' decision was also a reaction against "the fallacies and fatal consequences of Wilson's League of Nations." And Fall, as Doheny reminded him, was owed a debt of gratitude from the American people for his work as a member of the "Senate oligarchy" responsible for defeating the League. When it was over, Doheny believed that the election of 1920 "was a greater cause for rejoicing than the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, or of any other event or day since the eventful day in 1776 which gave birth to this Republic... The United States must, and now will be preserved, as the inspiration to progress for all the world by maintaining an independent and tolerant individualism among its citizens, and nationalism among the nations of the world, rather than promoting socialism with all its degrading effects, and internationalism with its danger of complete annihilation of Americanism."

Once in office, the Harding Administration used the Washington Disarmament Conference in November 1921 as the first test of its ability to handle foreign policy in a new era. And given the climate of opinion at that time, recent appraisals have given the president high marks for pragmatism in negotiating a realistic treaty between the naval powers which at least temporarily reduced tensions around the world. In brief, the United States, Great Britain, and Japan agreed to stop all major ship construction at current levels, established a 5:5:3 naval ratio among the powers, negated the Anglo-Japanese alliance, and made mutual concessions not to fortify islands and outposts in the western Pacific to reduce the possibility of an unintended confrontation. All in all, this seemed like a simple, cost-effective strategy, and it was extremely popular at a time when the American public refused to sacrifice tax relief to pay for additional military obligations. Nevertheless, modern scholars, knowing what came later, have characterized the debate over the disarmament
package as "shallow, cursory, and largely uninformed." Thus, without much reflection, the arms agreement was "steamrolled" into law.24

Another reason for this legislative coup was that a significant contingent of naval officers, primarily those responsible for war plans in the Pacific, were left entirely outside of the process. By and large, this group opposed almost every provision in the treaty, but their objections were never considered in the rush to push an agreement through Congress without debate. This tactic, and the political mindset behind it, made it quite clear to naval officers in the field that they could not appeal to Congress or to the public for additional support. In particular, the head of the General Board of the Navy, recently returned from the Asiatic Fleet, was absolutely "convinced of the Japanese menace," but his views, along with those of the War Plans Division, itself, were ignored because they deviated from what the politicians wanted to hear.25

As we know now, however, the fears about Japan were not mere illusions used to prop up the military budget. In fact, Japanese-American relations were at such a low point in 1921 that, one British naval expert concluded, "the situation in the Far East was so ominous that well-informed observers believed war between the United States and Japan to be only a question of time, and no long time at that." A memo on Japanese preparedness in April 1921, from the Office of Naval Intelligence, also concluded that "there seems no question that Japan is preparing for any eventuality that may occur and that America is the country she has in mind."26

Without question, the Japanese Navy focused its attention almost exclusively on the United States. But the Japanese were also engaged in a similar internal dispute over the need for a strong position at the disarmament conference. Consequently, while the treaty was hailed as a political victory for Congress and the president by stopping the call for increased military spending, it was also seen as a "godsend" by the Japanese naval minister, who knew that his country's economy could not support an arms race with the United States. However, the Japanese navy also had a corps of officers who reacted violently to the restrictions of the treaty: "As far as I am concerned," said Vice-Admiral Kato Kanji, "war with America starts now. We'll get our revenge over this, by God!"27

In hindsight, the conference turned out to be a temporary bandage for a festering problem on both sides of the Pacific. As one American naval officer noted after reviewing the nonfortification provisions of the treaty: "It is thus seen that our statesmen at Washington did not achieve great ends without making concessions ... [and] our hand is weakened in the Far East by this abdication of potential strategic position."28 Although navy
leaders had to accept the domestic political decisions made at that conference, they did not allow them to completely hinder preparations for a Pacific strategy. Recognizing the inevitable limitations placed on President Harding, the Navy Department, under Secretary Edwin Denby, "moved with circumspection," as one historian put it, to do as much as possible to strengthen the Pacific Fleet.²⁹

Some plans were as simple as sending oil-burning ships to the Pacific and coal-burning vessels to the Atlantic to take advantage of the cheapest source of fuel in each region. But these obvious moves were actually designed to cover more controversial changes along the lines of creating one grand fleet instead maintaining two equally divided forces, as mandated by former Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels. For years, critics argued with Daniels—to no avail—that one large fleet rather than two inadequate ones would be far more intimidating, especially to the Japanese. Once free of him, Daniels's opponents implemented their plans for redeploying the most powerful ships to Pacific waters. However, this strategy was limited by the inadequate shore facilities in the region. Existing plans to fully equip and protect bases in the Philippines and Guam had been scuttled by the disarmament treaty. For a line of defense against Japan, the navy would have to make do with commercial harbors in the western Pacific. Only the base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, had the capability of becoming a first-class naval station, but it was relatively undeveloped at the time.³⁰

Although Pearl Harbor was too far away from Japan to replace the need for bases farther west, it would be the central staging area for the Pacific Fleet and was the key to stopping any Japanese strike against the American mainland. Given this anticipated role, an official inspection in 1919 concluded that Pearl Harbor's current facilities were "entirely inefficient" for peacetime operations and "totally inadequate" for an emergency. The base needed longer piers, deep draft docks, and most especially fuel oil depots to meet even minimal standards. Implementing this Pacific strategy in the face of public apathy toward defense requirements made it necessary that fleet changes and other modifications be conducted as quietly as possible to avoid alerting the media and Congress to what was happening, at least until it was too late to do anything about it. An essential element in the success of this plan was that Navy Secretary Denby, unlike his predecessor, encouraged his subordinates to take the initiative in coming up with new ways to accomplish these goals.³¹

Controlling the navy's oil supply was also an integral part of this process. To streamline administrative responsibilities and assure a sufficient supply of oil for the fleet, Denby transferred operational control of the
naval petroleum reserves in California and Wyoming to the Department of the Interior. Since the Interior Department was already supervising public oil lands through the Bureau of Mines and the Geological Survey, it would save the navy needless duplication to have it administer the reserves as well. Along with this exchange of control, Denby authorized the secretary of the interior to use the royalty oil accruing from wells on the reserves as payment for the construction of fuel storage tanks at Pearl Harbor. Without sufficient funds to bring the base at Pearl Harbor up to operational standards, and with the certain knowledge that Congress would not give him any more, Secretary Fall decided to do the next best thing: trade the oil that he had in hand already for the storage tanks and dock facilities that he needed at Pearl Harbor. From the beginning, there were critics in the Navy Department who questioned both the loss of control over the petroleum reserves and the legality of transferring authority to Fall. But the utility of the trade could not be denied. The next problem was finding someone willing to take the navy’s oil in payment for such a massive construction project.32

In November 1921, as the Washington Conference got underway, Fall set to work on the plan. His first move was to ask Doheny if he could get an estimate of what it would cost to put up thirty 50,000-barrel tanks at Pearl Harbor. As the former head of the Mexican lobby in the Senate, Fall knew the extent of the Mexican Petroleum Company’s storage facilities in Tampico and trusted Doheny’s opinion. Furthermore, to protect the government from private wells operating along the perimeter of the naval reserve at Elk Hills, Doheny had already been awarded the right to drill several dozen offset wells on a small strip lease within the reserve itself—contracts won through competitive bids approved by Secretary Daniels before he left office. Thus, Fall had reason to believe that, in a similar contest, Doheny would win the additional leases necessary to pay for the work at Pearl Harbor. Yet, when Doheny reported back to Fall on November 28 with an estimate of $3.5 million, or just under 3 million barrels of royalty oil, he stated that he was not interested in doing work that required outside construction contracts and complicated negotiations with the government.33

Doheny changed his mind, however, after he received a visit from Rear Admiral John K. Robison a few weeks later. During the war, Robison had been Edward Doheny Jr.’s battleship commander. Afterward, the young Doheny kept in touch with Robison and had spoken many times of his father’s oil operations in California. With this mutual connection, Robison and the senior Doheny had met socially on a few occasions. Then, in Octo-
ber 1921, Robison was appointed by Secretary Denby to become the Chief of the Bureau of Engineering, the office in charge of the naval oil reserves. Prior to that, he had been working in the Office of the Chief of Operations on wartime plans for the navy's shore stations, where he had spent most of the previous year completing a report on the "problem in the Pacific." For Robison, therefore, the oil supply was of paramount importance.\textsuperscript{34}

When the two men met again in December 1921, Doheny mentioned that he had been attending some of the sessions of the Disarmament Conference, and Robison let him know that the administration had called the conference specifically because of Japanese conduct in the western Pacific, "with the idea of trying to bring about a crushing of this Japanese movement toward supremacy." Robison also revealed that the Naval Intelligence Department had reports that Japan was prepared for "mobilization along the Oriental frontier" and for maneuvers "toward our borders." Knowing that Doheny had initially turned down Fall's invitation to bid on a contract to provision Pearl Harbor with oil, Robison made it quite clear that, if the navy did not complete these preparations in time, the United States would be at Japan's mercy. Without that supply, Robison declared, "our navy could easily be overcome."\textsuperscript{35}

Having seen firsthand the result of invasions in Europe, Robison warned Doheny that a similar attack by the Japanese along the California coast would be just as catastrophic as the German invasion of Belgium, producing "a reign of terrorism that would be indescribable." Doheny recalled that Robison "got me very much worked up over it and told me in a very earnest tone of voice that it was up to me to give him such assurance that at least one company would bid on this [Pearl Harbor] transaction." Then, Robison recounted Lord Curzon's statement that the "armies of the Allies float[ed] to victory on a tide of oil." Amending it for the current crisis with Japan, Robison insisted that America could only maintain its position by "floating to security on a tide of oil on the Pacific."\textsuperscript{36}

Supposedly, Doheny's previous objections to the project were swept away by Robison's dramatic presentation. And once again, as had happened with Lane during the Anglo-Irish dispute, someone was appealing to him to make a great personal commitment not just as a patriot but as the only person in America uniquely suited to the task. Nothing in Doheny's recent experience caused him to refuse the request. That night, Doheny promised Robison that the navy could count on an offer from his company to do the work at Pearl Harbor. Furthermore, Doheny told him, "we would not figure on any profit in [the] transaction."\textsuperscript{37}

And so, over the next year Doheny took on several additional contracts
for leasing large sections of the Elk Hills Petroleum Reserve to accomplish these ends. In addition, Doheny kept his word to give the government its best deal for the Pearl Harbor construction job. Without a doubt, the value of Doheny's prospective leases on the reserve would be worth a vast sum over the next few decades. In return, he was willing to put up millions of his own to fulfill the navy's immediate requirements.

Then, in the spring of 1922, when Congress caught wind of Fall and Denby's policies, Robert La Follette, the Wisconsin firebrand, was the first to cry foul. Initially, attention fell on the contracts made with Harry Sinclair to drill oil on Naval Reserve No. 3 in Teapot Dome, Wyoming. Those contracts were not associated with any of Doheny's work at Pearl Harbor and seemed particularly suspicious. But recalling the Ballinger-Pinchot controversy during the Taft administration, La Follette reminded his colleagues that the Interior Department had always been the preferred "sluice-way" for corruption when private interests wanted to loot the government. The "throwing open of the naval reserves" to the oil corporations was obviously a part of that pattern and they should have seen it coming.  

Then La Follette cited a communication he had recently received from former Navy Secretary Daniels stating that Denby's leasing policy was "outrageous and wicked" and risked the "very national existence of the United States." The senator added that he had also been "astounded" that the new head of the navy would transfer control of the reserves to the Interior Department. In La Follette's opinion, given Albert Fall's longstanding preference for the private development of public land, that was nothing but a "surrender to the burglars." Moreover, since they had left a "trail of corruption . . . in the pages of American history," La Follette insisted that oil companies could never be trusted under any circumstances. Obviously, they were at it again, using ruthless means to seize the nation's oil supply with one hand while robbing the average citizen through extortionist prices with the other. In response to these charges the oil press ridiculed La Follette as "the most warped man in public life."  

Admittedly, despite the hysteria, the combination of public servants, private businessmen, and government resources seemed like a certain formula for corruption when Congress took up its investigation of the matter in 1923. But what about Doheny's role in these transactions? Was the story of the Japanese menace nothing but a ruse to gain control of the navy's oil for profit? Were Doheny's claims of patriotism just a pathetic attempt to explain away his insatiable greed? Or did he take advantage of the naval reserves because he needed the oil for his companies? Having determined how Doheny could have become involved in the leasing of the Elk Hills oil
reserve as a result of his desire to do his part to shore up the nation’s defenses in the Pacific, is it necessary for us, today, to assume that his allegiance was only as deep as his financial interests?

In 1923, the public responded to such questions according to whether they thought that businessmen were basically honest or inherently crooked. Politicians reacted according to their previous association with the suspects. Before any of these points can be adequately addressed, however, a more sophisticated approach must be taken to determine whether Doheny’s contracts with the government actually sustained or enhanced his oil interests, regardless of the other issues. If he was desperate for oil, he might have done anything to get it. But if he was not, or had less risky options, perhaps his motives were more laudable, if not more altruistic, than have been presumed.