



Douglas Peifer. *Choosing War: Presidential Decisions in the Maine, Lusitania, and Panay Incidents.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 344 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-026868-8.

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Published on H-Diplo (January, 2017)

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As they try to steer the American ship of state through the world's conflict-filled waters in search of a safe, happy harbor on the future's shore, American presidents risk encounters with the icebergs of foreign policy--unanticipated violent collisions that may send passengers or crew running for lifeboats or provoke mutinous objections to the course the captain has charted. The location of particular icebergs is unpredictable: the ship of state may sail through iceberg-filled waters without even a near miss, or it may plow straight into one. This does not imply, however, that the danger of foreign policy icebergs is one of pure chance. Particular kinds of ship handling and particular voyages have obvious risks. American foreign policy decisions that, by commission or omission, place American military forces or civilians in overseas war zones have historically fit this description. When the iceberg is struck--when Americans in conflict zones are killed--presidents face the challenge of trying to control or adjust to the domestic forces unleashed. In *Choosing War*, Douglas Carl Peifer provides a wonderfully probing and thought-provoking examination of three such cases in which American presidents have struck a foreign policy iceberg and struggled to manage the resultant domestic political crisis and retain control over a political decision-making process as the nation considered war.

Choosing War adds a historical account of three important naval events. Peifer argues that this historical account is necessary because historians have been too willing to concede the field of security studies to political scientists. Equally unfortunate, security practitioners have been too willing to accept historians' absence. Peifer's study of the role of naval incidents in the run-up to American entry into ongoing wars offers a compelling illustration of the sort of insights that political scientists and practitioners routinely miss. As Peifer gently reminds the social scientists and practitioners among us, the context within which events develop matters. Nuance and meaning associated with actions may disappear when facts are served up as data points, spread out on the analytical table, to be sorted through for lessons or picked and chosen for employment in defense of theoretical propositions.

This, of course, is one face of a larger historiographical truth, one that applies equally to the work of the historian as to that of the social scientist. In his concluding remarks, "Valuing the Particular," Peifer recalls E. H. Carr's observation from *What is History?* The facts "the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use.... History means interpretation" (pp. 247, 248).[2] The histo-

rian's prior beliefs about the facts that are worth fishing for, where these facts are to be found, and how they are to be caught will, like the social scientist's theory, set limits on the sort of intellectual catch even the most skilled scholar-fisherman will bring to port.

Happily, the waters into which Peifer has chosen to cast his nets are teeming with fish worth catching, and those brought in by his nets make an intellectually sustaining meal. Peifer examines the political crises that followed three naval incidents: the destruction of the USS *Maine* in Havana harbor on February 15, 1898; the torpedoing of the RMS *Lusitania* by the German submarine U-20 off the southern coast of Ireland on May 7, 1915; and the bombing and strafing of the USS *Panay* by Japanese aircraft on the Yangtze River on December 12, 1937.

On first glance, the three events would seem to have little in common, apart from the fact that all involved the surprise, violent destruction of a ship. One of the incidents involved a major warship; another, a minor warship, scarcely more than a boat; and the third, a civilian vessel. One occurred in the context of an ongoing, declared war; another, in the context of an undeclared war; and the third, in the context of an armed rebellion. One involved a vessel flying the flag of one of the combatant powers; another, the flag of an interested party external to the existing conflict; and the third, the flag of a third party engaged in protecting the lives and property of neutral civilians caught in a military crossfire. One cost three lives; another, 258 lives; and the third, 1,196 lives, including 94 children.

What the three do have in common, however, is the challenge they posed for US decision-makers seeking to retain control over American foreign policy. Each violently shook the domestic political tightrope being walked by the president, as he tried to tread a course that kept the nation out of war—or, in the case of Franklin Roosevelt, prepared it for a future entry into war. For William

McKinley, attempting to press the Spanish government and Cuban insurgents to reach a negotiated settlement, the sinking of the *Maine* did not simply make the US-Spanish diplomatic high-wire harder to see but generated powerful gusts of domestic crosswinds from the press, the public, and Congress. In 1915, Woodrow Wilson managed to retain his balance despite domestic political cross-pressures that reached all the way into his cabinet, but only at substantial long-term cost. Wilson's secretary of state William Jennings Bryan publicly resigned from the cabinet over Wilson's handling of the matter; the inflexible version of neutrality that Wilson found himself embracing placed the United States and Germany on a collision course, while the red line he drew on German U-boat warfare left him with little room for maneuver when Germany resumed its submarine campaign in February 1917; and, as Peifer notes, the narrative that emerged from the crisis would fuel the revisionist historiography stoked by the 1930s isolationists. While the context of the 1937 *Panay* crisis was of course quite different—Roosevelt at the time was in the process of trying to build domestic support for naval rearmament and to defeat the Ludlow Amendment, which would have required a national referendum on any decision to go to war—the sinking of the *Panay*, like the sinking of the *Maine* and *Lusitania*, gravely complicated Roosevelt's domestic political calculations. Although on first glance the incident would seem to have given Roosevelt leverage against opponents of rearmament, it also served to link rearmament to questions of American forward presence, to the role of American forces in protecting British and other imperial interests in China, and to the isolationist narrative regarding American involvement in World War I.

As interesting as this examination of the connection between naval incidents and war is, arguably the greater contribution made by this volume is in its exploration of the historical pathways that led to the naval incidents. It was not inevitable that the USS *Maine* would be on extended

port call in Havana harbor while an insurgency raged across Cuba, or that the RMS *Lusitania* would be steaming off the coast of Ireland, carrying American passengers as well as war materiel, while German submarines prowled these waters, or that the USS *Panay* would be smack-dab in the middle of a battle zone, retreating upriver as the rampaging Japanese Imperial Army drove the collapsing Chinese Nationalist forces back toward Chungking. The presence of these vessels—or, in the case of the *Lusitania*, the presence of substantial numbers of Americans—was a consequence of political decisions. These incidents occurred not only within particular international and domestic political contexts but within the context of ongoing American foreign policy. The *Maine* was sent by McKinley to Havana in an exercise in coercive diplomacy; it was there as part of a deliberate, if perhaps not clearly formulated, American strategy to press Spain for concessions that McKinley hoped would make a diplomatic solution of the Cuban insurgency possible. The *Lusitania* was permitted by Wilson to sail from New York with Americans on board despite explicit warnings from the German embassy that Americans traveled into the “war zone” at their own risk; Wilson’s reluctance to warn Americans against this travel and his insistence on holding Germany accountable for wartime infringements on traditional neutral trade rights were part of an overarching foreign policy. As for the *Panay*, Roosevelt left her and her sister ships on the Yangtze as a visible American commitment to the Open Door Policy and to the Nine-Power Treaty of 1922; even as it became clear that it would be impossible to defend US and Western interests in China without war, the implicit message that would have been conveyed by removing the gunboats was regarded as politically unacceptable.

None of this is to suggest that the policies that led to the dispatch of the *Maine*, to the presence of Americans on the *Lusitania*, or to the continued Yangtze patrols by the *Panay* were somehow “wrong.” Peifer’s effort to locate events within

context, however, helps us to understand not only why these incidents occurred but why they created dilemmas for American foreign policymaking. In each of Peifer’s cases, US presidents were knowingly pursuing foreign policies that involved taking risks. Vessels and lives were in harm’s way because foreign policy positions were being taken, positions that at least risked a violent response. And in each case, when tragedy struck the president was faced with the task of trying to control the domestic political consequences of what, intended or not, was in essence a failed bet.

Given his explicit intention of trying to begin to reclaim a portion of the strategic studies field for historians, it may not be surprising that Peifer’s volume is likely to appeal more to political scientists and to policymakers than to fellow historians. As Peifer acknowledges, the strength of this work is not in bringing to light new evidence about the *Maine*, *Lusitania*, and *Panay* incidents—all have already been meticulously researched. Rather, this work’s value lies in its careful use of what political scientist Alexander George and Richard Smoke termed “focused comparison.”[2] For each of the three incidents he examines, Peifer first explores the history of the incident itself, then the context, then the immediate reaction by relevant audiences, then the presidential decision process and analysis, and finally, the aftermath and consequences. What is gained is a substantially improved ability to compare not only the three incidents but the policy matrix within which they occurred and the problems they posed for politically vulnerable decision-makers.

The imposition of this self-conscious structure on Peifer’s account in no way reduces its readability. To the contrary, the combination of this foreshadowed organization and Peifer’s wonderfully clear prose makes the volume a page-turner—a pleasure read as well as a valuable tutorial. It is a book well designed to stimulate valuable discussions in classes on American foreign policy mak-

ing, at either the graduate or advanced undergraduate level.

Perhaps the one front on which the volume arguably falls short of its stated aims is in helping readers use a “historical mindset” (p. 5) to think about the three present-day problems that Peifer identifies as cause for concern (pp. 2-3): Chinese claims in the East and South China Seas, the proliferation of naval anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) weapons, and terrorism at sea. Obviously, any or all of these three may create or complicate naval incidents. But if the reason for policymakers to read this volume is that they may face such incidents, are there more specific insights that decision-makers and decision-making institutions can learn about how prepare for the future than that they should think historically? It is certainly good advice that, “rather than using history to provide direct analogies and ‘lessons learned,’ students of foreign affairs should employ history to gain strategic depth, study interconnections, examine what sort of options past presidents considered, and think about why they acted as they did” (p. 248). But this begs the question of how historians and histories can help busy, cognitively and emotionally stressed decision-makers employ history—perhaps specifically the history in this volume—in those ways. As a practical matter and with lives depending on it, how do we help President Donald Trump think historically when faced with possible naval incidents involving China, A2/AD, or terrorism?

Peifer succeeds magnificently, however, in his primary objective. There is value in approaching security studies with a historical mindset. *Choosing War* provokes an abundance of rich reflection on the risks created by forward presence in conflict zones, on the variety of ways incidents like these interact with public and congressional opinion to create pressures for (or against) executive branch action, and on the strategies open to presidents for dealing with such pressures.

Notes

[1]. Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (London: McMillan, 1961), 23.

[2]. Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 95-97.

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Citation: Edward Rhodes. Review of Peifer, Douglas. *Choosing War: Presidential Decisions in the Maine, Lusitania, and Panay Incidents*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2017.

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