



Choosing War: Presidential Decisions in the Maine, Lusitania, and Panay Incidents by Douglas Carl Peifer.

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The post-Cold War period has been relatively stable on the high seas. North Koreans have occasionally fired on South Koreans, Chinese frigates have clashed with the Philippine navy in the South China Sea, and Iranians have briefly captured small US patrol boats in their territorial waters. Pirates have caused trouble here and there, storming the odd merchantman and oil tanker off the Somali coast or in the Strait of Malacca. But, compared to earlier eras, the maritime theater has remained fairly tranquil.

This may be changing. Blue-water navies and naval outposts on uninhabitable atolls are under construction in the Pacific Rim. Russia appears interested in reasserting itself in its nearby seas. And for the next four-to-eight years, the free world will be led by a man utterly lacking experience or interest in naval affairs. Tensions may rise and with them the potential for accidents and perilous misunderstandings.

In *Choosing War*, historian Douglas Carl Peifer (US Air War College) has written a book that can help tomorrow's policymakers anticipate the kinds of predicaments that may confront them. He offers case-studies of decision-making during three major maritime crises involving American citizens. The first concerns the infamous sinking of the USS *Maine* in Havana harbor in 1898. Although the explosion probably resulted from a spark accidentally generated in the vessel's forward magazines, many blamed it on a sneak attack by Spain. The second case centers on the torpedoing of the RMS *Lusitania* by a German U-boat in 1915. Two thousand passengers had only eighteen minutes to scramble into lifeboats before the ship went under the waves (the *Titanic*, by comparison, stayed afloat for over two hours after hitting the iceberg). Some twelve hundred never made it. In his final case, Peifer considers the attack on the USS *Panay*, a riverine patrol boat, on the Yangtze in 1937.

All three accounts make for interesting reading. Although Peifer does not claim to have uncovered new facts, he does synthesize and organize information about the cases in novel ways, placing each in its international and domestic contexts, with careful attention to political pressures bearing on the respective presidents. The reader learns why the public was hawkish in 1898 but dovish in 1915 and 1937, and how that shaped decisions in the White House.

Peifer describes how President William McKinley had steadfastly opposed intervention in Cuba until the initial investigations of the explosion on the *Maine* pointed to Spanish perfidy. The loud voices of hawks in the press and the House of Representatives became difficult to ignore. Most influential with McKinley was the business community, which urged intervention. Rather than the eagerly imperialist America portrayed by revisionist scholars, Peifer sees "gradualism, conservatism, and aversion to war" (62) dominating the president's thinking.

The reaction to the horror of the *Lusitania* was marked by a tension between the traditional restraint (or isolationism) that had dominated US foreign policy since the nation's founding and the internationalism that accompanied its growing power. Pace revisionist historians, Peifer argues that arms makers did not compel President Woodrow Wilson to respond aggressively and that Americans remained loath to wade into the European quagmire. Nonetheless, the sinking of the *Lusitania* (and

tone-deaf German reaction to it) poisoned US-German relations and paved the way for American intervention in 1917.

The *Panay* incident was smaller and less consequential. Indeed readers may be unfamiliar with its details: during the atrocities of the “Rape of Nanking” in 1937, Japanese planes bombed and strafed a US river patrol vessel about thirty miles upriver from the city, as well as a few oil tankers anchored nearby. The low-flying bombers could hardly have missed the ships’ American flags. The Japanese government at its highest levels quickly (within hours) began apologizing for the assault, which killed three Americans and wounded dozens of others. The Franklin D. Roosevelt administration had to balance a wish to deter future attacks against its desire to de-escalate the crisis at a time when neither Congress, nor the press, nor the American public wanted war with Imperial Japan. The Japanese expressions of contrition, which to this day shroud the incident in mystery, made an enormous difference, especially in contrast with the German reaction in 1915.

Peifer calls the *Panay* episode the “culminating point of [US] isolationism” (215). But why, then, did the United States have a river patrol on the Yangtze and thousands of troops in a country at war in the first place? The nuances of American grand strategy are lost in the author’s insistent morality tale of strife between back-country isolationist rubes and sagacious interventionists. But this is a minor flaw in a set of otherwise very compelling and substantive case studies.

More contentious—and more interesting—are the methodological claims Peifer makes. He scrupulously differentiates his study from the kind of historical work typically done by political scientists, who search for commonalities and generalized lessons across case studies. Peifer cautions that the utility of those studies for policymaking is limited by the dangers of reasoning by analogy. He contends that historical inquiry can show policymakers *how* to think, not *what* to think. Detailed case studies encourage and train us to think critically, to recognize the complexity inherent in every situation, and to respect the differences between them. “One can best understand naval incidents as a phenomenon by approaching them with a historical mindset that values the particular, the interplay between foreign and domestic affairs, and the role of chance, friction, and uncertainty” (234). Simply put, “context trumps theory” (248). Although I myself am a political scientist, I agree with this argument. Political scientists too often cherry-pick from the historical record to discover common features that might lead to general rules, but miss the unique causal processes in every situation.

The insights that emerge from the book’s target cases are limited more by their nature than the author’s treatment of them. The only thing linking them is that they involve ships, and not even of remotely similar kinds. They differ in casualty figures, the nature and period of the incidents, their settings, and their victims. One feels Peifer could have picked cases better suited to accomplish his stated goal of instructing policymakers how to think seriously about future maritime crises.

Peifer explains that he ruled out using certain Cold War cases in part because the sources for aspects of the decisions made at the time remain classified (9). But his case studies do not rely exclusively on, say, notes from National Security Council meetings. He cites congressional views, public opinion, press commentaries, and the perceptions of the antagonists. Surely he could have used such sources in comparing, for instance, the seizures of the USS *Pueblo* and the USS *Mayaguez*; the direct attacks on the USS *Liberty* in 1967 and the USS *Stark* twenty years later; terrorist actions like the seizing of the *Achille Lauro* in 1985 and the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000; or even the USS *Vincennes*’ downing of an Iranian airliner in 1988. Americans’ reaction to the latter recalled Germany’s in 1915 far more than Japan’s in 1937. Twenty-first-century decision-makers are unlikely to have to react to torpedoed cruise ships, but they may well benefit from learning how earlier presidents handled such incidents in the more recent past.

Douglas Peifer clearly demonstrates that present-day decision-makers can profit by studying the complexities of prior crises. Anyone interested in improving critical thinking during future maritime emergencies will find *Choosing War* to be provocative, rewarding, and (mostly) persuasive reading.