



*America's First General Staff: A Short History of the Rise and Fall of the General Board of the U.S. Navy, 1900–1950* by John T. Kuehn.

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Military historian and Navy veteran<sup>1</sup> John Kuehn (Army Command and General Staff College) has filled a serious void with his welcome study of the history of the US Navy's General Board. Previous scholarship has concentrated on the Board's role in creating the strategy and designing the fleet that won the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> There have also been analyses of specific aspects of its impact on the interwar Navy. But *America's First General Staff* is the first one-volume account of the General Board from its origin to its ignominious end.

Kuehn argues that the early years of the General Board set the tone for the rest of its existence. The Board was part of the broader American naval reform and professionalization movement at the end of the nineteenth century, which saw the foundation the US Naval Institute (1873), the publication of Alfred Thayer Mahan's seminal works of naval history and strategy, and the construction of the steel Navy. Although the naval reformers who founded the General Board in 1900 had hoped to emulate the formal general staff model of the German General Staff, they accepted the General Board instituted by Secretary of the Navy John Long as an initial step in that direction.

The Board soon proved its worth. In fall 1902, determined to forestall a potential German invasion of Venezuela, President Theodore Roosevelt sent Admiral of the Fleet George Dewey, the President of the General Board, to the Caribbean with virtually the entire US Navy as a show of force. Dewey appointed fellow Board member Rear Adm. Henry Taylor as his at-sea chief of staff; Taylor guided the General Board's initial years as Chief of the Bureau of Navigation. Kuehn notes that

At the height of the crisis, Dewey and Taylor—the very model of a Prussian command team—had commanded more than fifty-four ships of the four squadrons in the Atlantic.... It might be added that never before had an American general staff existed in peacetime that was used so quickly after its creation as a seagoing staff prepared at a moment's notice for war. (53)

Over time, the General Board evolved into a strategic think tank that advised the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) and the Secretary of the Navy. It was comprised of senior admirals serving a sunset tour before retirement and the best and brightest up-and-coming naval officers. These men reviewed strategies, war plans, and ship designs, and conducted hearings on various topics, sometimes at the request of the Secretary of the Navy or CNO, sometimes on their own initiative. At these hearings, unvarnished testimony was provided by many subject-matter experts, even those hostile to the Navy, such as then-Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell. The proceedings were tran-

1. Of twenty years service as a naval aviator.

2. E.g., Kuehn's own *Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet That Defeated the Japanese Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2008)

scribed much like congressional hearings. Based on such testimony and their own research, Board members submitted annual detailed reports recommending priorities of the service to the Secretary of the Navy. “In this sense, the president, and later chairman, of the General Board served as a de facto *maritime* national security adviser to the Secretary of the Navy” (5).

The General Board reached its zenith after the First World War, when international treaties limited the Navy’s expansion. It advised Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, and their Secretaries of State and Navy on treaty articles. Though the Board’s recommendations were sometimes ignored, Kuehn observes that it still enjoyed respect at the highest levels of government:

Hoover presided over a marathon meeting of the General Board, his secretaries for State and Navy, Stimson and Adams, as well as the CNO and Navy undersecretary ... on 11 September 1929..., attempt[ing] to draft a telegram to Prime Minister [Ramsay] MacDonald that proposed a ... basis for negotiation. The meeting convened again the following day and lasted until past 8:00 p.m. before the final wording laying out the U.S. position on cruisers was approved by the president. (161)

Kuehn convincingly argues that Adm. Hilary Jones’s dispute with British representatives over cruiser tonnage at the 1927 Geneva naval conference stemmed not from Anglophobia but from the number of cruisers stipulated by War Plan ORANGE (against Japan). He portrays Adm. William Veazie Pratt not as a toady of pro-disarmament politicians, but as a forward-thinking realist who secured the best terms for naval growth. Kuehn’s perceptive discussion of the General Board’s involvement in the politics of treaty making and implementation is now the most nuanced treatment of the subject.

Although the author rehabilitates the reputation of Admiral Pratt, he contends that his misguided attempt to provide greater independence to the General Board by removing the Chief of Naval Operations, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, the President of the Naval War College, and the Director of Naval Intelligence from the Board ended up weakening it. As the office of the Chief of Naval Operations (OPNAV) grew in importance and prestige, the General Board’s small group of senior admirals saw their responsibilities shrink.

But even as the General Board began its decline, it nonetheless created the Navy that won the Second World War. Much of this had to do with treaty limitations:

Stymied in its efforts to effect change by modifying the treaty system, the General Board sought solutions through a combination of technology, ship design, and operational concepts. In the process the board’s attitudes about sea power and its relationship to bases, battleships, and aviation gradually changed, and with it the attitudes of the Navy at large. Although the battleship ... still represented power and dominated naval minds, ... Navy officers ... wrestled with its limitation and diminution for so long that a fundamental change in attitude had occurred, one ... fully exposed by the Japanese success against American battleships at Pearl Harbor.... Yet Pearl Harbor was not the occasion for a revolutionary change in attitude. This is best understood by a priority list [*sic*] that [former Board member] ADM [Ernest] King, then in command of the Atlantic Fleet, sent to the General Board in July 1941. King’s number one priority for building were [*sic*] submarines, followed by destroyers, [and] ... aircraft carriers. Battleships were last in priority ... Attitudes certainly had changed. The Navy fought the first year and a half of the war with the treaty fleet it had built—mostly the “scouting fleet” for the Orange approach phase—and the attitudes toward sea power it had developed as a result of building the treaty fleet. (194–95)

Although the Second World War proved the value of the General Board, it also undermined its significance. It increasingly became a home for demoted admirals like J. O. Richardson, Thomas C. Hart, Frank J. Fletcher, and Robert Ghormley. After the war, it was briefly revived by the in-

tervention of Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal and the appointment of brilliant officers such as Adm. John Towers and then-Capt. Arleigh Burke, who cut his strategic teeth authoring serials on the Navy required in the 1950s and on naval aviation. Ultimately, however, the General Board was weakened by the growing OPNAV staff and the disfavor of Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews.

Even near the end of its existence, however, the Board continued to win praise. Army Col. Kilbourne Johnston testified that “In my organization studies extending over... seventeen years, the Navy General Board has always appeared to me to be the epitome of the pure general staff theory ... much closer to that conceived of by the Germans in the early part of the nineteenth century [than to that of the Army]” (216). Kuehn comments:

If there is an “American Way of War,” perhaps part of such a way is a distinctive American way of problem solving.... We might further define this approach [of the General Board] as collaborative, but with healthy doses of good old American individualism, ... eschewing the language of militarism while retaining the efficiency of military professionalism; controlled by the civilian sector but allowing a respected team of military advisers a “voice” ... and, above all, interested in the greater good of the Republic. (222)

Frustratingly, Kuehn’s narrative suffers from distracting grammatical and historical errors. For instance, the Argentinian Navy included a cruiser named *General* (not *Admiral*) *Belgrano*. The rigid airship USS *Shenandoah* (ZR 1) crashed in *Ohio*, not New Jersey. And Raymond Spruance succeeded Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz—not John Towers—as Commander in Chief, US Pacific Fleet.

Such minor but irritating slips aside, John Kuehn’s new history has not only shed welcome light on the General Board of the Navy, but also mended the historical reputations of a number of early and mid-twentieth-century naval leaders. Anyone seeking to understand how the US Navy transitioned from the pre-dreadnought fleet of the Spanish-American War into the massive three-dimensional force that won the Pacific War should thoroughly read *America’s First General Staff*; it is an essential addition to the literature of the US Navy in the twentieth century.