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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.

Reviewed by Mark Montesclaros

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Calls to arms associated with historic naval crises, such as "Remember the *Maine*" and "Remember the *Lusitania*," are part of American memory. But how many will recall the USS *Panay* incident, which might have precipitated US entry into World War II three years before Pearl Harbor? Why didn't the *Panay* rise to become part of the national lexicon as well? In *Choosing War*, Douglas Peifer answers this question while examining three historic maritime cases involving either US warships or American citizen passengers and the US administrations that responded to them. Two of the incidents—the sinking of the battleship USS *Maine* in 1898 and the torpedoing of the British passenger RMS *Lusitania* (with Americans aboard) in 1915—eventually contributed to an American decision to go to war. The third, the Japanese attack on the patrol gunboat USS *Panay* in China in 1938, did not—but might have. How and why each administration responded to these high profile maritime cases are at the heart of *Choosing War*, which is articulate, well organized, and highly readable. (Coincidentally, the USS *Panay* also appears in the title of William T. Johnsen's recent work on the foundations of Anglo-American military cooperation preceding Pearl Harbor—*The Origins of the Grand Alliance: Anglo-American Military Collaboration from the Panay Incident to Pearl Harbor* [2016]. Johnsen argues that coalition success in World War II had its origins before US entry into the war, and that British-American collaboration, particularly following the Japanese attack on the USS *Panay*, greatly facilitated military-to-military ties that later paid great dividends to the Allied effort.)

Of course, maritime incidents continue to be newsworthy in 2017 and the subject remains highly relevant; at the time of this writing, US naval vessels were conducting shows of force in and around the South China Sea, and a Filipino container ship, colliding with the destroyer USS *Fitzgerald*, resulted in the deaths of seven American sailors. Heightened tensions with North Korea as well as with China increase the potential for a twenty-first-century *Maine*-like maritime incident, necessitating an appropriate response from today's war cabinet. Additionally, with 90 percent of global commerce conducted on the world's waterways, incidents involving US and foreign vessels, both military and civilian, are bound to occur. *Choosing War* helps us to understand the past with a more critical eye toward future national security responses to such incidents. Consequently, Peifer's insightful analysis in *Choosing War* is as useful as it is timely.

Perhaps the author's major contribution to our understanding of the national security decision-making process regarding each incident is

the primacy of context. As clearly laid out in his concise and excellent introduction, Peifer argues that one must take a holistic approach in understanding the complex background behind the presidential decisions regarding the subject incidents, rather than divine "lessons learned" or theoretical approaches that have broad applicability across time and space. He is all about scrutinizing multiple factors to get the most complete understanding of each incident, instead of "cherry picking" similarities that might provide some degree of predictability for future crises (p. 5). Of course, Peifer's argument in this regard has broader applicability to a variety of national security decisions, not just those based on maritime matters, and is an invitation to think critically in each case based on its unique specifics.

At the core of the book is the expert analysis Peifer provides on the three crises, which he lays out uniformly in chronological order. He begins with a concise but effective synopsis of the details of the USS ***Maine***, RMS ***Lusitania***, and USS ***Panay*** incidents in real time. He then reverses course, detailing the historical context in which each occurred. Here, the author focuses centrally on the role that popular support, the media, and Congress played in influencing the McKinley, Wilson, and Roosevelt administrations, respectively. Nevertheless, the author goes far beyond that, effectively recreating the atmosphere of the time by analyzing other contextual ingredients, such as the international environment, the impact of domestic business interests, key actors and their stakes, the role of the international media, the war cabinet's internal policymaking process, and reactions of America's adversaries. Peifer next examines the nuances of each administration's response, then concludes with some very insightful commentary on the "so what" of each case. In total, the author's organization is highly effective; because the three incidents are uniformly laid out, the reader can obtain a nuanced comparison between them relatively quickly. For Peifer, context is king, and his clear and logical organization definitely facilitates his driving this point home.

The author is also highly effective in pointing out the various operational environments that influenced the three administrations to act in unique ways. Regarding the USS ***Maine***, President William McKinley was heavily influenced by public opinion, a strong pro-Cuban movement, a split Congress, and of course the actions of Spain. The naval court of inquiry investigating the incident played a major role as well, in a manner similar to the USS ***Panay*** decision thirty-nine years later. Once the navy determined that a submarine mine caused the destruction of the battleship and the deaths of 260 officers and crew, intervention was in the air and McKinley pressed Spain—without success—to resolve the crisis. Peifer rightly concludes that the ***Maine*** incident was an "accelerant" to the Spanish American War but was an insufficient cause in and of itself (p. 62). The war was not inevitable and Spanish actions were a final determinant in a US war declaration. (On a separate but important point, Peifer reminds us that the exact cause of the ***Maine*** explosion remains a mystery to this day, despite subsequent investigations more than a half-century after the actual incident.)

Peifer also demonstrates the complexity of the RMS ***Lusitania*** case, which did not involve a US warship but a British passenger liner carrying American passengers, 128 of whom perished when a German U-boat torpedoed the craft off the Irish coast on May 7, 1915. Unlike the ***Maine***, there was no ambiguity regarding the perpetrator nor was there a public outcry for intervention in the United States; quite the opposite—President Woodrow Wilson and the majority of Americans were determined to stay out of the European war, which had been raging since July 1914. Wilson's idealism led him to chart a difficult path that favored Britain over Germany, while his administration struggled mightily to remain strictly neutral, as Peifer effectively details. Indeed, the

British caused considerable difficulty for the United States until Germany initiated its policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. This unequal treatment of belligerents eventually caused William Jennings Bryan, secretary of state, to resign in protest and later to become a symbol of a strict neutrality policy. Despite multiple attempts to stay out of the war, the United States eventually reluctantly entered World War I, Wilson's hand forced by Germany when it renewed its practice of unrestricted U-boat operations.

In the case of the USS ***Panay***, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had the benefit of hindsight from both the ***Maine*** and the ***Lusitania*** disasters; however, there were also contextual differences that made his particular challenge unique. Like the ***Maine***, the ***Panay*** involved an apparent attack on a US warship; unlike that incident, however, there was no public outcry for war as the United States once again took a strong non-interventionist tack. In that regard, it was similar to America under the Wilson administration, with one major difference: adherence to a strict neutrality policy—it sought to avoid international entanglements. (Determined not to repeat World War I, Roosevelt and Congress enacted a series of strict neutrality laws between 1935 and 1937 designed to treat belligerents equally, without any hint of favoritism.) Three years before Pearl Harbor, Japanese naval aircraft attacked the ***Panay*** (a patrol boat acquired from Spain as a result of the Spanish American War) on China's Yangtze River. There was no popular call for war, and Congress was largely inclined not to intervene. While a naval court of inquiry cast doubt on Japanese claims that the attack was one of mistaken identity, Roosevelt sought to resolve the situation diplomatically. The conditions for war were simply not there in 1938; indeed, Peifer notes that the ***Panay*** incident occurred at the apex of American isolationism. Additionally, Japan preempted American action by immediately apologizing profusely for the incident. Later, it made good on reparations, and the incident was resolved without resorting to force. Of course, this state of affairs was to change drastically in just three years.

Aside from his insightful individual coverage of the three cases, Peifer's ability to connect the dots among the three events, which he does so effectively in one of his final chapters, is another of the book's obvious strengths. Because the time distance between the ***Maine*** and ***Panay*** incidents was just thirty-nine years, there was obvious historical memory at work. In fact, some of the key players experienced multiple crises and brought that foreknowledge to the table as they wrestled over potential responses. Additionally, some factors were common among the ***Maine***, ***Lusitania***, and ***Panay*** incidents. For example, the newspapers of media magnate William Randolph Hearst played a major role in shaping both US and international public opinion, and hence influenced war cabinet decision making during each crisis. Peifer cites numerous examples of each administration drawing connections as well as distinctions in order to chart a course that avoided past errors and misjudgments. Thus, Wilson was influenced by the ***Maine***, Roosevelt by the ***Maine*** and ***Lusitania.*** Peifer concludes ***Choosing War*** with two concise but insightful chapters on the nuances of categorizing naval incidents, as well as a reaffirmation of the importance of historical context when examining such cases.

Of course, those looking for some degree of predictability in divining future actions on maritime crises will not find it here. As mentioned, Peifer's book is not about "lessons learned" but in understanding the underlying context—the multiple factors—influencing each administration as it agonized over what action to take regarding the ***Maine, Lusitania***, and ***Panay***. Readers looking for specific takeaways for future practical use might be dismayed by the author's view to take a holistic approach by considering a broad swath of factors —the importance of context and connections among factors—rather than discerning specific lessons learned.

In his introduction, Peifer states that his intent in *Choosing War* is to present a holistic, case study-like description of each incident with a critical eye, rather than distilling a complex reality into a template for future action. In this regard, the author has succeeded admirably. Peifer makes a unique contribution to our understanding of how an American administration makes that most important of decisions—whether or not to go to war. Students of diplomatic, naval, and military history and those interested in the national security decision-making process will find *Choosing War* a valuable endeavor and a worthwhile addition to their professional libraries. Well researched and with extensive notes, *Choosing War* hits the mark.