

1975

Admiral William Veazie Pratt, U.S Navy: a Sailor's Life

James K. McDonald

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

McDonald, James K. (1975) "Admiral William Veazie Pratt, U.S Navy: a Sailor's Life," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 28 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol28/iss1/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

been done along the same lines. I strongly commend this short but pithy and provocative work to all who would pretend to competence in the area of understanding the role of military—and particularly, naval—power in the “age of détente.”

JAMES F. McNULTY
Captain, U.S. Navy

Wheeler, Gerald E. *Admiral William Veazie Pratt, U.S. Navy: a Sailor's Life*. Washington, D.C.: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy. 1974. 456p.

We shall never know whether William Veazie Pratt would have made a great wartime admiral for he reached flag rank and rose to the top of the Navy during the peacetime years between 1921 and 1933. We do know that Admiral Pratt's role at the London Naval Conference in 1930 and his bad luck to head his service as the depression forced drastic cuts in the Navy meant that most naval officers did not regret his retirement in 1933.

While Professor Gerald Wheeler's admiration for this intelligent, humane, and extraordinarily professional naval officer is abundantly clear throughout his new biography, he concludes that Pratt's distinctive contributions to the Navy were rather modest. I would disagree. I believe that the evidence in Professor Wheeler's careful and detailed biography reveals Admiral Pratt as one of the outstanding figures of the modern American Navy. In his long career Pratt's two greatest contributions to the Navy and the Nation were his crucial role as Assistant Chief of Naval Operations in the conduct of World War I; and his courageous part in breaking the Anglo-American deadlock over cruiser limitations which made possible the London Naval Treaty of 1930.

As Assistant Chief of Naval Operations in World War I, Pratt managed, almost miraculously, to keep the stolid

and anglophobic CNO, Adm. William S. Benson, working effectively with the commander of the Navy's European forces, the brilliant but contentious anglophile Adm. William S. Sims. The eruption in 1919 of bitter charges and countercharges between Admiral Sims on the one side and Admiral Benson and Secretary of the Navy Daniels on the other convinces me that without Pratt in Washington, Sims' pent-up anger would have exploded during the war with disastrous consequences for the entire American war effort.

With the end of hostilities, the now Rear Admiral Pratt served as naval adviser to the American delegation of the Washington Conference in 1921-1922, but it was not until the London Conference of 1930 that his most important and controversial contribution to the limitation of naval armaments was made. Pratt was at that time called from his command of the U.S. Fleet to serve as naval adviser to the American delegation. The same quarrel between the United States and Great Britain over cruiser types and quotas that had caused the 1927 Geneva Naval Conference to fail seemed to once again doom the cause of disarmament. Pratt, however, had the courage to produce a compromise, in the conviction that since the Navy was well below the limits of the treaty, any agreement, no matter how imperfect, would serve the Navy well by providing long-term levels to build up to.

In his final evaluation of Pratt's career, Professor Wheeler cites Pratt's support for the 1930 London Treaty as one of the two issues “of transcendent importance to the Navy” on which Pratt was wrong. Perhaps this is because in the short run, during the Hoover administration, there was indeed no building up to treaty limits, and the Navy suffered continuous reductions which unquestionably damaged Pratt's prestige as CNO. Once Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, Pratt's “treaty Navy”

86 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

concept became, as one author has written, a magic formula for securing ever-increasing naval appropriations. For the Nation and the Navy, Admiral Pratt made the right decision in pressing for a compromise and a treaty in 1930.

In Professor Wheeler's judgment, Admiral Pratt's second great error was his willingness to trust Japan and his eagerness for friendship with Great Britain. Pratt had supported both the 1922 Washington naval treaty and the 1930 London naval treaty in the belief that if America and Great Britain could avoid rivalry between themselves, the two together could probably pressure Japan into limiting her navy as well. Pratt's willingness to trust Japan therefore depended upon the success of American cooperation with Great Britain. Moreover, it seems clear that Admiral Pratt never doubted that Japan was America's most likely future enemy, even if he refused to accept that war with Japan was inevitable.

Professor Wheeler, a distinguished historian of the U.S. Navy in the inter-war period, is especially well qualified to write this biography—the first ever—of Admiral Pratt. The book is based on wide research, most notably in Admiral Pratt's own extensive papers which fortuitously became available for research at the Naval War College while Professor

Wheeler held the King Chair of Maritime History there in 1968-1969. Professor Wheeler's scholarly yet eminently readable account of Admiral Pratt's life is valuable not only as the story of an individual's development but also as a case study in the sociology of the naval officer corps in this period. "Ticket-punching" careerism, cliques around rising admirals, and inexplicable flag selections are not innovations peculiar to the Navy of our generation. The author quotes generously from Pratt's fitness reports, and this art form has not advanced at all from the 1890's to the present. Beyond all this, Professor Wheeler's narrative of Pratt's role in the formation of American naval policy in World War I, at the Washington Conference, and from the 1930 London Conference to the end of the Republican era in 1933 is full of insights for our own struggles with strategic arms limitation and the fate of defense spending in times of national economic decline. Our defense establishment is now vastly larger and our management techniques more sophisticated, but I am not sure that we have nothing to learn from the experience of Admiral Pratt and his colleagues of 40 or 50 years ago.

JAMES K. McDONALD
Research Associate, Naval War College

— ψ —