

1966

The Barometer—Readers' Comments

Edward D. Napier
U.S. Navy

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

Recommended Citation

Napier, Edward D. (1966) "The Barometer—Readers' Comments," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 19 : No. 5 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol19/iss5/6>

This Additional Writing 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.

THE BAROMETER READERS' COMMENTS

This section is used for unofficial comments by the readers on articles which appear in the Naval War College Review. Such remarks are encouraged and should be addressed to the Editor, Naval War College Review, Newport, Rhode Island, 02840.

A NEW ISTHMIAN CANAL— KEY TO HEMISPHERIC PROGRESS

(December, 1965)

Regarding Lieutenant Commander Sandrock's paper—How much would the projected tonnage transiting the isthmus of the Panama change were the locks capable of handling the largest ships? Very little I fear, for the tonnage is less a function of the size of locks than of demand and supply. While a sea-level canal through Panama might encourage building some super-ships to replace older and smaller ones, the net tonnage would probably continue along its nominal expansion. The major effect of a sea-level canal through or near Panama would be to make the present canal uneconomical and force its abandonment. Then again we will find ourselves with a single canal, hamstrung by our short-sightedness. Only the present canal can continue the level of employment and revenues Panama now enjoys. Only if the present canal operates will we have a choice of canal routes.

What efforts can be made to insure the continued operation of the Panama Canal in the face of competition from a sea-level canal? First, build the sea-level canal as far away from Panama as possible; second, subsidize American flag ships to use the Panama —

Canal; and third, make a gift of the canal to Panama. The first will insure that a maximum of the present traffic will find it profitable to continue its present route. The second will help take up the slack until the normal growth saturates its capacity. The third will permit the canal to be profitable to Panama even under reduced traffic. I admit there may be more bias than real knowledge in the latter statement, but it is a bias built on one transit in the USS *Essex* and two in a destroyer through the Suez since the Egyptians seized that canal and three transits in the USS *Observation Island* through the Panama Canal within the last year.

Do canals have to be owned and/or operated by the United States to be militarily useful and reliable? I think not. In 1958, in response to a critical situation in the Far East, *Essex* and four destroyers were sent from the Mediterranean via the Suez and joined the Seventh Fleet more quickly than any of the carriers on the West Coast were able to. This despite the gloomy predictions of what would happen to the canal under Egyptian management and concern over clearance of the angle deck through the narrow railroad bridge near Timsah. The Egyptians went out of their way to show their competence. They made many departures from standard convoy procedures to insure a faster and safer transit. In the memory of those aboard who had transited Suez before, they had never experienced as well prepared and executed a passage as the *Essex* made. I was given to believe such would have been out of the question under its former management. In two subsequent transits in a destroyer there was evidence of continued improvement in both the management and operation of the canal.

There is a lot of growth potential remaining in the Panama Canal, but as a user, I have been sorely disappointed in the management and operation of the Panama Canal Company. Their attitude seemed self-serving. Some of the limitations spoken of in the paper are ones of the company's convenience and not physical limitations of the canal. Specifically, night transits are quite feasible and in some ways are safer because of the absence of distraction. (I made two night transits before a daylight one.) Handling at the locks could be speeded by additional towing engines and procedural changes if there were serious concern over delays. I feel that the Panama Canal Company has outlived its usefulness. Its presence is a thorn in the side of Panama, and I wonder if we would have fared any worse under Panamanian management. The impending competition of a sea-level canal when

coupled with a strong dependency upon canal revenues and a national pride would be tremendous incentives to the Panamanians to make a go of it. I think they ought to be given a chance before our being forced into it.

The sea-level canal which would present the least competition to the Panama Canal would of course be the Mexican Tehuantepec Canal. There are three other vital factors favoring this choice. For one it would literally open up the Gulf of Mexico to international trade in a way no other route would offer. For another it would be a substantial saving in time and distance for intercoastal shipping and might well cause a resurgence in the traffic, now at a low. For still another it would tend to improve the lot of our nearest neighbor to the South. Strategically, ought not we to be more concerned for his welfare than Panama's?

Who should build the canal? We must of course, if only to keep our Russian friends from doing it. A sea-level canal of the proportions described will be as near a permanent monument as man can make. The canal when built, as does the Panama Canal, will stand as evidence of Yankee ingenuity. In building just one such monument we should have as our criteria; what is the right way—not what is the easy way or the cheapest way. The "right way" is hard to define because it is measured in terms of hindsight, i.e., how will the planners fifty years from now regard our decision. The "right way" may be the one which gives us the minimum regret in the future, come what may. Just as the cost of the Panama Canal is of little importance today, so the difference between \$.6 billion and \$13 billion will be negligible when assessed in the year 2016. Neither is out of the question now. Likewise the differences in ease of building will be negligible in the year 2016. One may be more formidable than the other but none of the proposed routes is impossible. Accomplishing the more formidable will only be a matter of pride in 2016. But which would have given the greatest stimulus to growth and security of the United States? This is what will give us the least regret in the long run.

Who should own the canal? This is a wide-open question with answers ranging from some sort of international governing body to sovereignty by the host country. Ownership by the United Nations or the Organization of American States would provide a regular revenue which they would welcome. International control would seem to offer a hope of unrestricted use of the canal by all nations. However, these extra-territorial arrangements have generally been

resented by the host nation and sooner or later there would probably be some excuse to ease them out. In the long run undisputed sovereignty by the host nation may be the best guarantee of our unrestricted use of the canal especially if it belongs to our nearest neighbor to the South. I feel we should donate the work of building of a canal to the host nation and count on a lasting friendship as well as the competition posed by the Panama Canal and Straits of Magellan to insure it remains open to us.

For those who would insist we must get something in return, let us first realize that much of the cost of this project would never leave the United States and most of the labor on site could be provided by the host government. We might require free use of the canal, but this again under changed circumstances may be a source of contention that might act to deny us the use of the canal at some future time. Possibly we could negotiate a trade such as cession of Baja California in exchange for building the Tehuantepec Canal. We might have a better chance of hanging onto something like this. But let us not be distracted from our long-term gain by demands on the near term. We can easily spend more in sending a man to the moon and have less to show for our effort.

EDWARD D. NAPIER
Captain, U.S. Navy