

2021

On War and Politics: The Battlefield inside Washington's Beltway

Thomas J. Gibbons
The U.S. Naval War College

Arnold L. Punaro

David Poyer

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

Recommended Citation

Gibbons, Thomas J.; Punaro, Arnold L.; and Poyer, David (2021) "On War and Politics: The Battlefield inside Washington's Beltway," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 74 : No. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol74/iss2/13>

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.

broader context of the Mediterranean naval war. If that war's object was communications, the Germans achieved the majority of the tactical successes that produced operational and strategic consequences. Even according to O'Hara's data, 82 percent of Allied losses during the period of *Six Victories* resulted from German actions (p. 259). Second Sirte is a clear example of this; the delay the Italian surface forces imposed was not decisive, because it was German aircraft that sank the enemy ships. Despite this, O'Hara concludes that the three Italian victories led to Axis maritime control of the central Mediterranean up to November 1942, broken only by the coming of American naval reinforcements (p. 257).

This conclusion is not convincing. First, it seems to confound surface predominance with maritime control. During summer-fall 1942, intelligence, air, and underwater predominance—critical elements of maritime control during World War II—were in the hands of the British, enabling them to disrupt Axis communications despite enemy surface predominance. Second, this trend already was emerging during the first period considered by *Six Victories* (fall 1941). Current Anglo-American and Italian scholarly work agrees that the increased security of Axis transports during early 1942 depended on the decline of Malta as an operative base, itself caused by increasing German air attacks. O'Hara seems unable to shake this argument, because he only identifies a chronological connection in the improved situation of the Axis convoys after the three Italian victories (p. 127), possibly mistaking correlation for causation. Surface preponderance, the main result of the

Italian victories, could not stop air and submarine attacks against Axis convoys, Britain's primary weapons against enemy communications, which indeed regained their momentum when German airpower shifted from the central Mediterranean to assist Rommel.

In conclusion, O'Hara's book offers a detailed reconstruction of the naval actions described, deserving credit for proving that the effectiveness of the Italian navy at a tactical level was better than Anglo-American studies usually have acknowledged. Less convincing is the analysis of the operational and strategic consequences of the six "victories," owing to an overemphasis on surface warfare, which was only a part—and possibly not the most important one—of the Mediterranean naval scenario in 1941–42. Readers searching this book for lessons relevant to modern antiaccess warfare will need to bear this in mind.

FABIO DE NINNO



On War and Politics: The Battlefield inside Washington's Beltway, by Arnold L. Punaro, with David Poyer. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016. 249 pages. \$29.95.

On War and Politics is a remarkable autobiography. It explores the life and professional careers of Arnold L. Punaro, a U.S. Marine Corps Reserve (USMCR) major general and congressional insider; it also is a remarkable portrayal of the day-to-day workings of Congress and the Pentagon, so it will appeal to a broad range of readers interested in national-security affairs. Punaro spent over thirty-five years as a USMCR officer and worked closely with the chairman of the Senate Armed

Services Committee, Senator Samuel A. Nunn Jr. (D-GA), for almost twenty-four years. Nunn played an important role in almost every major piece of defense legislation and understood the intricacies of power politics inside the Beltway.

Punaro grew up a devout Roman Catholic, and as a young boy entered the seminary to become a priest, but eventually left and attended Spring Hill College for his undergraduate degree. On graduation, he started talking to military recruiters to avoid the draft, because his father warned him, “You don’t want to get drafted. You’ll go to Asia as an infantryman, and there’s nothing grand and glorious about war” (p. 18). Punaro was particularly impressed by the sharp uniform the Marine recruiter wore, so he decided to join the Corps.

Punaro’s dry wit and sense of humor are evident throughout the book. Describing his experiences during Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Quantico, he writes, “After being shouted into a haphazard queue, I began my introduction to the three eternal truths in the military: hurry up and wait, endless paperwork, and constant changes to ‘the word.’” Punaro excelled at OCS and the Basic School, and after graduation got his “dream job”: orders to Vietnam as an infantry platoon leader.

Punaro’s combat tour in Vietnam shaped the course of his subsequent life. Punaro starts the book with an incident in which he almost died. “None of us would come back the same. Some wouldn’t come back at all, especially from my area of operation, which held the dubious distinction of having the most casualties of any in the combat zone” (p. 26). Punaro learned well the leadership lessons of an infantry platoon leader in Vietnam. “We grew to respect each other, and my Marines gained confidence in my

leadership for two primary reasons: I never got lost, and they knew that I wouldn’t put them in more danger than absolutely necessary” (p. 50).

After nearly four months in Vietnam—almost all in the field—Punaro was seriously wounded. One of his fellow Marines, Corporal Roy Lee Hammonds, attempted to help Punaro but was killed in the firefight. “I had no doubt that the bullets that had torn through his protective gear would have ripped me to shreds had he not thrown himself between me and the snipers” (p. 55). Punaro was medevaced to a naval hospital in Okinawa. He always has remembered Hammonds’s actions that day.

On his return from Vietnam, Punaro was assigned to Marine Corps Base Quantico and became involved in planning social events for the training battalion. His wit and humor show when he describes the art of doing so in cooperation with officers’ wives. “It was an early lesson in Washington ways: if you don’t mind kissing some butts, you can go far” (p. 62).

After leaving the active-duty Marine Corps, Punaro entered the University of Georgia’s Grady School of Journalism. He excelled in his graduate studies and was offered a job with Senator Nunn. “Little did I know that I was signing up for a decade’s tour on Nunn’s personal staff, and then another fourteen years on the Armed Services Committee[—]nearly a quarter-century with the Senate and the senator, in one way or another” (p. 72).

Punaro weaves a tapestry of crucial events in our nation’s history through different presidencies—those of Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, and Bush II—with details available only from a congressional insider. Moreover, he gives the reader a front-row seat

on the development of American national security under each of these presidents. “As we wrapped up eight years of a defense buildup and both positive and negative developments, from Iran-Contra to the Gorbachev era, we thought we had seen it all. But we could not imagine the tumult the next years would bring” (p. 150).

Perhaps the best chapter is the last: “Lessons Learned.” Punaro provides a short synopsis of important lessons learned throughout his illustrious careers in the military, the Senate, and private business. These are lessons distilled after a lifetime spent in leadership positions and working with other great leaders. He writes, “If today’s leaders could find the courage to apply these, they would be well on their way to solving most of today’s legislative gridlock, finger pointing, and failure to act on even the most pressing issues” (p. 209).

The book is much more than a collection of autobiographical anecdotes. Punaro and his coauthor provide keen insights on important national-security issues in our nation’s history that many of us have never heard before, told from a Washington insider’s perspective. This book is a must-read for young military officers. I wholeheartedly recommend it.

THOMAS J. GIBBONS



“I Am Determined to Live or Die on Board My Ship”: The Life of Admiral John Inglis; An American in the Georgian Navy, by Jim Tildesley. Kibworth Beauchamp, U.K.: Matador, 2019. 561 pages. £19.99.

This five-hundred-page biography is longer than many devoted to the

world’s most famous admirals. One has to search quite carefully in the literature on the Royal Navy during the American Revolution and the wars of the French Revolution to find even a passing reference to John Inglis (1743–1807). During his forty-two years of active naval service, Inglis reached the coveted rank of post captain. Following his retirement from active service in 1799, he rose by seniority up the ranks of “yellow” half-pay admirals, eventually becoming a vice admiral.

The author of this work, Jim Tildesley, former director of the Scottish Maritime Museum, has unearthed—with admirable diligence, in more than twenty archives in England, Scotland, and the United States—the documentary evidence of Inglis’s life. The result of many years’ labor, Tildesley’s book provides a fascinating and lucid account that serves as a valuable case study of a diligent and successful naval officer who retired as a captain.

From other historians, we know that two-hundred-some captains were serving in the fleet during Inglis’s career, and only a small percentage of them could rise to flag rank on active service; then, as now, reaching the rank of captain meant that an officer had had a typical successful career. Thus, Inglis is part of a significant group of career naval officers worthy of study.

Tildesley follows Inglis’s life and career, seemingly using every scrap of paper that relates to him, his family, and his ships, from log- and muster books to municipal tax records as well as newspapers, estate records, letters from family friends and acquaintances, and a wide range of official reports. The result is a remarkably complete view of an ordinary naval captain’s life.