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Commanding Petty Despots: The American Navy in the New Republic

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only of foreign ministries but also of sports federations, NATO, and the IOC. Since all national Olympic committees had to communicate with the IOC in French or English, she uses these records to internationalize her account, documenting the views of the Italians, Portuguese, Spanish, Greeks, and others.

To make a long story short: Confusion plagued NATO delegates, but national Olympic committees and individual members of the IOC acted with purpose.

NICHOLAS EVAN SARANTAKES



Commanding Petty Despots: The American Navy in the New Republic, by Thomas Sheppard. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2022. 264 pages. \$44.95.

All naval officers are familiar with the phrase “six-thousand-mile screwdriver,” although its origins are not entirely clear. A likely source is Vice Admiral Joseph Metcalf, who felt that the evacuation of Saigon in 1975 had been micromanaged from Washington, DC. The lesson Metcalf drew from this experience was to have his staff send two situational reports every hour to the higher command authority. The more information they had, he hoped, the less likely they would be to intervene (Christopher J. Lamb, *The Micromanagement Myth and Mission Command: Making the Case for Oversight of Military Operations* [Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense Univ. Press, 2020], p. 43).

This tension between commanders on the spot and authorities in Washington was not invented in Vietnam, as Thomas Sheppard shows in his useful

new book. Metcalf’s frustration would have resonated with most officers of the U.S. Navy in the first fifty years of its existence. While communication technology meant that Metcalf’s superiors had far greater ability to intervene than the first leaders of the Navy, the fundamental tension between the authority of a captain on board “his” ship and that captain’s relationship to his superiors is strikingly similar across the centuries.

Take, for example, the vignette that Sheppard uses to open the book. In June 1813, Captain James Lawrence sailed USS *Chesapeake* out of Boston Harbor to fight HMS *Shannon*. A year into the war, the British blockade was beginning to tell. With *Shannon* alone guarding Boston, Lawrence saw an opportunity to break out. He misjudged his opponent, however, and his aggression cost him his life and his ship. *Shannon’s* well-trained crew captured *Chesapeake* and mortally wounded Lawrence in an action lasting just fifteen minutes. For Sheppard, what is most interesting about this famous episode is that Lawrence directly disobeyed orders. The Secretary of the Navy, William Jones, had ordered Lawrence to avoid risking his ship in battle and instead to attack British merchant ships. In this case, leaders in Washington had been right to meddle, and the officer on the spot did not have some unique insight into the best course of action.

What Sheppard explores is how common it was for officers to ignore Washington’s instructions and how difficult it was for civilians to gain control over officers. Secretaries of the Navy did not wield six-thousand-mile screwdrivers in the early republic, both because communication times limited their ability to do so and because officers

flatly refused to let them. What really motivated Lawrence, Sheppard shows, was not any strategic understanding of the blockade but rather a desire for glory. Early American naval officers, like all men of their social standing and background, defended their honor with their lives, frequently fighting duels. Seemingly minor questions of seniority quickly could spiral into bitter feuds leading to resignations. At sea, officers often prioritized fame and money over professional duties. Sheppard poses the question: How did the U.S. Navy create an institutional culture that reversed officers' priorities?

Commanding Petty Despots is full of clashes between officers and the Secretary of the Navy. From 1808 to 1810, the querulous David Porter commanded naval forces at New Orleans. His mission was to interdict smugglers, who used the maze of bayous and rivers to their advantage. Porter clearly needed many small vessels capable of following smugglers to their bases, but he discovered on his journey to New Orleans that the boats the Navy had given him were not up to the task. Taking the initiative, he purchased some small boats using his own money, then requested reimbursement from the Secretary of the Navy, Robert Smith. Smith denied the request on the grounds that the purchase had not been authorized, which predictably infuriated Porter. Smith, according to Porter, was not qualified to judge whether the purchase was necessary, because he was merely a civilian. Porter proposed instead that a committee of naval officers should be created to approve expenditures such as those in question. Smith refused, although Sheppard notes that Porter's suggestion eventually was

adopted with the creation of the Board of Navy Commissioners in 1815.

Sheppard traces the increasing professionalism of the officer corps and the related increasing bureaucratization of the Navy Department. It was a slow, grinding process on both sides. The Board of Navy Commissioners was designed to resolve some of the tension by giving officers bureaucratic oversight over their fellow officers while also limiting their scope for independent action. Instead, the board became yet another battle space for civil-naval competition. The civilians eventually won, thanks to the direct intervention of the president, and in doing so they transformed the Navy's institutional culture. Sheppard proposes that this transformation is as deserving of celebration as any of the great victories at sea in those years.

The book is built on the author's doctoral dissertation, but it does not read like one. That is both a compliment and a source of some frustration. Sheppard narrates his story well, and the book is free of academic jargon and other pitfalls of dissertations. However, in transforming it from a dissertation to a book some important pieces were lost. It is not clear from the introduction the extent to which its arguments are new. How does the story this book tells change our understanding of the U.S. Navy's institutional culture? The bibliography is also incomplete. Works cited in the endnotes do not always appear there, which can make tracking down further reading more challenging than it needs to be. Overall, though, these are minor issues in an otherwise strong book.

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