



THE GENERAL STAFF THAT WASN'T

By John Kuehn and JP Clark September 13, 2019

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JP Clark: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **JP Clark**, Deputy Director for Academic Engagement at the Strategic Studies Institute and a War Room Senior Editor. At the US Army War College, we have different departments teach defense management which essentially is the creation and sustaining of forces with the right kinds of technology in order for them to be successful, and then actually the employment of those forces through military strategy and campaigning. Outside of the schoolhouse, however, hopefully those things actually work in tandem and are not divided. In the first half of the 20th century, the US Navy's General Board did precisely that by combining what we could call the strands of institutional strategy and operational strategy in a single body. Our guide to the General Board today is **Dr. John T. Kuehn**, Professor of Military History at the US Army Command and General Staff College and the author of several books including *America's First General Staff: A Short History to the Rise and Fall of the General Board of the Navy, 1900 to 1950*. Dr. Kuehn is also a retired naval flight officer who specialized in electronic warfare and technical intelligence in his 23-year career. John, thank you very much for being here.

John T. Kuehn: Thanks, JP.

JPC: Alright, so let's begin by providing the listeners with some basic background. What was the General Board of the Navy and why was it initially founded?

JTK: The General Board of the Navy was established in 1900 by Secretary of the Navy John D. Long, who was William McKinley's Secretary of the Navy. The reason for its establishment was there were these naval reformers who had been - agitating is probably the best word for it, for the Naval Officer Corps, particularly the senior officers in the Navy - to have more of a role in how the Navy was employed strategically, if not operationally. In past wars, the secretaries of the Navy had retained that to themselves and then sent the ships out, and so strategy been a very ad hoc thing. After the Civil War, a group of reformers agitated for reforms, and there was a board established. This was something sort of standard in British practice and the Americans did the same thing - to solve a specific problem and the specific problem was - there were a number of specific problems - how to integrate the new steam and steel warships into the structure of the Navy. Also, the Navy wanted to establish a naval war college, and so a board met and one of the

results of that was the creation and establishment of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, the first president being Admiral Luce. Mahan was a part of this group. What they did was they hid the war planning strategy function that they wanted inside the Naval War College. So, they started working on the creation of war plans and studying war plans at the same time as educating strategic leaders in the Naval War College. The guy who really kind of gets most of the credit for this was the guy who relieved Luce. In fact, Luce was already gone when he showed up and that was Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan. And so, Mahan usually gets a lot of credit for that. His successors kind of followed in his footsteps doing that. Well in the Spanish-American War, the Navy had not been pleased with how everything performed. They were happy that they had sort of a modern fleet, and they had sort of this pre-dreadnought fleet. Secretary Long had kind of given in to Luce and Mahan and these others and established something called the War Strategy Board, but it was an ad hoc board that was created. It wasn't a permanent board, and they had actually run the naval operations of the Navy in the Spanish-American War, and this Board was actually seen as a success. So, Long and the Admirals in the Navy particularly George Dewey, the hero of Manila Bay wanted to capitalize on this, and Dewey actually had his protégé Captain Henry Clay Taylor write up a memorandum for the establishment of a Naval General Staff, modeled on the German General Staff, for Long. Well, Long took this memorandum and decided what he was going to establish was not a general staff, but a much smaller body, and that became the General Board of the Navy. Its charter was established by Navy General Order. I think it was General Order 540 or 544. It was established in 1900 and it established a General Board of the Navy to look at preparation of the Navy for the defense of maritime security and for the coasts. It was a real simple charter, but it was not established in law, was not established in code by Congress. It was essentially an experiment to establish sort of an experimental Navy General Staff but not call it a Navy General Staff because of the concerns over creeping Prussian militarism.

JPC: One of the amazing things that you bring out so nicely in the book - and even though you just mentioned it - I think a lot of our listeners who are used to the modern Pentagon and the lumbering staffs of hundreds and thousands between the service staffs and the joint staff and everything else like that. So, the Naval Strategy Board during the Spanish-American War was really down to about four or five skill players at one point where everybody had kind of gone off to war and so it was really just a handful of people.

JTK: Yeah, there were only three people in it. At one point - but the three main people were Captain Mahan, I don't know if he was an admiral yet, Captain Crowninshield, and there was one other person. Theo Roosevelt who was Assistant Secretary of the Navy had been on the board, but he left, and he wasn't really replaced at all because he remained Assistant Secretary of the Navy while he was Colonel of the Rough Riders. So, there normally would have been the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, but instead it was another captain. I'm trying to remember the other captain who was on the board. The membership changed. There were a couple new general

orders that came out to change the membership of the General Board. But you're right, it established sort of an intern program for junior officers. Some of these junior officers were almost - when you read the book - they're almost like coup plotters. They're trying to use the General Board as a vehicle to kind of create a Prussian naval general staff. And their Sea Daddy is this guy Bradley Fisk who's trying to, who really wants to create an official naval general staff. He thinks that the General Board is sort of a weak wishy-washy general board-light, and he wants a bigger general board - so does Luce, by the way. Taylor, on the other hand, is like, no, this is pretty good, and so it's a very small thing. Their main charter is war planning, is preparation of the fleet to defend the United States.

JPC: It's fascinating, in the book you'll have some of the things that they're looking at and some of these are very large strategic issues, some kind of neck down into the much more tactical - like how do we defend? and what's the fortifications for a choline station? Although all of them, perhaps some pretty large implications depending on how you going to do it. But it's from very focused studies and you'd mentioned some of the junior officers who are coming in and many of us can empathize with this that when you had a lot of these junior non-voting members where the number of studies tended to go up because the seniors were working the dog out of these young people who were producing tons of studies, but given a chance to understand the strategic and policy landscape. Now, moving forward a little bit to the establishment of the Chief of Naval Operations. There's a little confusion within the history about this - what does it mean for the General Board? So, how does the CNO come into this, and why is it a little bit more nuanced than a lot of people have remembered that well? CNO comes in and the General Board starts going down is essentially the over simplistic story that's been told up to now.

JTK: Right, and my work is revisionist in that regard. So, there's still this faction of officers inside the Navy, and one of them is a member of the General Board, Bradley Fisk. He's basically Dewey's Chief of Staff for Operations and Chief of Staff. He kind of combines the functions of a chief of staff and an N3 or an ops officer in one function. But he wants a naval general staff. He thinks the General Board is fine for the policy level, but he thinks you need a larger, more efficient staff to develop war plans and create war planning for the uses of the United States Navy in war. So, he bypasses Admiral Dewey, who's the President of General Board and the Secretary of the Navy, goes directly to Congress and gets legislation passed to create a Chief of Naval Operations. Also, part of this move is to create the Naval Reserve, by the way. So that's another thing, and by the way, the General Board had been recommending that for years but the CNO is sort of Admiral Fisk's own little brain child, and his plan is for him to be the first Chief of Naval Operations. He thinks as sort of the ops officer for Dewey, and for Josephus Daniels, that he'll get appointed. What happens is Daniels will not appoint Fisk to be the first Chief of Naval Operations. He'll grab the head of one of the navy yards, a guy named William S, Benson, Captain Benson, and promote him essentially over the heads of dozens of other captains and admirals to be the first Chief of Naval Operations. Benson will at first be on the General Board

as the CNO. Eventually, he'll get his own offices and everything, but he is a statutory member of the General Board, so that's in the law, that's written. And so, he is a member of the General Board by virtue of this. Initially, he doesn't have hardly anybody working for him. So, we think of the CNO today, we think of thousands and thousands of people inside the Pentagon working for OPNAV. But at the time, Benson's staff was extremely small. He didn't even get the war planning function right away. That is created and eventually what happens is that the Chief of Naval Operations and his planning staff, OPNAV, will be augmented overtime, and they will get, by 1917 - by the time the United States enters World War I - they will get the war planning portfolios. The General Board will still be advisory on war planning, but their main job will be policy advice to the Secretary of the Navy, particularly on fleet design and warship design. So, those functions will migrate away. The General Board will no longer be primarily a war planning organization. They'll still provide advice. They'll still review war plans, but the final war plans will be finalized under the Chief of Naval Operations.

JPC: One of the great parts of the book, especially for a lot of our Marine Corps listeners out there also, is where sometimes there's Marine Corps representation, sometimes there's not, and how that kind of shapes some of these...

JTK: I forgot that yeah, the Commandant of the Marine Corps is also a member of the General Board.

JPC: You can plot the relative relationships within the Department of the Navy by whether there's a Marine Corps representative or not in the Board. But certainly, you make a very good case that the thinking gets better when you have some more of these views within the small group.

JTK: Yeah, I think when the Commandant of the Marine Corps loses his seat on the General Board, I think that's a loss.

JPC: Now, moving head to the post-war era. This is a fascinating time in terms of strategy because clearly, we have several large combatants from World War I are exhausted. Everybody's trying to figure out where they're going to be in the world, certainly the United States. You have an intersection of domestic politics - to Versailles or not to Versailles? That is the question and whether we want to be part of the League of Nations. But then also there are some very interesting military technical problems. The submarine was a shock to many, the role that it played. Aviation - the huge leaps from 1914 to 1918 - but there's still a lot more to come from aviation and where exactly is that going to go? There are so many problems both strategic and in the policy realm and tactical, for everybody to figure out not just the US, not just the Navy. And it seems that there's a seminal moment for the General Board in 1922 with the Washington Naval Treaty. So, tell us a little about how there's this intersection of fleet design, and so the

institutional strategy with, really the national policy, and grand strategy of how should the US position itself in relation to the United Kingdom and Japan.

JTK: Well, one of the so-called lessons learned in World War I is that arms races, and particularly the naval arms race between Germany and Great Britain, caused the War. The fascinating thing is with the end of World War I, the arms race didn't end. And three of the victorious powers are the only three major naval powers left. Actually, there's five. There's France, Italy, Japan, the United States, and Great Britain. But the United States and Great Britain and Japan by far and away are the major naval powers. So, the arms race doesn't end, and for Great Britain, the United States and Japan, this is bad news. They all want to realize a peace dividend, but they can't. Their Naval Officer Corps are telling them, no, we've got to keep building. The Americans have this huge building plan, the British are trying to keep up with the Americans, because that's how it is now after World War I, and the Japanese are trying to keep their fleet in a position with the so-called Eight-eight plan - eight battleships, eight battle cruisers - so that they can maintain some modicum of capability against the Americans. What happens, coming out of World War I, is that the United States' new administration under Warren G. Harding invites all the major powers to Washington in 1921, November 1921. The conference goes from 1921 into the early part of 1922. Several treaties come up but the one that concerns us here is the Washington Naval Treaty which sets the 5:5:3 ratio between the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan. This is a seminal moment for the General Board because the General Board is asked for its advice on policy for this naval conference. They're actually against the 5:5:3 ratio. The Secretary of State actually goes against their advice and preempts them with the 5:5:3 plan. This is a shock to the Navy, and to the General Board, that the United States signs this naval treaty which is going to scrap a million tons a capital shipping. You already talked about the shock of the submarine in World War I. The Washington Conference is supposed to deal with the submarine. What do we do about the submarine? How do we get it back in the box? The other shock prior to the Washington Naval Conference is the sinking of the *Ostfriesland* by Billy Mitchell. And so, how are we going to deal with this new technology and everything? What happens is, after the conference is over, the General Board is presented with fait accompli. That fait accompli is one, battleship building holiday, there will be no capital ships built for 10 years. So, right off the bat, the battleship is sort of a dead end for naval design and solving what you see as your naval problems. Secondly, what can you build? You are allowed to build aircraft carriers but again, the ratio is going to be 5:5:3 between the Americans, the British, and the Japanese. So, it forces the navies of the world, particularly the United States Navy, into coming up with innovative ways around the treaty. And who gets the charge of all of this? The General Board does. Basically, after the treaty is signed, the President and the Secretary of the Navy turn to the General Board and say it's your job to implement the provisions of the Washington Naval Treaty in the United States Navy. Now, initially they see this as constraining the Navy. I argue this is good because it forces the General Board to think differently. It forces the Naval Officer Corps to think differently about how to solve its primary strategic problems

and I'll talk about what it sees as its primary strategic problem in a second, but it does constrain them.

JPC: So, to paraphrase, Churchill: gentlemen, we are out of money and we have a force cap, now it's time to think.

JTK: Now it's time to think, and this is true not just for the United States Navy but also for the Japanese and the British. The Americans and the Japanese actually do a pretty good job innovating based on these constraints. The other thing that limits the Navy by the Washington Treaty is something called the fortification clause. It limits the Navy's ability to build up bases in the Far East. That's because the Japanese only agree to sign the treaty if we'll agree to the fortification clause. Admiral Kato Tomosaburo, who is the Japanese chief delegate to the conference, who's also the Navy Minister and later becomes the Prime Minister all on active duty in the Navy. He agrees to this, but he says, the United States will not be able to put its ships into dry dock in the bases in the Far East, and that way the United States Navy will be limited in the efficiency of its fleet when it gets to the Western Pacific. So, this is also going to force the General Board the Navy to think, well how can we fight in the distant Pacific without bases? You can't.

JPC: And just to remind our listeners, at this point we have a lot of forces in the Philippines and so that is the big strategic problem for both the Army and the Navy. If you can't fortify, or even if you can fortify, can you really defend the Philippines versus Japan being so close? This is an essential dilemma that everybody wrestles with.

JTK: Right, and previous to this, the solution in the colored War Plan Orange was to fortify Guam and to fortify Subic Bay, create dry docks there, sail the Navy across to Guam at least, and maybe, to the Philippines, and then do upkeep of the ships in the Far East and then, if you have to fight the Japanese to protect the Philippines, you can do it from there. At the very least, you might be able to rescue the Philippines. This War Plan Orange takes on a life of its own. A great book on this is Edward Miller's book called War Plan Orange, and this shapes the Navy's thinking, and particularly the General Board's thinking about how do we build the Navy to do this. A couple things that they realize is one, we can still build airplanes. So, the General Board is pushed towards almost being reminded by the Washington Naval Treaty, as is the rest of the Naval Officer Corps, there's no limitations on submarines, we are limited in the numbers of cruisers we can build, and how big they are - eventually, the 1930 London Naval Treaty on limited cruisers. So, we can actually build submarines. Maybe we can build floating drydocks, oilers, and eventually what the Navy comes up with - and this is the General Board that comes up with this plan in concert with the CNO and the Naval War College which is wargaming these things and the fleet which is wargaming them in the fleet problems every year - is we're going to build a long-range navy that doesn't need shore bases in the Western Pacific. They will sail

across, capture the bases they need, and they'll bring their bases with them. This is called the Mobile Base Project and the General Board is entirely on board, pun intended, to create this plan. So, this strategy that's dictated by the geography of the Pacific causes the General Board to create a long-range navy. But it's a long-range navy that's not going to be able to sortie all the battleships at once and win the decisive sort of Mahanian victory. It's going to have to conduct a methodical step-by-step advance across the Pacific, creating bases, bringing floating bases with it - floating drydocks become a primary item in the General Board building priorities that it submits to the Secretary of the Navy every year. Building that maybe is actually going to build the Navy that's needed for World War II. Now will that Navy be built when World War II arrives? No, but the plans, the blueprints, the strategic design will already be there and the General Board along with the Chief of Naval Operations in the Naval War College should really get the credit for having that plan in place and the designs and everything all worked out, prior to the start of the war.

JPC: One thing you bring up very nicely in the book is that these people, once they got to the senior levels of the General Board, they've probably have been associated with it a couple times. As you said, maybe they're simply taking part in the hearings, but some have done multiple tours, or they've gone through Newport in the Naval War College and been the key of this work. So, you really have a small group of very talented individuals. This is a stepping stone to be able to do some of this. This is your shore duty and they're going to have a shared understanding of where they need to go later on. What are some of the other elements? What's the secret sauce of the General Board that they do such a good job of creating a coherent institutional and operational plan that are, for the most part, born out by experience during World War II.

JTK: Okay, so it's small. It stays small. Small organizations are more effective organizations. Anytime bureaucracy grows, organizational friction is introduced into the machine. It becomes the ghosts of the machine as it were. So, it stays small. It works for the Secretary of the Navy, and you've already mentioned the membership. The membership are seasoned operators, these are proven performers. They're very experienced. They are collaborative, not just with each other, but with the guys up at the Naval War College, with the guys inside the War Plans Division. They work very closely with the engineers. Eventually, everybody realizes, hey, the General Board, if they don't buy into it, it's not going to happen. So, they all are empowered, and they all play the game knowing that the General Board controls the final decision. And so, they all work towards the same end. Collaborative and collegial - the tone here is really good. When you read the correspondence, there's not, hey, this is Admiral Bristol, Captain so and so, do this. No, it's, my dear Yarnell or my dear Bristol - very collegial. The junior officers who work for the Board love working for it because they kind of get the hang around the admirals and see what it's like to work for an admiral.

JPC: You touched briefly upon it before that this was an experiment that Long who is a reformist secretary, he's one of the you know the better secretaries of the Navy of that time, but yet, he was a little bit wary about giving too much power to some of the military, both for our own American traditions as well as fear of Prussianification as you've mentioned. But over time, the General Board is recognized, not in authorizing legislation, but in some of the appropriations. And so, it really earns the trust of civilian policymakers which is what enables it to have this kind of authority and heft. You discussed in the book, originally this is all kind of embodied in Dewey, he was this huge national hero.

JTK: Yeah, he had an immense amount of gravitas and influence.

JPC: He gives everything to the General Board, but the General Board, in time, earns that trust on its own. Civil-military relations is so essential to both institutional and operational strategy. One final thing that I would ask for you to give to our listeners is, what are your thoughts about how does the military earn that kind of trust that they can have this sort of authority that the General Board had at its peak?

JTK: Throughout the General Board's early history, you constantly see it. We don't want to push too hard for naval general staff because disaster could happen, and we could end up with nothing. It's better to have this General Board that the civilians are comfortable with. It's not in your face, in a uniform with a bunch of medals and swords like the Prussian General Staff is. It's better. That's better than Bradley Fisk wanting a naval general staff, and we're all going to wear swords and uniforms. And he scares people. He scares Daniels. And actually, some of the historians that have looked at it, he scares them too. So, we don't want to ruin it. We don't want to undo all the goodness. By the time we get to the 20s and the 30s, they are trusted. But that never leaves them the fact that, hey, if we're not professional about this, if we don't defer to civilian authority... like when they go into the White House, President Hoover invites them over to the White House, and he says, you are going to solve this problem of something called the cruiser yardstick - and if you want to know what that is read the book - but you're going to solve it - or read Norman Friedman's work - you're going to solve this problem. But he feels comfortable enough to invite them over there and they don't all go over there and pound on the table with their shoe or something and tell him this is what we want, Mister President. They work with the president, they compromise, and they gain his trust. They gain the trust of the secretaries of the Navy.

JPC: One interesting aspect on the trust - the original design for the chief of staff of the army was they wanted to tie the chief's tenure to that of the president so there was somebody who always had the president's ear. It would be an interesting change if we can make it to now, it's the chairman of the joint chiefs is the equivalent, but that's how much they realized that you had to have the trust between the principal military advisor and the advised.

JTK: Right. And this is the big problem with the American system. And it's a good big problem, folks. It's a really good problem, but it is a problem and that is, the presidents, by statute, have these advisers: secretary of defense and a chairman of joint chiefs of staff. Now, with Goldwater-Nichols, who is the military advisor to the president, they don't have to listen to them. He has a national security advisor. He doesn't have to listen to him either. Alright, so presidents, it says nowhere that not only do you have these advisers, but you have to take their advice. The great thing about the General Board is that a lot of policymakers did take their advice. They not only listen to them, they took their advice.

JPC: Well, this has been a fascinating discussion. There are plenty of other bits in the book that I think that hopefully our listeners become readers and they enjoy it. We talked about how kind of accidentally, the General Board gained all this trust. One of the great elements for all those people interested in an organizational reform is that one of the great efforts to try to make the General Board better actually might have ended up having taken away from it, so all of that and plenty more within the book, America's First General Staff. Dr. John T. Kuehn, thank you so much for coming out and visiting us in the War Room.

JTK: Thank you, JP. It's a pleasure.