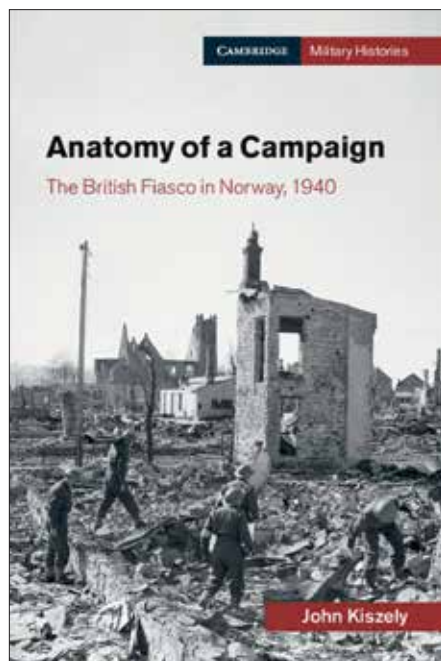


by unmalleable internal dynamics more than the actions of an outside power such as the United States.” JFQ

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## Anatomy of a Campaign: The British Fiasco in Norway, 1940

By John Kiszely

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Reviewed by Williamson Murray

John Kiszely had an outstanding career in the British army. As a major, he won the Military Cross while leading his company of Scots Guards in the attack on Tumbledown Mountain in the last days of the Falklands War. During his career, he served in the bureaucracy in Whitehall as the Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff and served stints in British operations in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Iraq, finally retiring as a lieutenant general. He has seen war at both ends: the

hard, sharp end of combat and the making and coordinating of policy and operations. He has brought that wide-ranging experience to bear in an extraordinary account of the disastrous British campaign in Norway in the spring of 1940.

What General Kiszely has managed to do is tie the thoroughly faulty strategic decisions by the British military and political leaders that led to equally faulty operational decisions that placed British troops on the ground in impossible situations. Without a sensible effort to connect ends with the means available, what might have been a major victory floundered from the start, and the initial mistakes only exacerbated those that followed.

In a cabinet meeting at the beginning of September 1939, Winston Churchill, finally added to the cabinet as First Lord of the Admiralty, proposed that the Royal Navy mine the Norwegian Leads (coastal waters) to cut off the flow of Swedish ore that moved through the port of Narvik during the winter when the ports were iced over. It was a sensible suggestion because Swedish iron ore was vital to the functioning of the Nazi war economy.

But with considerable opposition from members of the cabinet, worried about the impact of a violation of Norwegian neutrality, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain refused to make a decision—and this inability sums up British strategic decisionmaking over the next 7 months until the ruthless German invasion of Norway in April 1940. As the future Prime Minister Harold MacMillan noted, “It does throw a piercing light on the present machinery and method of government, the delay, the vacillation, changes of front, standing on one foot one day and on the other the next day before a decision is given. . . . The moral of the history of these three months to be drawn for the future is, to use Burke’s phrase, ‘a proof of the irresistible operation of feeble council.’”

So, the British political and military leaders took council of their fears. Endless meeting followed endless meeting with no decision as to what to do. Chamberlain was incapable as

the supposed wartime leader in pushing his colleagues or, for that matter, himself into action. Chiefs of staff were incapable of providing politicians with coherent or even sensible advice. They were incapable of cooperating, and they did not possess the competence required to provide their masters with nuanced, realistic, or intelligent advice. Churchill was all for action but showed why he would need the irascible Field Marshal Alan Brooke as a minder when he became prime minister to prevent him from making disastrous mistakes. But while all held their endless meetings, the military seemed not to have devoted much time to training unprepared troops for the terrible challenges of combat against the Wehrmacht. Moreover, all the meanwhile in the winter of 1940, the Germans began ruthlessly preparing to launch Operation *Weserübung*, code name for the amphibious assault on the Norwegian ports that would occur in early April 1940.

The denouement came on April 9, 1940, when the Kriegsmarine seized virtually every major Norwegian port. Immediately before the German invasion, the British went ahead and mined the Norwegian Leads, a totally pointless action because the Baltic ice was already breaking up. At least they provided the Germans with an excuse for the actions they were about to undertake. British intelligence provided a rich lode of warnings, all of which the politicians and military leadership totally ignored. After all, it was inconceivable that the Germans would undertake such a risky venture.

While the Germans were seizing the crucial Norwegian ports and airfields, Churchill and Admiral Dudley Pound sent the Royal Navy on a wild goose chase into the North Atlantic in the belief that the Kriegsmarine was attempting to break out there. Had the British reacted immediately, they could have destroyed most of the German invasion force and virtually all the German navy.

What followed was an inexcusable operational muddle as the British attempted to pull together a strategy that would restore their disastrous initial mistakes. Churchill was at his worst with

no one able to restrain him. Only his splendid days as prime minister in the days to come would save his reputation from having another Gallipoli hung around his neck. Unprepared for the combat conditions that late winter and early spring brought to Norway, British troops floundered in a muck of melting snow and mud. To make matters worse, British commanders on the ground were contemptuous of the Norwegians, who were putting up significant resistance. At least the Norwegians recognized and had operated in such conditions.

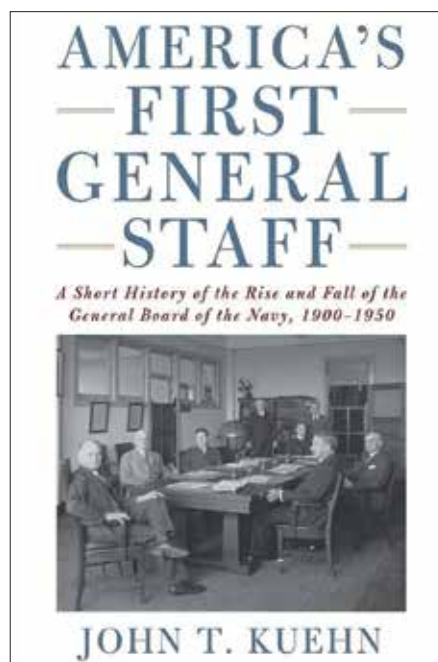
It took the British, with their control of the sea, nearly 2 months before they were able to launch an effective ground attack on Narvik. Among those leading the assault were two battalions of the French Foreign Legion, recently arrived from Africa, who performed in outstanding fashion. As one of their officers commented, "Ah, it's all very difficult. We are used to travelling on camels across the desert, and here you give us boats and we have to cross the water. It is very difficult, but it will be all right. I think so." Acidly, a French officer pointed out "that the British have planned this campaign on the lines of a punitive expedition against the Zulus, but unhappily we and the British are in the position of the Zulus." Events in France forced an Allied withdrawal in early June, ending a truly badly run campaign that lacked strategic sense, military effectiveness, and above all *professional* military leadership.

For those who are really interested in the study of war and the interrelationship between strategy, operations, and tactics, General Kiszely has written an extraordinarily important book. If military leaders fail to take the study of their profession seriously, they will inevitably find themselves incapable of connecting means to ends. Nor will they be able to provide sensible advice to politicians who have no background in military affairs or who, as occurred in Iraq in 2003, are willfully ignorant. Moreover, perhaps most disastrously, generals who have not taken the trouble to study their potential opponents will not understand the other side of the hill and, on the basis of the

most facile assumptions, will send their troops into combat unprepared to deal with a living, adapting opponent. JFQ

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Dr. Williamson Murray has held numerous teaching positions at joint professional military education institutions, including the Marine Corps University, U.S. Army War College, and U.S. Naval War College.



**America's First General Staff:  
A Short History of the Rise  
and Fall of the General Board  
of the Navy, 1900–1950**

By John T. Kuehn  
U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2017  
\$34.95 320 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1682471913

Reviewed by Randy Papadopoulos

This trim book explains the full course of the U.S. Navy's General Board, its institutional forum for innovation, during the period from 1900 to 1950. To remedy challenges identified during the Spanish-American War, Navy Secretary John D. Long established the board as an experiment. The Secretary realized he needed military advice, so he chose a mix of up-and-coming Navy

officers, the head of the Bureau of Navigation that managed careers, and one Marine officer, all led by the redoubtable Admiral George Dewey, to offer it. From the outset, the General Board strove to coherently align what we today term strategy, campaign plans, force structure, personnel, and ship design.

The author of this institutional history, John Kuehn, is a former naval aviator who earned his doctorate while teaching at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. *America's First General Staff* is an offshoot of his dissertation-turned-book, *Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet That Defeated the Japanese Navy* (U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2008). The consistency between that book and this more comprehensive one lies in Kuehn's conviction that military problem-solving is best revealed by understanding the decisionmaker's options and constraints.

In the case of naval strategy and fleet designs, the constraints are many. Innovation is not easy, and the Armed Forces must design ships, procure equipment, create doctrine, and plan wars with degrees of uncertainty. Civilian leaders can swiftly change the context, while navies are long-term investments with ships lasting up to 30 years, causing rivalries for ship design authority. In *America's First General Staff*, readers learn what happened when a 1921 Service secretary openly proposed bold international cuts to a principal weapon system (battleships) to save money, and subsequently agreed by treaty not to improve bases. That second point robbed the U.S. fleet of vital infrastructure needed for a protracted Pacific war. Only an organization that could assess threats, recommend investments, and provide top-level sponsorship for change could respond to such complexity, and Kuehn persuasively demonstrates how the Navy's General Board provided that vision and ultimately shaped innovation across the fleet.

According to the author, the General Board grappled sequentially with changing technology, World War I's evolving lessons, post-1922 treaty limits to construction, the Great Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War. Throughout the pre-1941 period, the board sponsored studies,