

On War and Politics

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

Arnold Punaro's memoir, *On War and Politics*, roars through his multiple, yet connected, stellar careers—an active and Reserve Marine (ultimately a major general), a civilian in government on Capitol Hill under Senator Sam Nunn, and in business. Throughout it all, Punaro's experiences harken back to his months in combat in 1969–70. Even his extensive participation in America's national security work for a legendary senator and the Senate Armed Services Committee had deep roots in his time at war. This book will appeal to a broad readership: professional military, defense business civilians, academics, and those with an interest in the legislative process. Punaro delivers an informative, entertaining, and often riveting narrative.

Despite the coincidental title, Punaro does not deliberately invoke Carl von Clausewitz's 19th century classic *On War*, still a leading reference for the professional military on the overarching themes of warfare. By contrast, in arriving at what he sees as lessons of "a lifetime—in combat, politics and business," Punaro shares his experiences and insight into the shaping of one's destiny in and after war and the process of American national security governance. His roles and achievements were more than mere accident or luck, but he admits that chance and fortune sometimes intervened.

Vietnam—its hazards, hardships, pains, triumphs, and brotherhood—permanently impacted Punaro's life. He tells his story in mostly chronological order, lacing it with well-chosen anecdotes—often powerful, fascinating, moving, and poignant.

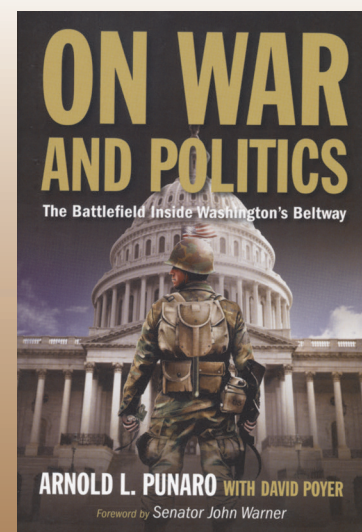
>Col Chase, an attorney in private practice in New Jersey, retired from the Marine Corps Reserve in 1998 after more than 30 years of active and Reserve service.

Even amidst somber revelations, doses of humor generate occasional laugh-out-loud moments.

On War does *not* start at the beginning, however. Instead, the first page of the first chapter, "Ambush at Hill 953," jumps into Punaro's signal event on 4 January 1970 as a Marine lieutenant. Though he didn't know it, this was to be the last day of his Vietnam tour of duty, cut short. He narrates the close, ferocious small unit combat on a hill in Vietnam's Que Son Mountains with vivid portrayals of courage, death, and injury. Hit by enemy fire, Punaro lay seriously wounded, but "[s]omeone had come after [him]. Incredibly brave. Incredibly risky." Shielding Punaro, that brave "someone," Cpl Roy L. Hammonds, took repeated mortal hits. He died, selflessly shielding fellow Marines, including the stricken Punaro. Following this riveting first chapter, the narrative circles back to earlier days, but the reader knows already why Punaro dedicates *On War* to Hammonds and why that day inspires him relentlessly.

After a summary of his early years, Punaro returns the story to Vietnam to backfill the months leading to Hill 953. Once in country, he describes the day-to-day routine for Marine grunts slogging in a free fire zone for weeks, or even months, as they seek an elusive and lethal enemy:

I quickly lost track of days and weeks. All that mattered was morning, noon,



ON WAR AND POLITICS, THE BATTLEFIELD INSIDE WASHINGTON'S BELTWAY by Arnold L. Punaro with David Poyer, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016
ISBN: 978-1612519067, ???pp.
<http://amzn.to/2bcxz30>
Price: \$21.80 (on Amazon)

and night. My world revolved around my patrol: the weather, the light, whether it was going to rain, and how much chow, ammo, bullets and water we had to last until the next clatter of helo blades somewhere above the ever-present canopy meant another resupply had arrived.

Like the others, I quickly discarded my underwear, which was a sure recipe for the fiery, infected chafe we called crotch rot. With no way to wash except when it rained, and little clothing in the resupply, we began to stink, like ... well, like grunts in the field always have. Field sanitation consisted of heading off the trail a few feet, taking a crap, and wiping as best we could. It was impossible to follow the field sanitation manual.

Infantry platoon commander Punaro captures the routine of boredom, drudgery, and hunger, punctuated by adrenaline-filled moments of excitement and fear when mortars poured lethal bursts into a defense perimeter. He

expresses frustrations at the comically bad judgment of his regimental commander—whom he names—and his glee that the colonel was caught with career-ending contraband in his luggage that was supposed to be shipped home. The colonel's comeuppance was no accident, but this review will not spoil Punaro's surprise for the reader.

From his weeks of hospital recovery in Yokosuka, Japan, and then further assignment in Okinawa, Punaro finally returns to the U.S. He served his waning active duty time at The Basic School in Quantico, where newly commissioned second lieutenants learn to lead Marines. Like most young Marine officers, Punaro exited active duty at the end of his initial commitment, without any clear vision of what would follow.

After journalism school at the University of Georgia, he launched his 24-year saga on Capitol Hill under Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA), who was then in his first term in the Senate, and later as Nunn's appointed Staff Director of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) when Democrats enjoyed a Senate majority and Nunn was chair. Punaro's stars rose with his boss's meteoric ascent but at a personal price to him exacted by long hours, seven-day work weeks, intensity, and stress. In the tradition of southern Democratic powerhouses before him, Nunn, like fellow Georgian Richard Russell, became a formidable Senate force in national security and defense. Although today's Congress is mired in historic disapproval ratings, Nunn earned and retained an unblemished reputation for integrity, expertise, and effectiveness that few legislators in American history have matched.

For Punaro's learning curve and his growing delegated responsibility, he could not have had a better example and mentor—or a stricter taskmaster. His chapters on Capitol Hill years read like a "who's who" of legislative and executive decisionmakers, military chiefs, and commanders. He provides "I was there" insight to lawmakers' participation in historical events, such as the exit from Vietnam,

arms control, the Panama Canal, the Iran hostage imbroglio and failed rescue attempt, the all-volunteer force, Goldwater-Nichols, Iran-Contra, the 1983 truck-bomb killing of 241 Americans (mostly Marines) in Beirut, DESERT STORM, "Don't Ask-Don't Tell," women's military roles, and others too numerous to mention.

Punaro's home life away from military and civilian work punctuates *On War's* narrative. He and his wife Jan deploy a literary "device" that will delight and resonate with most readers, particularly those whose professions require constant travel and grueling workdays. Long before she becomes Punaro's wife in 1974, Jan introduces herself with her own short vignettes, under her name, sprinkled

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periodically throughout the book. Her familial respites weave effectively into the storyline the partnership of affection that made possible Punaro's concentration on Reserve and civilian careers at the highest levels, while she chose to leave her own promising career to raise their (eventual) four children.

Punaro's historical episodes flow seamlessly with his insider's perspective. Historians and political scientists studying the give-and-take in major defense issues from 1973 to 1997 should relish Punaro's eyewitness accounts. For example, Punaro puts the discussion of gays and a still-simmering controversy in the military into a 20-year context with a conclusion that the contrasting outcomes were both right:

I believe that in 1993, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the appropriate approach. In the legislative business, you either have the votes or you don't. And the votes were just not there for the

president's position. Seventeen years later, in 2010, circumstances were different when President Barack Obama took the next step and allowed gays and lesbians to serve openly ... While there was still opposition, this time the votes were there and I was a public supporter, along with Senator Nunn, of lifting the ban ...

Today gays and lesbians are serving openly with little or no impact on operations. This is due primarily to the significant changes in both public opinion and especially in the military at all levels, who accepted the change as they would not have before.

Punaro pulls no punches. He criticizes elected officials who were either less than honest, overly political, or just dumb, naming them as he details his assertions. At the same time, he confesses his own lapses or mistakes, usually small ones, but, on rare occasion, a big one. A notable example occurred during his visit to HQMC to review cables about the terrorist-driven truck bomb in 1983 that took the lives of 220 Marines (plus others) in Beirut.

At that time, Punaro was a major in the Marine Reserve. This status provided invaluable insight to him but also created potential conflicts. As a Hill staffer, he was under the umbrella of a distinguished senator in the Legislative Branch, but, as a Marine, he was part of a military organization under the Executive Branch. Maintaining a critical separation between Punaro's disparate roles was important, even vital. Sometimes the lines were blurry or nuanced, as when he served on active duty, but he had to deftly navigate those lines to avoid even the appearance of a conflict.

As Punaro finished reading Beirut message traffic in a room at HQMC on behalf of the SASC, the Commandant unexpectedly summoned Punaro to his office. In response to the Commandant's question, Punaro shared his thoughts about the anticipated testimony. Big mistake.

Upon his return to the Hill, Punaro shared the exchange with Nunn who told him that his "advice

to [the Commandant was] a serious breach of the separation of powers and a conflict of interest.” Nunn further admonished “that he would have to think about [Punaro’s] future as ... the Staff Director.”

For a week or so, Punaro sweated it out. To his relief, Nunn gave him a stern lecture, but the mistake did not justify his firing:

[Nunn] decided that while I’d crossed a red line, it was not a career terminating offense. But he warned me clearly that if I ever did anything like that again, it would be immediate curtains. He had no issue with using my contacts to get inside information, but he drew the line at giving advice to Executive Branch personnel testifying before a committee. Of course, I never let this happen again. At least not without securing his explicit permission first.

This admonishment seared in his mind, and Punaro details a number of subsequent serious looming collisions between the Executive and Legislative Branches. He adhered to what he had learned in his trip to the woodshed from Nunn and adeptly enforced the prerogatives of the SASC against perceived intrusions by the Executive Branch, and vice versa. Punaro’s detailing of these serious incidents, including his mistake in 1983, reinforces his design throughout *On War* to share truths about the workings of Capitol Hill, warts and all.

Punaro was so committed to Nunn that he would never have left Capitol Hill while Nunn remained in the Senate. When Nunn decided not to run, however, and to retire at the end of his term in 1997, Punaro entered the private sector as a senior executive at Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), a technology and engineering company that, among other things, provides services to the Federal government, including the Department of Defense and military branches. Punaro was a natural for this kind of position, and he played a significant role in the growth of SAIC’s revenues from about \$4 billion per year to over \$10 billion.

Meanwhile, Punaro was continuing his activity as a Marine Reservist,

ultimately promoted to major general, and serving in a series of high leadership billets, including CG, 4th MarDiv. Having retired from the Reserve in 2005, he left SAIC in 2010 to start his own business but continued to accept appointments to defense-related commissions and boards. He still provides substantial public service, and the *Military Times* has ranked him as one of the most influential defense experts in America.

On War succeeds at all levels. It is a personal, yet riveting, journey of the author’s life, set against the most important military conflict and national security issues of the times. Punaro’s book dedication to Cpl Hammonds was a first priority because, as he explains, “he put me,

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his fellow Marine, first. He took the bullets an enemy aimed at me.” His ten “lessons learned” could apply to any profession, but he articulates them in military jargon, (“Lead from the front;” “Take the objective;” “Be willing to take a bullet,” etc.).

In the end, the reader comes away with several positive conclusions. First, Punaro’s “luck factor” included his employment in 1973 by Senator Nunn. For over two decades, Punaro was a witness to, and a participant in, the major national defense legislative initiatives and decisions of the late 20th century under the stewardship of Senator Nunn. Second, it was Nunn’s good fortune over his nearly quarter century in office to have Punaro’s loyalty, workaholic nature, and ability to help his senator formulate the best solutions and make them happen.

Punaro still lives his credo. From the vantage of a professional who has reached the highest levels of both military and civilian achievement in national security, Punaro ends *On War*

where he starts in Chapter 1: “Every day I pledge to make myself worthy of [Hammonds’] sacrifice and to ensure that all the Corporal Hammondses, of the past, present, and future, do not give up their lives in vain.”

>Reviewer’s note: Punaro dedicates *On War* to Cpl Roy L. Hammonds, my platoon sergeant in the third platoon, Lima Company/3d Battalion, 7th Marines. On the morning of 4 January 1970, as I led my platoon on a combat patrol in the Que Son Mountains toward the site of our successful ambush of NVA troops a day earlier, a bullet tore through my left calf. Within a couple of hours, I was helo medevaced to Da Nang, leaving Hammonds, a corporal, as the platoon’s senior Marine. It turned out that I was just the first of many Lima Company casualties on 4 January. In the U.S. Naval Hospital in Yokosuka, Japan, five days later, I learned from Punaro (who was in the bed next to mine) that a few hours after I was lifted out, Hammonds was killed by enemy fire. Only 21, and within weeks of his rotation date for return to the U.S., Hammonds personified the combat Marine in his courage and sacrifice. Movie star handsome, smart, quiet, tough as nails, and always insistent on taking point despite his leadership role, “Tex” Hammonds was a stud, looked up to by everyone in our platoon. Posthumously awarded a Silver Star for exceptional valor that cost him his life, he had rushed toward withering enemy fire to aid fellow Marines, wounded and pinned down, including Punaro. Punaro writes: “Why [did Hammonds] come after me? Corps discipline didn’t demand it. He wasn’t even in my platoon.” And more: “Hammonds had done what warriors have done throughout the ages: take care of their comrades, no matter the cost.” Amen, brother. — Eric L. Chase

>Editor’s Note: As infantry platoon commanders in the same company, Col Chase and Gen Punaro served together in combat in Vietnam in 1969–70. They have remained friends since.

