

Maurer, N., and Yu, C., (2011). *The Big Ditch: How America Took, Built, Ran and Ultimately Gave Away the Panama Canal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Hardcover, \$42.00.

For many political scientists, the international political arena is a system of myriad relationships with nation-states complicated by numerous other social factors that impact the political arena. These relationships are complicated by historical events while simultaneously including present-day alliances. Noel Maurer and Carlos Yu's book, *The Big Ditch: How America Took, Built, Ran and Ultimately Gave Away the Panama Canal*, opens with a discussion about the Panama Canal in this context. Maurer and Yu's book is as much an exploration of these relationships regarding the Panama Canal as it is a critical analysis and discussion about imperialism.

Maurer and Yu focus on a couple of important questions regarding the history and politics surrounding the American involvement in the Panama Canal. First, they explain that the Panama Canal was first built to connect two oceans to make trade easier for the United States. They highlight that this became an economic engine for the United States and the region in Central America. They also note that the Panama Canal and the historical period in the United States are seemingly forgotten pieces of American history, and the authors explain that their book is an attempt to reconcile some of the conflicting perspectives on the building of the Panama Canal and its role in the international political system. However, Maurer and Yu draw on their larger argument, writing, "The real choice for economists and political scientists is whether the historical arguments they make are supported by systematically gathered and carefully analyzed evidence, or whether they are supported by stylized facts" (p. 12). The authors also focus on another important question as they explain their book also seeks to answer, "whether a relatively modern democratic nation operating inside the strictures of Westphalian

sovereignty, was able to leverage its ability to impose military and economic sanctions into substantial economic gains?” (p. 4). The authors highlight the interest in understanding whether the “changing ideologies at home and changing power balances abroad, and whether the declining economic value of the Panama Canal had declined” (p. 4).

Maurer and Yu have two main arguments in the book. First, they argue that the “United States developed strategies that enabled it to leverage its military dominance into a far better economic outcome than it otherwise could have achieved” (p. 11). They also “argue that the United States returned the Panama Canal to Panama when the economic benefits from *ownership* of the Canal (if not necessarily the benefits of the canal’s existence) sufficiently declined” (p. 11). These contentions are not particularly surprising given the general understanding of the Panama Canal and its importance to the United States during the time that it was built in the international political arena. The author’s focus on imperialism is not only interesting but also contributes to the academic literature by adding dimensions of the political alliances of the time and their impact on the international political arena.

The book is organized in a historical context in that each chapter highlights and defines a piece of Maurer and Yu’s arguments. The book’s chapters include “before the [digging of the] ditch; preparing the ditch; crossing the ditch; passed by the ditch; sliding into irrelevancy; ditching the ditch; and concluding the ditch.” The historical context of the author’s arguments is well-discussed and organized. They highlight that the various agreements put in place with the Panama Canal focused on the notion that “any canal built across the isthmus would not discriminate against American commerce” (p. 325). They continue to explain that when the Canal provided “fewer and fewer economic returns to the United States” (p. 325) and when the political environment in Latin America turned where the government structures in Latin America

were changing, it became necessary for the United States to relinquish its ties to the Panama Canal” (p. 325).

Maurer and Yu’s book is not only an interesting read but is also particularly important to understanding the development of the twenty-first-century international political system. The development of the Panama Canal and the economic prosperity that it brought to the United States helped to propel the United States into the international political arena as a major player. The role of the Panama Canal in this equation is of particular importance to scholars and students of international relations and homeland security studies. Further, it is a wonderful source for understanding the numerous political issues with the military intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean during the Teddy Roosevelt era. Historians with a focus on the Banana Wars would also enjoy this book.

In essence, *The Big Ditch: How America Took, Built, Ran and Ultimately Gave Away the Panama Canal* contributes to the academic literature in a very important way, broadening our understanding of the Panama Canal’s impact on the political and economic world of the twentieth century.

Allison G. S. Knox

Political Science Faculty - Marist College and Western Connecticut State University

Emergency Management Faculty - Eastern Kentucky University and American Military University

Intermittent Emergency Management Specialist - U.S. Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response