



A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO WAR? ANTOINE-HENRI JOMINI (GREAT STRATEGISTS)

By William Johnsen, Conrad Crane and Jacqueline Whitt, September 5, 2019
<https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/special-series/great-strategists/scientific-approach-to-war-jomini/>

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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace: The War Room Podcast. I'm Jacqueline Whitt, professor of strategy and the War Room Podcast editor here at the U.S. Army War college. Thanks for joining us today.

Today's episode continues our series on great strategists, and today's subject Baron Antoine-Henri De Jomini is both loved and reviled, central and marginalized. And in short, we're ambivalent, and I think we struggle to figure out exactly what to do with him in professional military education, and within the realm of strategic studies more broadly.

So I have, as my guest today, two historians and experts to help us make sense of Jomini, his worked and his legacy, especially for the U.S. Army. I'm joined today by Dr. Bill Johnson, who is a long-time faculty member at the U.S. Army War College in the department of National Security and Strategy. And actually by the time this airs, Bill will be a distinguished former faculty member at the War College as his retirement is imminent, but he has kindly agreed to work until the last possible moment and record this with us. Bill is a historian of land warfare and an expert on the 20th-century American military, and has served as our course director for the Theory of War and Strategy course for several years so he's really familiar with how do we put Jomini in PME.

William Johnsen: Good morning, Jackie, and thanks for having me.

JW: Great. And then second is Dr. Con Crane. Con is a regular guest here on A Better Peace. He is the chief of the Historical Services division of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, and an expert in the history of the U.S. Army counterinsurgency, and the all-around go-to guy for questions about military history and its influence within the U.S. Army.

Conrad Crane: Yeah, Jackie, glad to be here.

BH

JW: All right. So welcome to the War Room, and with that, we'll turn to Jomini. So Bill, we'll turn it over to you first to tell us about who Jomini was, his sort of biography or background. And what we maybe need to know about him and his time in order to read what he has to say well?

WJ: Okay, interestingly, though his name sounds French, he's Swiss. He has the benefit of a long and productive life. He's a child prodigy of sorts. His family initially wants him to go into the banking business. They send him to Paris where he becomes involved in the revolutionary fervor of the time and begins a lifelong association with the military.

Again, as part of this prodigy business, he quickly attaches himself to the right people. His mentor is Marshal Ney, one of Napoleon's favorite Marshals. And he campaigns with the French Army throughout most of the major campaigns of Napoleon's success. Later in life, he leaves the Napoleonic army, largely over some confrontations with Napoleon's chief of staff, Berthier, who does not have the same high opinion of Jomini that Jomini holds of himself, and goes into service initially with those allies fighting Napoleon and eventually becomes associated with the Russian army where he serves for over 50 years in one form or another.

Throughout this entire-

JW: 50, like five, zero?

WJ: Five zero.

JW: So he's old.

WJ: He's 90 years old by the time he dies, which for that age is a considerable longevity, which is part of the reason for his success.

JW: He just sticks around.

WJ: If you outlive all of your competitors, you get to control the narrative.

JW: You get the last word. Okay. So, sorry, I was shocked by 50 years of service in the Russian army, which is his second.

WJ: Well it's off and on. Much of that time was actually spent in Paris.

JW: More pleasant.

WJ: But he has a great influence. He helps establish the Russian military academy. He talks about strategy. He helps structure their army. He's a commentator for the Crimean war. He is a trainer-educator of many of the Czar's children and subsequent Czars.

And so he has a great deal of influence throughout Europe, throughout most of the first half of the 19th century.

He's a prolific writer. He's a very good operational-level historian. He conducts a lot of studies that he uses to create his larger bodies of work. He is unafraid to borrow copiously from others. And some would say, this is collaboration, others might not be quite so kind. But he has the benefit of being able to take advantage of significant works of others to blend them into his own, to come to some form of synthesis.

Interestingly, I think from the perspective that we're going to talk about today, I see him as more one of the final products of the Enlightenment. The idea of this ability to find scientific principles from larger phenomenon, distill them down into key principles that anyone can use, and this happens to be in Jomini's case, war and strategy. But those key points that if anyone follows them, at least according to Jomini, you follow my principles and you too will be successful because I have derived these from the great Napoleon.

JW: And that he thinks that war, like anything else, is a knowable thing. The world is a knowable phenomenon, and we can observe and figure out laws and rules that govern that world.

And we'll talk a little bit about Clausewitz later. But I think that's a key thing to keep in mind.

So when we think about all of the texts, there are a couple that stand out as being key texts or things that we go back to even now, over and over and over. So could you tell us a little bit about what he wrote?

WJ: Yeah. He writes that his treatise, [*The Art of War*](#), which is the predominant document that many individuals throughout, and I think Con will cover this later in terms of both the United States Army, as well as the European armies. It's important, I think, that he writes in French, because French is literally the lingua franca of the educated and enlightened at the time.

This guy, Clausewitz, happens to write in German, which is not as widely known. And so he's capable of writing in a language that is the common language of intellectuals, particularly military intellectuals. Because again, Napoleon being obsolete of course again, but French, he's very popular. Writing in the French allows Jomini to make his times known. He's very prolific, writes a lot of articles, many books, campaign histories, but it's really his treatise on *The Art of*

War that distills all of these things down into key points. And he writes this very early in his career, and continues to promote it throughout his life-

CC: Yeah, and revise it.

WJ: And revise it.

JW: And revise it. And this gets to his longevity and the ability to, like you said, take what other people have written and incorporate it, so you can put *The Art of War*, sort of side-by-side with other texts. And you can really see the influences, and the way his thinking maybe changes over time. So we'll ask both of you this, but what are the central ideas to this text, *The Art of War*?

WJ: If you could encapsulate it down, it's that war is based on the offensive and it's massing the appropriate number of troops and bodies at the decisive point, and engaging with high level of energy, which he never quite really defines, but it's bringing the most massive amounts of troops concentration on the decisive point. And he has a long series of principles for determining what those points are and how to get them. Interestingly enough, Jomini is also the first person that really talks about logistics, and he sees it not necessarily as we do today, which is partially the supplying of war and warfare. But for him, logistics was also the ability to mass on the battlefield. For Jomini and as well as I think for Clausewitz, the idea, for them, military strategy was the movement of forces on the map, bringing them to bear in the appropriate theater of operations at the decisive point. That's much more Jomini, but it's this idea that you have to mass. It is the offensive and logistics is what allows you to bring all of those things to bear at the critical point.

JW: Okay. So Con, if we think about how Jomini has been sort of interpreted and taken over the years, does that central point stay the same or do we see sort of, reinterpretations of it over time?

CC: Jomini is the major influence on the 19th century, but J.F.C. Fuller is the one that's going to transfer his ideas more to the 20th century, and move into more of the principles of war idea. Again, I have a copy here. This is a copy of an 1862 cadet notebook, where Dennis Hart Mahan is teaching Jomini to cadets and a series of lectures. And this is how the third lecture starts off on strategy: "Jomini defined strategy by the science of making war on a map. Strategy is the embodiment of rules and principles drawn from experience. Strategical operations is nothing more than the movement of troops for something decisive". So that's kind of, again, that just what Bill said, that's kind of the essence of Jomini that's being taught at West Point and in military academies in the 19th century. But again, the 20th, it starts to expand, and you get Fuller and others to start to try to draw even more principles out of it. And I think it starts to change a bit when we get into the 20th century.

JW: When we think about what Jomini has observed and the Napoleonic era in particular, this seems like an entirely reasonable observation for him to make, in many cases. And then when we think about maybe the deviations from that in the Peninsular Campaign, and some other places where we know Napoleon maybe had trouble. But if Jomini is watching Napoleon's great victories, then finding the decisive point on the map, literally, and getting the people to it and putting them on that location, seems totally fine. So is this an example where something that works in one context is just difficult to translate into other contexts? Is it difficult to move it forward into the 20th century, or even into the 21st century?

WJ: Well, let me take a stab at that, because I think, part of what you mentioned, Spain, which is quite important, Jomini's approach to Spain is, just don't do that anymore. Don't go there. Don't do that. That's not Napoleonic. It's going to consume you-

JW: That feels like solid advice actually.

WJ: Well, and I would argue, and Con may chime in or not, that that's still a tendency in modern armies.

CC: That's the American reaction after Vietnam. The same thing. Don't do that anymore.

JW: In 2019-

CC: Yeah, 2019, the 2000-

JW: The new field manual, right?

CC: The 2012 Defense Planning Guidance says we're not going to do counterinsurgency or stability ops anymore.

WJ: And so I think, there are multiple lessons to be learned. There's positive lessons to follow, which I think Jomini does with his principles of war and his texts, *The Art of War*. But there's also the, "here's the lessons to avoid", the negative lessons. Don't do this, because this is not how you're going to succeed in a Napoleonic manner.

JW: Mm-hmm(affirmative). So we've talked a little bit about how Jomini's work spreads. It's in French, so it's within this sort of military intellectual community for a long time. Why is it persistent? Is it just because it has something that's sort of soothing and comforting to say, do we just like it?

CC: Well, I'll take that one. If you're trying to set up a fledgling professional military education system in the 19th century, and you've got the philosopher of war Clausewitz who basically says, "to master war you've got to be a genius". Then you've got this other guy, Jomini who says, boy, if you apply these principles, you can be successful. Which one do you get to base your education on? So obviously that's the appeal of Jomini. There's an engineering solution to war. If you apply these principles, you'll be successful. You can teach it. So you can bring in young men from all over the United States and put them in a place like U.S. Military Academy, and you teach them these principles and send them out to be successful leaders. It's the attraction of his presentation, and the appeal of this scientific solution that appeals to professional military education, especially in the 19th century. And it carries on into the 20th as well.

WJ: Throughout the conduct of war, I think, what generals and leaders have tried to do is bring order out of chaos, and Clausewitz very forthrightly says, war is going to be chaos, and it's going to be chaotic. Jomini on the other hand says, no, here's how you can stop the chaos. You can reduce the chaos. It is possible to apply these and to provide some form of solution that anybody can master. And that's a decided difference between the two approaches.

JW: And we see that difference, in sort of, the different sides that they're on to, right? Jomini is on the winning side, an awful lot. And Clausewitz is on the losing side, in some cases. And I think one of the things that I think about in my own classroom and my teaching, is that, of course we want to bring order to chaos. That's the point of strategy. And in some cases is to link causes to effects, and to have decisive effect on a problem. And so it's not unusual that, that we want Jomini-like solutions to these things, even as we understand maybe the importance of Clausewitz, and understanding the importance of unpredictability in this problem that we face.

I think a lot of times, Jomini and Clausewitz are sort of pitted against each other, right? That there's like a cage match of sorts, or that we have to maybe choose between one, and that if we envision ourselves as Clausewitzian, then we have to toss Jomini into the dust bin. So I'm always a little bit uncomfortable with that sort of dichotomy, even as we see important differences between the two. Is it just a difference in style or substance, or is there room for both Jomini and Clausewitz in professional military education?

WJ: I'm a "moderation in all things" kind of person. And so I want to take the best of both. And so the way I portray it to the students and others is that Clausewitz is a philosopher of war and strategy who occasionally delves into the scientific nature of strategy. Jomini is by and large, a strategist who occasionally delves into the philosophy of war. They do overlap with each other. They are not always contradictory. Much of what PME (Professional Military Education) talks about is Clausewitz as the philosopher of philosopher of war. We don't talk about two thirds of the book, which is really about how to fight in a 19th century context, which is more of what Jomini does, but then tries to draw the generalization that it's just not the 19th century, you can

apply this broadly. And I think if you look at the wars of the 19th century, particularly the German wars of unification, Prussia Austrian war, the Franco-Prussian war, you can see large elements of Jomini in play. The decisive point at the decisive time with the largest concentration of forces. It's successful. And so the success of the Germans in the 1860s and 1870s, drives the other militaries of the world to look at how the Germans accomplished their strategy, national level, and it's very Jominian as opposed to Clausewitzian. But that doesn't mean it's either or, in my mind.

CC: Yeah. I always try to present it as, I know it's oversimplification, but Clausewitz is about the art and the business, the commerce of war. Jomini is much more with the science of war. And obviously there are elements of all in the approach we have today. And in my concern has always been that we Americans especially been very much attracted to the science of war and this scientific approach, this engineering approach. And so I think the danger is more of tilting, more too much one way or the other. Whereas as Bill says, a balance, you really need a balance of the approaches.

WJ: I think that one of the key differences that I typically hone in on is the civil military relationship that occurs. For Clausewitz, wars continuation of policy with the addition of other means. Jomini takes a much more, "the king or the statesman decides that there will be war", turns it over to the general to fight the war, the general fights the war, wins and turns it back over to the Monarch. Now, both of them say that the chief of the military should be part of the King's cabinet, but there's a much broader division of duties and responsibilities under Jomini. And I think that also greatly influences U.S. Civil Military relations to today. Give the military the job, the task, leave us alone, and we'll hand you back to the political leadership-

JW: This idea of objective control in a Huntingtonian model of really distinct civil and military, or political and military spheres. I think that's a great point. Jomini, feeds into that sort of bifurcation.

CC: It's a product of the late 19th century when the American military is really becoming professionalized, and they look at the Prussians and victory of 1870, and that's a very Van Moltkean model where, "Okay King, give me the war and after we win it, I'll turn it back over to you for the peace", and I agree with that. I think that's always been kind of the ideal for the American military. That's the approach they'd like to take.

JW: Does Jomini in the things that he writes, talk about what we might consider the before or after, or is it really contained into the sort of combat? I know we're not phasing wars anymore, but does it stick to the fighting?

WJ: I think by and large, it does. He makes the point very specifically that it's the Statesman's responsibility to determine when to go to war. How the war is fought is the responsibility of the General and of the military. And it's a very clear cleavage in his mind on how that occurs. Very different from the Clausewitzian idea of the Trinity, or the idea of continuation of politics.

JW: Right, the politics are suffused throughout the conflict. When we think about Jomini again in this U.S. military context. So, we've gotten him into the military academies. He's part of the 19th century vocabulary and thinking of U.S. military officers. There's a critique, right, that we see Jominian principles, maybe applied, and badly applied, in the American Civil War, and then through the First World War. Is that critique a reasonable one?

CC: Well, I mean, again, Jomini is not alone in this process. There are disciples and, and those that spread his word, and Dennis Hart Mahan teaches Jomini at West Point for 40 years, from 1830 to 1870. So he influences a whole generation of leaders, though it's funny, I've got a copy here of a cadet notebook. He finally got into Jomini at the very last set of lectures of the Military Art and Engineering course the Firsties, for the seniors. And I've read somewhere where somebody asked you Ulysses Grant somewhere down the road about the influence of Jomini on his thinking, and he kind of gave him a look like, "Who"? "Who"? You know, I'm not sure how much attention cadets are paying-

JW: Yeah, I taught Firsties in April and May.

CC: Yeah, that's right. So that's when you're getting it. So you understand, I'm not sure how much stuck, so I'm not sure, I don't think Jomini deserves a lot of blame for whatever happened, but that is what is shaping the military academy education. Again, it's kind of the simple approach to his, you know, there is a history of some mental infirmity in the Mahan family, as I mentioned to Bill, you teach Jomini for 40 years and you throw yourself into a paddle wheel. So we got to be careful-

JW: So Bill, how many years have you been teaching Jomini?

WJ: About ten now.

JW: Okay.

CC: Oh yeah. We go back to West Point. I figure it's about 30's, so we're getting close. And then of course, he has another sign of this mental infirmity, as one of his sons actually goes to the Naval Academy. And of course, Alfred Thayer will take the ideas to the Navy as well, and if you look through Mahan's writings, they're very Jomini as well for the Navy. So that influences not just the army, but the Navy as well. This is a very deterministic, scientific approach. So, that

spreads into the 20th century, and then what happens is, in the inner warriors, the British military writer, J.F.C Fuller, really starts to develop these principles of war, and really popularizes this. And he is really the next step in this Jominian evolution. And so that we go from Jomini to Fuller, and if you read his foundations of science of war, it's amazingly, he goes through all these definitions of different operations and all the principles that apply in each one, and has all these strange diagrams and things, very Jominian geometric diagrams.

CC: And that really influences very much the schools. And that's when you start to see principles of war show up in American doctrine. And so then that spreads as well, so that these principles of war being taught all the way up through World War II and after. And even when the army after Vietnam, where the U.S. Army finally starts to get a grasp on Clausewitz, and that the main book that is going to do that is Harry Summers book [*On Strategy*](#). But if you look at Harry Summers book *On Strategy*, basically what he does is try to change Clausewitz into Jomini.

JW: Right.

CC: He's got chapters on the objective, offensive, mass, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, surprise, and simplicity.

JW: He rattles all of those off still, right?

CC: He rattles them off and he tries to take Clausewitz and shoehorn him into this very Principles of War structure. So it, it stays with us.

JW: There's a slide out of a doctrine manual that I love, which is basically Jomini and Principles of War about decisive points and mass. And then you add the words, fog and friction to it. I call it the sort of Jominization of Clausewitz, and vice versa, so as if adding fog and friction are going to complexify your thinking sufficiently to-

CC: And that's exactly what Summer's does. The first part of the book is about friction. The second part is he talks Principles of War. So that's exactly what Summer's approach is after Vietnam to try and get the American army, to get their handle around this, these ideas of Clausewitz.

WJ: I think it's important, also. The American Army spends a great deal of time talking about Clausewitz in his professional military education, but its doctrine is Jomini.

JW: Mm-hmm(affirmative).

WJ: So Jomini is the father of what we would call modern operational art. When you look at areas of operation, zones of operation, lines of effort, objective, decisive points. All of these operational art terms that we use today, they all have a basis in Jomini. And so I would make the argument that the American military, but particularly the U.S. Army is Jominian without understanding that they are. We talk and read Clausewitz, but we act and perform according to Jomini's operational principles.

JW: Is there a difference between the strategic level and the operational level of war, and the sort of gray area that blends the two together?

WJ: I think we would make the argument that operational art is what ties together tactics and strategy. There was a great Strategic Studies Institute publication by two Australians I believe, whose names escape me, a number of years ago, but it was entitled "Alien: How The Operational Art Ate Strategy", and it looks at how the American army, at least from their critique has become overly focused on the operational art, because it does lend itself to that engineering solution that Con talked about.

JW: And to doctrine.

WJ: Its doctrine is how to apply. It avoids all that messy politics stuff that the military doesn't want to get involved in, but which is actually essential to the conduct. And I think it's this emphasis on the operational art, which is a very important aspect that comes truly into its own being in the late seventies, early eighties, where we have become, in my argument, the most proficient practitioners of the operational art. However, we have sometimes divorced that operational art from the connection to strategy.

CC: Well, I mean, okay, Colin Gray says Americans are astrategic, that's just not the way we think-

JW: We just don't do it.

CC: That's right.

JW: Yeah. So does Jomini then have a place in strategic level education?

CC: I think it goes back to this idea of you've got to balance the art and the science. And yes, I mean, Jomini does have a place. If you look at the development campaign design, campaign design in some way you could say is Jomini on steroids, and which we pushed. So yes, there is a role for Jomini, but it can't be the only role.

JW: Okay.

WJ: There are time distance factors that you have to take into account that is a physics problem.

JW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WJ: And particularly, I think in the logistics arena, it is truly an engineering solution. How are you going to get all of the equipment, people, everything necessary for modern war to the appropriate place in time. That's the science of it. There is a science that you have to pay attention to. It can't simply be art. It can't simply be science. You've got to do both.

JW: Okay. So we'll wrap up with this last question, which is for students and for faculty, for people who are teaching. What can we do to read or teach Jomini sort of more or most responsibly?

WJ: I'll make the argument that we need to study Jomini in the same way that we urge our students to study everything. With a hardy element of skepticism, not cynicism, but skepticism. Question the basic underlying assumptions. Where do they apply and where do they not? There's a reason why we don't read two thirds of [On War](#), it's because it no longer applies. It's the same thing, looking at Jomini. Which of these aspects of what he taught, read, wrote on, still adhere today? Which are those that can be useful, that we should make use of, and which are those, which are well past their use-by date.

CC: Yeah, I'd say that they can't just read Jomini. I would suggest that if you really understand Jomini, you've got to read J.F.C Fuller's [Foundations of Science of War](#). At least some of it, to kind of see how this approach morphs in the 20th century. There's actually a great piece, I think it was Don Starry who did it, where he did an analysis of *The Principles of War*, and he went through and he said, "Okay, now here's where following this principle of war worked, and here's where following this principle of war failed. And here's where violating this one worked fine". I mean, realize that these are just all guidelines. None of these are locked in stone. And just realize that every situation's unique, and Fuller and Jomini and Clausewitz are all possible. That's data to put into your program when to help generate the proper solution, but you're going to need elements of all of them to come-

JW: Okay.

CC: ...up with the right way to do things.

WJ: Even Jomini spoke about times when you would need to ignore one of his principles, and that might lead to more success than adhering to them blindly. So, even though we sort of paint Jomini as this, "Oh, if you just do this by the numbers", he still has an element of art-

JW: Sure.

WJ: ...to the application of the principle.

JW: Absolutely. So I think that's solid advice as our students are beginning a new year in the resident program. Read deeply and broadly, critically, skeptically. Understand your own institution and organization's history and how it develops over time. And then to think about the relationship between tactics, operations, and strategy. And if we can do that and get our faculty and our students doing those things, I think we'll be off to a good start. So Bill, Con, thanks so much for joining me here today on the War Room.

WJ: Pleasure as always.

CC: A lot of fun as always.

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