

History 211 US Military History Discussion Transcript for February 18, 2021

Main Reading: James Pohl on Jomini and Gen. Winfield Scott

Every student of American military history should be familiar with the influence of Jomini and with the extraordinary career of Gen. Winfield Scott, who was America's most celebrated military figure for the first half of the nineteenth century. Pohl's article offers a compelling but still debatable account of how the "French school" influenced Scott during the Mexican War. The following selections come from student comments:

OVERVIEW

STUDENT COMMENT: Antoine Henri de Jomini and his writings on war were a great influence on the leaders of the United States Army in particular General Winfield Scott. Jominian doctrine was held in high regard by the professional officer corps of the United States Army because of the lessons and doctrine he observed and formulated during and after the Napoleonic wars. Scott was a "thorough professional" (88) and was well read in military doctrine of foreign nations. Scott had seen first-hand the structure of the English, German, and French armies and preferred the "French School" (88) of organization, drill, and planning. These teachings were a heavy influence on Scott's leadership during the Mexican-American War. I believe the most important Jominian insight observed by Scott during the Mexican-American War was "that even before an army took the field in an offensive war, the general should study the theater of operations and make preparations." (89). Armies conducting offensive operations in foreign territory bear the weight of preparation, as they are less familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of the land. The "Jominian interpretation of the proper conduct of war" (110) aided Scott's decision making through his many engagements of the war. I think it also is important to note that Jomini did not only influence Scott but also influenced many of the officers under Scott who would go on to lead campaigns in the American Civil War.

IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING

STUDENT COMMENT: Pohl pointed out how some historians believed that Jomini's rival, Carl von Clausewitz's, ideas and ways of war would lead to success in modern war, but that Jomini's were discussed and made popular because Clausewitz was not usually studied (86). However, Pohl argues and shows how through Jomini's rules and way of war, General Winfield Scott was undefeated in a battle in which he was in charge, and so he became one of the best U.S. generals in history (88). Pohl points out how Scott trained and organized his army like that of the French and how in most of his major battles, Scott followed at least one of Jomini's rules for fighting battles. Even when Scott would do something that went against or ignored Jomini's rules, it was usually an exceptional situation that Jomini thought of and would have cancelled out one of his other ones. I think one of the main points when reading about Jomini's way of war and Scott's actions during the Mexican War is how extensive planning was needed and that every scenario had to be thought of ahead of time, or before a battle would start. I thought it

was really interesting to read about how Jomini and Scott thought about and planned for losses and retreats. They both made sure that there was always a safe and strategic out/retreat if one was needed.

FROM VERA CRUZ TO MEXICO CITY

STUDENT COMMENT: It is self-evident throughout the reading that General Winfield Scott effectively used the methods of Baron Antonie Henri De Jomini to conduct his operations efficiently from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. One of the key points James W. Pohl makes is how Scott used the avenue of approach to support the safest route of movement for his troops. Scott incorporated his movement into position in almost every battle to gain the advantage of Santa Anna's bigger but less trained army. Jomini emphasized that it was critical "that the control of the sea and seizure of enemy ports were essential in all wars of coastal invasion" (90) Scott followed the principles very closely and secured Vera Cruz by diverting to the south to avoid contact with the enemy forces in a head on attack. By maneuvering around and attacking the flanks of the city on the high ground Scott was able to secure the city without unnecessary bombardment that could cripple the logistical capabilities of the city. The next objective was to take a direct line of operation into the city of Jalapa. General Santa Anna had created a heavily fortified position in the village of Cerro Gordo with effective artillery fire where he believed the American forces would walk into in order to secure the next objective. However, Scott using a Jominian principle that "the line of operations not only should produce the clearest direction to the final objective but also should offer the greatest advantages for the advancing army." (94) Once again, Scott had his artillery "properly placed and would have severed his enemy's line of communications in one swoop. In order to divert the enemy, he struck at the first ridge line with what turned out to be considerably more than a feint, as he simultaneously dispatched the two columns toward the enemy's rear" (96) In conclusion, Scott continuously used the surroundings Mexico with Jomini's teaching to gain tactical advantages over Santa Anna's bigger Army.

STUDENT COMMENT: Jomini's teachings had great influence over General Scott, which aided his success in the Mexican-American war. Through embracing much of Jomini's teachings, like the basic tenants of capturing a city, General Scott was able to successfully invade Chapultepec. In particular, General Scott noticed a strong and resilient morale within his ranks. This helped solidify the consideration to attack Chapultepec. The high morale could have been produced from the battlefield successes of the military or perhaps through the diplomacy and respect felt towards portions of the local populace. General Scott's success did not go unnoticed and other American leaders, in attempts of emulating his achievement, realized the value General Scott put towards Jomini's teachings. The U.S. military therefore became influenced to an even greater degree by Jomini for years after the Mexican-

QUESTIONING POHL'S ARGUMENT

STUDENT COMMENT: Although Pohl convinced me that Jominian principles were essential for Scott's campaign, I took note of the way he explained each offensive advancement during the war. Throughout the passage, I felt constantly reminded that Scott's leadership was exemplary

and reminiscent to George Washington's leadership. Should he have elaborated more on the negative aspects and shortcomings during the campaign, I would have had a better idea on whether Scott truly respected Jominian principles and recognize other factors that influenced his decision-making.

STUDENT COMMENT: James Pohl's piece dissects Gen. Winfield Scott's highly coveted campaign through central Mexico in the Mexican American War. To identify the impact of Jominian principals in the 19th Century, Pohl points the reader into the direction of Scott's representation of Jomini's teachings. In the battle of Vera Cruz, Pohl makes clear that Scott looks at the disadvantages his army was to endure in the same light as Jomini would. Scott's campaign was of course extremely impressive, his force lost very few men, he defeated heavily entrenched units with abusive siege tactics and successfully routed Mexican forces on multiple disadvantageous battlefield positions. Pohl argues that this was only possible because Scott interpreted Jominian tactics specifically for the engagements his army was met with. Although Scott's tactics were clearly Jominian in practice, no commander can conduct a battle purely from a textbook.

STUDENT COMMENT: Did Winfield Scott follow any of Clausewitz's ideas, or was he strictly loyal to Jomini's ideas and ways of war? Are Jomini's ideas and ways of war still being followed, or how long were they followed? Were some followed and others not later on?

STUDENT COMMENT: This emphasis on a "decisive point" (11) and "zones of operation" (11) which Jomini defines as "a certain fraction of the whole theater of war, which may be traversed by an army in the attainment of its object" (11) seem largely relevant in military application [today]. I would argue the nature of increased asymmetric warfare seen in both the Civil War and today make finding the "decisive point" (11) that Jomini puts such an importance on very problematic. The main issue I see with this whether it is in regard to the United States involvement in combating insurgents in the Syrian Civil War today or in the U.S. civil war where pro-slavery guerrilla warfare groups on the pro-Confederate side attacking pro-Union townspeople in the Border War conflict in Kansas, is how Jomini focused too much on the "decisive point" on the battlefield, and in doing so missed the bigger strategic picture.

STUDENT COMMENT: The paper reads as if Pohl starts with the assumption that Scott was influenced by Jomini, and reasons backwards to prove it. At every major action of Scott's campaign Pohl provides a Jomini quotation as proof of his influence. While most of these linkages are valid, others are either overtly general or extremely tenuous, giving me cause to think confirmation bias may be at play.