

FINDING DENIS HART MAHAN THE PROFESSOR'S PLACE IN MILITARY HISTORY

BY

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USAWC DIRECTED STUDY PROJECT

**FINDING DENIS HART MAHAN
THE PROFESSOR'S PLACE IN MILITARY HISTORY**

by

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Topic Approved By
Dr. Douglas Johnson

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ABSTRACT

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This paper seeks to ascertain the "place" of Dennis Hart Mahan, professor at the United States Military Academy from 1832-1871, within American military history. The research for this paper commenced with a premise that Mahan has a pervasive influence upon his West Point cadet classes, and thereby upon Civil War generalship. The extensive literature reviewed found that this premise was not widely supported. Mahan's place was found to be inconsistent, sometimes championed, but mostly marginalized. This paper discusses three ongoing and overshadowing historiographical contests that seem to contribute to this: the hagiographic and political struggles surrounding Civil War generalship: the continuing debate regarding Jomini's influence before, during, and after the Civil War; and in opposing views concerning the professional status of the United States Army in the 19th century. All three obscure any consistent interpretation of what influence this professor may have had upon the military affairs of his day, and suggest that it is time for a comprehensive and independent treatment of him in American military history

FINDING DENIS HART MAHAN: THE PROFESSOR'S PLACE IN MILITARY HISTORY

Historians do not agree what place Dennis Hart Mahon has in American military history. Mahon was senior professor in engineering and tactics and head of the academic board at the United States Army Military Academy at West Point from 1832 to 1871. In this capacity he dominated the curriculum of academy, instructed every (regular army) future Civil War general in the art and science of war,¹ determined the meriting system, ranking and branch assignments of all graduating cadet, and produced the first military literature of the United States Army. He became known as the father of civil engineering instruction in America,² providing generations of officers of the US Army Corps of Engineers with foundational training that enabled “internal improvements” to occur across the continent. Both President Abraham Lincoln and General Winfield Scott sought his advice regarding selection of commanding generals and chiefs of staff.³ Both the Union and Confederate armies used his doctrinal writings, with 10,000 copies of his *Field Fortifications* and 8,000 of his *Outposts* being used by the North, and a pirated edition producing thousands of copies of each in the South.⁴ Contemporary remembrances claim that Mahan’s work was highly sought after by Civil War officers.⁵ Yet military historians still remain divided about what influence he held upon the military affairs of his day.⁶

The purpose of this paper is to review how Mahan has been treated by historians since his death in 1871, and to identify the basis for an accurate and balanced biography of him. To achieve this aim, a review of relevant literature has been undertaken. The research commenced with the premise that Mahan had some impact upon the intellectual development of the army, which to some degree influenced Civil

War generalship where, Azar Gat maintains: “military outlook was in some important respects almost predetermined by the prevailing cultural perspectives.”⁷ However, the research revealed that this premise constitutes a radical outlook, and that there is no consensus regarding Mahan’s influence at all. Whatever influence he may have had is now obscured by what I contend are three ongoing historiographical contests; the hagiographic and political struggles surrounding Civil War generalship; the continuing debate regarding Jomini’s influence before, during, and after the Civil War, and in opposing views concerning the professional status of the United States Army throughout the 19th century. This paper is divided into three parts, each dealing with one of these historiographical debates and illustrating how any appreciation of Mahan’s place in history is lost in the contest of interpretations. Central to all three parts is the question of what influence professors and institutions of learning have upon the military profession or upon contemporary military culture and decision-making; a question that remains relevant today and which invokes emotional responses from both uniformed and non-uniformed contributors.

Mahan and the Hagiography and Continuing Politics of the Civil War

Any examination of Dennis Harts Mahan moves directly to the issue of his connection to decision-making during the Civil War, an issue that is subsumed within powerful historical forces. The most enduring of these forces has been the application of “great man” theory to Civil War generals. This hagiography assumes that successful Civil War commanders were independent personalities; their genius existing apart from impersonal influences of institutions such as West Point, or the personal influences of a mere professor such as Mahan.

Post-war myth-making immediately robbed Civil War history of any direct consideration of any such impersonal or personal influences. Early hagiography of Lincoln was balanced by the apotheosis of Robert E. Lee, who in southern folklore rose above Lincoln to attain divine affiliation.⁸ Concurrently, during Reconstruction, it was problematic to attribute Southern failure to Northern superiority. So, in 1866, Edward Pollard began the lasting political debate on Civil War outcomes in his *Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates*, the first of many interpretations that placed the blame for Southern failure squarely upon the shoulders of key Confederate leaders, Lee excluded, and ignored any competencies of Northern leadership, or influences of military theorists and educators such as Mahan. In the past century and a half, the specific victim of blame (President Davis, Governors Brown and Vance, Generals Beauregard, Johnston, Pemberton, Longstreet, Stuart, and Ewell) has changed, but not the thesis; the South was doomed from the start by internal failures because of particular ineptitude of certain generals or politicians.⁹ Their West Point affiliation or connection to Mahan seldom enters this thesis. Making this affiliation would be create difficulties because almost every general officer (including Robert Lee) and President Jefferson Davis were former students, colleagues, or intimate acquaintances of Mahan; therefore attributing failure to the influence of this Northerner would lead to questions about the apparent successes of icons such as Jackson, Hill, and Lee, who were also affected by his writing and teaching.¹⁰

A parallel but separate interpretation has examined external sources for the failure of the South, emphasizing powerful determinant forces that favored the North. The explanations are many, but all come back to a root cause, that (in Lee's own words

at Appomattox): “The army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.”¹¹ Economic, technological, and demographic determinism has endured in Civil War historiography from Appomattox onward. It became popularized in Ken Burn’s PBS documentary “The Civil War”, when Shelby Foote claimed: “I don’t think the South ever had a chance to win the war.”¹² This continues to be balanced by biographical efforts that idolize Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman as the political and martial geniuses that carried the North to victory. Unfortunately the vast majority of the immense volume of work on Civil War leadership follows either economic, demographic, and technological determinism, or hagiography; most of it devoid of consideration of United States Army culture, its learning institutions, or of professors and theorists as influential factors in the outcome of the war.

Within professional military history in the United States, Mahan’s continued obscurity is surprising given his entry into published works in the mid twentieth century. Ernest R. Dupuy introduced Mahan in his institutional histories of West Point, *Where They Have Trod*, and *Men of West Point*, in 1940 and 1951 respectively. The historian and his son, Trevor N. Dupuy, then situated Mahan in an unequalled position of influence in American military history in *Military Heritage of America* (1956):

In our United States an obscure professor at West Point, Dennis Hart Mahan, was to expound views on the art of war which influenced the great leaders of both sides during the Civil War, and which, as a consequence, have had a marked effect on strategic thinking in the American army ever since.¹³ ...It is not too much, then, to assert that Dennis Hart Mahan’s brilliantly expounded precepts on war influenced not only the military destiny of the United States, but also military thought and practice the world over.¹⁴

According to these authors, Mahan's works are greatly similar to Clausewitz's. His influence, particularly in emphasis of timeless principles of war, extended to the German General Staff and to World War Two American generalship.¹⁵

However, the Dupuys' bias toward Mahan was not picked up by subsequent reviewers of American military history. In fact, Mahan remains largely ignored in general surveys, probably because of enduring hagiography and Civil War politics. Robert Leckie's 1160 page *The Wars of America* (1968), for instance, does not spend one word on Denis Hart Mahan.¹⁶ C. Robert Kemble in *The Image of the Army Officer in America* (1973); Ellis and Robert Moore, most peculiarly, in *School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* (1974); Jay Luvass in *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance* (1988); and Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln's Generals* (1994), likewise say nothing of Mahan.¹⁷ In *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America* (2005), Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton make no mention of Mahan in 527 pages, and give no consideration of West Point.¹⁸ In the 1943 and 1971 versions of Edward Mead Earle's *Makers of Modern Strategy*, there is no mention of Mahan. Only when Russell Weigley penned a chapter on American military intellectual development in the 1986 version of *Makers* is Mahan introduced.¹⁹

Mahan receives passing mention in Walter Millis, *Arms and Men: A Study of American Military History* (1981); in David H. Overly's chapters of *The American Military Tradition* (1984); and in John Whiteclay Chamber's *The Oxford Companion of American Military History* (1999).²⁰ But these appear to be drive-by mentions, using words and ideas from Dupuy or Weigley. Richard W. Stewart in, *The United States Army and the*

Forging of a Nation, 1775-1917 (2005), quotes Mahan twice favorably in the introduction then gives contradictory broad assessments by stating:

Mahan's emphasis on rules and principles and failure to address technological change or innovation would play a significant role in the Civil War. Most of the academy graduates on both sides of the conflict had studied under Mahan, and many other officers used his book as a field manual. Mahan's thought had an enduring impact on U.S. Army doctrine,....²¹

But, in all this brief slight, praise, and generalizing, there is no explanation of how wide was Mahan's influence or its impact upon generalship or war conduct.

In biographies of Civil War generals, Mahan has begun to be mentioned, with mixed review. Edward Hagerman claims that General McClellan (and General Scott) learned maneuver from Mahan; but Timothy D. Johnson, in *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory* (1998), refutes this - citing McClellan's own works.²² John F. Marszalek, in *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck* (2004), explains briefly what was a very complex relationship between Mahan and Halleck, and Mahan's influence upon Halleck's thinking about doctrine. But he does not suggest that the professor had any impact upon General Halleck's war conduct or decision-making.²³ Of all the Northern and Southern generals, only Sherman claims knowledge and influence of Mahan.²⁴

Fair and consistent treatment of Mahan within broad histories of the Civil War is largely forsaken in the recurring hagiography, Lost Cause revivals, and progressive deterministic arguments. Within smaller circles of professional military historians, the Dupuys' initial assessment of the role of Dennis Hart Mahan gave him, for a brief period, some recognition as an influential character. Unfortunately as this was occurring the question of Mahan's influence quickly became obfuscated by two other historiographical

debates. The first of these is also connected to explanation of Civil War outcomes. It considers the extent of the influence of Franco-Swiss military theorist Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini on the development of United States Army and upon Civil War generalship, a subject that directly implicates Mahan.

Mahan and the Jominian Debate

The Jominian historiographical debate began in 1947, when, in a translation of Jomini's *Precis de l'Art de al Guerre*, J.D. Hittle introduced a very simplistic interpretation of the decisive impact of Jomini upon the Civil War armies and generalship: "It has been said with good reason that many a Civil War general went into battle with a sword in one hand and Jomini's *Summary of the Art of War* in the other."²⁵ Brief but compelling eloquent, Hittle's unproven assertion of profound Jominian influence has become a commonly restated assumption in subsequent works on the Civil War; and has also become a contested issue.

In 1962, military historian Russell Weigley placed Dennis Hart Mahan squarely in the middle of this debate by claiming that Mahan was the chief purveyor of Jomini in America. Weigley's chapter on Mahan remains the best and most comprehensive published assessment of him, and issues gratuitous praise upon the professor.²⁶ Weigley saw Mahan as the first military intellect in America, and a founder of American Army professionalism. However, in the following chapter (dedicated to Halleck and McClellan), Weigley criticizes Mahan and his students for their deference to Jomini and their lack of understanding of broader currents of thought in the United States. In 1973 he took the debate a step forward (in his *American Way of War*) by arguing that it was Mahan's Jominian prescriptions (of limited warfare) that prevented generals in the Civil

War from realizing Clausewitzian method (of decisive warfare), by adopting a more appropriate practice of “annihilation”. Here Weigley diminishes Mahan in an effort to reinforce his argument for a distinct “American way of war”. He accredits success in battle in the Civil War to those generals who broke from bookish adherence to West Point precepts and discovered a more naturally-American “strategy of annihilation”. Weigley’s motive in this reduction of Mahan is to emphasize to America, in the wake of Vietnam, the efficacy of Clausewitz over Jomini. He suggests that the winning genius of generals Grant and Sherman was not a matter of independent personality so much as their personal discovery of natural American warfare, a cultural force outside of American professional military circles, and unappreciated by Mahan.

This reduction of Mahan was carried on by Harry T. Williams, in *The History of American Wars from Colonial Times to World War I* (1981). According to Williams, Dennis Hart Mahan’s teaching left the United States Army ill-prepared for the Civil War. “The offensives they [Mahan and Halleck] envisioned were limited in force and fury and were to be employed in a war for limited objectives such as to pacify or to acquire a strip of territory from a neighbor like Mexico.”²⁷ This implies a large but negative influence upon Civil War generalship. It is a curious thing therefore, that Williams in a separate publication offers much great praise of Mahan, particularly his singular emphasis of audacious offensive maneuvers and of deception. However, he later qualifies this appraisal by stating:

...to speak either of Mahan’s influence, or of Jomini’s through Mahan and West Point, as conditioning Civil War generalship can readily make American soldiers of the 1860s appear much more bookish than they were, and far less the military improvisers confronted with new conditions that they had to be.²⁸

It is impossible to discern from Williams' words whether or not Mahan was an influential force. Another assessment that same year – 1984 - by John D. Maxwell, states:

Mahan endorsed a standard Jominian view of Napoleonic campaigns. Had West Point cadets had access to Clausewitz's *On War*, they might have learned that in conflicts of nationalism, such as the Napoleonic wars, only the annihilation of enemy forces might be decisive.²⁹

Equating Mahan with Jomini, and comparing both to Clausewitz, appears to have been a common pastime of many historians in the 1980s.

The trend of situating Mahan under the large shadow of Jomini endures, but has become more nuanced. In 1986, James L. Morrison Jr., in his "Military Education and Strategic Thought, 1846-1861" (1986), states that Mahan and Jomini were not synonymous. He in fact believed that Mahan had evolved from Jomini, elevating "Napoleonic" audacity, speed, and maneuver, and new fortifications, as important elements in war. Morrison thought that Mahan even exceeded Napoleon in terms of advocating deception. Therefore, according to Morrison; "Despite their substantial pro-French bias, they [Mahan and Halleck] deserve recognition for pioneering in the effort to create a discrete body of American strategic literature."³⁰ But Morrison also concludes that Mahan's overall influence was marginal; that while he did instruct all cadets in the science and art of war, his purveyance of any worthwhile strategic theory amounted to one nine hour course of instruction during the entire four years of the West Point experience: "It was therefore a rare genius indeed who obtained from the course anything more than the shallowest perception of strategic principle."³¹ This assessment is often repeated.

Picking up on Weigley's theme, Morrison also emphasizes Mahan's stifling intellectualism:

The disciplinary system remained a hugely effective tool for securing instantaneous, unquestioning obedience to a multitude of minutely detailed rules.³² ...If intellectual intransigence prevented the antebellum officers from appreciating the potential significance of the American Revolution and frontier experience, the origins of that intransigence can be traced to the banks of the Hudson where cadets were conditioned to think in an unimaginative, mechanistic way.³³

Where Weigley condemned Mahan and West Point for being too isolated from the democratic elements of American society to appreciate how to lead mass mobilized armies, Morrison concluded that Mahan and West Point were too professionally narrow, concentrating only upon low level command. This left the future Civil War generals unprepared for higher unit command and strategy.³⁴ His detailed account of West Point (1986) is equally critical: "...it seems highly unlikely that the one nine-hour period out of an entire four-year program would so impress a student that it would continue to govern his thinking years later."³⁵

Geoffrey Perret followed on with this diminishment. In *A Country Made by War* (1989), he credits General Scott with telling President Lincoln that Mahan was "the most influential professor at West Point and the nation's leading authority on the military art"; however, the author then suggest that it was Mahan's teaching that led to indecisive battles in the Civil War. In the end, he states: "The war was won for the north by superior manpower and firepower."³⁶

Revision of Mahan's influence (within the Jominian debate) began in 1992, when historian Archer Jones published *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat*. Jones states here that Mahan's impact upon United States Army

leadership was foundational for the Mexican War, where the army learned the rights and wrongs of his teachings, which were then highly instructive to Civil War generalship.³⁷ When Zachary Taylor's army repulsed Mexican cavalry and infantry attacks from unfortified positions, and attacked in the open against fortified Monterey, they contradicted Mahan, with success. Yet Scott's continuous use of engineer reconnaissance and the "turning movement" to dislodge Santa Anna from fortifications, avoiding the need for volunteers to attack fortifications, reinforced Mahan's dictums. By focusing upon Mahan and the Mexican War, Jones avoids discussion about any direct impact Mahan may have had upon the Civil War. He implies that acceptance and rejection of Mexican war practices decisively shaped Civil War generalship, without attribution to Mahan and to inter-war developments. He is on the whole very complimentary of Civil War generalship, and accredits antebellum army methods with fostering the high standards achieved during the Civil War. Jones is close to establishing a key force of continuity in American military thought and practice, but does not attempt to overcome the obstacles of hagiography, Lost Cause mythology, or the economic, technological and demographic determinism that are behind most explanations of Civil War generalship.

Edward Hagerman (1992) pushed the debate a step further in his *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare*.³⁸ Hagerman credits Mahan with some of the most influential and sweeping changes in an army caught in the transition from the age of the mechanistic world view to a more systematic one (based upon the study of history and technological change). He claims that Mahan set down a firm theoretical foundation for the conduct of the Mexican War and influenced most of the technical

aspects of the Civil War. Hagerman's book is a watershed in that his subject is military theory, doctrine, and practice and therefore discusses impersonal forces in the conduct of the Civil War. Hagerman is complimentary of Mahan and is deliberate in describing how Mahan broke from Jominian tradition to establish his own distinct concepts of war. Hagerman believes Mahan was an influential force in the conduct of the Civil War, mentioning several examples of adherence to his principles in operations throughout the conflict. However, Hagerman's subject is not Dennis Hart Mahan, and he therefore keeps Mahan in the margins, giving peripheral and general reference to his impact upon Civil War generalship. Upon reading Hagerman's work, one feels a strong need for a singular treatment of Mahan.

Despite Hagerman's work, peripheral mention of Mahan's influence is still most common. Thomas Fleming argues in "Iron General" (1995), that General Pershing felt that a variation of the doctrine taught by Mahan was the answer to breaking the stalemate of World War One. This included speed, fire, and movement: "the essence of Mahan's ideas, along with seizing and holding the initiative."³⁹ But for every such referral there remain twice as many neutral statements or castigations of Mahan as entirely Jominian. For a surprisingly neutral reference see, Stephen E. Ambrose, in *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (1999);⁴⁰ and for late criticism see John M. Carroll's and Colin F. Baxter's *The American Military Tradition: From Colonial Times to the Present* (2007), which gives only casual mention of Mahan, but carries on the assertion that the Military Academy failed to teach the real lessons of Napoleonic warfare, therefore contributing to poor generalship in the Civil War.⁴¹

So, despite revisionist treatments of Mahan on the margins of other historical subjects, the professor's place in history remains overshadowed by the enduring belief of a Jominian grip upon Civil War armies, with prerogative connotations. Thomas J. Goss, in *The War Within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War* (2003), squarely criticizes the West Point curriculum for failing to impart military knowledge of use above company level.⁴² Goss reasserts Morrison's line that Mahan's nine hour course in military science was inadequate to impart knowledge or lay a foundation of strategic thinking, and that it was not reinforced with a follow-up program, and did not inspire "intellectual growth". Goss resurrects Jomini:

... it was this combination of Jomini, Mahan, and Halleck, all under the shadow of the Great Napoleon, that greatly influenced most West Pointers by imprinting Jominian language and concepts on their view of the nature of war."⁴³

Goss argues (as did T. Harry Williams) that this led to a notion of war as conventional battle disconnected from political purpose, and was causal to poor Civil War generalship. But his critique is subtle, suggesting that Mahan really had a very limited influence upon the whole affair, as his teachings were too far removed from the war's conduct to have impact. The underlying reason for Goss's assertions has less to do with Jomini (who he uses as a scapegoat), and more to do with his belief that West Point failed to instill professionalism in the antebellum army, with the result of poor operational performance. He believes that generals in the war lacked education in strategy; were warped by partisan affiliations with political and sectional quarters; and lacked occupational corporateness, which he defines as: "the shared sense of organic unity and culture within a profession that would separate all military officers from laymen."⁴⁴ Goss condemns West Point and indirectly Mahan:

West Pointers were prepared only for the aspects of officership that they had been performing as junior officers prior to the war. Without any experience or instruction in higher level leadership, these officers were no more prepared for maneuvering corps and divisions in battle than their volunteer peers.⁴⁵

When one contrasts Goss's critical interpretation with that of Weigley, Jones, or Hagerman, it is impossible to discern just how Jominian Mahan really was, how much influence he wielded over Civil War tactics or strategy, or how positive or negative was his influence.

Mahan in the Professional army Debate

Goss's diminishment of Mahan perhaps more correctly falls into the third historiographical debate that has impeded balanced treatment of the West Point professor. This debate was initiated in the 1950s by Samuel P. Huntington, in his monumental *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. Huntington maintains that the United States Army did not achieve status as a profession until after the Civil War, although its roots emerged in a southern "military enlightenment" in the 1830s, out of the security interests of the plantation elite.⁴⁶ He contends that West Point's engineering focus delayed army professionalization. This produced a "technicism" instead of inculcating a vocational spirit that would have a cadet commit to the army as – Morris Janowitz would later say – "the locus of his career".⁴⁷ Mahan's place in history since this initial assertion seems to have been closely tied to his role in fostering or impeding professionalism.

The Civil War brought together regular "professional" with amateur generals and masses of citizen soldiers, creating a dynamic that historians cannot stop studying in attempts to determine whether or not performance in war related directly to

professionalism or amateurism. T. Harry Williams, James Macpherson, Bruce Catton, Bruce Tap, Archer Jones, Herman Hattaway, Richard Beringer, and William Still, have all had to deal with this complex issue in their studies of Civil War generalship.

Treatment of Dennis Hart Mahan in all their works is brief at best, and oscillates between great praise for contributing to professional knowledge to great condemnation for keeping the regular officer corps constrained in a Jominian paradigm.⁴⁸

Mahan's biggest champion in this debate is again Russell Weigley. His *Toward an American Army* (1962) argues that the Revolution had left a dual legacy in the United States – one of a larger “well regulated militia” and one of a small regular and professional army in which Mahan was the most influential force in the antebellum era. Mahan helped to establish standardization of regular army education and indoctrination. In this Weigley challenges Huntington directly. Thomas E. Griess's Ph.D. thesis on Mahan (1968) entirely supports Weigley's promotion of Mahan as the leading advocate for military professionalism.

Marcus Cunliffe also reinforces Weigley's argument that professionalism rose in the antebellum period, but does not credit Mahan in any way. In *Soldiers and Civilians: the Martial Spirit in America, 1775-1865*, (1968), he states that professionalism came from a rising “popular martial spirit” – a general interest in military things during the first half of the 19th century. He believes that it was Jacksonian anti-militarism and not institutional practices at West Point that forced together the band of professionals in the regular army.⁴⁹ He treats West Pointers as elitist and authoritarian, and isolated from society.

This is a stark contrast to Allan R. Millett's and Peter Maslowski's view. In *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (1984), Mahan is praised: "During his more than four decades at West Point, no one was more influential than Mahan in the transition of officership from a craft into a profession."⁵⁰ But the debate flip-flopped. Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime 1784-1898* (1986), resurrected Huntington's idea that professionalization of the army was not achieved until late 19th century, when the force found a purpose after being piecemealed across America during Reconstruction and the western expansion.⁵¹ Therefore, Mahan had little influence upon this process.

William B. Skelton disagrees with Coffman on the first point; he believes that the antebellum army was a professional force by the 1830s, meeting Janowitz's criteria that a professional was a person who has made the military establishment his chosen career. But to Skelton, Dennis Hart Mahan had little to do with this professionalization. In a detailed history of the emergence of a professional army in America, 1784-1861, in 481 pages Skelton mentions Mahan in passing only five times and without credit for professional influence.⁵²

James L. Morrison, historian of West Point, weighs into the debate in the 1980s by supporting Skelton, contending that the army was professionalizing before the Civil War. But he is also reluctant to give West Point and its faculty much credit in this. His castigation of Mahan as exceedingly narrow and conventional suits his thesis that West Point graduates were ill prepared for higher command in their profession, were unnecessarily cautious, and that they held a "deep mistrust of innovation and creativity."⁵³

Morrison's theme of granting Mahan substantial but negative impact upon Civil War leadership became a trend in the 1990s. Paddy Griffith, for instance, blames Mahan for the lack of good cavalry in the Civil War:

Certainly the influence of Dennis Hart Mahan and his West Point teaching appears to have been in the direction of light cavalry outposts and scouting rather than heavy combat. It comes as no surprise that Mahan's baleful engineering view of the battlefield eclipsed the potential contribution of a large and energetic cavalry force. He had been influential in shaping the tactical thinking of the infantry, and there was a logical spiral at work: the greater the emphasis laid by the infantry upon firepower and protection, the less attention was paid to shock and mobility such as the cavalry could - supremely - provide.⁵⁴

Not everyone in the 1990s agreed with this, as accounted in Hagerman's assessment mentioned earlier. James R. Endler is also more complimentary to Mahan, but confines his assessment of Mahan's influence to the imparting of technical engineering knowledge to the professional military and to civilian schools.⁵⁵

Calculating Mahan's influence upon the emerging profession has become a highly nuanced debate to some historians. Matthew Moten, in *The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession* (2000), recognizes the contribution of Mahan to American professional military thinking, but at the same time circumscribes discussion of Mahan's impact upon the emerging profession:

Halleck and Mahan stood foremost among that body of men, yet even among military professionals they were almost alone....Their works represent the apogee of West Point's contribution to the intellectual component of military professionalism before the Civil War. Still, even their contributions were limited. Their conceptual elevation of military engineering hampered a fuller understanding of warfare. They had risen above West Points' "system of habit and thought", but West Point's constricted definition of military expertise foreshortened their range of vision.⁵⁶

Thus Moten deliberately accuses Mahan with failing the profession by preventing higher levels of cognition of strategy. He goes a step further by suggesting that Mahan's method of teaching led to an anti-intellectual backlash by the graduating officer corps; that his pedagogical ways worked against his purpose and retarded longer term acquisition of professional knowledge.

The contention that Mahan impeded professional development is not singular. Steven R. Jones, *The Right Hand of Command: Use and Disuse of Personal Staffs in the American Civil War* (2000), maintains that Mahan and West Point had no influence upon Civil War generalship and staffs. This is based upon Morrison's previous accusation of narrowness in Mahan's course on military science:

Still, the amount of time Mahan devoted to strategy and tactics was brief - only one week out of the one-year course. The rest of the time he discussed civil engineering, architecture, and building fortifications. In short, if any of the West Pointers who would go on to command Civil War armies wanted to know mid-nineteenth century staff theory, they would have to learn it on their own.⁵⁷

The historiographical debate over antebellum professionalism is now led by Thomas J. Goss, in his fore-mentioned book, *The War Within the Union High Command*. Here Goss addresses the issue of Civil war generalship by assessing the performance of "professional" generals and "political" generals (civilian politicians appointed to command). Goss asserts that at the time, this division was a false dichotomy; that during the Civil War, regular army generals were not considered "professional" (someone dedicating themselves totally to a calling), and that contemporary society held higher esteem for military amateurs. Each tactical failure by West Point generals reinforced this view. Therefore, to Goss, the United States Army did not achieve a professional status until after the Civil War, and was impeded in

reaching that status earlier by slavish adherence to Jominian thinking imparted at West Point by Dennis Hart Mahan. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the interpretations of the Dupuys, Weigley, and Hagerman. Taken all together, no one can tell definitively whether or not Professor Mahan played any significant role in fostering military professionalism in America.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to categorize the historical interpretations of the life and work of Dennis Hart Mahan in order to ascertain his “place” within American military history. A commencing premise that Mahan had a pervasive influence upon his West Point cadet classes, and thereby upon Civil War generalship, was not supported in the literature reviewed. Mahan’s place was found to be inconsistent, but mostly marginalized. Three ongoing and overshadowing historiographical contests seem to contribute to this: the hagiographic and political struggles surrounding Civil War generalship; the continuing debate regarding Jomini’s influence before, during and after the Civil War; and in opposing views concerning the professional status of the United States Army in the 19th century. All three debates obscure the question of what influence professor Mahan may have had upon the Civil War.

The conclusion is that it is time for a balanced assessment of the life and influence of Dennis Hart Mahan, best approached by avoiding the ongoing hagiographic debate, and shying away from interpretations of professionalism that pertain more to the 20th century than to 19th century armies. A new biography should instead dismiss all published interpretations and go back to primary sources to find evidence of Mahan’s influence before historiographical forces came to play. Of the contributors in each of the

three debates mentioned, only four (Weigley, Williams, Morrison, and Hagerman) make extensive use of primary sources. A new look at Mahan might best approach the subject by examining primary sources to see how Mahan influenced the emerging (and distinctly American) organizational culture of the United States Army before and during the Civil War. In this manner, Mahan might be considered as an important “cultural” influence without suggesting that he was a deterministic force over Civil War generalship, or a detractor to professionalism. This approach would prevent his being relegated back to the place that he has long occupied; a mere translator of Jomini whose students largely failed to impress historians when they took held command on the battlefields of the Civil War.

Endnotes

¹ Except for Robert E. Lee, who graduated after Mahan in 1829. However, Lee knew Mahan well and would have learned from this professor when he was Commandant of the Military Academy 1852-1855, when he personally attended Mahan's Napoleon Club: see Paul D. Casdorff, *Lee and Jackson: Confederate Chieftains* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992), 109-119 .

² James R. Endler, *Other leaders, Other Heroes: West Point's Legacy to America Beyond the Field of Battle* (Wesport: Praeger, 1998), 72.

³ Geoffrey Perret, *A Country Made by War* (New York: Random House, 1989), 207.

⁴ Mahan's *Treatise on Field Fortifications* first appeared in 1836 and, through seven editions, became the standard text for teaching and practice throughout America, and had considerable influence in Europe. His *Advanced Guard, Outpost and Detachment Services of Troops* (a long descriptive title that masks what is a broad treatise on the art and science of war), was published in 1847 and revised and published again in 1862. Mahan's *Course of Civil Engineering* became the American standard text in all engineering schools, with 15,000 copies made, and translation into several other languages. For details see Thomas E. Griess, "Dennis Hart Mahan: West Point Professor and Advocate of Military Professionalism, 1830-1871" PhD. Dissertation from Duke University, 1968, Photocopy 20 cm. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1989.). See also Henry L. Abbot, *Memoir of Dennis Hart Mahan 1802-1871* A memorial speech read before the National Academy, 7 November, 1878 (Washington: publisher unknown, 1878). Also relevant is George W. Cullum, "Professor D.H. Mahan," *Army and Navy Journal*, IX (7 October 1871), 199-120. Mahan's works include: *An Elementary*

Treatise on Advanced-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops, and the Manner of Posting and handling Them in Presence of an Enemy. With a Historical Sketch of the Rise and Progress of Tactics, etc. Intended as a Supplement to the System of Tactics Adopted for the Military Services of the United States, and Especially for the Use of Officers of Militia and Volunteers (New York: 1853, and rev. June 1862): *Advanced-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Services of Troops, with the Essential Principles of Strategy and Grand Tactics for the Use of Officers of the Militia and Volunteers* (New York: 1864): *A Complete Treatise on Field Fortifications, with the General Outlines of the Principles Regulating the Arrangement, the Attack, and the Defence of Permanent Works* (New York: 1836, rev. 1846, and rev. 1862): *An Elementary Course of Military Engineering. For the Use of the Cadets of the United States Military Academy* (New York: 1837): *Summary of the Course of Permanent Fortification of the Attack, and the Defence of Permanent Works For the Use of the Cadets of the United States Military Academy* (New York: 1850, rev. 1863): *An Elementary Course of Military Engineering. Part I, Field Fortifications, Military Mining, and Siege Operations* (New York: 1865): *An Elementary Course of Military Engineering. Part II, Permanent Fortifications* (New York: 1867): *A Treatise on Civil Engineering*, rev. and ed. with additions and plates by De Volson Wood (New York: 1873): *Industrial Drawing, Comprising the Descriptions and Uses of Drawing Instruments, the Construction of Plane Figures, the Projections and Sections of Geometrical Solids... Teaching the Subject* (New York: 1868).

⁵ See Jacob D. Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 2 Vols. (New York: publisher unknown, 1900), Vol. I, 30.

⁶ No published book has yet been dedicated to his life and work. The single unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Thomas Griess mentioned above chronicles his teaching career at West Point. This amounts to a routine documentation of his academic activities.

⁷ Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 272.

⁸ In 1868 Fanny Dowling wrote of General Lee as being “bathed in the white light which falls directly upon him from the smile of an approving and sustaining God.” This quote is found in Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 4.

⁹ Other divisions of the “internal failure” school, beyond generalship, rose out of the economic Progressive tradition of the early 20th century: See Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: MacMillan, 1927); James G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: C.C. Heath and Co., 1937); and Avery Craven, *The Repressible Conflict, 1830-1861* orig. 1939 (London: Reprint Services Corp., 1993). A chief proponent, Frank Owsley, argues that the real southern cause – the rights of each individual state – was the fragmentary determinant factor in their collective demise. He contends that Jefferson Davis’ government never had sufficient powers to mobilize all Confederate forces: Frank Owsley, *States Rights in the Confederacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925). David Donald extended this to suggest that southern anti-war dissent, and “democratic” criticism of the Confederate government, diminished political cohesion and led to an inevitable demise. This was reinforced in Emory Thomas, Paul Escott, and David Donald, *Why the North Won* (Baton

Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960); see also Paul Escott, *After Secession* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), and Emory Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Englewood Cliffs: Spectrum Books, 1971). The role of class conflict in the demise of the south has also been raised: focusing on the marginalization of a large number of non-slave-holding whites and of the subjugation of approximately six million blacks: See: Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Plain People of the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1943); P.S. Paludan, *Victims: A True Story of the Civil War* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986); and Wayne K. Durrill, *War of Another Kind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Neo-whig ideological arguments have also been used to explain the failure of the south. E. Merton Coulter argues that southerners lacked will enough to win. This theme was picked up in 1986 by the authors of *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, who explain that the act of secession from a nation until then dominated by southern leadership, collapsed any ideological underpinning of southern peoples and even made them wonder if God had forsaken them in their decision. See E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 566; and Richard Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 351.

¹⁰ Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered*, says nothing of Mahan. Paul D. Casdorff talks of Mahan and Jackson only once, when Mahan refused to support Jackson in a bid by Jackson to secure a teaching at the University of Virginia in 1854; see, *Lee and Jackson*, 155-177. George F.R. Henderson in *Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968) makes no mention of Mahan, but credits West Point for reinforcing his sense of duty and discipline. No mention of Mahan is made in Robert G Tanner, *Stonewall in the Valley* (Mechanicsburg, PA.: Stakepole Books, 1996). Hal Bridges ignores any influence of Mahan or West Point on General D.H. Hill; see *Lee's Maverick General – Daniel Harvey Hill* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961). James I. Robertson Jr. states that West Point was influential in the lives of its cadets, but fails thereafter to explain why or how; see *General A.P. Hill: The Story of a Confederate Warrior* (New York: Random House, 1987), 8. In contrast to other works on southern generalship, Nathaniel Cheirs Hughes Jr., in, *General William J. Hardee: Old Reliable* (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1987), 9, 63, credits West Point with making Hardee a professional general, and gives praise to Mahan, referring to Dupuy's original assessment (see endnote 12).

¹¹ Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Confederacy Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *Military Heritage of America* (Fairfax: Hero Books, 1984; rev. for the orig. ed. 1956), 173.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁶ Robert Leckie, *The Wars of America* (New York: Harper & Row, rev. ed. 1981. Org. ed. 1968).

¹⁷ C. Robert Kemble, *The Image of the Army Officer in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973). Ellis and Robert Moore, *School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). Jay Luvass, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988). Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (New York: Viking, 2005).

¹⁹ Edward Meade Earle (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), updated from the original 1943 version by addition of chapters related to the Second World War and post-war environments. Only two Americans are mentioned in this very superb work – Alfred Thayer Mahan and Billy Mitchell. It was not until the 1986 version that this is expanded to include Dennis Hart Mahan: see Russell F. Weigley, “American Strategy from its Beginning through the First World War” in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 408-443.

²⁰ Walter Millis, *Arms and Men: A Study of American Military History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981). David H. Overy's chapters in John Carrol and Colin Baxter, eds., *The American Military Tradition; From Colonial Times to the Present* (Wilmington: SR Books, 1984). John Whiteclay Chamber. ed. in Chief, *The Oxford Companion of American Military History* (Oxford: University Press, 1999).

²¹ Richard W Stewart, ed., *The United States Army and the Forging of a Nation, 1775-1917*, rev. ed., Army Historical Series, American Military History (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 2005), 12, and 194.

²² Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 15. Timothy D. Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998). The exact relationship between Mahan and one of his most favorite students remains unexplored, but most biographies of McClellan are cautious in attributing much to the professor, lest they diminish McClellan's originality; see Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor and Fields), 1988.

²³ John F. Marszalek, *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 34, and 46.

²⁴ Grant – and his biographers - give no credit to Mahan; see J.F.C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1982); Bruce Catton, *U.S. Grant and the American Military Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954); James Marshall-Cornwall, *Grant as Military Commander* (New York: Barnes and Noble

Books, 1970): U.S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1886). Although Sherman had a lasting and amiable relationship with Mahan, his biographers ignore this; see B.H. Liddell Hart, *Sherman, Soldier, Realist, American* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992); Mark Coburn, *Terrible Innocence: General Sherman at War* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1993). General Thomas' biographers likewise make no mention of Mahan, even though Thomas was a colleague instructor there 1853 and had constant contact with the professor and the instruction at West Point; see Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga" The Life of General George H. Thomas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948. For influence upon Southern generals see endnote 10 above.

²⁵ J.D. Hittle, *Jomini and His Summary of the Art of War* (Harrisburg: Military Service Publishing Co., 1947), ii. See also Conrad H. Lanza, *Napoleon and Modern War* (Harrisburg: Military Service Publishing Co., 1949).

²⁶ Russell Weigley, *Toward an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1962), 38-78.

²⁷ Harry T. Williams, *The History of American Wars from Colonial Times to World War I* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 197.

²⁸ Roger J. Spiller, ed., *Dictionary of American Military Biography, Vol. II, H-P* (Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), 717.

²⁹ John D. Maxwell, "Warfare in the Age of Napoleon" in John Carroll and Colin Baxter, *The American Military Tradition From Colonial Times to the Present* (Wilmington: SR Books, 1984), 37.

³⁰ James L. Morrison Jr., "Military Education and Strategic Thought, 1846-1861" in Kenneth J. Hagan and R. Roberts William, eds., *Against All Enemies: Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 122.

³¹ Ibid., 119.

³² Ibid., 120

³³ Ibid., 125.

³⁴ Ibid., 127.

³⁵ James L. Morrison Jr., *"The Best School in the World": West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1986), 109.

³⁶ Geoffrey Perret, *A Country Made by War* (New York: Random House, 1989), 207 and 253.

³⁷ Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 268-271.

³⁸ Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). Also complimentary and contemporary is John C. Waugh, *The Class of 1846: From West Point to Appomattox: Stonewall Jackson, George McClellan and their Brothers* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1994); in which he describes Mahan's influence, 62-66; how Jackson learned Mahan's "celerity", 287; how McClellan lacked it, 350; and the positive influence of West Point values at Appomattox, 515.

³⁹ Thomas Fleming "Iron General" in Calvin L. Christman, ed., *America at War: An Anthology of Articles from MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* (Annapolis Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 239.

⁴⁰ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

⁴¹ John M. Carroll and Colin F. Baxter, *The American Military Tradition: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 49.

⁴² Thomas J. Goss, *The War Within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship During the Civil War* (Lawrence Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 9-10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1957), 168-169. See also Arthur A. Ekirch Jr., *The Civilian and the Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

⁴⁷ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), 432. On this page Janowitz says this of Mahan: "His conception of military operations as a complex engineering undertaking supplied the intellectual background for the emergence of the military manager."

⁴⁸ T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Random House, 1952); and T. Harry Williams, "Military Leadership of North and South" in David H. Donald, ed., *Why the North Won the Civil War* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 35-37. Bruce Catton, *America Goes to War* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1958). Bruce Catton, *Mr. Lincoln's Army* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962). Kenneth P. Williams, *Lincoln Finds a General: A Military Study of the Civil War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959). Beringer, Hattaway, et.al., *Why the South*

Lost. James M. MacPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988). Bruce Tap, *Over Lincoln's Shoulder: The Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998). Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991). Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

⁴⁹ Marcus Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians: the Martial Spirit in America, 1775-1865*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1968).

⁵⁰ Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: the Free Press, 1984), 133.

⁵¹ Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁵² William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: the Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992). See also B. Skelton: "The Army in the Age of the Common Man, 1815-1845" in Kenneth J. Hagan and William R. Roberts, eds., *Against all Enemies : Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 91-112.

⁵³ James L. Morrison Jr., "Military Education", 121.

⁵⁴ Paddy Griffith, "Civil War Cavalry: Missed Opportunities" in Calvin L. Christman, ed., *America at War: An Anthology of Articles from MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 151-152.

⁵⁵ James R. Endler, *Other Leader, Other Heroes: West Point's Legacy to America Beyond the Field of Battle* (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 51-58.

⁵⁶ Matthew Moten, *The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 2000), 62-64.

⁵⁷ R. Jones, *The Right Hand of Command: Use and Disuse of Personal Staffs in the American Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2000), 10.