

### With a Sword in One Hand & Jomini in the Other: The Problem of Military Thought in the Civil War North

William L. Barney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Barney, William L. (2012) "With a Sword in One Hand & Jomini in the Other: The Problem of Military Thought in the Civil War North," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.3.16

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss3/15>

## Review

Barney, William L.

Summer 2012

**Reardon, Carol** *With a Sword in One Hand & Jomini in the Other: The Problem of Military Thought in the Civil War North*. University of North Carolina Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3560-9

### Examining Military Doctrine

Based on the Steven and Janice Brose Lectures delivered at Penn State University in March, 2009, *With a Sword in One Hand & Jomini in the Other* consists of three essays dealing with efforts in the Union by civilians and soldiers alike to find in writings on war a body of thought to draw upon in trying to make sense of the military dimensions of the Civil War. Surprisingly, given the prominence of the French military theorist Jomini in the title, the essays downplay the significance of Jomini's writings. Instead, the emphasis is on the utter lack of any body of strategic thought that offered useful guidelines for how to wage the war and bring it to a successful conclusion.

After a very useful introduction that places Jomini's writings in the context of a growing body of military literature in eighteenth- and mid-nineteenth-century Europe aptly characterized by John A. Lynn as the age of the Military Enlightenment – the application of reason to reduce the complexity of war to fundamental principles – Professor Reardon explores in her first essay the robust debate in the North's print media over how the Union was waging the war laced with opinions as to how it should be fighting it. The war became part of a public debate in which praise and blame were dispensed freely. A revised edition of Jomini's *Summary of the Art of War* brought out by J. B. Lippincott in early 1862 gave the French writer a fleeting prominence soon lost in the welter of military theorists rushed into print by the publishing houses. The failure of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign to take Richmond and the apparent indecisiveness of the overall Union military effort associated Jomini's doctrines with lethargy and endless planning to no end. The popularity of other military authorities rose and fell in accordance with how the public perceived that their

ideas impacted Union successes and defeats. In the end, if any consensus emerged explaining Union victory, it was the pragmatic doggedness of Grant and the ability of the Union to concentrate their forces on all fronts during the campaigns of 1864.

Reardon next turns to a tension that has long permeated civil-military relations in the American republic: the debate over entrusting military leadership to professionally trained officers as opposed to relying on the emergence of a military “genius” whose innate understanding of war would emerge in a time of crisis. In tracing out this debate as it played out in the public reaction to the top generals appointed by the Lincoln administration, Reardon shows how each side selectively culled from the same authorities in order to make their case. Although nothing was settled in this debate, military reformers did recommit themselves to advancing an agenda in the postwar era for a professional system of educating for subordinate officers, a goal that would be achieved only in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War.

The concluding essay focuses on the human element in warfare, one of the most glaring gaps in the theorizing of Jomini and other European military writers. The result is a superb analysis of the cumulative impact of physical and psychological stresses on the morale and combat effectiveness of Union soldiers exposed to six weeks of nearly continuous fighting under adverse conditions in the Overland Campaign of the Army of the Potomac in 1864. Drawing upon modern studies that have proliferated since the Vietnam era, Reardon identifies what are known in military parlance as combat stress indicators. The demands of the physical environment – the fires, dense smoke, and tangled undergrowth of the Wilderness; the ongoing cycle of fighting, marching, and digging; the lack of any recuperative sleep; undernourishment as supply chains broke down; the mud, dust, and heat – drained the men of strength, energy, and often the ability to think clearly. Physical and mental exhaustion heightened the vulnerability of the soldiers to a host of extreme physiological responses – elevated heart rates, nodding off in the middle of combat, indifference to death, strange, unpredictable behavior – that underlay all the psychological symptoms of combat stress. After reading Reardon’s harrowing account of the conditions facing the soldiers in this campaign, no one should be surprised at the tentativeness of these men and their officers who represented the lead elements of the Army of the Potomac converging on Petersburg in the summer of 1864.

Specialists will enjoy Reardon's fresh look at the intellectual vacuum facing the Union high command as it struggled to formulate strategic ideas for winning the war. General readers, I suspect, will be drawn more to the fine-grained analysis of the staggering burdens imposed on Union soldiers in the Overland Campaign. Here Reardon highlights an issue that is all too relevant in the America of today that places extraordinary demands on its combat soldiers fighting abroad.

*William L. Barney is Professor of History at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His most recent work is The making of a Confederate: Walter Lenoir's Civil War (2007).*