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## LESSON 8

### MODERN THEORISTS (I): NAVAL--MAHAN AND CORBETT

*Moreover, from the middle of the Pacific War onward, this carrier air power had been increasingly directed against enemy land targets -- airfields, naval bases, ports, refineries--rather than primarily against enemy naval forces at sea. This development was in line with the strategic concept (often misunderstood by continental powers) that the purpose of powerful navies was not to oppose other navies, but instead to gain and maintain control of the seas in order to influence events on land.*

-- Jeffrey G. Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals*  
(1995)

## Introduction

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### **Purpose**

This lesson

- Examines how two maritime strategists, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett, influenced maritime strategy in the early 20th century
  - Considers what aspects of their theories continue to affect strategic thinking today
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### **Importance of the Study**

As a Marine officer, you need to be familiar with

- Two leading thinkers on naval theory and strategy
  - Theoretical transitions that accompanied the transformation of U.S. strategies from an "island nation" to a global perspective
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## Introduction, Continued

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**Relationship to  
Other  
Instruction**

- This lesson builds on your study of the classical theorists (lessons 1, 4, and 5) and complements the earlier study of land warfare.
  - Maritime strategy is a vital component in American national security policy and will be discussed further in *Strategic Level of War* (8802) and *Operational Level of War* (8803).
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**Study Time**

This lesson, including the issues for consideration, will require about 3.5 hours of study.

## Educational Objectives

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**Mahan and Corbett Theories** Compare the basic theories on maritime strategy of Mahan and Corbett, and describe the influence that earlier theorists may have had on their development. [JPME Areas 3b and 3d]

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***Forward... From the Sea*** Assess "*Forward... From the Sea*" and relate it to the theories of Mahan and Corbett. [JPME Area 3e]

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**Use of Sea Power** Explain the use of sea power as an element of military force employed to achieve national policy. [JPME Area 3b]

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**Six Elements** Identify the six elements that Mahan viewed as influencing the sea power of nations. [JPME Area 3b]

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**JPME Areas/ Objectives/Hours (accounting data)** 3/b/1.5  
3/d/0.5  
3/e/0.5

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## Historical Background

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### **Maritime Strategy and Theory**

As an officer in a maritime service, you need to be aware of an important subset of the theory of war: **maritime strategy**. Just as there were conflicting theories on land warfare, there were conflicting thoughts on naval warfare. To truly understand and develop a theory of war, you need to incorporate all strategies, including maritime thinking. Naval strategy has evolved in much the same manner as land warfare. In many instances, they developed independently and in conflict with one another.

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### **Two Maritime Theorists**

Two maritime theorists, the American Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Briton Sir Julian S. Corbett, emerged as the leading thinkers on naval strategy. Like Jomini and Clausewitz, Mahan and Corbett agreed on a central theme. Their differences are much the same as those of Jomini and Clausewitz. To a degree, Jomini influenced Mahan while Clausewitz was held in high esteem by Corbett.

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### **Development of Maritime Strategy**

This lesson examines the development of the theory of sea power as it emerged at the end of the 19th century and introduces the works of these two classic theorists of naval strategy and tactics. Through his historical studies, Mahan achieved greatness as both a strategic theorist and an evangelist for sea power in its broadest sense. Corbett, a naval strategist, developed a theoretical framework fundamental to an understanding of naval warfare.

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# Mahan

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## **Importance of Mahan and Corbett**

Mahan and Corbett stand out as the leading thinkers on naval theory, strategy, and history during the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The readings for this lesson will introduce you to their basic theories.

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## **Mahan and Jomini**

The American Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), a career Naval officer, was primarily a Jominian. His ideas were based on what he considered to be a scientific historical analysis of the rise of Britain to global colonial and imperial prominence. He then applied these ideas to the United States.

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## **Strategic Concerns of Mahan**

Mahan was conscious of the growing power of the United States. He thought it had almost unlimited resources and potential. In the context of quickly changing geopolitical realities for the United States, Mahan

- Argued for a large fleet of capital ships whose purpose would be to destroy the enemy battle fleet in a decisive fleet engagement (*guerre d'escadre*), thus achieving total command of the sea
  - Assumed there was no foreign enemy capable of attacking CONUS with a large land army
  - Called on the United States to acquire key overseas possessions to act as coaling stations for America's large fleet of capital ships
  - Was one of America's foremost proponents calling for the U.S. to build a canal in Panama or Nicaragua.
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## Corbett

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### **Corbett and Clausewitz**

The Briton Sir Julian Stafford Corbett (1854-1922) wrote in the Clausewitzian tradition. Having a legal and academic background, he based his ideas on a wide view of history, applicable to any nation, island, or continent, but his strategic concern was Britain.

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### **Strategic Challenge for Britain**

- Corbett worried about a turn-of-the-century Britain faced with a declining naval dominance, limited budget, and limited manpower resources.
  - Corbett was specifically concerned with the possibility of a seaborne invasion of Great Britain by a continental land power like France or Germany, but he was confident that British seapower could provide an effective defense.
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### **Other Strategic Concerns**

- Corbett was also interested in
- Achieving local (or theater) command of the sea as opposed to an exclusive focus on total command of the seas
  - Exploiting the possibility of limited wars with limited objectives
  - Using amphibious operations
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## Required Readings

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***Some Principles  
of Maritime  
Strategy***

Corbett, Julian S. *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988, reprint of the 1911 edition, pp. 77 to 92 (16 pages), Part II (Theory of Naval War) Chapter 1, "Theory of the Object--Command of the Sea." While you read this excerpt from Corbett's writing, focus on his theory about the fundamental principles which underlie command of the sea. Look for the consistency of his thought with these principles.

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***Makers of  
Modern Strategy***

Crowl, Philip A. "Alfred Thayer Mahan, The Naval Historian." *Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, edited by Peter Paret. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 444 to 447. This historical essay acknowledges Alfred Thayer Mahan as one of the leading military theorists of his age. Crowl's comprehensive approach provides an excellent basis to examine Mahan's approach to theory and maritime strategy and his views on the fundamentals of sea power.

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***Theory and  
Nature of War  
Readings***

Department of the Navy. *Forward... From the Sea*. Washington, D.C., 1994, pp. 1 to 12. *Theory and Nature of War Readings*, Annex C, pp. C-3 to C-12. This selected reading is a white paper from the Secretary of the Navy. It provides the foundation for the concept of Operational Maneuver From the Sea (OMFTS), a concept for projecting naval power ashore.

Look for the ways in which the concept emphasizes the importance of

- Littoral areas
  - More intimate cooperation between forces afloat and forces ashore
  - Naval expeditionary force
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## For Further Study

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### Supplemental Readings

The readings listed here are **not** required; they are provided as recommended sources of additional information about topics in this lesson that may interest you. They will increase your knowledge and augment your understanding of this lesson.

Weigley, Russell F. *The American Way of War*. MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc. Collier-MacMillan Canada Ltd., 8 1973. Read the following chapters:

- Chapter 9, "A Strategy of Sea Power and Empire: Stephen B. Luce and Alfred Thayer Mahan" (pp. 167 to 191). How did Jomini influence Luce in the historical context of the years between the Civil War and the 20th century?
  - Chapter 12, "A Strategy for Pacific Ocean War: Naval Strategists of the 1920s and 1930s" (pp. 242 to 265). How did politics between the Democrats and Republicans and key strategists affect development of naval strategies before and during World Wars I and II?
  - Chapter 12, "The Strategic Tradition of A. T. Mahan: Strategies of the Pacific War" (pp. 269 to 311). What was the scope of Mahan's influence during and after the World Wars?
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## Issues for Consideration

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### Introduction

The theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett have greatly influenced U.S. naval strategy during the past one hundred years. You have been encouraged to see how

- Mahan was influenced by Jomini
  - Corbett was influenced by Clausewitz
  - Their ideas continue in current policy as described in *Forward... From the Sea*.
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### Jomini and Mahan

How did Jomini's influence manifest itself in Mahan's writing? How did Clausewitz' influence manifest itself in Corbett's writing? Look for specific examples.

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### Concept of "Seapower"

What was Mahan's concept of "seapower"? Did he think it could be an instrument of war? How?

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### *Guerre d'escadre*

Why did Mahan argue for a large fleet of capital ships whose purpose was to destroy the enemy battle fleet in a decisive fleet engagement (*guerre d'escadre*), thus achieving total command of the sea?

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### Navies vice Armies

According to Mahan, were navies better instruments of national policy than were armies? Why? Was this especially true of the U.S.? Why?

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### Mahan's Changing Views

Look for

- Ways Mahan's views on employment of the fleet changed as his perception of U.S. roles and needs changed
  - Examples of his impact on today's naval policy as reflected in *Forward... From the Sea*.
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## Issues for Consideration, Continued

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**Six Critical Elements**

One of the important issues in Mahan's views is the six geopolitical elements of seapower. Look them up in your reading(s) and think about how they related to the geopolitical perspective from which Mahan was writing and from today's global perspective.

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**Corbett's Basic Premise**

What premise did Corbett base his theories on?

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**Balanced Fleet Concept**

- What did Corbett mean by his concept of balanced fleet and what kinds of warfare could be waged with the capability the term implies?
  - What kind of capabilities did Corbett want to see in a fleet? Why? How were these capabilities related?
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**Land Vice Naval Warfare**

According to Corbett what is the fundamental difference between land and naval warfare? What restriction exist for land warfare? What kind of balance did Corbett propose between maritime and land forces? What part did he believe maritime strategy should play in national strategy?

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***Guerre de Course***

Corbett argued that *guerre de course*, commerce-raiding warfare, was no longer appropriate for his time. What was his reason?

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