SEC 6381: The Nature and Theory of War

Course Description/Overview

“The Nature and Theory of War” course introduces students to a selection of military classics. These include books, theories, and interpretations of recognized and enduring theorists. The course will improve the student’s critical reasoning and analytical skills by critically analyzing a specific selection of what classical war theorists had to say about war, its nature, and its conduct. Students evaluate the various theories in terms of both the authors’ immediate contexts and purposes, and their enduring value for the present and future. To achieve this objective, students will read assigned background materials, analyze scholarly interpretations, participate in online seminar sessions, and discuss and analyze theorists and theories of warfare, determine enduring themes, and address their applicability to the contemporary security environment. Students will be familiar with the general historical and intellectual outlines of military thought from antiquity through the early 21st century. They will be able to differentiate between narrowly focused “prescriptive” theories that address specific procedural approaches to the conduct of warfare and “descriptive” explorations that focus on the nature of human conflict and the enduring complexities of warfare’s interaction with society.

Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, the students will be able to:

- Analyze, compare, and contrast prescriptive and descriptive theories of air, land, naval, space, and unconventional/irregular warfare.
- Analyze continuity and change associated with character and nature of war.
- Identify and discuss moral and ethical considerations associated with war and war theory.
- Identify and compare inter-relationships between military theorists and the societies and cultures that produced them.
- Analyze the applicability, if any,

Grading Policies

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percent of Grade</th>
<th>Due Date and Requirements</th>
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<tr>
<td>Engaged participation (discussion)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td><strong>Weekly.</strong> Initial post are due by 11:59 P.M. CST Saturday, of each week. Respond to at least 2 posts from other students by 11:59 P.M. CST Sunday, the end of each week.</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Assessment (Lesson 3)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td><strong>11:59 P.M. Central Standard Time of the Sunday ending Week 3.</strong> 2-3 page executive summary of a theoris</td>
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Course Organization:

Lesson 1: Introduction and Sun Tzu: What is war?

What is the nature of war and has it changed over time? Is there a universally accepted theory of war? Are there different “ways” of war? These questions are foundational to understanding the various theories associated with war and the conduct of war in the land, air, sea, space and cyber domains. Continuity and change are certainly part of war. Change in warfare is ubiquitous. Some changes are random, but some occur in cycles or patterns that make general estimates—not predictions—possible. By examining history and theory, we can use those cycles and patterns to provide insights into the conduct of future war. Conversely, although change is an invariable feature of war, so is continuity—a fact that is often overlooked as people who generally believe they understand war try to anticipate or keep up with the latest technological or doctrinal changes. In some respects, the more war changes, the more apparent the continuity becomes. This takes us back to the importance of understanding war and the theories associated with this social and political endeavor. Perhaps the best way to begin our theoretical journey is to begin with the most ancient of codified explanations of war and warfare – Sun Tzu’s, The Art of War. Written around 500 B.C.E. Sun Tzu stressed the importance of achieving victory through indirect methods, arguing the “supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.” The book has much more to offer about war and its significance to state security. Since Sun Tzu represents an eastern perspective of war, is it applicable to western constructs as well? Lesson two will focus on the origins of the western way of war.

Lesson 2: Thucydides and the Western Tradition:

Thucydides is often credited with being the father of political realism. His most famous work, The Peloponnesian War, is presented as a history rather than a theory. It stands at the beginning of the Western tradition of military history. Thucydides also provides insight into the importance of culture and its relationship to security. Implicit in this text is the question of the relationship of history to theory. Students should pay particular attention to the speeches of the main characters as reported by Thucydides, as well as the author's comments on war and society, human nature, leadership, and strategy.

Lesson 3: Jomini and the Science of War:
Antoine-Henri Jomini, a Swiss officer who rose to the rank of general in Napoleon’s army before switching his allegiance to Russia in 1813, emerged as one of the earliest and most influential military scholars of the Napoleonic period. His seminal work, The Art of War, first appeared in 1838. Jomini, a product of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, applied the scientific method, as he understood it, to the study of warfare. He argued that war could be reduced to a universal immutable set of principles for achieving battlefield success. This seminar examines the theoretical writings of Jomini and explores the application of Jomini’s scientific approach to war and strategy to modern operations. Are Jomini’s principles for the employment of military force still applicable today? How is net assessment and operations research an extension of Jomini’s notion of war as a science? What might such analyses miss about the nature of war?

**Lesson 4: Clausewitz and the Art of War:**

Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian contemporary of Jomini, is arguably the most influential of military theorists. While Jomini offered a more systematic and scientific study of war, Clausewitz developed a more nuanced, philosophical tome on the nature of war and the complexity of waging it. For Clausewitz, war was “not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means” (On War, p. 87). To this point, war could not be reduced to a set of military axioms, for it was far too complex and unpredictable, a paradoxical trinity of reason, chance, and primordial violence. How do Jomini and Clausewitz compare in their views of war? Is Clausewitz’s understanding of war still relevant.

**Lesson 5: Naval Theory:**

The Napoleonic wars left a mark on naval strategy, influencing the writings of the two great naval threats of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—American naval officer, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and the lawyer from England, Julian S. Corbett. Both theorists attempted to develop a theory of naval war, applying what they read about land warfare to the maritime operations. Mahan offered a theory of sea power and principles of maritime strategy, drawing heavily on Jomini’s writings in his emphasis on the importance of lines of communication, concentration, and the offensive to destroy the enemy's fleet. In contrast, Corbett, like Clausewitz, offered a theory of naval war and principles of maritime strategy that eschewed prescription. Which set of ideas better accounts for the practice of sea power during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Are Mahan and/or Corbett’s ideas still relevant for the employment of naval forces today?

**Lesson 6: Air and Space Theory:**

When World War I began, few understood how to employ airpower as an instrument of national policy. By the end of the war, more questions than answers remained. During the interwar period, bold claims for the power of air forces to supplant land and sea power matured—alongside arguments for the emergence of independent air services. Airmen and theorists like Giulio Douhet in Italy and J.C. Slessor in Great Britain extolled airpower’s future prospects and made it a basis for their theories of airpower employment; this included discussions of air superiority, strategic bombing, interdiction, and close air support. The modern discourse of airpower theory was born, commencing the conversation about the capabilities and limitations of airpower— that continues to this day. What problems does airpower theory attempt to resolve? In what other forms of military theory do we see the origins of airpower theory? What are the common threads between the ideas of these classical airpower theorists? Where do they diverge? How does classical airpower theory apply to the modern warfighter? What is the state of space theory?

**Lesson 7: The Theories of (Almost) Everything Else:**

Some commentators believe that insurgents, terrorists, and warlords have transformed not merely the character of war but even its nature. So unfamiliar has the conduct of
modern wars become to Western conceptions of war that some commentators have privileged them with the title of “new wars.” However, what is really new about contemporary conflict, as opposed to what seems new? This seminar considers whether the nature and/or character of war has changed since the end of the Cold War. Are today’s wars fundamentally different from earlier conflicts? Is war still a useful instrument of policy? Which of the military theorists examined in this course are still relevant for understanding the nature, character, and conduct of war today and in the future?

Lesson 8: Assessment

This week is set aside for the student to complete a 12-15 page analytical assignment. The assignment measures student mastery of the course objectives.

Course Bibliography and Required Readings:


Bartholomees, Jr. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, June 2012): 133-141.


Bassford, Christopher. “Jomini and Clausewitz: Their Interaction.” An edited version of a paper presented to the 23rd Meeting of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe at Georgia State University February 26, 1993,


Jomini, Antoine Henri. The Art of War, trans. By Capt G.H. Mendell and Lt. W.P. Craighill, 1862. (Free) Gutenberg or (Google book The Complete Art of War includes Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, and Jomini) ($1.99 on Google)


Luttwak, Edward N. “Give War a Chance,” Foreign Affairs 78, no. 4 (July/August 1999): 36-44.


Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963 (Kindle) or

*(Google book The Complete Art of War includes Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, and Jomini)* ($1.99 on Google)


**OPTIONAL ONLINE SOURCES:**

- [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15076/15076-h/15076-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15076/15076-h/15076-h.htm) (Corbett) (cut and paste)
- History, 1998) (Reprint of original English edition) at:
  - [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13529/13529-h/13529-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13529/13529-h/13529-h.htm) (Mahan)

**Communication**

**Office Hours/Contacting the Instructor**

See the Instructor Information section for contact information.

**University Policies**

**Academic Integrity**
Angelo State University expects its students to maintain complete honesty and integrity in their academic pursuits. Students are responsible for understanding and complying with the university [Academic Honor Code](#) and the [ASU Student Handbook](#).

**Accommodations for Disability**
ASU is committed to the principle that no qualified individual with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs or activities of the university, or be subjected to discrimination by the university, as provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments of 2008 (ADAAA), and subsequent legislation.

Student Affairs is the designated campus department charged with the responsibility of reviewing and authorizing requests for reasonable accommodations based on a disability, and it is the student’s responsibility to initiate such a request by emailing studentservices@angelo.edu, or by contacting:

**Office of Student Affairs**
University Center, Suite 112
325-942-2047 Office
325-942-2211 FAX
Student absence for religious holidays
A student who intends to observe a religious holy day should make that intention known in writing to the instructor prior to the absence. A student who is absent from classes for the observance of a religious holy day shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment scheduled for that day within a reasonable time after the absence.