

# The study of war

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By Norbert Hirschhorn

Sometime between 600 and 400 B.C. the Chinese general Sun Tzu wrote a treatise, "Art of War," that still influences military and even corporate strategies of today. Napoleon, Mao Tse-Tung, Ho Chi Minh, Colin Powell and Norman Schwartzkopf were among the many military leaders who paid close attention to Sun Tzu's precepts.

Some doubt he existed - the work a composite from others - but if he did live this story tells his character: Sun Tzu was once auditioning to be the top commander of an Emperor's army. The Emperor asked if Sun Tzu could drill, discipline and make soldiers of any body of people. "Yes, of course." Can you do it with women, the Emperor continued. "Yes, of course." So the Emperor sent 180 of his concubines for the test. Sun Tzu lined them up, made sure they knew left from right, explained the orders, then shouted, "Left turn! Right turn!" and beat the drum. The women broke out in giggles. Sun Tzu explained and repeated the orders and again beat the drum. The women roared with laughter. Sun Tzu then ordered the two most beautiful women to be executed. The Emperor, alarmed, begged that it not happen. But executed they were. Sun Tzu now repeated the orders and the women performed flawlessly. "The Emperor likes only empty words," snarled Sun Tzu, "He is unable to put them into practice." Sun Tzu, who would have intimidated Donald Trump, got the job, and won many battles. War has been part of human existence perhaps as long as our species has been spreading across the globe, and continues to the present. Organized warfare, however, is known from only about 2500 B.C. Sun Tzu was the genius who brought a sense of organization to military strategy; the conduct of fighting; moral precepts within armies and behavior toward enemies. He was a realist: "War is a matter of vital importance to the State ... the road to survival or ruin. It must be thoroughly studied." Sun Tzu emphasized five elements of successful warfare: understanding the terrain (think of Desert Storm, Kandahar); weather (think of D-Day); logistics ("The army travels on its stomach"); the General's virtue and wisdom (Eisenhower, Marshall); but foremost, success requires a moral and benevolent Emperor, "who first cultivates his own humanity and justice." By this I take to mean a ruler who can convince his people that a war is necessary (Roosevelt).

Sun Tzu might have been horrified by how we conduct war today. War had to be as subtle as it was brutal. "All warfare is based on deception." He insisted that war be done quickly: "Make the war swift, for there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited." After Vietnam, and now Iraq and Afghanistan, will we have learned this lesson? Sun Tzu understood that protracted war leads to high taxation, deprivation, forced recruitment, famine. Civilian casualties rise. Sun Tzu insisted on a humane approach to war - not from charity, but to assure that one's own troops and civilians would be properly treated. "Treat captives well, and care for them...Do not put a premium on killing. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill...Attack cities only when there is no alternative." He would be horrified by the torture of prisoners, the use of rape as an instrument of war, firebombing and atomic warfare against cities. He might, however, have approved of unmanned drones. He acknowledged the wiliness of guerrilla war, small forces capable of withdrawing, hiding, but then striking. What would he have thought of suicide bombings, an ultimate weapon of the outnumbered and outgunned?

It is typically said that war is too important to be left to the generals. And yet, Sun Tzu observed, "No evil is greater than commands of the sovereign from the court. He whose generals are able and not interfered with by the sovereign will be victorious." Germany might have won World War II had it not been for Hitler's military interference and mismanagement. Lincoln closely observed Union military strategy, but he had to find the right generals, Grant and Sherman, to conduct the war on the ground as they saw it. Sun Tzu understood this: "It is said that enlightened rulers deliberate upon plans, and good generals execute them....Therefore, the enlightened ruler is prudent and the good general is warned against rash action." Sun Tzu favored blitzkrieg tactics: "When the enemy is at rest, make him move; when well fed, starve him. Appear at places to which he must hasten; move swiftly where he does not expect you." He also emphasized the need for espionage, code-breaking, subterfuge - as ways to hasten victory. Our modern electronic surveillance would meet with his approval.

Sun Tzu was a man of war, not peace. In his time, war was a way of life, inevitable, therefore to be conducted in the most efficient and humane way possible. In our brutal age we may wonder if the prophet Isaiah's words can ever come to pass: "(T)hey shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

Norbert Hirschhorn, a poet and retired physician who taught at the University of Minnesota and headed the Division of Family Health in the Minnesota health department, lives in London. His column appears occasionally on these pages. His e-mail address is [bertzpoet@gmail.com](mailto:bertzpoet@gmail.com).