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The Art of War:
Battles Won and Wars Lost

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The Art of War by Sun Tzu is one of, if not the most influential military manuscripts of all time. The methodologies outlined by Sun Tzu are still being taught at the world's most prestigious military academies, including the U.S. Naval Academy and West Point. Sun Tzu saw war as much more than just fighting or the movement of pawns on a board, "War is a grave affair of state; it is a place of life and death, a road to survival and extinction, a matter to be pondered carefully."¹ To Sun Tzu and his followers war is a matter of life and death. Not only did he understand the military tactics required for success in any campaign, but the social and political implications of war that lead to defeat without a single battle being fought. Sun Tzu's work shines a light onto the underlying factors of war, explaining in great detail how they determine the outcome of every war past or present. His message of proper military strategy is put on display in an emphatic fashion during the Vietnam War. By analyzing *The Art of War* it becomes clear that Sun Tzu predicted the Viet Cong's victory and the United States' failure centuries in advance. He was considered the greatest military strategist of his time, but the origin and even the existence of Sun Tzu is questioned. "As John Minford, translator of a new edition of this text, has observed, if whoever wrote it 'was indeed an advisor to King He Lu ..., then he would have been a contemporary of Confucius (551-478 BCE). And yet he is not mentioned once in the Zuo Commentary, the principle source for the history of the period. Despite this fact, by the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), everyone knew of Master Sun the Strategist, and his name had become inseparable from *The Art of War*."² No matter who Sun Tzu was his legend lives on through his famous treatise.

Sun Tzu's story began in 500 BCE when King He Lu of the state of Wu, located in Eastern China, called Sun Tzu to address the threat of an invasion from the state of Chu. Sun Tzu claimed to be able to turn anyone into a soldier, so He Lu challenged him to turn the palace women into soldiers. Sun Tzu showed the women the basic maneuvers, appointed the two eldest women platoon leaders and ordered the exercise to begin. After one failed attempt Sun

Tzu reiterated his orders to the women. After the second failed attempt Sun Tzu, in front of everyone, executed the platoon leaders and immediately appointed two new ones. The third time he ordered them to do the exercise the women followed his instructions perfectly and without hesitation. After the display Sun Tzu was granted full control over the Wu army by King He Lu.

Outnumbered and out trained, Sun Tzu used his strategic principles outlined in *The Art of War*, including the use of spies, deception, knowledge of the landscape, and most importantly knowing your enemy. Using mostly guerilla tactics Sun Tzu and the Wu forces struck quickly, yet decisively and disappeared. Sun Tzu and his military exploits are legendary, outnumbered, out trained, or fighting against insurmountable odds, it didn't matter Sun Tzu accounted for every situation and had a strategy that resulted in victory. "... Sun Tzu's general intent is clear - to analyze the diversity of interdependent choice situations in warfare and to deduce efficient strategies - plans of action that lead to victory, broadly defined."³ Through his superior strategies and tactics Sun Tzu was able to win the support of neighboring kingdoms who joined his fight against the Chu. As his forces grew, Sun Tzu could go on the offensive and despite the bad hand he was dealt he was able to defeat the Chu army in decisive fashion.

If you follow Sun Tzu and his teachings, you will go to war with victory ensured, but if you ignore *The Art of War* defeat is inevitable. "Although immensely popular in the Far East, and widely available in Europe, the message of Sun Tzu has been seriously neglected in America."⁴ Many wars throughout history are proof of this statement, but there is no greater example than America's defeat in Vietnam. Did the Viet Cong defeat the United States, or did we defeat ourselves? Despite having a much more powerful, highly trained, and organized military the United States was defeated in Vietnam just as the Kingdom of Chu was defeated by Sun Tzu. The Viet Cong used the principles that Sun Tzu outlined in *The Art of War*, deception, use of spies, knowledge of the enemy and landscape as their victory was ensured from the moment the United States set foot in Vietnam.

“Know the enemy, know yourself, and victory is never in doubt, not in a hundred battles.”⁵ Superior knowledge is the key to success in warfare, therefore before going to war, one needs to know everything about the enemy. You need to know their culture, their history, and their strategy. The Viet Cong were fanatically devoted to fighting to unify their country, no matter the price. The country had constantly been at war since World War II when they fought against the Japanese. They eventually fell victim to the Japanese occupation, but their fighting spirit never wavered. The guerilla tactics used by the Viet Cong were more well suited to fighting at home where they were masters of the terrain. The United States knew of, but chose to ignore these factors about the Vietnamese. In contrast the Viet Cong knew us. They knew as a foreign combatant, we would fight a traditional campaign that their guerilla tactics could pick apart. They knew the tactics behind every movement that the American forces took. In many cases this understanding included our lack of tactics; like our habit of blindly sending counterinsurgent patrols where they could easily be picked off by the Viet Cong fighters they were so desperately searching for. They knew drawing the war out would demoralize the troops and the American public, who were already apprehensive about fighting to begin with. The effect of this demoralization led to multiple offensive campaigns by military leaders, which produced occasional individual and group atrocities against non-combatants by American soldiers. These atrocities accelerated the decline in support for the war back home, marked by numerous anti-war protests across the nation. The continuation of the war despite the nationwide desire for its end left a tainted feeling that surrounds the legacy of Vietnam to this day.

Vietnam was the first so called ‘televised war’, where the American news media brought the horror of war into living rooms on a daily basis. “Vietnam veterans for years felt tainted by the stigma of unallocated blame because of the failure to prosecute the guilty, no matter how numerous or high ranking.”⁶ In addition to demoralizing troops overseas, drawing out the war took a drastic toll on support of the war back home. Sun Tzu said, “No nation has ever benefited

from a protracted war”⁷ America was sending citizens to and spending money on a war the public wanted to end. It is impossible to win a war overseas when you have virtually no support at home. The Americans and the Viet Cong had polar opposite approaches in the Vietnam War, one based on ignorance and one based on knowledge. One led to defeat and the other led to victory.

“The Way of war is a way of deception. When able, feign inability; when deploying troops appear not to be. When near, appear far; when far, appear near. Lure with bait; strike with chaos.”⁸ Sun Tzu believed that deception was one of the most valuable tools in warfare. When deception is combined with knowledge, the effectiveness of your strategy increases exponentially. The Viet Cong were masters of deception, troop and supply movements were done in complete secret. Using a vast underground network of tunnels the Viet Cong were able to move troops and supplies in complete accordance with Sun Tzu’s principle of deception. The United States failed miserably to be deceptive when it came to movement of units. To clear a path for troops, we would carpet bomb areas before sending ground forces to sweep out any remaining insurgents. Wherever the bombs dropped, the troops were not far behind, and the Viet Cong knew it. They would flock to and surround the area and, as Sun Tzu would put it, strike with chaos. “The results consistently show that bombing was counterproductive as a counterinsurgency practice. High frequencies of bombing corresponded unambiguously to higher levels of downstream control by the Viet Cong.”⁹ The Viet Cong would repeat this pattern as the Americans repeated it, and were able to gain ground in the war effort as the years went on.

Vietnam is what Sun Tzu would refer to as Deadlock ground, “‘Deadlock’ means that neither side finds it advantageous to make a move. On deadlock terrain, even if our enemy offers bait, we do not make a move; we lure him out; we retreat. And when half his troops are out, that is our moment to strike.”¹⁰ One of the United States’ biggest mistakes in Vietnam was going to war without a clear objective. There was no clear cut target for the Americans to capture to end the war, because the Viet Cong lacked a central base of operation. The Viet

Cong were spread across the country, which prevented the United States from attacking and wiping them out with a single blow. When troops were sent out on patrol fewer and fewer would come back. The Viet Cong were able to pick off both incoming and outgoing patrols by surrounding United States bases and simply waiting for the opportunity to present itself. The Viet Cong didn't have to take the risk of mounting a major direct assault on United States forces because they didn't have to win battles to win the war. "Ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting."¹¹ The Viet Cong were winning the war without having to launch a single attack. To the Viet Cong a war of attrition was a success because on Deadlock ground, where any move for either side could be fatal, they would always have the ability to watch and wait until the moment to strike presented itself.

"Spies are a key element in warfare. On them depends an army's every move."¹² Sun Tzu views spies as one of the most valuable assets in warfare because of the strategic purpose they serve. He described five types of spies: local, internal, double, dead and live. Each serving their own important strategic purpose. Local spies come from fellow countrymen, internal come from inserting spies into the forces of the enemy, double spies feedback false information, dead spies deliberately provide the enemy with false information, and live spies return with information. The Viet Cong possessed a vast intelligence network made up of local, internal, dead and live spies. Their local spies were sympathetic civilians. Among the South Vietnamese population the Viet Cong had supporters that passed information gathered by simply observing the American troops. The Viet Cong possessed internal spies, disguised as South Vietnamese soldiers that infiltrated American bases and gathered information from within. The dead spies would allow false information to be intercepted by American spies hopelessly attempting to infiltrate the complex Viet Cong intelligence network. The live spies played the largest role in the Viet Cong intelligence network. They gathered valuable information regarding numerous aspects of the tactics and strategy of the United States. Knowing every punch that is about to be thrown at you and

where your opponent's openings will be gives you an insurmountable advantage over your opponent. The use of spies by the Viet Cong was an essential part of their success in the war.

"Managing many is the same as managing few; it is a question of division. Fighting with many is the same as fighting with few,"¹³ We think of war as a numbers game, the side with the most soldiers and most firepower will win, but Sun Tzu refutes this principle. He and the army of Wu were greatly outnumbered by the Chu army, but Sun Tzu emerged victorious because of his superior handling of strategy. He was able to get the most out of limited resources he possessed. The Viet Cong were outnumbered and outgunned, but like Sun Tzu they emerged victorious. The tight guerilla structure of the Viet Cong combined with their massive network of tunnels spread across the entire country made it impossible to deal a direct blow to a large percentage of their insurgency. Having a suitably sized fighting force spread across the country allowed the Viet Cong to strike decisively and then disappear anywhere without leaving a clue where they were headed next. Contrary to the widespread strike and disappear strategy employed by the Viet Cong the United States consolidated their forces. American military bases provided a clear objective point for the Viet Cong to target. The Viet Cong knew they couldn't mount a full out offensive on the bases themselves, but they could wait just outside and pick off incoming and outgoing soldiers. Having a consolidated area holding all of our troops and resources provided a clear target that the widespread Viet Cong were able to take advantage of. The Viet Cong were able to maximize the potential of their fighting force, despite being outmanned and outgunned they were effective in accomplishing their objectives.

"The wise general is a Lord of Destiny; he holds the nation's peace or peril in his hands"¹⁴ the implementation of a strong chain of command is essential to properly executing Sun Tzu's strategies. The American chain of command in Vietnam, headed by General Westmoreland, was accustomed to fighting a traditional campaign proved another one of Sun Tzu's principles, "The general

who cannot master his anger orders his troops out like ants, sending one in three to their deaths.”¹⁵ They were conditioned to fighting a traditional war, but now sending troops on what would be routine counterinsurgency patrols was turned into marching them to their deaths. “Westmoreland was not proposing a ‘new’ concept of operations or a change in basic military strategy. Offensive operations designed to locate main force units and their bases remained the focus of his strategy.”¹⁶ Fighting a search and destroy war in an environment like Vietnam showed a clear lack of leadership, flexibility, and military creativity in the United States’ command structure. “Lewy is especially critical of Westmoreland’s search and destroy strategy. It represents, he says, the ‘traditional attack mission of infantry,’ but since the ‘setting of a counterinsurgency was in the environment of Vietnam posed anything but traditional problems, the results of this conventional way of thinking and acting were to prove a great disappointment.”¹⁷ As previously discussed Vietnam had no endgame, there was no objective that the United States could take to bring the war would end. The United States military was running a search and destroy campaign with nothing particular to search for and destroy. The Vietnam War became an exercise in futility that, according to the records of the National Archives, resulted in the loss of 58,220 American lives. “Not until 1995 did Vietnam release its official estimate of war dead: as many as 2 million civilians on both sides and some 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters.”¹⁸

The Viet Cong did not experience the same failures from their commander General Vo Nguyen Giap. General Westmoreland and General Giap were polar opposites. Westmoreland received training at West Point, Giap’s education in warfare was completely self taught. Westmoreland was traditional, rigid, and lost, Giap was untraditional, adaptive, and won. General Giap was not pressured to win the war in a quick hard hitting campaign like his United States counterpart. He took the methodic approach of guerilla strike and disappear warfare. His command over the Viet Cong was characterized by organized, quick strikes that devastated the United States forces that were attempting a

traditional campaign in an untraditional environment. His leadership of the Viet Cong provided an effective guerilla strategy that helped them win the war. Westmoreland and Giap took very different approaches that reflected their backgrounds, one led to crushing defeat and the other to undeniable victory, proving Sun Tzu's idea that the general holds the fate of the nation in their hands.

The one time the Viet Cong ignored Sun Tzu it led to disaster, the Tet Offensive on January 30th 1968. It started as a brilliant Sun Tzu deception tactic, agreeing to an armistice during the holiday period known as Tet, then launching an attack when the enemies guard would be down. The error in the plan was that Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Communist North Vietnamese, wanted the victory to end the war in one decisive blow. "While the Americans were not winning, they had the power to expand the war. On the other hand, while the communists had successfully managed to withstand the US military power, they were not able to achieve a decisive victory. Their goal continued to be a decisive victory in a relatively short time."¹⁹ The Tet Offensive ignored the fact that Vietnam was 'Deadlock ground' making a direct attack disadvantageous and unnecessary. Tet would consist of multiple widespread attacks on United States bases all across the country ignoring Sun Tzu's idea that, "The skillful warrior attacks so that the enemy cannot defend; he defends so the enemy cannot attack."²⁰ General Giap didn't want to go through with the Tet Offensive because he saw the flaws of the plan, despite his General's Ho Chi Minh demanded the plan be carried out. Spreading the Viet Cong guerrilla fighting force so thin for a widespread direct assault went against the winning formula the Viet Cong had produced and proved a costly decision. By attacking where the Americans could defend themselves the Viet Cong cracked open a window of opportunity for the American soldiers who could now take the fight to the Viet Cong. The Tet Offensive led to an extended period of fighting that produced numerous casualties on both sides. Tet had no winners or losers, but the military consequences were more detrimental to the Viet Cong resulting in the loss of

70,000 soldiers. The Viet Cong lost their strategic advantage and the press coverage of the Tet Offensive greatly impacted public opinion of the war, “Many members of the American media used Tet to underscore their arguments that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable and venerable broadcast journalist Walter Cronkite questioned U.S policies in a February 1968, asserting, ‘we are now in a stalemate.’ Lyndon Johnson allegedly responded, ‘If we’ve lost Cronkite, we’ve lost the country.’”²¹ The Tet Offensive, despite its strategic failures, marked a turning point in the Vietnam War.

The United States military has failed to learn from its strategic shortcomings even after observing the disaster that occurred in Vietnam. The inability to acknowledge flawed strategy has and will lead to more military blunders. “As the United States finds itself involved in a dire counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, with little apparent reason for optimism, some political scientists have turned their attention to the origins and development of U.S military strategy in Vietnam for readily applicable lessons.”²² The application of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* will result in victory, but the United States military continues to take the traditional approach, failing to understand the error of their ways. The United States military has been repeating the same action for decades, expecting a different result. Unless you adapt you are destined to fail, be it in Vietnam or in Afghanistan.

The Vietnam War provides us with evidence that Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* stands the test of time. *The Art of War* strategies and tactics used by Sun Tzu in 500 BCE are applicable to modern and future wars because Sun Tzu stripped war down to the bones. Sun Tzu identified the underlying factors that determine who will be victorious on the battlefield, but he also understood the political and social implications of waging war. War is much more than fighting or moving pawns on a board, a war can be won or lost without a single battle being fought, it is life and it is death. The most important factor that Sun Tzu teaches is knowledge because, “He who knows neither self nor enemy will fail in every battle.”²³ Being able to collect knowledge and the application of that knowledge

are two of the most critical aspects of warfare. *The Art of War* and its teachings will be immortal because the basic tenants of war never change.

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