

Fighting it out with strategy

By  Sid Peimer

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When you're the age of about two or three you discover something quite devastating. And you never view the world in the same way again...

And what do you learn? You learn that the world is not made just for you. You begin to discover that there are scarce resources and that you need to compete for them. For example, you may learn that if you cry louder than your siblings you may get more of your mother's attention.

The Art of War

So inevitably with scarce resources we get conflict and we have been in conflict probably since the advent of becoming *Homo sapiens*. If not before. Forward to 400BC and we find the *The Art of War* written by Sun Tzu. It has been deemed a classic in military strategy and you will always find a copy in your local bookstore, although most people have probably never read further than the first few pages. And that admittedly includes me. It just isn't very readable. However it has received praise from lofty quarters, so it would not be prudent for me to comment, as those people have probably read it. However, *The Art of War* does illustrate something very important - and what it illustrates is that strategic principles are somewhat of a constant. Look at this statement made by Sun Tzu in 400BC, and compare it with the statement made 2,500 years later by Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart.



The man himself: Sun Tzu. (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

"To be certain to take what you attack, is to attack a place your enemy does not protect." Sun Tzu (author of *The Art of War*)

And

"Sears ignored us in the early years, and in the end we simply blew them away." Sam Walton (Chairman Walmart)

Sears were not interested in rural America, even though these small towns would often serve a large number of potential customers. Sam Walton literally saw the gap - the place that his competition was not protecting - and defeated them.

Tricks of war

The term strategy is derived from the ancient Greek word "*strategia*", which roughly translated means the art of the general or "generalship". Warfare changed in 500BC - no longer were wars won by the heroic deeds of individuals - things became more complicated and needed to be coordinated. So, the Athenians appointed the head of each tribe a "*strategos*" or commander who practiced "*strategia*" or generalship.

The term "*strategema*" was introduced in about 50AD by Sextus Julius Frontinus in his compilation written in a somewhat more accessible story style than Sun Tzu's - granted Frontinus wrote his treatise 450 years later. His work had the title *Strategemata* where "strategema" was literally tricks of war. You can read his work online, and is somewhat more accessible with stories such as the following:

"Himilco, the Carthaginian general, desiring to land in Sicily by surprise, made no public announcement as to the destination of his voyage, but gave all the captains sealed letters, in which were instructions what port to make, with further directions that no one should read these, unless separated from the flag-ship by a violent storm."

On War

The name Carl von Clausewitz will be familiar to any military strategist. He was a Prussian general who authored *On War*, and although this work was unfinished at his death in 1831, it is still often quoted by modern writers on strategy. His most quoted aphorism is "War is the continuation of politics* by other means".

He advocated six principles for strategic efficacy:

1. Advantage of terrain
2. Surprise
3. Attack from several sides
4. Aid to theatre of war by means of fortifications
5. Assistance of the people
6. Use of great moral forces

Interestingly he believed that surprise was the decisive factor, and that focusing on any of the other 5 always cost in terms of surprise. (1) For instance if you wanted advantage of terrain, you may need to be exposed for longer, attack from several sides requires movement and time, also fortifications require time,. And so on for all the other 5. This is somewhat analogous to what my printers always tell me about a job. Say you wanted to print some flyers advertising your services. There are three attributes affecting the outcome: time, quality and price. You can never have all three. If you want the job quickly it will affect quality and or price. If you want better quality, it will affect the time and/or price, and if you want a better price you sacrifice quality and/or time.

Nearly wiped out

Forward to the First World War. BH Liddell Hart was a captain in the British army who had the unfortunate experience of participating in the Battle of the Somme where his battalion was nearly wiped out on the first day of the battle which saw some 60,000 casualties across the battlefield. It was probably this awful experience that gave rise to his principles which are summarised as the indirect approach.

There are two fundamentals:

1. Direct attacks against an enemy firmly in position should never be attempted
2. To defeat the enemy one must first upset his equilibrium before the main attack can succeed.

Here we have someone who was profoundly affected by the method of direct attack, and became a proponent of his indirect approach. Is it suitable in all situations? No. Was it suitable for the situation that gave rise to its inception? Probably.

Unfortunately humanity has never been short of war, and consequently generals who have all contributed to the field. Some have a very simple approach, such as General Nathan Bedford Forrest's strategy: "Get there first with the most men". I'm sure in his experience he got there second with less men - hence his very focused outlook.

However, with all this experience, there's one cold hard fact: no plan survives contact with the enemy (or in the case of a brand, the competitor).

So you can bet that Sam Walton very likely had to change and adapt his plan as his battle against Sears developed.

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Ref 1. The primary reference for this article was: Rich Horwath. *The origin of strategy*. Strategic Thinking Institute. 2006. The rest was Wikipedia and some books from the UCT GSB library (with strategy in the title).

** Clausewitz had many aphorisms, of which the most famous is that "War is the continuation of Politik by other means" (Politik being variously translated as "politics" or "policy", terms with very different implications), a description that has won wide acceptance. - Wikipedia.*

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