

From The Gulf War to Global War on Terror – a distorted Sun Tzu in US strategic thinking?

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It is claimed that Sun Tzu's precepts were applied in US strategy for both the First Gulf War and the ongoing Global War on Terror. General Norman Schwarzkopf, who led the US and coalition forces in the Gulf War, was a student of Sun Tzu and employed tactics from *The Art of War* to secure victory. In the latest war in Iraq and Afghanistan, former CENTCOM Commander, General Tommy Franks, was reported to be a devotee of Sun Tzu and often found quoting him. However, the results differ. The Gulf War was a short and victorious war while the Global War on Terror (GWOT) is long and hitherto inconclusive. This essay does not seek to judge the success of the GWOT, but rather understand why the results of the US application of Sun Tzu are so different, given McNeilly's claim that Sun Tzu's influence is growing in the US military amongst the higher-ranking officers, to the extent that an essay competition in Sun Tzu's name has been inaugurated at the National Defense University.

A simple answer would be that the Gulf War was a conventional war and fighting it using Sun Tzu's indirect approach was sufficient to deliver an overwhelming victory, which Schwarzkopf did. However, the GWOT is an unconventional war against unseen enemies (terrorists) and hence the entire force needs to fully understand Sun Tzu in order to fight against the terrorists who are arguably also using the indirect approach. Therefore, it becomes a battle of hearts and minds and the side which is faster and more 'indirect' will emerge victorious. Even if Franks had internalized Sun Tzu, his subordinates might not have, and this could have

been the weak link. However, this answer is simplistic.

Based on wide reading of secondary literature and textual analysis of Sun Tzu-related articles in *Military Review* (MR), *Naval Proceedings* (NP) and *Parameters* (PA) between 1997 to June 2006, the author found the following insights to better understand the phenomenon. By analyzing the manner and the frequency of usage of Sun Tzu in each article, there is evidence that he was usually name-dropped and quoted to substantiate certain points and some misuse of quotes was observed. Sun Tzu is incorrectly engaged in other articles: for example, the maxim 'know your enemy and yourself' is often used to legitimize the Information Technology (IT) Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) where knowledge leads to victory. But Sun Tzu meant 'foreknowledge', or human intelligence of intentions, rather than merely technical information. Other articles misuse Sun Tzu's phrase 'to subdue without fighting' to justify the IT RMA,¹ overwhelming and precise firepower.² Sun Tzu actually stated a preference for non-violence, skillful strategizing and psychological operations.³ In their correct engagements, there is evidence pointing towards articles in *Naval Proceedings* demonstrating a firmer grasp of Sun Tzu's concepts though *Parameters* and *Military Review* also featured writers who truly understood Sun Tzu. Based on further reading on the US military and the various influences on its strategic thinking, this article concludes that Sun Tzu has been gradually distorted since the Gulf War through the shifting balance between the structural (strategic culture) and agential factors.



Sun Tzu. The ancient Chinese philosopher's maxims have been misapplied in recent US military campaigns.

Sun Tzu in the Gulf War – the Boyd factor

John Boyd was the chief architect behind the application of Sun Tzu in the Gulf War. Boyd was a disciple of Sun Tzu who spent many years researching the philosopher's works and strategy. He found that Sun Tzu's concepts of *cheng/ch'i* (deception, flexibility and speed, amongst others) were understood and employed in the campaigns of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. Boyd's statement that 'Machines don't fight wars... You must get into the minds of humans. That's where battles are won'⁴ shows his correct understanding of Sun Tzu's 'know your enemy and yourself'. In 'an updated and elaborated, albeit unintended, reinterpretation of Sun Tzu', Boyd conceptualized the OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) loop that consistently used 'Sun Tzu's ideas to overcome Clausewitz's overemphasis on achieving decisive battles by overcoming friction and the under-emphasis on strategic manoeuvre'.⁵ As a result, Berkowitz crowned Boyd 'the American Sun Tzu'.⁶

It was precisely Boyd's influence and work within the US military and Pentagon that helped spread a 'correct' understanding of Sun Tzu amongst some

personnel in the 1980s and 1990s, paving the ground for the application of Sun Tzu to the First Gulf War. Boyd did so via his legendary seven hour briefing, 'Patterns of conflict', delivered over 1,500 times, in which he would introduce ideas of Sun Tzu and its applications through the battles of Napoleon and Genghis Khan. All his final ideas can be found in the slides for his fifteen-hour briefing (of 327 slides) titled 'Discourse of Winning and Losing'.⁷ His audiences in the 1980 and 1990s included the then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, Senator Sam Nunn (Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee), Newt Gingrich (Speaker of the House), General Al Gray (former Commandant, US Marine Corps (USMC)) and General Edward Myer (former Chief of Staff of the US Army).

Sun Tzu meant 'foreknowledge' or human intelligence of intentions, rather than merely technical information

However, the influence of Boyd was uneven across the services. The process was gradual and facilitated by his associates, whom he insisted read and reread Sun Tzu. The Marines were most friendly to Boyd, probably due to his relationships with Colonel Wyly (retired Vice President of USMC University) and former Commandant Gray. Boyd lectured several times a year at the Marine Basic School, amongst others, and thus inculcated a generation of Marines. Sun Tzu and Boyd's manoeuvre warfare appears in *FMFM-7*, the USMC 'Warfighting' manual, which was conceived by General Gray who further instructed all Marines 'to read and reread'; Gray and Captain Schmidt (a drafter of the manual) later insisted that it was inspired by Sun Tzu, rather than Clausewitz.⁸ Therefore, even enlisted Marines were reading Sun Tzu. The NP also published articles by Boyd's associates.⁹ In contrast, the US Army was

less receptive to Sun Tzu and Boyd's ideas. Although Boyd lectured at Army War College and Fort Leavenworth (Command and Staff General College) a few times, his associate, Brigadier-General Wass de Czege, who wrote a few articles in *MR*, was in no position to initiate greater change than Al Gray in the Marines. In addition, General Myer only attended Boyd's standalone presentation on 'The Conceptual Spiral', which was more a scientific explication of the OODA loop, and was thus unable to fully understand the strategic aspects of Sun Tzu. The result was a stronger tendency within the NP to engage Sun Tzu *vis-à-vis* PA and *MR*.

After laying the foundation, it was precisely Sun Tzu and Boyd's manoeuvre strategy that won the First Gulf War. McNeilly and Atkinson linked this victory, and the evident usage of Sun Tzu's strategic concepts, with General Schwarzkopf's admiration of Sun Tzu.¹⁰ Yet Boyd had a direct role in the planning of Operation *Desert Storm* too. According to Coram, the Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, invited Boyd to the Pentagon to discuss strategy.¹¹ With Boyd as his background adviser and the support of Colin Powell (then Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff), Cheney rejected Schwarzkopf's initial plan for a head-to-head assault against the main Iraqi force (classic attritional warfare) in favour of a 'left-hook' manoeuvre led by the Marines. The result was 'a first rate instance of Sun Tzu's *cheng/chi*'¹² and the surrender of fifteen Iraqi divisions to two Marine divisions. After the victory, the US military spokesperson remarked 'we kind of got inside his decision [Boyd's OODA] cycle'.¹³ As General Krulak, Commandant of the USMC, testified, 'Boyd was the architect of that victory'.¹⁴ Against this context, one can understand why Schwarzkopf had no choice but to declare himself a student of Sun Tzu. But apart from Schwarzkopf, there were few who understood Sun Tzu and thus an intellectual gap was formed. Ultimately, this gap became manifest in the misapplication of Sun Tzu to the GWOT, where Boyd's thinking has been supplanted by Admiral William Owens and the US's strategic culture.

Strategic Culture

Colin Gray defines strategic culture as 'the modes of thought and action with respect to force'¹⁵ and comprises 'shared assumptions and decision rules that impose order on individual and group conceptions with respect to their social/organisational/political environment'.¹⁶ It is part of 'national character'¹⁷ and is shaped by 'national historical experience, geography, political philosophy, and civic culture amongst others'.¹⁸ Strategic culture is understood as a context which provides meanings for events (in this case, the understanding of Sun Tzu), but also the context, which 'weaves together socialized humans and their world "out there"'.¹⁹ US strategic culture consists of different factors. However, it is neither easy to pinpoint the exact constitutive factors behind US strategic culture, nor is it the purpose of this essay to do so.

The US has a 'pragmatic problem-solving culture' based on utilitarianism

that seeks efficacy and self-interest amongst other values. It favours reductionist and atomistic techniques, which emphasizes differences and dichotomies, rather than relationships and linkages. Thus, it dissects strategic problems for discrete and sequential treatment in a Cartesian manner²⁰ and results in a-historical,²¹ a-political and quantitative-based policies.²² It prefers the linear approach to thought and action.²³

it was precisely Sun Tzu/Boyd's manoeuvre strategy that won the First Gulf War

Consequently, US military leadership style is thus more 'managerial than strategic'.²⁴ It focuses more on management of large defence programmes than on operational issues.

For example, the 2005 actual US Fiscal Budget spent \$147 billion (31 per cent) on procurement and research and development (R&D), *vis-à-vis* military personnel (\$102 billion) and operation and maintenance (\$138 billion),²⁵ and at 'the expense of services' shortages of money for training, spares, care and feeding of the troops'.²⁶ This is attributed to the 'systems analysis' techniques introduced by former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and revived by present civilian defence chiefs. These are mathematical models that treat warfare as a cumulative exchange of firepower and substitute military instinct with logic and calculation. Strategy, as an art, is thus neglected.

Pragmatism and utilitarianism underlies the US reverence for and pride in its science and technology. Technology is so central that it warrants a National Security Science and Technology Strategy, which declares the importance of *technological superiority* in the US

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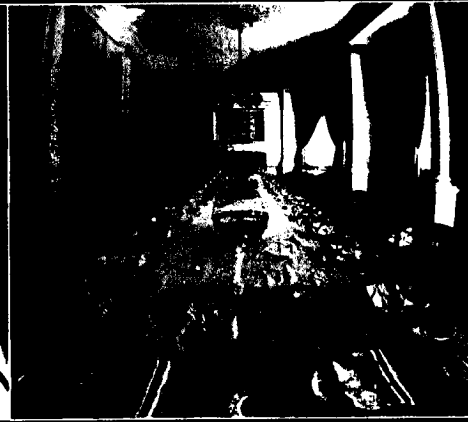
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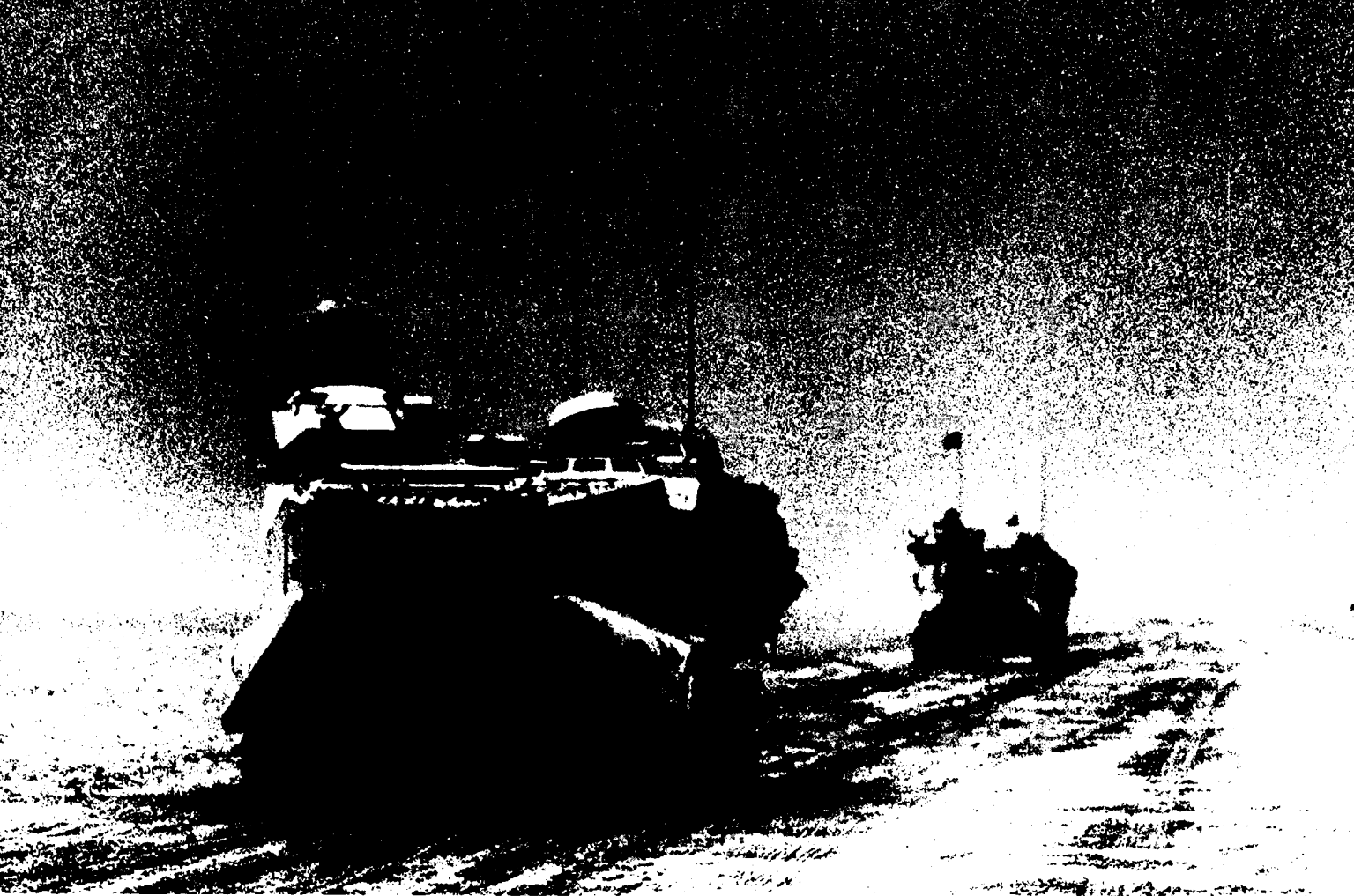
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Two Marine Corps amphibious assault vehicles travel through the Kuwaiti desert following the withdrawal of Iraqi troops during Operation Desert Storm. Photo courtesy © Department of Defense/Ed Bailey

national military strategy. The 2001 *US Army Field Manual (FM 3-0)* describes 'information technology as both a powerful enabler and tool that creates conditions for decisive action'.²⁷ The 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (QDR) restates its commitment in 'sustaining America's scientific and technological advantage over potential competitors'.²⁸

Its national experience of technological wars has reinforced the belief that production, rather than strategic skill, determines national security and that numerical inferiority is offset by technological superiority. Precision-guided munitions replace humans with machines on many battlefields, thus reducing casualties, a domestic requirement since the Vietnam War. Technology and US material production capacity promise short and decisive wars, overwhelming the enemy with superior firepower. Furthermore, the successes of information technology in the civilian world and the enticing arguments put forth by the Tofflers on its impact on war-fighting further strengthened the US military's reverence

for science and technology. Strategy is thus, to an extent, equated with technology.

In general, these US strategic/cultural norms support 'the American way of war': annihilation and attrition. The US likes to 'deliver wars that are short in duration, quick in tempo, low in casualties and strategic in consequences'.²⁹ The enemy is treated as an inventory of targets to be destroyed

Owens committed the error of failing to differentiate between information...and intelligence

by procedural attrition warfare, as opposed to a manoeuvre warfare approach, which engages intelligence and the intellect. Manoeuvre warfare is not alien to US military thinking; Ulysses Grant famously demonstrated it in the Civil War. But it was neglected by Weigley's influential thesis and

resulted in a continuing propensity towards overwhelming force despite the defeat in Vietnam.³⁰ Although concepts such as the indirect approach are adopted in the QDR, US strategic culture skews the practice of these concepts towards the traditional direct approach as seen by the GWOT and its call for annihilation.

Relating back to the research question, the US strategic culture, and specifically its over-reverence of and over-reliance on science and technology, has resulted in the conceptual distortion of Sun Tzu to justify the Information Technology Revolution in Military Affairs (IT RMA). In the quote, 'know the enemy and know yourself', Sun Tzu referred to the foreknowledge of the enemy's intentions through human intelligence and a cultural understanding of the enemy. He cites 'five types of spies: local, internal, double agent, expendable and living'.³¹ With local, internal, living spies and double agents, the US can know the terrorists' strategies, intentions and alliances. Such foreknowledge essentially allows the US to operate inside the terrorists' OODA loop. With

expendable spies who can spread false information (deception) and leak it to the terrorists' agents, the US can thus attack the minds of the terrorists. This will mislead or confuse to the extent that their flawed strategy will collapse by itself. In addition, the US could also isolate the terrorists from their allies and sources of funding. This punctures their morale and support base, 'subduing without fighting'. It is thus with good human intelligence in hand that Sun Tzu declared with confidence that 'one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements [in figurative speech]'.³² However, instead of understanding Sun Tzu in this light, the US strategists have distorted Sun Tzu to construe that he recommends the knowing of the enemy's technical capabilities and whereabouts via technological means. Thus, the US seeks to use information and data fusion technology to attain Owens'

informational dominance with the self-belief that Sun Tzu supports this. In practice, this technological emphasis in its strategic culture has plagued the US intelligence establishment. First, the future investments in intelligence cited in 2006 QDR are mainly technological. The US still lacks good human intelligence and credible clandestine intelligence on the terrorists takes time to develop. As George Tenet, ex-CIA director, remarked in 2004, 'the CIA was still five years away from having adequate capability for collecting human intelligence even on its number one target'.³³ Second, the US has been slow in developing its human intelligence capability. To first embark on the GWOT and then start training recruits in the Arabic language and culture is to reverse the order that Sun Tzu would have suggested. Moreover, to quickly master a language and a culture so distinct from American

is extremely difficult. Third, US civic culture that perceives intelligence as 'undermining laws, risky at best, "dirty" and "un-American" at worst' creates an institutional/cultural bias against intelligence.³⁴ Specifically, the recruitment of double agents runs counter to the policy of no 'dirty hands' (people who might be terrorists or criminals). Yet, these are, paradoxically, the agents who most effectively infiltrate the enemy. Additionally, US Intelligence is subordinated to Operations, when in Sun Tzu's context, the commander is his own director of intelligence. According to an ex-Senior Intelligence officer, other operational problems such as neglecting open-source intelligence; persistence of decentralized intelligence institutions; schizophrenic approaches to intelligence oversight and a technological emphasis on intelligence collection methodologies are indirectly a result of the US civic and strategic

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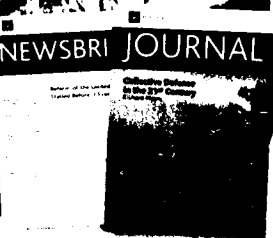
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culture's stereotypes against intelligence. Therefore, it is little wonder why Chambliss, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security, has to admit that 9/11 was the result of a 'systemic intelligence failure' and this 'systemic' problem is largely due to cultural bias.³⁵

This *enduring* technological emphasis of US strategic culture has also affected current US operations. The US still favoured technology over people and concepts in the 2006 QDR and 2007 Presidential Fiscal Budget. Too much of the \$439 billion defence budget is devoted to conventional weapons platforms left over from the Cold War, such as the F/A-22 Raptor and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. The entire budget for language and cultural training – \$181 million – amounts to less than the cost of one F-35. On manpower, the QDR appears to increase active duty personnel to 482,400, but that is to its pre-2001 strength (by comparison, its pre-1991 strength was 710,000 soldiers). Technology is a force-multiplier in conventional wars, but in unconventional wars, the evidence is far less clear.

The Owens Factor

Admiral William Owens was one of the strongest and most influential proponents of the IT RMA and may have contributed to the distortion of Sun Tzu. As Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1994-6) he convinced his colleagues of the IT RMA, which emphasized information technology to achieve 'battle-space awareness, C4I (Command, Control, Communications, Computer and Intelligence) and precision force use' at the 'national strategic level'. In *Lifting the Fog of War*, he quoted Sun Tzu's 'know your enemy and yourself' in his introduction of the IT RMA.³⁶ It is particularly significant that he quoted Sun Tzu first before citing Napoleon, Jomini and Clausewitz on their views on the importance of knowing the battlefield and one's enemy, and the difficulty in doing so. However, after reiterating the advice of these military strategists, Owens points to the possibilities that technology offers: 'seeing a battlefield as large as Iraq or Korea – an area 200 miles on a side –

with unprecedented fidelity, comprehension, and timeliness; by night or day, in any kind of weather, all the time'.³⁷ Besides writing in a rhetorical manner, Owens committed the aforementioned error of conflating information (physical location and technical capabilities) and intelligence (human intelligence of the enemy's intentions and strategies). Therefore, Owens played an important role in misleading the US military into believing that Sun Tzu's writings support the IT RMA. However, given the nature of structural influences, Owens too is himself doubtless influenced by the US's strategic culture.

Strategic culture in perspective

No one and no institution can operate 'beyond culture'.³⁸ US strategic culture is a 'collective self-image' that generates preferences in the understanding of Sun Tzu and perpetuates and revitalizes these values. Just as Weigley's American way of war could not explain the US behaviour in the Philippines War and First World War, similarly US strategic culture might not affect everyone in the same manner. However, everyone is, to an extent, socialized to think in this technological paradigm via their shared military training and institutions. For this majority, the US strategic culture moderates the effect of Sun Tzu. Most importantly, the majority, who had little time to read *The Art of War*, would readily quote or engage Sun Tzu for the IT RMA. Popular references to Griffith's translation clearly indicate their failure to read his introduction, which highlights Sun Tzu's non-support for IT RMA's extreme technological focus. Without properly analyzing Sun Tzu, the US technological paradigm naturally takes precedence in conditioning an understanding of him. These factors collectively account for the majority of authors who (usually unwittingly) miscast Sun Tzu and his ideas, even in the case of the IT RMA, to the extent of holding an essay competition on Information Warfare in his name.

Cultural norms are not laws. Boyd and the minority who make efforts to understand Sun Tzu in a culturally informed manner are in effect agents in

a revolutionary process against these strategic cultural norms.

Observations and further research

This research alludes to three interesting observations that may point to further research. Firstly, there seems to be an American approach towards *à la carte* 'strategies' which decontextualize the cultural and military context in which the strategists wrote. This is supported by evidence of widespread misuse of Sun Tzu. This is alongside other strategic thinkers, such as Clausewitz, whose focus on the fog, friction, chance and luck in war is antithetical to the American ethos of absolute certainty and precision, and who might have suffered a similar fate. In addition, Jomini's emphasis on science and technology was accepted, but not his one sentence principle – 'bring superior force to bear on a point where the enemy is both weaker and vulnerable to crippling damage' which is similar to Sun Tzu's *cheng/ch'i* manoeuvre warfare. Therefore, American pragmatism and its technological focus results in this selective understanding of Sun Tzu that risks losing the inherent logic and consistency within and further aggravates the a-strategic problematique of the United States.

Sun Tzu lived in an age of technological transformation too. Yet, he still advised that humans remain the most important element in warfare

Secondly, it is understandable that Sun Tzu is distorted in the US: there are inherent cultural differences which make it all but inevitable. *The Art of War* is a short philosophical treatise, which involves the essence of Taoist philosophy and ancient Chinese way of life. Taoism believes in harmony, moderation and the use of minimum force. These run counter to American ideals of pragmatism, utilitarianism and overwhelming force.

Does that mean Sun Tzu is never relevant to the US context? No, but Sun Tzu needs to be appreciated from an outsider's perspective. The fact that Britons Liddell Hart and T E Lawrence also expounded the indirect approach highlights the poverty of any clear-cut East-West dichotomy. Interestingly, Gordon Brown's British strategy for the Long War, clearly distinct from the US emphasis on linearity and technology, reflects an emerging European strategic culture that may be even closer to Sun Tzu's ancient China than the US.

Lastly, what might Sun Tzu have advised on the role of technology in warfare? If technology was rudimentary in ancient China – and Sun Tzu did not mention technology – then is Sun Tzu relevant to twenty-first century warfare? In fact, Sun Tzu lived in an age of technological transformation too, yet he still advised that humans remain the most important element in warfare.

The US's failure to understand and act upon its strategic culture perpetuates the American self-belief of having completely understood and applied Sun Tzu. This helps explain why there has been little development of its post Cold War strategic thinking. This self-belief also dangerously maintains its technological-based strategy. The use of technology and management techniques to operationalize war is not a strategy. This is why Colin Gray labeled the US as 'a-strategic'.³⁹ These are structural problems which require a searching examination of its own problems and a commitment to act upon them.

NOTES

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Letters to the Editor

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