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**Why the Tet Offensive?**  
**Sun Tzu Knows the Answer**

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Course 2

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# Report Documentation Page

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## **Introduction**

At the beginning of 1968 the Vietnam war was a stalemate. The conflict resembled an American style boxing match between a lightweight and a blindfolded heavyweight. The Communist Vietnamese lightweight danced nimbly around the ring, unseen by his opponent. While he could deliver quick jabs, and an occasional one-two combination, he was ever wary of the risk that his powerful adversary would find, corner, and attack him. He could pursue his tactics indefinitely but knew that he could not defeat his enemy in this fight. The United States/South Vietnamese heavyweight knew his opponent was in the ring and could feel, but was not deeply hurt by, the jabs and punches. He was forced to swing blindly when his adversary was close in hopes of landing the decisive roundhouse punch. He occasionally made contact, but rarely was it solid, causing him to expel great energy for little progress. He was certain not to lose the bout, yet he was frustrated that the decisive blow of victory would continue to elude him.

The boxing analogy offers a simplistic description of the nature of the conflict - both sides faced the problem of how to conduct the war so as to win the bout. The Communists determined that the answer was to break the other boxer's will to continue and force him to forfeit the match. Their strategy was to strike at the heart of the opponent's strength, the will of the American people, resulting in their decision to launch the Tet Offensive of 1968. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate that offensive in light of the principles of a great military strategist, Sun Tzu. The Chinese strategist's theories more closely fit the situation than those of other Western writers. What follows is a short description of the offensive, followed by an analysis of the strategy compared to Sun Tzu's key principles.

## **Background**

In the twilight of 1967 the Americans and the South Vietnamese were becoming increasingly frustrated. Enemy forces were fully embedded in society, and it was often impossible to distinguish combatants from civilians. In fact, many played both roles - civilians by day and Viet Cong by night. There were no front lines or rear areas, and the enemy, in large part, determined the pace and scope of combat. The Americans, having misunderstood the war as a fight between North and South, adopted a two-part strategy to bombard the Northern strongholds while purging the Viet Cong from the South. Each part of the strategy was limited by political concerns and did little to achieve the assigned mission. As ever more Americans died for seemingly vague objectives, US public support weakened amid growing questions about the purpose and the conduct of the war.

The communists had problems of their own. They were stuck in a war of seemingly endless attrition. They were forced to sustain a program of infiltration and propaganda aimed at weakening the government of the South while absorbing powerful conventional attacks throughout the country.

On 31 January 1968 the Communist Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive - a surprise series of massive, closely coordinated, conventional-style attacks throughout the cities and towns of South Vietnam. Seventy thousand communist soldiers engaged over 100 towns in a significant shift from rural to urban combat. The attacks were unprecedented in brutality and scope, including a direct assault on the United States Embassy in Saigon. The campaign was a model of deception. Supplies were secretly moved into Saigon for months prior to the attacks, while other

actions diverted attention away from the towns and cities. Finally, the attacks occurred at night on what should have been a truce to honor the Vietnamese holiday known as Tet.

## **Analysis**

Sun Tzu developed a comprehensive program for fighting a war. He left over one hundred maxims defining virtually every aspect of warfighting. Some were general principles governing relationships between civilian and military leaders and describing the object of war. Others focused on specific tactical concepts. Together they present a perspective of war that can be described as minimalist, humanist and conservative. His central underlying themes embraced the importance of political leadership, relationship to the people, unity, conservation of energy, and full consideration for the social, psychological, moral, economic and military factors in war. From a military perspective Sun Tzu espoused the principles of deception, flexibility, surprise, fluidity, intelligence and resolving problems by an indirect approach. Of these many principles, seven key themes apply specifically to the Tet Offensive: attacking the enemy strategy, knowledge of friendly and enemy capabilities, the art of deception, the indirect approach, shaping the enemy, man's role as the decisive factor in war, and the application of intelligence gathering activities.

### **Attack the Enemy Strategy/Know Thy Enemy and Know Thyself**

For Sun Tzu the supreme factor in war is to attack the enemy's strategy. To do so properly is to disrupt his alliances and create a situation that brings the enemy to the field of battle. A close corollary favors an approach that pursues victory in the moral sphere through dislocation without having to achieve physical destruction of the mass of the enemy's forces. Paraphrasing the communist Vietnamese leaders General Giap and Truong Chinh, the Tet Offensive had multiple objectives, the strategy was a synthesis of military, political and diplomatic

efforts. To them military action could succeed only when the politics were correct. Resistance must be carried out in every field - military, economic, political and cultural. How does this apply to the aforementioned US strategy? General Giap answers that the high-end goal of the Tet Offensive was to control Saigon and expel the Americans, while an acceptable low end was to force a halt to the bombing in the North while weakening the alliance in the South enough to encourage negotiation for peace.

Sun Tzu would also argue that to attack successfully the commander must have knowledge of the opponent. In retrospect the Communists also achieved this important requirement. For example, they knew that United States troops had been trained to fight in jungles and would not be prepared for urban warfare. Further, General Giap determined that the US could not afford to escalate the war by introducing more troops; they were already overextended. He also assessed the political situation to be in his favor. The US feared Chinese intervention, humanitarian concerns prevented a comprehensive bombing campaign, and inadequate US operational control of the South Vietnamese forces made effective, coordinated fighting difficult at best. He was also certain that media coverage would fuel growing uncertainty among Americans about their role in the war and consequently impact their alliance with the South. Thus, General Giap determined that the key to exploiting both factors must be a decisive blow to fracture the alliance and take advantage of a vulnerable US population. Finally, General Giap also "knew himself." His soldiers were well trained and highly disciplined and would be exceptionally adept at maneuvering in the urban environment they knew so well.

## **Deception and the Indirect Approach**

Sun Tzu believed strongly in the art of deception and the indirect approach. His principle of the cheng and the ch'i allows that the normal force (cheng) fixes or distracts the enemy while the extraordinary force (ch'i) acts when and where the blows are not anticipated, yielding victory through dislocation. This indirect and deceptive approach creates shapes to confuse and delude the enemy concealing the attacker's true dispositions and intent. The Tet Offensive was a model of the application of these principles. According to Stanley Karnow, the Vietnam historian, the battles at Khesanh and elsewhere in the hinterlands, before and during the Tet Offensive, were intended to draw the Americans away from the South Vietnamese population centers, thereby leaving the cities and towns naked to assault. Sun Tzu agreed that under certain conditions one sacrifices a portion of his force in order to gain a more valuable objective - masking a deeper purpose. If this deception was properly developed and executed, Sun Tzu believed the commander would achieve surprise. In this case the South sensed an imminent attack, but could not anticipate where, when or how. The US military was lulled into a sense of security because of poor reporting of communist strength and capability. Of course, an attack during a holiday on which a truce had been declared, coupled with the coordinated timing and scope of the effort, helped complete the circle of deception.

## **Shaping the Enemy**

Another set of Sun Tzu's principles addressed "shaping" the enemy. By this he meant that the strategist must fight at the place of his own choosing. When the enemy disperses and attempts to defend everywhere, he is weak everywhere. A complementary maxim follows that when the enemy concentrates, prepare against him and where he is strong, avoid him. General Giap stated

that he chose Tet because, in war, one must seize the moment when time and space are propitious. This is exactly what Sun Tzu meant. Execution of the initial strikes of the campaign certainly knocked the enemy forces off balance and displaced them from the points of attack. However, General Giap also misjudged some factors. He failed to see the true strength of US forces and did not accurately predict the resolve or resistance of the South Vietnamese government and much of the population. Nonetheless, the Tet Offensive, by design, shaped the enemy to improve the strategic and tactical situation.

### **The Human Factor**

Sun Tzu believed that man is the decisive factor in war. His maxims on this concept are wide-ranging and reflect the importance he placed on the subject. In this regard, Sun Tzu taught his disciples to attack the mind of the enemy, to anger the enemy general and confuse him. Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance - keep him under a strain and wear him down, and then attack where he is unprepared and divide him. Another facet of this subject was the art of infiltration and propagandization. Sun Tzu said that the general should replace enemy flags and banners with his own and mix captured chariots with his and mount them. These principles were certainly the centerpiece of the Tet Offensive. The intent was to strike at the heart of the South by infiltrating, sowing dissension and nurturing subversion. The attacks were extremely brutal - opposition meant torture or death. This would serve initially to isolate the population, confuse the enemy force, and degrade the confidence and judgment of enemy leaders. Of course, once the attacks were complete, the Communists intended to pursue unity by orchestrating a general uprising of the population. This would allow them to shape the people's moral and intellectual

strengths toward the Communist ideology and undermine the South Vietnamese government  
Together these human factors heavily influenced the campaign

### **Intelligence**

Sun Tzu was also a great supporter of intelligence activities. In his view, these were clandestine and subversive maneuvers aimed at gaining information, corrupting officials and spreading rumors. The Communists focused over five months of human intelligence on the Tet Offensive. This effort served to gain valuable information about enemy troop strength, physical layout of towns and quantity of defensive weapons

### **Not All of Sun Tzu's Principles Were Followed**

The Communists did not follow all of Sun Tzu's principles. After the initial success of lightning strikes, American and South Vietnamese forces reacted well and fought back. When the campaign was over the death toll in the South was over twenty thousand soldiers, while the communists had lost an overwhelming fifty thousand. One Communist general said that they did not correctly evaluate the specific balance of forces between themselves and the enemy and did not fully realize that the enemy still possessed considerable capabilities. According to Stanley Karnow, some thought it had been a grievous miscalculation, which had wantonly squandered the southern insurgency costing over half of the National Liberation Front forces

This analysis is focused specifically on the basis for developing and initiating the Tet Offensive. Tactically speaking, the Communists bit off more than they could chew - attempting to maintain strongholds for too long against overwhelming forces. Sun Tzu would say that instead the general should approach indirectly and conduct a war of movement by executing quick, decisive blows only when the situation assures victory. In defense of the Communists it appears

that they believed that they had actually created such a situation. Clearly their intelligence information was not as good as they thought.

Sun Tzu would also argue that the ultimate in disposing one's troops is to be without ascertainable shape. This had been the Communist's status for many years. Changing to a conventional approach caused them to assume a relatively clear shape, which made a difference in the success of the Southern defense.

Finally, Sun Tzu believed that the skillful strategist should be able to subdue the enemy's army without engaging it. This concept is often confusing if taken out of context. Sun Tzu was likely referring to deterrence followed by some brilliant maneuvering on any of the political, moral or economic fronts to prevent unnecessary military conflict. In other words, the communists could possibly have achieved the same ultimate objective by some other means. One obvious example might be to sustain time-consuming guerrilla tactics, while using perceived diplomatic ties with China as negotiating leverage with the United States.

This balanced perspective is important to ensure a careful and thoughtful analysis. These few opposing points are rather limited and certainly open for interpretation. Some of this is a function of Sun Tzu's principles being offered in a lengthy list of short maxims. This list, in an attempt to be all-inclusive, tends to contradict itself. It certainly does not clearly categorize principles at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Thus a certain principle intended for the tactical commander may be taken out of context if applied to the strategic level of decisionmaking.

## **Conclusion**

Sun Tzu's warfighting maxims span a wide range of strategic, operational, and tactical theories. From this list emerge several strategic underlying themes: attacking the enemy's strategy, knowledge of enemy and friendly capabilities, practicing the art of deception and the indirect approach, shaping the enemy, man's role as the decisive factor in war, and the application of intelligence gathering activities. The Communists applied them all in the Tet Offensive. They correctly assessed the nature of the war and developed a strategic campaign to conclude it successfully. In the final analysis General Giap achieved his low-end goals, albeit at a tremendous cost. It was a tactical loss, but a strategic victory. Shortly after the conclusion of the Tet Offensive, President Johnson suspended bombing of the north and personally accepted responsibility for a weakening alliance and popular dissatisfaction with the war by choosing not to seek reelection. While the war continued for several more years, this offensive is now widely considered the key turning point in the disintegration of the American will to continue. Returning to the boxing analogy, the Communists ultimately won the match by forcing their opponent to leave the ring. Why the Tet Offensive? Sun Tzu knows the answer.

## **Bibliographic References**

Comments and quotes were taken from National War College Class of 1995 seminar analysis of Sun Tzu as well as directly from his book the Art of War Comments on the Tet Offensive reflect information and analysis presented in Stanley Karnow's book Vietnam, A History published by Penguin Books in 1983 In each case, the source is referenced by name in the text of the paper