Leadership in Sun Tzu, Machiavelli and Clausewitz

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Introduction

Military theory provides a definition for war as well as methods and systems for how to wage it in the most effective way. Implicate in each theory are the qualities and abilities that create the most effective forms of leadership for those methods and systems. We shall examine how the theories of Sun Tzu, Niccolò Machiavelli and Carl von Clausewitz have helped to define their ideas of military leadership and statecraft as well as attempt to evaluate those ideas through their application to a recent and important historical conflict, the Vietnam war.

Sun Tzu

*Sūn Zi Bīng Fā*, the Chinese military treatise attributed to Sun Tzu, begins with a description of the five constant factors of war: the moral law, heaven, earth, the commander and method and discipline. Of these five, a nation will only have control over method and discipline and their choice of commander. As one of the few constant factors of war that people have control over, the choice and training of leaders is critical for success in war and, as war is of vital importance to the state, critical for the well-being of the nation and its people. Without a strong leader there can be no victory (Sun Tzu, Giles 21). There are three characteristics of a military leader that show up repeatedly throughout *Sūn Zi Bīng Fā*: independence of command, the use of deception and perhaps most important, wisdom (zhi).

One of the ways in which a ruler can bring misfortune upon his army is by “attempting to govern an army in the same way as he administers a kingdom” (Sun Tzu, Giles 27). Sun Tzu frequently makes reference to the need for military command that is independent of the government of the state. In *Records of the Grand Historian*, Ssū-ma Ch’ien relates a now famous story about Sun Tzu. Ho Lu, the king of Wu asks Sun Tzu if his methods could be applied to women. He replies that they can and 180 of the king’s concubines are brought out to learn military method and discipline. After several attempts to teach the concubines, they would only respond with laughter. Sun Tzu then orders the king’s two favorite concubines that had been put in charge of the two companies to be executed. The king protested but Sun Tzu replied,
“Having once received His Majesty’s commission to be general of his forces, there are certain commands of His Majesty which, acting in that capacity, I am unable to accept” (Sun Tzu, Giles 15-17). In chapter three, Sun Tzu himself makes this precept one of his five essentials for victory. “He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign” (Sun Tzu, Giles 28).

“All warfare is based on deception” (Sun Tzu, Giles 23). Sun Tzu makes this clear from the very first chapter of Sūn Zi Bīng Fǎ. A commander must always keep his enemy unsure of what he will do next. When about to strike, he must seem inactive. When close by, he must seem far away. To unsure surprise and success he should always “devise unfathomable plans” (Sun Tzu, Giles 53).

To further facilitate this ability to deceive and surprise the enemy he must also be able to ensure secrecy amongst his own officers and troops. “He must be able to mystify his officers and men by false reports and appearances, and thus keep them in total ignorance. By altering his arrangements and changing his plans, he keeps the enemy without definite knowledge. By shifting his camp and taking circuitous routes, he prevents the enemy from anticipating his purpose.” (Sun Tzu, Giles 54) Secrecy and deception are the cornerstone of military success and should be well practiced by any strong leader, both with his friends as well as his enemies.

In his list of attributes for the successful commander that he gives us in the opening section of the first chapter, wisdom (zhi) is placed first on the list. More traditional military virtues like courage (yǒng) and discipline (yán) are placed at the end of the list (Sun Tzu, Giles 21). Wisdom (zhi) is of primary importance to Sun Tzu’s military leader, but not just any kind of wisdom. Sun Tzu’s wisdom appears to have a very strong propensity for calculation.

The basic description of his military methods (bīng fǎ) in chapter four includes five steps described by the Chinese characters: dù, liáng, shū, chēng and shèng. All five of these steps arise in sequence from dì. Giles and Denma translate dì as “earth.” Sawyer, always more literal, translates dì as “terrain.” None of them use the more open-ended and, in the context more appropriate, “situation” or “circumstance.” Read in this way Sun Tzu says that each situation yields a series of four calculations. Dì, the situation, leads to dù, a measurement of degree, one might anachronistically relate it to our concept of qualitative analysis. Dù leads to liáng, a measure of quantity or weight, which could be associated with our concept of quantitative analysis. Liáng leads to shū, a counting of specific numbers. Shū leads to chēng, a weighing, perhaps of
probabilities but it could also refer to calling—defining a plan and giving orders, or fitting—finding the right action for the situation. Chêng finally leads to shèng, success or victory (Sûn Zi Bîng Fâ).

Sun Tzu reiterates the importance of calculation again in chapter ten with his six ways that commanders court defeat. “A power of estimating (liào) the adversary, of controlling the forces of victory, and of shrewdly calculating (jì) the difficulties, dangers and distances, constitutes the test of a great general” (Sun Tzu, Giles 49). He ends the very first chapter of Sûn Zi Bîng Fâ with a description that is even more extreme:

“Now the general who wins a battle makes many calculations (suàn) in his temple ere the battle is fought. The general who loses a battle makes but few calculations (suàn) beforehand. Thus do many calculations (suàn) lead to victory, and few calculations (suàn) to defeat: How much more no calculations (suàn) at all! It is by attention to this point that I can see who is likely to win or lose” (Sun Tzu, Giles 23).

In the original Chinese passage Sun Tzu uses the character suàn (calculate) seven times. If there is one thing Sun Tzu wants to emphasize in his concluding summary of the first chapter of Sûn Zi Bîng Fâ, it is the need for calculation.

Machiavelli

The two most important ideas for Machiavelli with respect to leadership are closely related to how a leader comes to obtain power. He opens the first chapter of Il principi with a description of the kinds of principalities and discusses the means by which they are acquired, and “they are acquired either by fortune (Fortuna) or by ability (virtù)” (Machiavelli, Prince 13). Later, in chapter seven of Il principi, Machiavelli tells us about his two paragons of leadership. The first, Francesco Sforza, is Machiavelli’s contemporary example of one who obtained his position through virtù. The other, Cesare Borgia, is Machiavelli’s example of a leader who obtained his position through Fortuna.

As an exemplar of virtù, Machiavelli praises Francesco Sforza. Sforza was a condottiere who “by suitable means and by his own remarkable ability (virtù)” became the Duke of Milan (Machiavelli, Prince 29). After the previous duke of Milan Filippo Maria Visconti, died without an heir in 1447; the kings of France and Aragon claimed the throne, neighboring states encroached on Milanese territory and the people of Milan were rioting and declared a republic. Sforza, a condottiere married to the former duke’s daughter, restored order but was dismissed by the republic. He laid siege to the city, until they granted him “popular sovereignty.” He ruled Milan like he ruled his army—he was efficient, clever, ruthless, but fair. He
reversed many of the policies of the Visconti. He established close ties with his enemies France and Aragon and worked with Milan’s traditional rival Florence to establish the Peace of Lodi that divided the Italian peninsula into five spheres of influence: Venice, Milan, Florence, Naples and the Papal States. A year later the treaty was reinforced with a military alliance, the Italian League which resulted in a generation of relative peace and stability in a region of constant war and conflict.

Sforza was not royalty, not even nobility; he was a common soldier. He did not have the support of France or Aragon, who wanted the throne for themselves, but nevertheless established close relations with them. He worked closely with the Florentine prince and the natural rival to Milan, Cesare Borgia, to bring peace to a region of perennial war. He was able to use his own ability and virtù to establish and create his own Fortuna.

It is great to be lucky but acquiring power solely through Fortuna is far more dangerous and less stable than through virtù. “Such individuals depend entirely upon the will and the fortune—two fickle and unstable things—of those who have installed them. They lack both the knowledge and the means to keep their position” (Machiavelli, Prince 28). They are most susceptible to losing their power and principalities unless they “have the rare ability to learn quickly how to preserve what fortune has dropped in their laps” (Machiavelli, Prince 29).

Cesare Borgia was able learn quickly after he came to power. He became the duke of Romagna through the actions of his father, Pope Alexander VI. He then consolidated his power and expanded his territory through the careful manipulation of alliances and military conquest. He executed disloyal troops and established his own local militia to help securely maintain his power base. Yet, in spite of all his actions, Cesare Borgia was to lose his power the same way he acquired it, through the action of Fortuna. In 1503 his father died and soon after his enemy, Giuliano della Rovere, became Pope Julius II. Soon Borgia’s lands were seized by the Papal States and he was exiled to Spain in 1504 where he died three years later at the age of thirty-one.

Machiavelli gave his assessment of the career of Borgia in chapter seventeen. “Cesare Borgia was considered cruel; yet his cruelty restored Romagna, uniting it in peace and loyalty. If this result is considered good, then he must be judged much kinder than the Florentines who, to avoid being called cruel, allowed Pistoia to be destroyed” (Machiavelli, Prince 59).
The career of Cesare Borgia provides us with an excellent example of Machiavelli’s approach to ethics and how a leader should act. While Machiavelli is often thought of as an amoral proponent of expedience, a careful reading shows that he did in fact have a strong ethical system. Machiavelli was well aware of the difference between how people ought to live and how they really do live. Because there are so many people who are willing to do evil, “it is necessary that a prince who is interested in his survival learn to be other than good, making use of this capacity or refraining from it according to need” (Machiavelli, *Prince* 56).

A prince is not to perform cruel actions whenever his wishes, or to support his personal wealth. Machiavelli describes particular limits for when a prince should and should not use cruelty and its justification:

“A prince, therefore, must be indifferent to the charge of cruelty if he is to keep his subjects loyal and united. Having set an example once or twice, he may thereafter act far more mercifully than the princes who, through excessive kindness, allow disorders to arise from which murder and rapine ensue. Disorders harm the entire citizenry, while the executions ordered by a prince harm only a few individuals” (Machiavelli, *Prince* 59).

This does not mean that the leader is allowed to do whatever he wishes to enrich himself and to preserve his personal standing. It does not mean there is no expectation of moral behavior for a prince. It means the standard for moral behavior that applies to a head of state must, by virtue of his position and responsibility, be different from that of an individual citizen. The goal is to keep his subjects loyal and to preserve order, as disorder and crime are harmful to the entire population.

**Clausewitz**

Clausewitz’ ideas on leadership follow directly out of his ideas on war. Clausewitz’ theory of war was in direct opposition to the ideas put forth by enlightenment theorists and a result he looked for a very different kind of leader. The enlightenment thought of war as rational, mechanistic and predictable. Theorists like Adam von Bülow created elaborate systems and rules based on logic and reason. It was even believed that a correct understanding and execution of strategy, as expressed with geometry performed on maps, might some day even replace the act of battle itself. (Van Creveld 98-104)

Clausewitz was highly critical of this understanding of warfare. He thought that the idea of rational and predictable war was a grave error and utter nonsense:
“Bülow considered envelopment the key to victory in battle, and from this principle developed a geometrical system, to which—as all charlatans are want to do—he ultimately gave a veneer of mathematical elegance. A host of others, headed by Mathieu Dumas, discovered that the fundamental principle lay in the possession of the higher ground. By way of numerous half-truths and doubtful conclusions this led to a highly picturesque system of geological analogies… General Jomini, finally, emphasizes the concentration of power at a single point and deduces from this a geometric system of internal lines directly opposed to that of Bülow. We ought not to be surprised that these fanciful or one-sided systems should have emerged and even found acceptance …” (Clausewitz, Scharnhorst 103).

For Clausewitz there are four elements that make up the climate of war: danger, exertion, uncertainty and chance (Clausewitz, Scharnhorst 104). He also opposed the idea that war could be thought of in isolation from the rest of the world. War is not an insular activity that takes place within the defined limits of an abstract dimension of a mapped terrain. War was particular to a time, a place and a specific relationship of the participants. This lead to his well-known statement that “War should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy” (Clausewitz, War 87).

For Clausewitz policy is just one element of the “remarkable trinity” that works together to define war in the real world. The first is the “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity” which is derived from the people that reside in the state or polity. The second is “the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam.” This is the realm in which a strong leader and capable commander can overcome what has been defined in all the rules and systems created by theorists and achieve success even against all odds. The final element is the subordination of war as the instrument of policy, where the goals and ends are not defined by a system of bases and maneuvers, but are entirely beyond the scope of battle itself (Clausewitz, War 89).

Clausewitz defined leadership in a way that is directly based upon this new conception of war. The key attributes of a leader that he talks about in third chapter of the first book of Vom Kriege specifically address his four elements. To deal with danger and exertion a leader needs courage and to deal with uncertainty and chance one needs intelligence (Clausewitz, War 101-102). The exemplar of Clausewitz approach to leadership was his mentor Gerhard von Scharnhorst.

Scharnhorst provided the antidote to the intellectualizing of war into theoretical constructs and speculative thought unrelated to the uncertainty and violence of real war. He did not oppose theory and analysis, but when faced with an overly abstract and idealistic approach,
Scharnhorst would quietly turn back and direct his energies toward reconciling ideas and reality, carefully fusing the two by theoretical or by historical analysis, as the particular issue demanded. Only a mind of this type is suited to public life in general and to war in particular. In war mere imagination has no creative power at all, while the truth that emerges from the congruence of reality and analysis is indispensable. (Clausewitz, Scharnhorst 100)

Scharnhorst’s ability to reconcile theoretical analysis with the realities of danger, chance and fриktion that permeate actual war was an inspiration to Clausewitz. Scharnhorst was for him the quintessential example of the creative spirit able to freely roam through the play of chance and probability.

**Evaluation**

Philosophy does not create testable hypothesis but Sun Tzu, Machiavelli and Clausewitz are not building metaphysical systems. They are trying to tell us something practical about the world. As a result there is a need for some form of empirical verification. However what they say is not mutually exclusive and does not create clearly defined criteria for evaluation. Still, we should attempt to compare their ideas with the examples history has presented to us.

Machiavelli claims that a leader will arise from either Fortuna or virtù. This seems a reasonable truism and is vague enough to be accepted without the need for verification but it does not really tell us a great deal. His view that there are different systems of morals for private individuals and leaders of states are of greater interest but are perhaps difficult to verify. To begin with we are faced with the difficulty of adequately defining what constitutes personal morality. While it seems possible that it should be better to value a society’s welfare more than an individual’s personal conduct, but where does one draw the line? How often and how long can a leader ignore personal moral conduct in the service of the state before his rule becomes so corrupt that it is no longer able to function?

If we take the US involvement in Vietnam as an example, the Johnson administration was able to continually act beyond societies moral expectations. Dangerous chemical herbicides and defoliants were indiscriminately applied to an agrarian landscape and the people that lived in it. The supposed neutrality of Laos and Cambodia were violated with increasing frequency. Bombing and other operations were often conducted to maximize civilian casualties. While each of these examples was conducted with the purpose of bringing an end to the war and establishing peace and stability, their collective results undermined the
public confidence and trust in the Johnson administration and eventually brought an end to his progressive and beneficial social policies.

Sun Tzu looks for a wise leader with a strong penchant for planning and especially calculation. If there was ever a military leader with a strong ability and inclination for computation it would have to Robert McNamara. Young, bright, Harvard-educated; McNamara applied the same management and analysis skills he used as an executive to turn around Ford to the art of war. If ever there was a man who embraced calculation in warfare it was McNamara—bringing new levels of efficiency to the US execution of the war effort in Vietnam. However, in this case calculation and efficiency did not lead to a successful conclusion. Sortie completion rates rose, bombing efficiency improved and body-count ratios soared, but this seemed to have little or no effect on resolving the conflict or bringing it to a conclusion.

Of course Sun Tzu could counter that the failure was not related to the calculations, after all they led to winning all the battles. Sun Tzu might point out the lack of independence of command. President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara always kept limits on the generals in the field and never allowed them to completely follow-up on any tactical victory. He could also argue that complete victory is not a matter of winning battles but in breaking the enemy’s resistance, something the North Vietnamese were able to accomplish whereas the US failed.

For Clausewitz war is not a system of rules and maneuvers. It cannot be solved through calculation. It is dirty, messy and violent. A leader must adapt to changing circumstances, find the unpredictable, the unexpected and the accidental and make something of them. Clausewitz realizes that war is not fought on paper, nor is it independent of policy. The US often fought in Vietnam as though the military objectives were independent of political considerations. McNamara’s calculations brought efficiency but not victory. From the perspective of Clausewitz, what was missing from US efforts in Vietnam was a balance of the trinity. The support and passion of the people, the ability of military leaders to understand and use the complexity and chaos of the situation to military and political advantage, and the government to construct and execute a clearly defined and practical policy would have brought the conflict to a successful conclusion. All things that were not achieved by the US in Vietnam. Perhaps Clausewitz’ recognition of the violence and chaos of war can provide us with the most realistic and useful definition of leadership.
Bibliography


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