
CHAPTER 8

Keeping Doors Open

Why Options Distract Us from Our Main Objective

In 210 BC, a Chinese commander named Xiang Yu led his troops across the Yangtze River to attack the army of the Qin (Ch'in) dynasty. Pausing on the banks of the river for the night, his troops awakened in the morning to find, to their horror, that their ships were burning. They hurried to their feet to fight off their attackers, but soon discovered that it was Xiang Yu himself who had set their ships on fire, and that he had also ordered all the cooking pots crushed.

Xiang Yu explained to his troops that without the pots and the ships, they had no other choice but to fight their way to victory or perish. That did not earn Xiang Yu a place on the Chinese army's list of favorite commanders, but it did have a tremendous focusing effect on his troops: grabbing their lances and bows, they charged ferociously against the enemy and won nine consecutive battles, completely obliterating the main-force units of the Qin dynasty.

Xiang Yu's story is remarkable because it is completely