Thinkers from all time periods have spoken about morality; what does it mean to be good? What should people strive to be? What qualities should we hold out leaders up to? On questions such as this there is no right answer, however the most common virtue that society tends to hold people up to is not how just, or how merciful or generous a leader is, but rather how effective that leader is. A “good” leader is an effective leader, and no matter what opposing viewpoints different ideologies they have, they all agree that effectiveness is the hallmark of a good commander.

Sun Tzu is one of the most famous writers and military leaders in history, whether he is real or not. In his book *The Art of War* he outlines many strategies and ideas for a commander to follow should he want to be successful. Sun Tzu (1993) said: “*the commander who understands war is the final arbiter of people’s lives*” (page 90), he makes the argument that a commander must be effective in war to be able to have power over his citizens lives, that an unskilled commander cannot protect his people’s lives. Sun Tzu states that if a commander does not have knowledge or a plan to face the enemy and expects command of troops and money for his services, that commander is “*the height of inhumanity*” and cannot expect to be a leader or to achieve victory (page 138). Sun Tzu’s philosophy seems to be that the only thing that makes someone a “good” commander is winning, even if typically dishonorable practices such as deceit (page 85) or spies (page 139) are used.

In his book *The Prince* Machiavelli describes what he believes to be the qualities that a leader (the prince) must have in order to be successful. Machiavelli really demonstrates the idea that the best leaders are the ones that win, despite what they must do to achieve that victory. Machiavelli (2005) says that because there is so many people out there who are not good, that someone who wants to be good will fail (page 53), in this he really demonstrates his philosophy that to be successful you cannot be good, that if you try to be good in an evil world you will face defeat. Therefore, to maintain your position at the top you must do cruel things to secure the loyalty of those below you, that fear is the better motivator for this than love (page 58). The only times that Machiavelli believes it is acceptable to be good or merciful in this case, is when it serves to give you the image of being good, to make others believe you are a good person (page 57). So, if being good is not the rubric to hold yourself against then what is? Machiavelli says it is the way a Prince can conduct warfare, that war is the only skill that matters an all else should be forsaken for skill in the art of war (page 50).

Thucydides (2019) writes about the Peloponnesian war in *How to Think About War,* in this famous conflict there are two sides, Athens and Sparta. These two powers of that time represent two different ideologies in the way they conduct war, Sparta is straightforward, superior strength on land, while Athens is more deceptive with unorthodox strategies and the most powerful navy at the time. (page 15-17). At the same time Sparta desired freedom for the people that Athens had subjugated (page 7) while Athens wanted to continue their growth and expansion. Even though it is very easy to look at this in the frame that Sparta (and their allies) looked at them selves as the “good guys”, even though they are the ones who are trying to secure freedom for all of Greece, Athens in modern history isn’t looked at as “evil”. This is because that despite their (at least on the surface) moral high ground and good intentions they lost in the end, and Athens continued to expand their empire. above all else Athens was the more effective combatant, that they were willing to use unconventional and deceitful strategies to secure their victory where Sparta was more set in their ways. This conflict is a very good example of how, in the end, the only thing that matters is that you win, all else is secondary.

A “good” leader is an effective leader, this is the theme we see repeat itself over and over in history. In Sun Tzu (1993) we see it from a purely strategic viewpoint, that the best commander is the one that wins. In Machiavelli (2005) he argues that the Prince should not have any other art than war (page 50). And finally, Thucydides (2019) details a very good example of this in the Peloponnesian war. Despite modern conceptions of “good vs evil” it seems that all it comes down to is simply who is the better commander.

Reference Page:

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