Introduction:

In his book *The Perfect Weapon* (2018) David E. Sanger describes the facets of modern cyber warfare and makes the claim that it is the perfect weapon. He describes a cyber warfare room where “the chaos of the modern Internet played out across screen after screen, often in an incomprehensible jumble” (page 3). This illustrates the reality of the modern battlefield, where no one person can completely understand the layout. Sanger compares the innovations in the cyber warfare field to that of the invention of nuclear warfare, he quotes General Michael Hayden saying “This has a whiff of August 1945. Somebody just used a new weapon, and this weapon will not be put back in the box” (page 7). This illustrates just how powerful Sanger thinks cyber warfare is. He believes that it has so much destructive potential that it renders all other forms of conventional warfare irrelevant. Sanger makes some exceptional claims in regard to the success and effectiveness of cyber warfare, and the ideas put forth by classical military strategists, such as Sun Tzu and Machiavelli would appear to support his views.

Sun Tzu and Classical vs. Modern Espionage:

Sun Tzu’s views on military strategy are some of the oldest and best regarded in history. One of the main things he advocated for is the proper use of espionage “It is only the enlightened ruler … who will use the highest intelligence of the army for purposes of spying and thereby achieve great results.” (page 52) In the modern era, the ultimate version of espionage is realized with the use of cyber warfare, where a spy can act with anonymity. Sun Tzu (2018) said “what enables the wise sovereign to … achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge.” (page 50) Sun Tzu valued information highly and in the information age, it is readily available for whoever knows how to look for it. This is exactly what Sanger sees when he calls cyber attacks the perfect weapon. Another argument that Sun Tzu presented was that all warfare is based off of deception, (page 8) which in the modern era is exactly what makes cyber warfare so effective. As Sanger (2018) said, it is practically impossible to determine where a cyber attack is coming from, (page 3) this anonymity allows the unparalleled use of deception, where an attacker can operate with relative impunity. Sun Tzu also made claims that “The clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but does not allow the enemy’s will to be imposed on him” (page 21). Within the realm of cyber warfare, an attacker can usually exert their will upon someone without revealing themselves and allowing their enemy to exert their will back onto them. Based from Sun Tzu’s ideas on military strategy, Sanger's ideas about cyber attacks being the perfect weapon seem to be correct.

Machiavelli and Chris Rock:

Niccolò Machiavelli (2005) talked about the ruling of a state and what a leader (or prince, as he referred to it as) can do to ensure their rule over their state. However, modern cyber attacks can exploit many of the weaknesses he advocated to avoid. Machiavelli argued that “princes, since they are placed on a higher level, are judged by some of those qualities that bring them either blame or praise” (page 53). In this statement he is talking about how the leader(s) of a state is the one that is most scrutinized and anything that they or do will have more effect on them rather than if they were an average person. During Chris Rock’s presentation at the defcon conference (2016) he provides a case study about a theoretical approach to overthrowing the government of Kuwait. In this presentation he suggests framing the leader of Kuwait for embezzling government money, then leaking this to the media so everyone in the state thinks the leader is at fault. Even though it was false, just the belief that it happened resulted in the overthrow of the Kuwait government by the angered populace. Having something like this happen is exactly what Machiavelli warns against. As with embezzlement of money, there are certain vices that a leader can possess that will lead to this exact thing happening, and Machiavelli knows this and as such warns any potential leaders to stay away from doing them, or at the very least hide the fact that the leader practices these vices (page 54). While this advice of hiding vices might work in Machiavelli’s time, in the modern era it is much harder to conceal these things. Chris Rock’s presentation shows that even if these vices do not exist, an attacker can easily fake them and achieve the same effect. Machiavelli’s principles and the example by Chris Rock show how threatening a cyber attack can be and the detrimental effect they can have on an individual or nation. Due to their exceptional efficiency, nothing else compares.

Conclusion:

The classical military thinkers would likely agree with Sanger’s (2018) statement about cyber warfare being the perfect weapon. Sun Tzu (2018) advocated strongly for the usage of spies and espionage, and when framed against the modern landscape it becomes even more useful. Sun Tzu imagined warfare in a time where the technology of the world would not have even been thought possible. The technology we have today can be used to accomplish Sun Tzu’s suggestions about espionage with ease rather than the traditional methods of gathering information. Machiavelli (2005) advised potential leaders about how to ensure their rule over their state. One of the main things he warns against is to hide any potential vices a leader might hold from the populace, but in the Chris Rock (2016) example it shows how an attacker might be able to exploit those vices, even if said vices do not exist in the first place, all thanks to modern cyber warfare technology. Based on the warfare theories of classical military thinkers, Sanger’s claim that cyberattacks are the perfect weapon, is one with strong support.

Reference Page:

*Def Con 24 - Chris Rock - How to Overthrow a Government.* (2016). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1lhGqNCZlA>.

Machiavelli, N. (2005). *The Prince*. (P. Bondanella, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Sanger, D. E. (2018). *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage, and Fear in the Cyber Age*. Broadway Books New York.

Sun Tzu. (2018). *The Art of War*. (L. Giles, Trans.). East India Publishing Company.