

Beat the Grass to Startle the Snake



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Strategy 13 Beat the Grass to Startle the Snake

*Agitate him and ascertain the pattern of his movements.
Determine his disposition and so ascertain the field of battle.
Probe him and learn where his strength is abundant and
where deficient.*

Sun Zi, *The Art of War*

*When no matter what you do you are unable to determine the
enemy's situation, pretend that you are going to attack
fiercely, and you will learn the enemy's plan. When you know
the enemy's plan, it will be easy to gain victory.*

Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings*

When you cannot detect the opponent's plans launch a direct, but brief, attack and observe your opponent's reactions. His behaviour will reveal his strategy.

Song Dynasty China

One day, in the county of Jianzhou, there was a man who lost a precious object. The local magistrate, *Chen Shuku*, was called in to investigate. He questioned several people, but no one could tell him who the thief was. So, Magistrate Chen laid a trap for those he suspected.

"I know of a temple," he told them, "whose bell has great spiritual power that can tell a thief from an honest man. Since my investigation is at a standstill we must employ the supernatural powers of the bell to solve the matter."

The magistrate had the bell brought to the courthouse and displayed in the rear chamber. Then he had the suspects brought in to testify to their guilt or innocence. He explained to them that if an innocent man touched the bell it would remain silent, but if a guilty man touched the bell it would ring out. After lighting incense and chanting prayers, the magistrate had curtains erected around the bell.

Previously he had instructed one of his assistants to secretly smear ink on the bell after the curtains were closed. Each suspect was then told to place his hand through the curtain and touch the bell. As they withdrew their hands Chen would examine them. Everyone's hands were stained except those of one man, who confessed to the theft. He did not touch the bell for fear it would ring.

Qin Dynasty

The notorious eunuch *Zhao Gao* is credited with helping to bring down the house of Qin, ending China's first and shortest imperial dynasty. After the first emperor died, Zhao Gao conspired with the chief minister Li Si to dispose of the legitimate heir to the throne and install a weak and corrupt puppet emperor, Huhei (see Chapter 14).

Having established his influence over the young emperor, Zhao Gao was nervous about possible opposition from the other ministers of state. So he devised a test to see which ones would be faithful to him. One day he brought a stag into the court and presented it to the emperor explaining that it was a horse.

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"You're mistaken, Prime Minister," said the emperor. "You've called a stag a horse."

Zhao Gao turned to the other ministers present and asked them whether it was a horse or a stag. Some kept silent. Others, in an attempt to ingratiate themselves with the true power behind the throne, agreed it was a horse. And still others said it was a stag. The emperor was under Zhao Gao's control to such a degree that he believed he was going insane and that the stag really was a horse.

Meanwhile, one of Zhao Gao's spies was recording the answers given by each of the ministers. Afterwards, Zhao Gao secretly framed charges against all those who had said it was a stag and had them executed.

Momoyama Period Japan

After almost two centuries of civil war Japan was brought under the military control of one man, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, but he died eight years later leaving a five year-old heir.

The Daimyo who had served under Hideyoshi split into two camps: those who supported the heir led by Ishida Mitsunari, and those who secretly supported Tokugawa Ieyasu. For two years tensions between the two camps increased as the remaining Daimyo⁹ chose which side to support in the inevitable showdown.

In 1600 the two camps met near the small village of Sekigahara and fought what has come to be known as the last great samurai battle.

Those supporting Ishida and the heir apparent numbered eighty thousand, while the Tokugawa army numbered seventy-five thousand. The two armies formed battle lines among the rolling hills with neither side having the advantage of terrain.

However, positioned on some hills overlooking the flanks of both armies were troops led by Kobayakawa Hideaki, an ally of Ishida. Hideaki's position was a serious threat to the Tokugawa left flank. Yet when the battle began, the Tokugawa forces did not attack them, nor

⁹ The rough equivalent of a feudal baron or warlord.

The Thirty-Six Strategies of Ancient China - S. H. Verstappen

did Hideaki charge down on the Tokugawa. As the battle raged on neither side appeared to be gaining the upper hand so Ishida signalled Hideaki to make his attack, but no attack came. Ishida then signalled frantically and sent messengers urging Hideaki to attack but he still refused to move.

Tokugawa was also concerned about Hideaki's refusal to enter the fray since he had secretly agreed to betray Ishida during the heat of battle. It became apparent to Tokugawa that Hideaki was going to use the strategy *Waiting at Horagatoge* (see Chapter 9) and join in with the winning team after the battle was won.

Tokugawa ordered a detachment of harquebusiers to charge up the hill and fire on Hideaki's troops. This forced Hideaki into action since he could no longer sit passively observing.

He honoured his secret agreement with Tokugawa and charged down on the flank of his former ally Ishida. Hideaki's defection helped turn the tide of battle. The Tokugawa forces prevailed and Ieyasu went on to become Shogun and found the Tokugawa dynasty.

Summary

A seasoned warrior knows this strategy well and will not reveal his true intentions. But the inexperienced, nervous of making a mistake in such a high stakes game, will overreact to feints and will thus reveal their weakness.

