TAKE THE LINE OF LEAST EXPECTATION

THE ORDINARY-EXTRAORDINARY STRATEGY

People expect your behavior to conform to known patterns and conventions. Your task as a strategist is to upset their expectations. Surprise them and chaos and unpredictability--which they try desperately to keep at bay--enter their world, and in the ensuing mental disturbance, their defenses are down and they are vulnerable. First, do something ordinary and conventional to fix their image of you, then hit them with the extra*ordinary. The terror is greater for being so sudden. Never rely on an unorthodox strategy that worked before--it is conventional the second time around. Sometimes the ordinary is extraordinary because it is unexpected.*

UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

Thousands of years ago, military leaders--aware of the incredibly high stakes involved in war--would search high and low for anything that could bring their army an advantage on the battlefield. Some generals who were particularly clever would devise novel troop formations or an innovative use of infantry or cavalry: the newness of the tactic would prevent the enemy from anticipating it. Being unexpected, it would create confusion in the enemy. An army that gained the advantage of surprise in this way could often leverage it into victory on the battlefield and perhaps a string of victories.

The enemy, however, would work hard to come up with a defense against the new strategy, whatever it was, and would often find one quite fast. So what once brought brilliant success and was the epitome of innovation soon no longer worked and in fact became conventional. Furthermore, in the process of working out a defense against a novel strategy, the enemy itself would often be forced to innovate; now it was their turn to introduce something surprising and horribly effective. And so the cycle would go on. War has always been ruthless; nothing stays unconventional for long. It is either innovate or die.

In the eighteenth century, nothing was more startling than the tactics of the Prussian king Frederick the Great. To top Frederick's success, French military theorists devised radical new ideas that were finally tested on the battlefield by

Napoleon. In 1806, Napoleon crushed the Prussians--who were still using the once unconventional tactics of Frederick the Great, now grown stale--at the Battle of Jena-Auerstadt. The Prussians were humiliated by their defeat; now it was up to them to innovate. They studied in depth Napoleon's success, adapted his best strategies, and took them further, creating the seeds for the formation of the German General Staff. This new Prussian army played a large role in the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo and went on to dominate the military scene for decades.

In modern times the constant challenge to top the enemy with something new and unconventional has taken a turn into dirty warfare. Loosening the codes of honor and morality that in the past limited what a general could do (at least to some extent), modern armies have slowly embraced the idea that anything goes. Guerrilla and terrorist tactics have been known since ancient times; now they have become not only more common but more strategic and refined. Propaganda, disinformation, psychological warfare, deception, and political means of waging war have all become active ingredients in any unconventional strategy. A counterstrategy usually develops to deal with the latest in dirty warfare, but it often involves falling to the enemy's level, fighting fire with fire. The dirty enemy adapts by sinking to a dirtier level still, creating a downward spiral.

This dynamic is particularly intense in warfare but it permeates every aspect of human activity. If you are in politics and business and your opponents or competitors come up with a novel strategy, you must adapt it for your own purposes or, better, top it. Their once new tactic becomes conventional and ultimately useless. Our world is so fiercely competitive that one side will almost always end up resorting to something dirty, something outside earlier codes of accepted behavior. Ignore this spiral out of a sense of morality or pride and you put yourself at a severe disadvantage; you are called to respond--in all likelihood to fight a little dirty yourself.

> *Everything which the enemy least expects will succeed the best. If he relies for security on a chain of mountains that he believes impracticable, and you pass these mountains by roads unknown to him, he is confused to start with, and if you press him he will not have time to recover from his consternation. In the same way, if he places himself behind a river to defend the crossing and you find some ford above or below on which to cross unknown to him, this surprise will derange and confuse him....*
>
> FREDERICK THE GREAT, 1712-86

The spiral dominates not just politics or business but culture as well, with its desperate search for the shocking and novel to gain attention and win momentary acclaim. Anything goes. The speed of the process has grown exponentially with time; what was unconventional in the arts a few years ago now seems unbearably trite and the height of conformity.

What we consider unconventional has changed over the years, but the laws that make unconventionality effective, being based on elemental psychology, are timeless. And these immutable laws are revealed in the history of warfare. Almost twenty-five hundred years ago, the great Chinese strategist Sun-tzu expressed their essence in his discussion of ordinary and extraordinary means; his analysis is as relevant to modern politics and culture as it is to warfare, whether clean or dirty. And once you understand the essence of unconventional warfare, you will be able to use it in your daily life.

Unconventional warfare has four main principles, as gleaned from the great practitioners of the art.

Work outside the enemy's experience. Principles of war are based on precedent: a kind of canon of strategies and counterstrategies develops over the centuries, and since war is so dangerously chaotic, strategists come to rely on these principles for lack of anything else. They filter what's happening now through what happened in the past. The armies that have shaken the world, though, have always found a way to operate outside the canon, and thus outside the enemy's experience. This ability imposes chaos and disorder on the enemy, which cannot orient itself to novelty and collapses in the process.

Your task as a strategist is to know your enemies well, then use your knowledge to contrive a strategy that goes outside their experience. What they might have read or heard about matters less than their personal experience, which dominates their emotional lives and determines their responses. When the Germans invaded France in 1940, the French had secondhand knowledge of their blitzkrieg style of warfare from their invasion of Poland the year before but had never experienced it personally and were overwhelmed. Once a strategy is used and is no longer outside your enemy's experience, though, it will not have the same effect if repeated.

Unfold the extraordinary out of the ordinary. To Sun-tzu and the ancient Chinese, doing something extraordinary had little effect without a setup of

something ordinary. You had to mix the two--to fix your opponents' expectations with some banal, ordinary maneuver, a comfortable pattern that they would then expect you to follow. With the enemy sufficiently mesmerized, you would then hit it with the extraordinary, a show of stunning force from an entirely new angle. Framed by the predictable, the blow would have double the impact.

> *Make a false move, not to pass it for a genuine one but to transform it into a genuine one after the enemy has been convinced of its falsity.*
>
> *THE WILES OF WAR: 36 MILITARY STRATEGIES FROM ANCIENT CHINA*, TRANSLATED BY SUN HAICHEN, 1991

The unconventional maneuver that confused enemies, though, would have become conventional the second or third time around. So the wily general might then go back to the ordinary strategy that he had used earlier to fix their attention and use it for his main attack, for that would be the last thing the enemy would expect. And so the ordinary and the extraordinary are effective only if they play off each other in a constant spiraling manner. This applies to culture as much as to war: to gain attention with some cultural product, you have to create something new, but something with no reference to ordinary life is not in fact unconventional, but merely strange. What is truly shocking and extraordinary unfolds out of the ordinary. The intertwining of the ordinary and extraordinary is the very definition of surrealism.

Act crazy like a fox. Despite appearances, a lot of disorder and irrationality lurks beneath the surface of society and individuals. That is why we so desperately strain to maintain order and why people acting irrationally can be terrifying: they are demonstrating that they have lost the walls we build to keep out the irrational. We cannot predict what they will do next, and we tend to give them a wide berth--it is not worth mixing it up with such sources of chaos. On the other hand, these people can also inspire a kind of awe and respect, for secretly we all desire access to the irrational seas churning inside us. In ancient times the insane were seen as divinely possessed; a residue of that attitude survives. The greatest generals have all had a touch of divine, strategic madness.

The secret is to keep this streak under control. Upon occasion you allow yourself to operate in a way that is deliberately irrational, but less is more--do this too much and you may be locked up. You will in any case frighten people more by showing an occasional flash of insanity, just enough to keep everyone

off balance and wondering what will come next. As an alternative, act somewhat randomly, as if what you did were determined by a roll of the dice. Randomness is thoroughly disturbing to humans. Think of this behavior as a kind of therapy--a chance to indulge occasionally in the irrational, as a relief from the oppressive need to always seem normal.

Keep the wheels in constant motion. The unconventional is generally the province of the young, who are not comfortable with conventions and take great pleasure in flouting them. The danger is that as we age, we need more comfort and predictability and lose our taste for the unorthodox. This is how Napoleon declined as a strategist: he came to rely more on the size of his army and on its superiority in weapons than on novel strategies and fluid maneuvers. He lost his taste for the spirit of strategy and succumbed to the growing weight of his accumulating years. You must fight the psychological aging process even more than the physical one, for a mind full of stratagems, tricks, and fluid maneuvers will keep you young. Make a point of breaking the habits you have developed, of acting in a way that is contrary to how you have operated in the past; practice a kind of unconventional warfare on your own mind. Keep the wheels turning and churning the soil so that nothing settles and clumps into the conventional.

No one is so brave that he is not disturbed by something unexpected.
--Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.)

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

1. In 219 B.C., Rome decided it had had enough of the Carthaginians, who had been stirring up trouble in Spain, where both city-states had valuable colonies. The Romans declared war on Carthage and prepared to send an army to Spain, where the enemy forces were led by the twenty-eight-year-old general Hannibal. Before the Romans could reach Hannibal, though, they received the startling news that he was coming to them--he had already marched east, crossing the most treacherous part of the Alps into northern Italy. Because Rome had never imagined that an enemy would attack from that direction, there were no garrisons in the area, and Hannibal's march south toward Rome was unimpeded.

His army was relatively small; only some 26,000 soldiers had survived the crossing of the Alps. The Romans and their allies could field an army of close to

750,000 men; their legions were the most disciplined and feared fighters in the world, and they had already defeated Carthage in the First Punic War, twenty-odd years earlier. But an alien army marching into Italy was a novel surprise, and it stirred the rawest emotions. They had to teach these barbarians a lesson for their brazen invasion.

Legions were quickly dispatched to the north to destroy Hannibal. After a few skirmishes, an army under the Roman consul Sempronius Longus prepared to meet the Carthaginians in direct battle near the river Trebia. Sempronius burned with both hatred and ambition: he wanted to crush Hannibal and also to be seen as the savior of Rome. But Hannibal was acting strangely. His light cavalry would cross the river as if to attack the Romans, then retreat back: Were the Carthaginians afraid? Were they ready to make only minor raids and sorties? Finally Sempronius had had enough and went in pursuit. To make sure he had sufficient forces to defeat the enemy, he brought his entire army across the freezing-cold river (it was wintertime), all of which took hours and was exhausting. Finally, however, the two armies met just to the west of the river.

> *It is assumed that Alexander encamped at Haranpur; opposite him on the eastern back of the Hydaspes was Porus, who was seen to have with him a large number of elephants..... Because all fords were held by pickets and elephants, Alexander realized that his horses could neither be swum nor rafted across the river, because they would not face the trumpeting of the elephants and would become frantic when in the water or on their rafts. He resorted to a series of feints. While small parties were dispatched to reconnoitre all possible crossing places, he divided his army into columns, which he marched up and down the river as if he sought a place of crossing. Then, when shortly before the summer solstice the rains set in and the river became swollen, he had corn conveyed from all quarters to his camp so that Porus might believe that he had resolved to remain where he was until the dry weather. In the meantime he reconnoitred the river with his ships and ordered tent skins to be stuffed with hay and converted into rafts. Yet, as Arrian writes, "all the time he was waiting in ambush to see whether by rapidity of movement he could not steal a passage anywhere without being observed." At length, and we may be certain after a close personal reconnaissance, Alexander resolved to make the attempt at the headland and island described by Arrian, and in preparation he decided on a manoeuvre almost identical with that adopted by General Wolfe in his 1759 Quebec campaign. Under cover of night he sent out his cavalry to various points along the western bank of the river with orders to make a clamour, and from time to time to*

raise the battle-cry; for several nights Porus marched his elephants up and down the eastern bank to block an attempted crossing until he got tired of it, kept his elephants in camp, and posted scouts along the eastern bank. Then "when Alexander had brought it about that the mind of Porus no longer entertained any fear of his nocturnal attempts, he devised the following stratagem": Upstream and along the western bank he posted a chain of sentries, each post in sight and hearing of the next one, with orders to raise a din and keep their picket fires burning, while visible preparations were made at the camp to effect a crossing..... When Porus had been lulled into a sense of false security and all preparations were completed at the camp and the crossing place, Alexander set out secretly and kept at some distance from the western bank of the river so that his march would not be observed....

THE GENERALSHIP OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT, J. F. C. FULLER, 1960

At first, as Sempronius had expected, his tough, disciplined legions fared well against the Carthaginians. But on one side the Roman lines were made up of Gallic tribesmen fighting for the Romans, and here, suddenly, the Carthaginians unleashed a group of elephants ridden by archers. The tribesmen had never seen such beasts; they panicked and fell into a chaotic retreat. At the same time, as if out of nowhere, some 2,000 Carthaginians, hidden in dense vegetation near the river, fell on the Romans' rear. The Romans fought bravely to get out of the trap that Hannibal had laid for them, but thousands of them drowned in the frigid waters of the Trebia.

The battle was a disaster, and back in Rome emotions turned from outrage to anxiety. Legions were quickly dispatched to block the most accessible passes in the Apennines, the mountains that run across central Italy, but once again Hannibal defied expectations: he crossed the Apennines at their most unlikely, most inhospitable point, one that no army had ever passed through before because of the treacherous marshes on the other side. But after four days of trudging through soft mud, Hannibal brought the Carthaginians to safe ground. Then, in yet another clever ambush, he defeated a Roman army at Lake Trasimene, in present-day Umbria. Now his path to Rome was clear. In a state of near panic, the Roman republic resorted to the ancient tradition of appointing a dictator to lead them through the crisis. Their new leader, Fabius Maximus, quickly built up the city's walls and enlarged the Roman army, then watched perplexed as Hannibal bypassed Rome and headed south into Apulia, the most fertile part of Italy, and began to devastate the countryside.

Determined first and foremost to protect Rome, Fabius came up with a novel

strategy: he would post his legions in mountainous areas where Hannibal's cavalry would be harmless, and he would harass the Carthaginians in a guerrilla-style campaign, denying them supplies and isolating them in their position so far from home. Avoiding direct battle with their formidable leader at all costs, he would defeat them by exhausting them. But many Romans saw Fabius's strategy as disgraceful and unmanly. Worse, as Hannibal continued to raid the countryside, he hit none of Fabius's many properties, making it seem as if the two were in cahoots. Fabius became more and more unpopular.

Having razed Apulia, Hannibal entered a fertile plain in Campania, to Rome's south--terrain that Fabius knew well. Finally deciding he had to act or be thrown out of power, the dictator devised a trap: he stationed Roman armies at all the exit points from the plain, each army close enough to support the other. But Hannibal had entered Campania through the eastern mountain pass of Allifae, and Fabius had noticed that he never left by the same route he entered. Although Fabius kept a sufficiently large Roman garrison at Allifae just in case, he reinforced the other passes in greater numbers. The beast, he thought, was caged. Eventually Hannibal's supplies would run out, and he would be forced to try to break through. Fabius would wait.

In the weeks to come, Hannibal sent his cavalry north, perhaps trying to break out in that direction. He also plundered the richest farms in the area. Fabius saw through his tricks: he was trying to bait the Romans into a battle of his choice. But Fabius was determined to fight on his own terms, and only when the enemy tried to retreat from the trap. Anyway, he knew Hannibal would try to break through to the east, the only direction that afforded him a clean break, into country the Romans did not control.

One night the Roman soldiers guarding the pass at Allifae saw sights and heard sounds that made them think they were losing their minds: an enormous army, signaled by thousands of torches, seemed to be heading up the pass, covering its slopes, accompanied by loud bellowing sounds as if possessed by some evil demon. The army seemed irresistible--far larger than the maximum estimate of Hannibal's strength. Afraid that it would climb above them and surround them, the Romans fled from their garrison, abandoning the pass, too scared even to look behind them. And a few hours later, Hannibal's army came through, escaping from Fabius's cordon.

No Roman leader could figure out what Hannibal had conjured up on the slopes that night--and by the following year Fabius was out of power. The consul Terentius Varro burned to avenge the disgrace of Allifae. The Carthaginians were encamped near Cannae, in southeastern Italy not far from modern Bari. Varro marched to face them there, and as the two armies arrayed themselves in

ranks to meet in battle, he could only have felt supremely confident: the terrain was clear, the enemy was in full view, there could be no hidden armies or last-minute tricks--and the Romans outnumbered the Carthaginians by two to one.

The battle began. At first the Romans seemed to have the edge: the center of the Carthaginian line proved surprisingly weak and easily gave ground. The Romans attacked this center with force, hoping to break through and indeed pushing forward--when, to their shock and horror, they looked behind them and saw the two outer ends of the Carthaginian lines moving around to encircle them. They were trapped in a lethal embrace; it was a slaughter. Cannae would go down in history as Rome's most devastating and humiliating defeat.

The war with Hannibal would drag on for years. Carthage never sent him the reinforcements that might have turned the tide, and the much larger and more powerful Roman army was able to recover from its many defeats at his hands. But Hannibal had earned a terrifying reputation. Despite their superior numbers, the Romans became so frightened of Hannibal that they avoided battle with him like the plague.

Interpretation

Hannibal must be considered the ancient master of the military art of the unorthodox. In attacking the Romans on their own soil, he never intended to take Rome itself; that would have been impossible. Its walls were high, its people fierce and united in their hatred of him, and his forces were small. Rather, Hannibal's goal was to wreak havoc on the Italian peninsula and to undermine Rome's alliances with neighboring city-states. Weakened at home, Rome would have to leave Carthage alone and put a stop to its imperial expansion.

> *To cross the sea without heaven's knowledge, one had to move openly over the sea but act as if one did not intend to cross it. Each military maneuver has two aspects: the superficial move and the underlying purpose. By concealing both, one can take the enemy completely by surprise....* [*If*] *it is highly unlikely that the enemy can be kept ignorant of one's actions, one can sometimes play tricks right under its nose.*
>
> *THE WILES OF WAR: 36 MILITARY STRATEGIES FROM ANCIENT CHINA*, TRANSLATED BY SUN HAICHEN, 1991

To sow this kind of chaos with the tiny army he had been able to bring over the Alps, Hannibal had to make his every action unexpected. A psychologist before his time, he understood that an enemy that is caught by surprise loses its discipline and sense of security. (When chaos strikes those who are particularly

rigid and orderly to begin with, such as the people and armies of Rome, it has double the destructive power.) And surprise can never be mechanical, repetitive, or routine; that would be a contradiction in terms. Surprise takes constant adaptation, creativity, and a mischievous pleasure in playing the trickster.

So Hannibal always took the route that Rome least expected him to take--the road through the Alps, for example, considered impassable to an army and therefore unguarded. Eventually, inevitably, the Romans caught on and began to expect him to take the least obvious route; at that point it was the obvious that was unexpected, as at Allifae. In battle, Hannibal would fix the enemy's attention on a frontal assault--the ordinary, usual way armies fought at the time--then unleash the extraordinary in the form of elephants or a reserve force hidden to the enemy's rear. In his raids in the Roman countryside, he deliberately protected Fabius's property, creating the impression that the two men were in collusion and ultimately forcing the embarrassed leader to take action--an unorthodox use of politics and extramilitary means in war. At Allifae, Hannibal had bundles of kindling tied to the horns of oxen, then lit them and sent the terrified, bellowing animals up the slopes to the pass at night--creating an indecipherable image to the Roman sentries, literally in the dark, and a terrifying one.

At Cannae, where the Romans were by this time expecting the unorthodox, Hannibal disguised his stratagem in broad daylight, lining up his army like any other army of the period. The Roman force was already impelled by the violence of the moment and the desire for revenge; he let them make quick progress through his deliberately weak center, where they became crowded together. Then the swift-moving outer wings of his line closed in and choked them. On and on he went, each one of Hannibal's ingeniously unorthodox maneuvers flowering out of the other in a constant alternation between the uncanny and the banal, the hidden and the obvious.

Adapting Hannibal's method to your own daily battles will bring you untold power. Using your knowledge of your enemies' psychology and way of thinking, you must calculate your opening moves to be what they least expect. The line of least expectation is the line of least resistance; people cannot defend themselves against what they cannot foresee. With less resistance in your path, the progress you make will inflate their impression of your power; Hannibal's small army seemed to the Romans much larger than it really was. Once they come to expect some extraordinary maneuver on your part, hit them with the ordinary. Establish a reputation for the unconventional and you set your opponents on their heels: knowing to anticipate the unexpected is not the same thing as knowing what the unexpected will be. Before long your opponents will give way to your reputation alone.

2. In 1962, Sonny Liston became the heavyweight boxing champion of the world by defeating Floyd Patterson. Shortly afterward he turned up to watch a young hotshot on the scene, Cassius Clay, take on and beat rather decisively the veteran Archie Moore. After the fight, Liston paid a visit to Clay's dressing room. He put his arm around the boy's shoulder--at twenty, Clay was ten years younger than Liston--and told him, "Take care, kid. I'm gonna need you. But I'm gonna have to beat you like I'm your daddy." Liston was the biggest, baddest fighter in the world, and to those who understood the sport, he seemed invincible. But Liston recognized Clay as a boxer just crazy enough to want to fight him down the road. It was best to instill a touch of fear in him now.

Chaos--where brilliant dreams are born.

THE I CHING, CHINA, CIRCA EIGHTH CENTURY B.C.

The fear did not take: as Liston had guessed he would, Clay soon began to clamor for a fight with the champion and to brag to one and all that he would beat him in eight rounds. On television and radio shows, he taunted the older boxer: maybe it was Liston who was afraid to take on Cassius Clay. Liston tried to ignore the upstart; "If they ever make the fight," he said, "I'll be locked up for murder." He considered Clay too pretty, even effeminate, to be a heavyweight champion.

Time passed, and Clay's antics provoked a desire for the fight in the public: most people wanted to see Liston beat the daylights out of Clay and shut him up. Late in 1963 the two men met to sign on for a championship fight in Miami Beach the following February. Afterward Clay told reporters, "I'm not afraid of Liston. He's an old man. I'll give him talking lessons and boxing lessons. What he needs most is falling-down lessons." As the fight grew closer, Clay's rhetoric became still more insulting and shrill.

Of the sportswriters polled on the upcoming fight, most of them predicted that Clay would not be able to walk on his own after it was over. Some worried that he would be permanently injured. "I guess it's quite hard to tell Clay not to fight this monster now," said the boxer Rocky Marciano, "but I'm sure he'll be more receptive after he's been there with Liston." What worried the experts most of all was Cassius Clay's unusual fighting style. He was not the typical heavyweight bruiser: he would dance in place with his hands down at his side;

he rarely put his full body into his punches, instead hitting just from the arms; his head was constantly moving, as if he wanted to keep his pretty face unscathed; he was reluctant to go inside, to brawl and pummel the body--the usual way to wear down a heavyweight. Instead Clay preferred to dance and shuffle, as if his fights were ballet, not boxing. He was too small to be a heavyweight, lacked the requisite killer instinct--the press critique ran on.

At the weigh-in on the morning of the bout, everyone was waiting for Clay's usual prefight antics. He exceeded their expectations. When Liston got off the scales, Clay began to shout at him: "Hey, sucker, you're a chump. You've been tricked, chump.... You are too ugly.... I'm going to whup you so bad." Clay jumped and screamed, his whole body shaking, his eyes popping, his voice quivering. He seemed possessed. Was he afraid or downright crazy? For Liston this was quite simply the last straw. He wanted to kill Clay and shut the challenger up for good.

As they stood in the ring before the opening bell, Liston tried to stare down Clay as he had stared down others, giving him the evil eye. But unlike other boxers Clay stared back. Bobbing up and down in place, he repeated, "Now I've got you, chump." The fight began, and Liston charged forward at his prey, throwing a long left jab that missed by a mile. He kept coming, a look of intense anger on his face--but Clay shuffled back from each punch, even taunting Liston at one point by lowering his hands. He seemed able to anticipate Liston's every move. And he returned Liston's stare: even after the round ended and both men were in their corners, his eyes never left his opponent's.

The second round was more of the same, except that Liston, instead of looking murderous, began to look frustrated. The pace was far faster than in any of his earlier fights, and Clay's head kept bobbing and orbiting in disturbing patterns. Liston would move in to strike his chin, only to miss or find Clay hitting Liston's chin instead, with a lightning-quick jab that made him wobble on his feet. At the end of the third round, a flurry of punches came out of nowhere and opened a deep gash under Liston's left eye.

Now Clay was the aggressor and Liston was fighting to survive. In the sixth round, he began taking punches from all angles, opening more wounds and making Liston look weak and sad. When the bell for the seventh round rang, the mighty Liston just sat on his stool and stared--he refused to get up. The fight was over. The boxing world was stunned: Was it a fluke? Or--since Liston had seemed to fight as if under some spell, his punches missing, his movements tired and listless--had he just had an off night? The world would have to wait some fifteen months to find out, until the two boxers' rematch in Lewiston, Maine, in May 1965.

Consumed with a hunger for revenge, Liston trained like a demon for this second fight. In the opening round, he went on the attack, but he seemed wary. He followed Clay--or rather Muhammad Ali, as he was now known--around the ring, trying to reach him with jabs. One of these jabs finally grazed Ali's face as he stepped back, but, in a move so fast that few in the audience even saw it, Ali countered with a hard right that sent Liston to the canvas. He lay there for a while, then staggered to his feet, but too late--he had been down for more than ten seconds, and the referee called the fight. Many in the crowd yelled fix, claiming that no punch had landed. Liston knew otherwise. It may not have been the most powerful blow, but it caught him completely by surprise, before he could tense his muscles and prepare himself. Coming from nowhere, it floored him.

Liston would continue to fight for another five years, but he was never the same man again.

> *One who studies ancient tactics and employs the army in accord with their methods is no different from someone who glues up the tuning stops and yet tries to play a zither. I have never heard of anyone being successful. The acumen of strategists lies in penetrating the subtle amid unfolding change and discerning the concordant and contrary. Now whenever mobilizing you must first employ spies to investigate whether the enemy's commanding general is talented or not. If instead of implementing tactics, he merely relies on courage to employ the army, you can resort to ancient methods to conquer him. However, if the commanding general excels in employing ancient tactics, you should use tactics that contradict the ancient methods to defeat him.*
>
> HSU TUNG, CHINA, 976-1018

Interpretation

Even as a child, Muhammad Ali got perverse pleasure out of being different. He liked the attention it got him, but most of all he just liked being himself: odd and independent. When he began to train as a boxer, at the age of twelve, he was already refusing to fight in the usual way, flouting the rules. A boxer usually keeps his gloves up toward his head and upper body, ready to parry a blow. Ali liked to keep his hands low, apparently inviting attack--but he had discovered early on that he was quicker than other boxers, and the best way to make his speed work for him was to lure the opponent's chin just close enough for Ali to snap a jab at him that would cause a lot more pain for being so close and so quick. As Ali developed, he also made it harder for the other boxer to reach him by working on his legs, even more than on the power of his punch. Instead of

retreating the way most fighters did, one foot at a time, Ali kept on his toes, shuffling back and dancing, in perpetual motion to his own peculiar rhythm. More than any other boxer, he was a moving target. Unable to land a punch, the other boxer would grow frustrated, and the more frustrated he was, the more he would reach for Ali, opening up his guard and exposing himself to the jab from nowhere that might knock him out. Ali's style ran counter to conventional boxing wisdom in almost every way, yet its unorthodoxy was exactly what made it so difficult to combat.

Ali's unconventional tactics in the first Liston fight began well before the bout. His irritating antics and public taunts--a form of dirty warfare--were designed to infuriate the champion, cloud his mind, fill him with a murderous hatred that would make him come close enough for Ali to knock him out. Ali's behavior at the weigh-in, which seemed genuinely insane, was later revealed as pure performance. Its effect was to make Liston unconsciously defensive, unsure of what this man would do in the ring. In the opening round, as in so many of his subsequent fights, Ali lulled Liston by fighting defensively, an ordinary tactic when facing a boxer like Liston. That drew Liston in closer and closer--and now the extraordinary move, the speedy punch out of nowhere, had double the force. Unable to reach Ali with his punches, disconcerted by the dancing, the lowering of the hands, the irritating taunting, Liston made mistake after mistake. And Ali feasted on his opponents' mistakes.

Understand: as children and young adults, we are taught to conform to certain codes of behavior and ways of doing things. We learn that being different comes with a social price. But there is a greater price to pay for slavishly conforming: we lose the power that comes from our individuality, from a way of doing things that is authentically our own. We fight like everyone else, which makes us predictable and conventional.

> *The chief characteristic of fashion is to impose and suddenly to accept as a new rule or norm what was, until a minute before, an exception or whim, then to abandon it again after it has become a commonplace, everybody's "thing." Fashion's task, in brief, is to maintain a continual process of standardization: putting a rarity or novelty into general and universal use, then passing on to another rarity or novelty when the first has ceased to be such.... Only modern art, because it expresses the avant-garde as its own extreme or supreme moment, or simply because it is the child of the romantic aesthetic of originality and novelty, can consider as the typical--and perhaps sole--form of the ugly what we might call* ci-devant *beauty, the beauty of the* ancien regime, *ex-beauty. Classical art, through the method of imitation and the*

practice of repetition, tends toward the ideal of renewing, in the sense of integration and perfection. But for the modern art in general, and for avant-garde in particular, the only irremediable and absolute aesthetic error is a traditional artistic creation, an art that imitates and repeats itself. From the anxious modern longing for what Remy de Gourmont chose to call, suggestively, "le beau inedit" derives that sleepless and fevered experimentation which is one of the most characteristic manifestations of the avant-garde; its assiduous labor is an eternal web of Penelope, with the weave of its forms remade every day and unmade every night. Perhaps Ezra Pound intended to suggest both the necessity and the difficulty of such an undertaking when he once defined the beauty of art as "a brief gasp between one cliche and another." The connection between the avant-garde and fashion is therefore evident: fashion too is a Penelope's web; fashion too passes through the phase of novelty and strangeness, surprise and scandal, before abandoning the new forms when they become cliche, kitsch, stereotype. Hence the profound truth of Baudelaire's paradox, which gives to genius the task of creating stereotypes. And from that follows, by the principle of contradiction inherent in the obsessive cult of genius in modern culture, that the avant-garde is condemned to conquer, through the influence of fashion, that very popularity it once disdained--and this is the beginning of its end. In fact, this is *the inevitable, inexorable destiny of each movement: to rise up against the newly outstripped fashion of an old avant-garde and to die when a new fashion, movement, or avant-garde appears.*

THE THEORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE, RENATO POGGIOLI, 1968

The way to be truly unorthodox is to imitate no one, to fight and operate according to your own rhythms, adapting strategies to your idiosyncrasies, not the other way around. Refusing to follow common patterns will make it hard for people to guess what you'll do next. You are truly an individual. Your unorthodox approach may infuriate and upset, but emotional people are vulnerable people over whom you can easily exert power. If your peculiarity is authentic enough, it will bring you attention and respect--the kind the crowd always has for the unconventional and extraordinary.

3. Late in 1862, during the American Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant made several efforts to take the Confederate fortress at Vicksburg. The fortress was at a critical point in the Mississippi River, the lifeline of the South. If Grant's Union

army took Vicksburg, it would gain control of the river, cutting the South in half. Victory here could be the turning point of the war. Yet by January 1863 the fortress's commander, General James Pemberton, felt confident he had weathered the storm. Grant had tried to take the fort from several angles to the north and had failed. It seemed that he had exhausted all possibilities and would give up the effort.

The fortress was located at the top of a two-hundred-foot escarpment on the riverbank, where any boat that tried to pass was exposed to its heavy artillery. To its west lay the river and the cliffs. To the north, where Grant was encamped, it was protected by virtually impassable swamp. Not far east lay the town of Jackson, a railroad hub where supplies and reinforcements could easily be brought in--and Jackson was firmly in Southern hands, giving the Confederacy control of the entire corridor, north and south, on the river's eastern bank. Vicksburg seemed secure from all directions, and the failure of Grant's attacks only made Pemberton more comfortable. What more could the Northern general do? Besides, he was in political hot water among President Abraham Lincoln's enemies, who saw his Vicksburg campaign as a monumental waste of money and manpower. The newspapers were portraying Grant as an incompetent drunk. The pressure was tremendous for him to give it up and retreat back to Memphis to the north.

Grant, however, was a stubborn man. As the winter dragged on, he tried every kind of maneuver, with nothing working--until, on the moonless night of April 16, Confederate scouts reported a Union flotilla of transport ships and gunboats, lights off, trying to make a run past the batteries at Vicksburg. The cannons roared, but somehow the ships got past them with minimal damage. The next few weeks saw several more runs down the river. At the same time, Union forces on the western side of the river were reported heading south. Now it was clear: Grant would use the transport ships he had sneaked past Vicksburg to cross the Mississippi some thirty miles downriver. Then he would march on the fortress from the south.

Pemberton called for reinforcements, but in truth he was not overly concerned. Even if Grant got thousands of men across the river, what could he do once there? If he moved north toward Vicksburg, the Confederacy could send armies from Jackson and points south to take him from the flank and rear. Defeat in this corridor would be a disaster, for Grant would have no line of retreat. He had committed himself to a foolhardy venture. Pemberton waited patiently for his next move.

Grant did cross the river south of Vicksburg, and in a few days his army was moving northeast, heading for the rail line from Vicksburg to Jackson. This was

his most audacious move so far: if he were successful, he would cut Vicksburg off from its lifeline. But Grant's army, no different from any other, needed lines of communication and supply. These lines would have to connect to a base on the eastern side of the river, which Grant had indeed established at the town of Grand Gulf. All Pemberton had to do was send forces south from Vicksburg to destroy or even just threaten Grand Gulf, endangering Grant's supply lines. He would be forced to retreat south or risk being cut off. It was a game of chess that Pemberton could not lose.

And so, as the Northern general maneuvered his armies with speed toward the rail line between Jackson and Vicksburg, Pemberton moved on Grand Gulf. To Pemberton's utter dismay, Grant ignored him. Indeed, so far from dealing with the threat to his rear, he pushed straight on to Jackson, taking it on May 14. Instead of relying on supply lines to feed his army, he plundered the area's rich farmlands. More, he moved so swiftly and changed direction so fluidly that Pemberton could not tell which part of his army was the front, rear, or flank. Rather than struggle to defend lines of communication or supply, Grant kept none. No one had ever seen an army behave in such a manner, breaking every rule in the military playbook.

A few days later, with Jackson under his control, Grant wheeled his troops toward Vicksburg. Pemberton rushed his men back from Grand Gulf to block the Union general, but it was too late: beaten at the Battle of Champion Hill, he was forced back into the fortress, where his army was quickly besieged by the Union forces. On July 4, Pemberton surrendered Vicksburg, a blow the South would never recover from.

Interpretation

We humans are conventional by nature. Once anyone succeeds at something with a specific strategy or method, it is quickly adopted by others and becomes hardened into principle--often to everyone's detriment when it is applied indiscriminately. This habit is a particular problem in war, for war is such risky business that generals are often tempted to take the road well traveled. When so much is necessarily unsafe, what has proven safe in the past has amplified appeal. And thus for centuries the rules have been that an army must have lines of communication and supply and, in battle, must assume a formation with flanks and a front. Napoleon loosened these principles, but their hold on military thinkers remained so strong that during the American Civil War, some forty years after Napoleon's death, officers like Pemberton could not imagine an army behaving according to any other plan.

I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.

MARCEL DUCHAMP, 1887-1968

It took great courage for Grant to disobey these conventions and cut himself loose from any base, living instead off the rich lands of the Mississippi Basin. It took great courage for him to move his army without forming a front. (Even his own generals, including William Tecumseh Sherman, thought he had lost his mind.) This strategy was hidden from Pemberton's view because Grant kept up ordinary appearances by establishing a base at Grand Gulf and forming front and rear to march toward the rail line. By the time Pemberton had grasped the extraordinary nature of Grant's free-flowing attack, he had been taken by surprise and the game was over. To our eyes Grant's strategy might seem obvious, but it was completely outside Pemberton's experience.

To follow convention, to give inordinate weight to what has worked in the past, is a natural tendency. We often ignore some simple yet unconventional idea that in every sense would upset our opponents. It is a matter sometimes of cutting ourselves loose from the past and roaming freely. Going without a security blanket is dangerous and uncomfortable, but the power to startle people with the unexpected is more than worth the risk. This is particularly important when we are on the defensive or in a weakened state. Our natural tendency at such times is to be conservative, which only makes it easier for our enemies to anticipate our moves and crush us with their superior strength; we play into their hands. It is when the tide is against us that we must forget the books, the precedents, the conventional wisdom, and risk everything on the untried and unexpected.

4. The Ojibwa tribe of the North American plains contained a warrior society known as the Windigokan (No-flight Contraries). Only the bravest men, who had demonstrated bravery by their utter disregard for danger on the battlefield, were admitted to the Windigokan. In fact, because they had no fear of death, they were considered no longer among the living: they slept and ate separately and were not held to the usual codes of behavior. As creatures who were alive but among the dead, they spoke and acted contrarily: they called a young person an old man, and when one of them told the others to stand still, he meant charge forward. They were glum in times of prosperity, happy in the depths of winter. Although there was a clownish side to their behavior, the Windigokan could

inspire great fear. No one ever knew what they would do next.

The Windigokan were believed to be inhabited by terrifying spirits called Thunderers, which appeared in the form of giant birds. That made them somehow inhuman. On the battlefield they were disruptive and unpredictable, and in raiding parties downright terrifying. In one such raid, witnessed by an outsider, they gathered first in front of the Ojibwa chief's lodge and yelled, "We are not going to war! We shall not kill the Sioux! We shall not scalp four of them and let the rest escape! We shall go in daytime!" They left camp that night, wearing costumes of rags and scraps, their bodies plastered with mud and painted with splotches of weird color, their faces covered by frightening masks with giant, beak-like noses. They made their way through the darkness, stumbling over themselves--it was hard to see through the masks--until they came upon a large Sioux war party. Although outnumbered, they did not flee but danced into the enemy's center. The grotesqueness of their dance made them seem to be possessed by demons. Some of the Sioux backed away; others drew close, curious and confused. The leader of the Windigokan shouted, "Don't shoot!" The Ojibwa warriors then pulled out guns hidden under their rags, killed four Sioux, and scalped them. Then they danced away, the enemy too terrified by this apparition to pursue them.

After such an action, the mere appearance of the Windigokan was enough for the enemy to give them a wide berth and not risk any kind of encounter.

Interpretation

What made the Windigokan so frightening was the fact that, like the forces of nature from which they claimed to derive their powers, they could be destructive for no apparent reason. Their mounting of a raid was not governed by need or ordered by the chief; their appearance bore no relation to anything known, as if they had rolled on the ground or in trays of paint. They might wander in the dark until they chanced on an enemy. Their dancing was like nothing anyone had seen or imagined. They might suddenly start to kill and scalp, then stop at an arbitrary number. In a tribal society governed by the strictest of codes, these were spirits of random destruction and irrationality.

The use of the unconventional can startle and give you an advantage, but it does not often create a sense of terror. What will bring you ultimate power in this strategy is to follow the Windigokan and adapt a kind of randomness that goes beyond rational processes, as if you were possessed by a spirit of nature. Do this all the time and you'll be locked up, but do it right, dropping hints of the irrational and random at the opportune moment, and those around you will always have to wonder what you'll do next. You will inspire a respect and fear

that will give you great power. An ordinary appearance spiced by a touch of divine madness is more shocking and alarming than an out-and-out crazy person. Remember: your madness, like Hamlet's, must be strategic. Real madness is all too predictable.

5. In April 1917, New York's Society of Independent Artists prepared for its first exhibition. This was to be a grand showcase of modern art, the largest in the United States to date. The exhibition was open to any artist who had joined the society (whose dues were minimal), and the response had been overwhelming, with over twelve hundred artists contributing over two thousand pieces.

> *A similar vision among the Siouan tribes turns the warrior into a Heyoka, who also exhibits the clown-like behavior of the Windigokan, the use of sacking as a war shirt, and plastering the body with mud..... Psychologically the Heyoka was of immense importance, as were similar characters among numerous other tribes. During periods of happiness and plenty he saw only gloom and despair, and could be goaded into providing hours of harmless amusement when he gorged himself on buffalo ribs while complaining there was no food in the camp, or declared he was dirty and proceeded to wash in a bath of mud..... Yet behind this benign face of the Heyoka there lurked the ever-present fear that he was possessed by the spirit of Iktomi, and was therefore unpredictable and potentially dangerous. He, after all, was the only person who dared challenge the super-naturals even if he was in dread of a common camp dog and would run screaming in fright if one approached too close. Thus he made a mockery of the pretensions of some of the warriors, but at the same time emphasized the fact that the powers which guided and protected them in battle were of such strength that only a Heyoka might oppose them.*
>
> WARRIORS: WARFARE AND THE NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN, NORMAN BANCROFT HUNT, 1995

The society's board of directors included collectors like Walter Arensberg and artists like Man Ray and the twenty-nine-year-old Marcel Duchamp, a Frenchman then living in New York. It was Duchamp, as head of the Hanging Committee, who decided to make the exhibition radically democratic: he hung the works in alphabetical order, beginning with a letter drawn from a hat. The system led to cubist still lifes being hung next to traditional landscapes, amateur

photographs, and the occasional lewd work by someone apparently insane. Some of the organizers loved this plan, others were disgusted and quit.

A few days before the exhibition was to open, the society received the strangest work so far: a urinal mounted on its back, with the words R. MUTT 1917 painted in large black letters on its rim. The work was called *Fountain,* and it was apparently submitted by a Mr. Mutt, along with the requisite membership fee. In viewing the piece for the first time, the painter George Bellows, a member of the society's board, claimed it was indecent and that the society could not exhibit it. Arensberg disagreed: he said he could discern an interesting work of art in its shape and presentation. "This is what the whole exhibit is about," he told Bellows. "An opportunity to allow the artist to send in anything he chooses, for the artist to decide what is art, not someone else."

Bellows was unmoved. Hours before the exhibition opened, the board met and voted by a slim margin not to show the piece. Arensberg and Duchamp immediately resigned. In newspaper articles reporting this controversy, the object was politely referred to as a "bathroom fixture." It piqued a lot of curiosity, and an air of mystery pervaded the entire affair.

At the time of the exhibition, Duchamp was one of a group of artists who published a magazine called *The Blind Man*. The magazine's second issue included a photograph of *Fountain* taken by the great photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who lit the urinal beautifully so that a shadow fell over it like a kind of veil, giving it a slightly religious appearance, along with something vaguely sexual in the arguably vaginal shape of the urinal when laid on its back. *The Blind Man* also ran an editorial, "The Richard Mutt Case," that defended the work and criticized its exclusion from the show: "Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral...no more than a bathtub is immoral.... Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view--created a new thought for that object."

It soon became clear that the "creator" of *Fountain* was none other than Duchamp. And over the years the work began to assume a life of its own, even though it mysteriously disappeared from Stieglitz's studio and was never found again. For some reason the photograph and the story of *Fountain* inspired endless ideas about art and artmaking. The work itself had strange powers to shock and compel. In 1953 the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, was authorized by Duchamp to exhibit a replica of *Fountain* over its entrance door, a sprig of mistletoe emerging from the bowl. Soon more replicas were appearing in galleries, retrospective exhibitions of Duchamp's work, and museum collections. *Fountain* became a fetish object, something to collect. Replicas of it have sold

for over $1 million.

Everyone seems to see what they want to see in the piece. Shown in museums, it often still outrages the public, some disturbed by the urinal itself, others by its presentation as art. Critics have written extended articles on the urinal, with all kinds of interpretations: in staging *Fountain*, Duchamp was urinating on the art world; he was playing with notions of gender; the piece is an elaborate verbal pun; on and on. What some of the organizers of the 1917 show believed to be merely an indecent object unworthy of being considered art has somehow turned into one of the most controversial, scandalous, and analyzed works of the twentieth century.

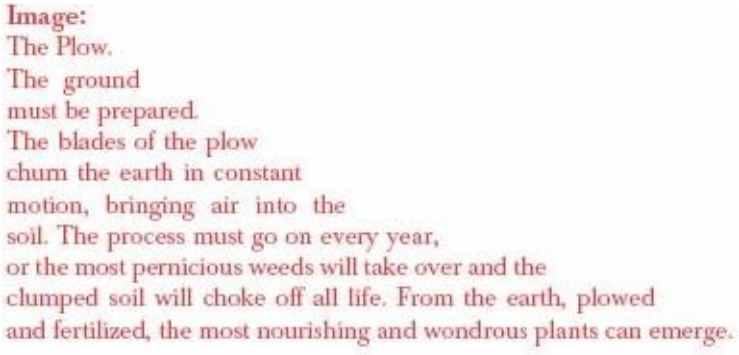
Interpretation

Throughout the twentieth century, many artists wielded influence by being unconventional: the Dadaists, the surrealists, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali--the list is long. But of all of them, it is Marcel Duchamp who has probably had the greatest impact on modern art, and what he called his "readymades" are perhaps the most influential of all his works. The readymades are everyday objects--sometimes exactly as they were made (a snow shovel, a bottle rack), sometimes slightly altered (the urinal laid on its back, the mustache and goatee drawn on a reproduction of *The Mona Lisa*)--"chosen" by the artist and then placed in a gallery or museum. Duchamp was giving the ideas of art priority over its images. His readymades, banal and uninteresting in themselves, inspired all kinds of associations, questions, and interpretations; a urinal may be a seedy commonplace, but to present it as art was utterly unconventional and stirred up angry, irritating, delirious ideas.

Understand: in war, politics, and culture, what is unconventional, whether it is Hannibal's elephants and oxen or Duchamp's urinal, is never material--or rather it is never *just* material. The unconventional can only arise out of the mind: something surprises, is not what we expected. We usually base our expectations on familiar conventions, cliches, habits of seeing, the ordinary. Many artists, writers, and other producers of culture seem to believe it the height of unconventionality to create images, texts, and other works that are merely weird, startling, or shocking in some way. These works may generate a momentary splash, but they have none of the power of the unconventional and extraordinary because they have no context to rub against; they do not work against our expectations. No more than strange, they quickly fade from memory.

When striving to create the extraordinary, always remember: what is crucial is the mental process, not the image or maneuver itself. What will truly shock and linger long in the mind are those works and ideas that grow out of the soil of

the ordinary and banal, that are unexpected, that make us question and contest the very nature of the reality we see around us. Most definitely in art, the unconventional can only be strategic.



Authority: In general, in battle one engages the enemy with the orthodox and gains victory through the unorthodox.... The unorthodox and the orthodox mutually produce each other, just like an endless cycle. Who can exhaust them?

--*Sun-tzu (fourth century B.C.*)

REVERSAL

There is never any value in attacking opponents from a direction or in a way that they expect, allowing them to stiffen their resistance--that is, unless your strategy is suicide.