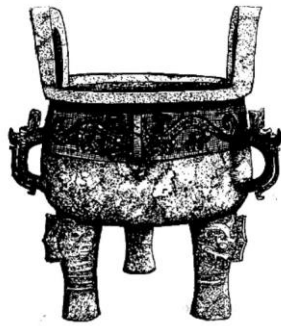


Steal the Firewood From Under the Pot



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Strategy 19

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When attacking a strong force, it is difficult to attack it directly as it stands. In these cases, one attacks the corners. In large scale battles, after careful inspection of the enemy's forces, one can gain advantage by attacking the corners of exposed strategic points. When one has eliminated the strength of the corners, the strength of the whole will also be diminished.

Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings*

When faced with an enemy too powerful to engage directly you must first weaken him by undermining his foundation and attacking his source of power.

Warring States Period China

The king of Wei had amassed and trained a large army with which he intended to expand his territories. The strength of his army frightened

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

several neighboring barons and princes into supporting his dreams of conquest and, with twelve lords pressed into an alliance, he went to the emperor to receive permission to increase his territories. 13

With his imperial blessing in hand, the king of Wei first set his sights on Qin. The king of Qin realized his territory would be the first to fall under the Wei expansion and convened his council for advice.

One advisor by the name of *Wei Yang* asked permission to travel to Wei so that he could prevent the army from attacking.

"And how do you plan to accomplish this?" asked the king.

"Have you not heard that defeat can be achieved at a banquet, generals captured while in a sitting room, cities razed between wine and the spiced meat, and a battering ram broken by a sleeping mat?"

The king confessed he had not and gave permission for Wei Yang to travel to Wei and try this unusual strategy.

When Wei Yang arrived at the Wei court, his reputation enabled him to have an audience with the king.

There he said to the king, *"Your majesty's accomplishments are great. Your order is obeyed throughout the land, and you are leader of the twelve lords. Soon you will control enough of the country to become emperor. However, to be recognized as emperor you must look and act like an emperor. The first step would be to build a palace befitting an emperor of the realm."*

The king was flattered and immediately began construction on a massive scale to increase the size of his palaces.

Then Wei Yang told the king, *"Now you must begin to look like an emperor and wear the scarlet robes, raise the nine pennants of power, and fly the flag of the Red Bird Constellation 14."*

13 This was just a formality since the Zhou Dynasty emperors were by this time mere figureheads.

14 Regalia that only the emperor could display.

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The king could not resist flaunting his power openly and he was soon walking about dressed in red robes and accompanied by imperial pennants and flags.

It soon became apparent to everyone in the empire that the king of Wei had visions of becoming emperor. This angered the noble houses, especially those of the more powerful kingdoms of Chu and Qi, any one of whom would have a far more legitimate claim to the throne than that provincial upstart, the king of Wei.

Through Wei Yang's subtle manipulations the twelve lords were persuaded to secretly switch their allegiance to Qi. When a large Qi army penetrated the Wei border, the king of Wei called on the twelve lords to stop the invasion. However, they captured the king instead and placed him in prison.

When the Qi army arrived, they installed another prince on the throne of Wei and, to prevent Wei from becoming too powerful in the future, parceled out much of its territory to the neighboring kingdoms.

Thus, while the king of Qin sat calmly watching, Wei Yang was able to avert the impending attack by Wei, bring down its king, and annex a portion of Wei territory, without so much as drawing a weapon.

After receiving the king's honors Wei Yang said, *"This is what is meant by defeat achieved at a banquet, generals captured while in a sitting room, cities razed between wine and the spiced meat, and a battering ram broken by a sleeping mat."*

Three Kingdoms Period China

The rebel warlord Cao Cao was on campaign against General Yuan Shao when he was joined by a third general, *Xu Yu*, who inquired about their current situation.

Cao Cao replied, *"We have only one month of supplies left while General Yuan has a year's worth of provisions stored within easy access at his garrison at Wu Chao. As it stands now we will be defeated within a month."*

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General Yu thereupon devised the following stratagem. He ordered a division of his elite cavalry to dress as Yuan troops and to muffle their horse's hooves by wrapping them in cloth. The disguised cavalry set out the next night carrying Yuan banners. Whenever they encountered a real Yuan patrol or checkpoint, the captain would tell them they were safeguarding Yuan's rear against a possible sneak attack.

Silently arriving at the garrison by dawn, the elite cavalry took the Yuan troops by surprise and succeeded in setting fire to the stores.

When the report made its way through the Yuan army that their provisions had been destroyed, they quickly surmised that they were now the ones at risk of starvation. The Yuan troops lost their will to fight and three days later General Yuan Shao was defeated and killed.

Legendary Era Japan

Japan's ancient hero Yamato Takeru was one of the eighty children of Emperor Keiko. One day he was sent to kill a notorious outlaw who was such an expert swordsman that all who had gotten in his way were killed.

Yamato Takeru did not intend to duel with the bandit and pretended to be ignorant of the man's reputation in order to befriend him. They became such good friends that they even went swimming together on a regular basis.

When Yamato Takeru was assured the bandit harbored no suspicions, he was ready to act. One day when they went swimming, he brought with him a wooden sword that he hid in his travel kit. They were in the habit of racing each other around a small island, but this time while they were racing Takeru let the bandit take the lead. Once he was out of sight behind the island, Takeru swam back to shore and quickly replaced the bandit's sword with the wooden one.

After they had gotten dressed, Takeru turned to the bandit and revealed his true purpose. The bandit immediately went for his sword, but the wooden sword had become wedged in the scabbard. While he was struggling to draw the wooden sword, Takeru took the bandit's head off in a single stroke.

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Summary

The source of an opponent's strength lies in either wealth, resources, or manpower. If in wealth, cause him to incur expenses, if in resources, disrupt the lines of distribution, if in manpower, sow discord.

