

To Catch Something, First Let It Go



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Strategy 16 To Catch Something, First Let It Go

Do not obstruct an army retreating homeward. If you besiege an army you must leave an outlet. Do not press an exhausted invader.

Sun Zi, *The Art of War*

Cornered prey will often mount a final desperate attack. To prevent this you let the enemy believe he still has a chance for freedom. His will to fight is thus dampened by his desire to escape.

When in the end the freedom is proven a falsehood the enemy's morale will be defeated and he will surrender without a fight.

Spring And Autumn Period China

In 506 B.C. an alliance of states headed by Wu overran and defeated the army of Chu. The remaining Chu troops were in retreat.

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

The king of Wu wanted to pursue and destroy the fleeing army but was held back by his younger brother Fu Gai who said, "*A cornered beast will fight to the finish, how much more an army of warriors. If they know there's no escape and they must fight to the death, they are bound to overpower us. However, if we allow them to reach and cross the river then, once in their home territory, they will think only of escaping the field.*"

The king followed his brother's advice and allowed the Chu army to cross the river. Once on the other side, the Chu soldiers began preparing food since they had not eaten in a long time. When the Wu army finally arrived on the opposite shore, the Chu soldiers abandoned their cooking fires and scattered into the countryside. The Wu army followed after and easily conquered the Chu capital of Yingdu.

Han Dynasty China

The Han general, *Zhao Zhongguo*, was sent to conduct a campaign to drive out a tribe of Xianling barbarians who had invaded the western provinces.

By the time general arrived in the area the Xianling had been pillaging for months and were negligent and lax in their guard. They were no longer in the mood to fight and were intent on making off with their booty.

When they saw the great Han army approaching from a distance, they panicked, abandoned their baggage train, and withdrew towards the Huang River. Their route of retreat was narrow and constricted, so general Zhao proceeded slowly.

Some of his commanders were eager to close in fast on the retreating tribesmen, but Zhao said, "*These impoverished invaders cannot be hastily pursued. If we proceed slowly they will depart without paying much attention to us; if too quickly, they will turn about and fight to the death.*"

His commanders half-heartily agreed.

The Xianling, seeing in the lax pursuit an opportunity to escape unharmed, dashed madly into the Huang River to flee. Several hundred drowned, while the remainder threw down their weapons and scattered into the countryside.

Thus without engaging in battle or suffering any casualties, General Zhao succeeded in inflicting heavy casualties and completely routing the enemy.

Six Dynasties Period China

In A.D. 384 a district administrator named Hong allied himself with the local tribes and rose up in arms against the emperor of the Former Qin.

The emperor sent General Fu to quell the rebellion. General Fu was renowned as being a fierce commander who showed no pity for either the enemy or his own troops. When the rebel Hong heard that general Fu was leading the army against him he prepared to flee the state. General Fu drove his soldiers fast in order to intercept Hong and prevent him from escaping.

One of General Fu's advisors said, "*Hong and his tribesman have a mind to go home. It behoves us to allow them to escape beyond the pass rather than obstruct them.*"

But General Fu did not agree with this advice and urged his men on even faster. He finally caught up to Hong and his tribesmen at the Hua Marsh. There Hong and his men were on desperate ground and turned to fight.

Because of the entangling terrain, General Fu could not make effective use of his superior numbers, while Hong's tribesmen were determined to fight to the death. The result was that the Qin forces suffered an unexpected defeat and General Fu was killed. Hong went on to carve out his own autonomous kingdom that remained free from imperial rule until his death.

Six Dynasties Period China

During the Southern Song period General *Tan Daoji* launched an attack against the north on behalf of the emperor. Throughout the campaign he seized cities and destroyed fortifications, taking more than four thousand prisoners. His advisors suggested that he should execute them all and erect a victory mound with the dead.

Tan Daoji replied, "At this time we have attacked the guilty and consoled the people. The army of a true king takes the upright as its position, so why is it necessary to slay the people?"

He released all the prisoners and sent them back to their homes. These former prisoners told their kinsmen of their capture and release and of the fair treatment they received at the hands of general Tan. Thereupon the barbarians dwelling in the region were elated, and wherever general Tan went a great many came forward to give their allegiance to the emperor.

Summary

Sun Zi wrote that if you place your troops in a desperate situation they will fight for their lives. When the advantage of power lies in your favour you must beware not to place the enemy's forces in a position where they will fight to the end against you. By allowing the possibility of escape you undermine the moral basis for a last ditch battle.

