

# TRADE SPACE FOR TIME

## THE NONENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

*Retreat in the face of a strong enemy is a sign not of weakness but of strength. By resisting the temptation to respond to an aggressor, you buy yourself valuable time--time to recover, to think, to gain perspective. Let your enemies advance; time is more important than space. By refusing to fight, you infuriate them and feed their arrogance. They will soon overextend themselves and start making mistakes. Time will reveal them as rash and you as wise. Sometimes you can accomplish most by doing nothing.*

### RETREAT TO ADVANCE

In the early 1930s, Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976) was a rising star in the Chinese Communist Party. A civil war had broken out between the Communists and the Nationalists; Mao led campaigns against the Nationalists, using guerrilla tactics to beat them time and again, despite being greatly outnumbered. He also served as the chairman of the fledgling Chinese Communist government, and his provocative essays on strategy and philosophy were widely read.

Then a power struggle broke out among the Communists: a group of Soviet-educated intellectuals known as the 28 Bolsheviks tried to gain control of the party. They despised Mao, seeing his taste for guerrilla warfare as a sign of timidity and weakness and his advocacy of a peasant revolution backward. Instead they advocated frontal warfare, fighting the Nationalists directly for control of key cities and regions, as the Communists had done in Russia. Slowly the 28B isolated Mao and stripped him of both political and military power. In 1934 they put him under virtual house arrest on a farm in Hunan.

Mao's friends and comrades felt he had suffered a dizzying fall from grace. But more troubling than the fall itself was his apparent acceptance of it: he did not rally supporters to fight back, he stopped publishing, he effectively disappeared. Perhaps the 28B had been right: Mao was a coward.

That same year the Nationalists--led by General Chiang Kai-shek--launched a new campaign to destroy the Communists. Their plan was to encircle the Red Army in its strongholds and kill every last soldier, and this time they seemed likely to succeed. The 28B fought back bravely, battling to hold on to the few cities and regions under Communist control, but the Nationalists outnumbered

them, were better equipped, and had German military advisers to help them. The Nationalists took city after city and slowly surrounded the Communists.

Thousands deserted the Red Army, but finally its remaining soldiers--around 100,000 of them--managed to break out of the Nationalist encirclement and head northwest. Mao joined them in their flight. Only now did he begin to speak up and question the 28B strategy. They were retreating in a straight line, he complained, making it easier for the Nationalists to chase them, and they were moving too slowly, carrying too many documents, file cabinets, and other trappings from their old offices. They were acting as if the whole army were merely moving camp and planning to keep fighting the Nationalists in the same way, fighting over cities and land. Mao argued that this new march should not be a momentary retreat to safer ground, but something larger. The whole concept of the party needed rethinking: instead of copying the Bolsheviks, they should create a distinctly Chinese revolution based on the peasantry, China's single largest population group. To accomplish this they needed time and freedom from attack. They should head southwest, to the farthest reaches of China, where the enemy could not reach them.

Red Army officers began to listen to Mao: his guerrilla tactics had been successful before, and the 28B strategy was clearly failing. They slowly adopted his ideas. They traveled more lightly; they moved only at night; they feinted this way and that to throw the Nationalists off their scent; wherever they went, they conducted rallies to recruit peasants to their cause. Somehow Mao had become the army's de facto leader. Although outnumbered a hundred to one, under his leadership the Red Army managed to escape the Nationalists and, in October 1935, to arrive at the remote reaches of Shan-hsi Province, where it would finally be safe.

*Six in the fourth place means: The army retreats. No blame. In face of a superior enemy, with whom it would be hopeless to engage in battle, an orderly retreat is the only correct procedure, because it will save the army from defeat and disintegration. It is by no means a sign of courage or strength to insist upon engaging in a hopeless struggle regardless of circumstances.*

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

After crossing twenty-four rivers and eighteen mountain ranges and having many near misses with disaster, the army came to the end of its "Long March." It

was radically reduced--it now numbered only 6,000--but a new kind of party had been forged, the kind Mao had wanted all along: a hard-core group of devoted followers who believed in a peasant revolution and embraced guerrilla warfare. Safe from attack in Shan-hsi, this purified party was slowly able first to recover, then to spread its gospel. In 1949 the Communists finally defeated the Nationalists for good and exiled them from mainland China.

## **Interpretation**

Mao was born and raised on a farm, and Chinese farm life could be harsh. A farmer had to be patient, bending with the seasons and the capricious climate. Thousands of years earlier, the Taoist religion had emerged from this hard life. A key concept in Taoism is that of *wei wu*--the idea of action through inaction, of controlling a situation by not trying to control it, of ruling by abdicating rule. *Wei wu* involves the belief that by reacting and fighting against circumstances, by constantly struggling in life, you actually move backward, creating more turbulence in your path and difficulties for yourself. Sometimes it is best to lie low, to do nothing but let the winter pass. In such moments you can collect yourself and strengthen your identity.

Growing up on a farm, Mao had internalized these ideas and applied them constantly in politics and war. In moments of danger, when his enemies were stronger, he was not afraid to retreat, although he knew that many would see this as a sign of weakness. Time, he knew, would show up the holes in his enemies' strategy, and he would use that time to reflect on himself and gain perspective on the whole situation. He made his period of retreat in Hunan not a negative humiliation but a positive strategy. Similarly, he used the Long March to forge a new identity for the Communist Party, creating a new kind of believer. Once his winter had passed, he reemerged--his enemies succumbing to their own weaknesses, himself strengthened by a period of retreat.

War is deceptive: you may think that you are strong and that you are making advances against an enemy, but time may show that you were actually marching into great danger. You can never really know, since our immersion in the present deprives us of true perspective. The best you can do is to rid yourself of lazy, conventional patterns of thinking. Advancing is not always good; retreating is not always weak. In fact, in moments of danger or trouble, refusing to fight is often the best strategy: by disengaging from the enemy, you lose nothing that is valuable in the long run and gain time to turn inward, rethink your ideas, separate the true believers from the hangers-on. Time becomes your ally. By doing nothing outwardly, you gain inner strength, which will translate into tremendous power later, when it is time to act.

*Space I can recover. Time, never.*  
--Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)

## **KEYS TO WARFARE**

The problem we all face in strategy, and in life, is that each of us is unique and has a unique personality. Our circumstances are also unique; no situation ever really repeats itself. But most often we are barely aware of what makes us different--in other words, of who we really are. Our ideas come from books, teachers, all kinds of unseen influences. We respond to events routinely and mechanically instead of trying to understand their differences. In our dealings with other people, too, we are easily infected by their tempo and mood. All this creates a kind of fog. We fail to see events for what they are; we do not know ourselves.

Your task as a strategist is simple: to see the differences between yourself and other people, to understand yourself, your side, and the enemy as well as you can, to get more perspective on events, to know things for what they are. In the hubbub of daily life, this is not easy--in fact, the power to do it can come only from knowing when and how to retreat. If you are always advancing, always attacking, always responding to people emotionally, you have no time to gain perspective. Your strategies will be weak and mechanical, based on things that happened in the past or to someone else. Like a monkey, you will imitate instead of create. Retreating is something you must do every now and then, to find yourself and detach yourself from infecting influences. And the best time to do this is in moments of difficulty and danger.

Symbolically the retreat is religious, or mythological. It was only by escaping into the desert that Moses and the Jews were able to solidify their identity and reemerge as a social and political force. Jesus spent his forty days in the wilderness, and Mohammed, too, fled Mecca at a time of great peril for a period of retreat. He and just a handful of his most devoted supporters used this period to deepen their bonds, to understand who they were and what they stood for, to let time work its good. Then this little band of believers reemerged to conquer Mecca and the Arabian Peninsula and later, after Mohammed's death, to defeat the Byzantines and the Persian empire, spreading Islam over vast territories. Around the world every mythology has a hero who retreats, even to Hades itself in the case of Odysseus, to find himself.

*Opportunities are changing ceaselessly. Those who get there too early have gone too far, while those who get there too late cannot catch up. As the sun and moon go through their courses, time does not go along with people.*

*Therefore, sages do not value huge jewels as much as they value a little time.  
Time is hard to find and easy to lose.*

HUAINANZI, CHINA, SECOND CENTURY B.C.

If Moses had stayed and fought in Egypt, the Jews would be a footnote in history. If Mohammed had taken on his enemies in Mecca, he would have been crushed and forgotten. When you fight someone more powerful than you are, you lose more than your possessions and position; you lose your ability to think straight, to keep yourself separate and distinct. You become infected with the emotions and violence of the aggressor in ways you cannot imagine. Better to flee and use the time your flight buys to turn inward. Let the enemy take land and advance; you will recover and turn the tables when the time comes. The decision to retreat shows not weakness but strength. It is the height of strategic wisdom.

The essence of retreat is the refusal to engage the enemy in any way, whether psychologically or physically. You may do this defensively, to protect yourself, but it can also be a positive strategy: by refusing to fight aggressive enemies, you can effectively infuriate and unbalance them.

During World War I, England and Germany fought a side war in East Africa, where each of them had a colony. In 1915 the English commander, Lieutenant General Jan Smuts, moved against the much smaller German army in German East Africa, led by Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. Smuts was hoping for a quick win; as soon as he had finished off the Germans, his troops could move to more important theaters of war. But von Lettow-Vorbeck refused to engage him and retreated south. Smuts marched in pursuit.

Time and again Smuts thought he had von Lettow-Vorbeck cornered, only to find that the German officer had moved on just hours earlier. As if drawn by a magnet, Smuts followed von Lettow-Vorbeck across rivers, mountains, and forests. Their supply lines extended over hundreds of miles, his soldiers were now vulnerable to small, harassing actions from the Germans, which destroyed their morale. Bugged down in pestilential jungles, as time went by, Smuts's army was decimated by hunger and disease, all without ever fighting a real battle. By the end of the war, von Lettow-Vorbeck had managed to lead his enemy on a four-year cat-and-mouse chase that had completely tied up valuable English forces and yielded them nothing in return.

Smuts was a persistent, thorough, aggressive leader who liked to defeat his opponents through maneuver in the field. Von Lettow-Vorbeck played on this

taste: he refused to engage Smuts in frontal battle but stayed enticingly close, just beyond reach, holding out the possibility of engagement so as to keep the Englishmen pushing forward into the wilderness. Infuriated to no end, Smuts continued the chase. Von Lettow-Vorbeck used Africa's vast spaces and inhospitable climate to destroy the English.

Most people respond to aggression by in some way getting involved with it. It is almost impossible to hold back. By disengaging completely and retreating, you show great power and restraint. Your enemies are desperate for you to react; retreat infuriates and provokes them into further attack. So keep retreating, exchanging space for time. Stay calm and balanced. Let them take the land they want; like the Germans, lure them into a void of nonaction. They will start to overextend themselves and make mistakes. Time is on your side, for you are not wasting any of it in useless battles.

War is notoriously full of surprises, of unforeseen events that can slow down and ruin even the best-laid plan. Carl von Clausewitz called this "friction." War is a constant illustration of Murphy's Law: if anything can go wrong, it will. But when you retreat, when you exchange space for time, you are making Murphy's Law work for you. So it was with von Lettow-Vorbeck: he set up Smuts as the victim of Murphy's Law, giving him enough time to make the worst come to pass.

During the Seven Years' War (1756-63), Frederick the Great of Prussia was faced with Austrian, French, and Russian armies on every side, all determined to carve him up. A strategist who usually favored aggressive attack, Frederick this time went on the defensive, crafting his maneuvers to buy himself time and slip the net his enemies were trying to catch him in. Year after year he managed to avoid disaster, though barely. Then, suddenly, Czarina Elizabeth of Russia died. She had hated Frederick bitterly, but her nephew and successor to the throne, Czar Peter III, was a perverse young boy who had not liked his aunt and who greatly admired Frederick the Great. He not only pulled Russia out of the war, he allied himself with the Prussians. The Seven Years' War was over; the miracle Frederick needed had come to pass. Had he surrendered at his worst point or tried to fight his way out, he would have lost everything. Instead he maneuvered to create time for Murphy's Law to do its work on his enemies.

War is a physical affair, which takes place somewhere specific: generals depend on maps and plan strategies to be realized in particular locations. But time is just as important as space in strategic thought, and knowing how to use time will make you a superior strategist, giving an added dimension to your attacks and defense. To do this you must stop thinking of time as an abstraction: in reality, beginning the minute you are born, time is all you have. It is your only

true commodity. People can take away your possessions, but--short of murder--not even the most powerful aggressors can take time away from you unless you let them. Even in prison your time is your own, if you use it for your own purposes. To waste your time in battles not of your choosing is more than just a mistake, it is stupidity of the highest order. Time lost can never be regained.

Image: The Desert Sands. In the desert there is nothing to feed on and nothing to use for war: just sand and empty space. Retreat to the desert occasionally, to think and see with clarity. Time moves slowly there, which is what you need. When under attack, fall back into the desert, luring your enemies into a place where they lose all sense of time and space and fall under your control.

**Authority: To remain disciplined and calm while waiting for disorder to appear amongst the enemy is the art of self-possession.**

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

## **REVERSAL**

When enemies attack you in overwhelming force, instead of retreating you may sometimes decide to engage them directly. You are inviting martyrdom, perhaps even hoping for it, but martyrdom, too, is a strategy, and one of ancient standing: martyrdom makes you a symbol, a rallying point for the future. The strategy will succeed if you are important enough--if your defeat has symbolic meaning--but the circumstances must work to highlight the rightness of your cause and the ugliness of the enemy's. Your sacrifice must also be unique; too many martyrs, spread over too much time, will spoil the effect. In cases of extreme weakness, when facing an impossibly large enemy, martyrdom can be used to show that your side's fighting spirit has not been extinguished, a useful way to keep up morale. But, in general, martyrdom is a dangerous weapon and can backfire, for you may no longer be there to see it through, and its effects are too strong to be controlled. It can also take centuries to work. Even when it may prove symbolically successful, a good strategist avoids it. Retreat is always the better strategy.

Retreat must never be an end in itself; at some point you have to turn around

and fight. If you don't, retreat is more accurately called surrender: the enemy wins. Combat is in the long run unavoidable. Retreat can only be temporary.