

To Catch The Bandits First Capture Their Leader



擒賊擒王

Qín Zéi Qín Wáng

Strategy 18

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Deploy a detachment of shock troops and select commandos to focus their assault on the enemy's vital points. This is the way to slay their commanders.

Sun Bin, *Art of War*

If the enemy's army is strong but is allied to the commander only by money or threats then, take aim at the leader. If the commander falls, the rest of the army will disperse or come over to your side. If, however, they are allied to the leader through loyalty, then beware, the army can continue to fight on after his death out of vengeance.

Spring And Autumn Period China

In 756 B.C. the rebel commander *Yin Ziqi* led an army to lay siege against the strategic city of Suiyang.

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

The defending commander, *Zhang Xun*, noticed that Yin Ziqi oversaw the siege from well outside the range of the city's archers. He believed that if he could take out the leader the rebel's morale would sink and he would be able to launch a counter attack. He devised a plan with his best archers.

The next time the rebels assailed the wall they were to shoot back using the branches of trees. When Yin Ziqi heard that the defenders were reduced to shooting with branches he felt certain the city was ready to be taken.

Before the next assault, he moved in closer to better oversee the final victory. Riding atop his horse he unknowingly came within range of the archers who had saved their arrows for just such a moment.

One arrow hit Yin Ziqi in the left eye killing him instantly.

The spectacle of their commander's death in front of almost the entire rebel army served to demoralize them to such an extent that they quickly dispersed from the field.

Six Dynasties Period China

In A.D. 369 there were numerous rebellions against the rule of Emperor *Fu Jian* of the former Qin dynasty. One rebel general, *Li Yan*, joined forces with the local hill tribes and proclaimed himself governor of the province of Yi.

Fu Jian sent his ablest commander *Wang Meng* to quell the rebellion. Wang Meng promptly attacked and defeated Li Yan's outlying command posts scattering the tribes back into the hills. Then he chased Li Yan to the city of Fuhan where he laid siege to the city.

Li Yan was terrified of being executed and sent his younger brother to seek terms of surrender from the emperor. Wang Meng called out for Li Yan to surrender, but Yan would not come out from behind the city walls.

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Another commander urged Wang to attack the walls but Wang Meng, refused saying, "*I received an imperial order to seize a rebel, not to fight a war.*"

Instead of attacking the walls, Wang Meng employed a Trojan horse strategy. He dressed himself in multi-layered white robes, mounted a ceremonial carriage, and rode up the city gate accompanied by only two unarmed attendants. There he announced that he had come alone and unarmed to personally negotiate a peace treaty with Li Yan himself.

Yan, seeing that Wang posed no threat, finally agreed to negotiate and he went to open the gate. Unseen from the city walls, were a handful of armed soldiers, some hidden under Wang's robes, others clinging to the underbelly of the carriage.

As soon as Li Yan walked out the gate, these hidden soldiers rushed out and seized the rebel general so fast that his own troops were too dumbfounded to react. They hustled him off in the carriage and Wang Meng returned him to the capital. Without a leader, the province was brought under control without any further battles.

Heian Period Japan

There was an aristocrat known by the name of Master Yoga who had a dispute over the ownership of some rice paddies with another official named Sawamata. One night, Master Yoga was woken from his sleep to discover that Sawamata had launched a surprise attack. The attackers numbered over six hundred men, and Master Yoga, with less than a hundred retainers, was certain his fate was sealed.

Sawamata's troops surrounded the compound and set it ablaze with fire arrows. Those who tried to escape the fire were shot down by the archers. By morning all the defenders were dead. Sawamata ordered his troops to bring him the head of Master Yoga but the bodies were so charred they were unable to identify him, although they found his armor on one of the corpses.

"In any case, no one escaped alive, not even a dog," said Sawamata. "I am certain that Master Yoga is dead as well."

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

Sawamata and his men left the charred ruins to return home. On the way back they stopped at the mansion of an elderly aristocrat to seek food and fodder as well as medicine for their wounded.

Sawamata told his tale to the Great Prince who said, *"I'm impressed that you were able to kill Yoga in so brilliant a fashion. He was extremely clever, a man of such ferocity and energy that I wouldn't have expected you could trap him in his house and kill him. Well, now I trust you have his head tied to your saddle and I would like to see it."*

"That's a ridiculous request. I told you all that was left were burned corpses. Surely, you wouldn't expect me to carry around such a disgusting thing as a charred head," replied Sawamata.

"Yes, I understand. It is just that from an old man's experience I would feel much more at ease if I knew his head was tied to your saddle just in case it revived."

"But since it isn't, I cannot take the risk that Yoga is still alive and that I would be caught having to defend someone as unreasonable as you. Therefore you must leave immediately! However, I will send you all the provisions your men need."

Sawamata deferred to the elderly prince and he and his troops continued along the road. A short time later several carts carrying the food and fodder arrived and they stopped to unsaddle their horses and heat the wine. After having fought through the night and then marching until late day, Sawamata's troops were near exhaustion. They eagerly drank down the wine and ate the food, after which they all fell asleep along the side of the road.

Unbeknownst to Sawamata, Master Yoga was still alive. The night before he had decided fighting was futile, so he dressed a corpse in his armor and, with a handful of men, slipped through the latrine and swam out through a narrow canal to escape.

While Sawamata was still at the Great Prince's mansion, Master Yoga had managed to round up some men from the countryside so that they now numbered fifty. A scout reported that Sawamata's troops were all asleep in the fields not far away.

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Master Yoga turned to his men and said, *"Now is the time to strike. Presently they believe me dead and are drowsy from food and drink. If we attack with our fifty men now we may still have a chance"*

Master Yoga and his men attacked and caught Sawamata's troops by complete surprise. Many fled in panic while others were slain reaching for their saddles and weapons.

Sawamata was killed, and Master Yoga made sure to tie his head to his saddle.

Summary

To kill a poisonous snake you must cut off the head. For if you should you cut the snake in half, then the section containing the head may yet coil suddenly and bite. To destroy an opponent you must destroy the command structure to insure that the defeated do not merely find another leader.

