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The Military's Role on the War on Drugs

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"Only if statesmen look to certain military moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature do political decisions influence operations for their worse."

Carl Von Clausewitz

President George Bush warned the nation that the gravest threat facing our country today is drugs. Traditionally, a problem facing only civilian agencies, the president thrust the military into the middle of an expanding war -- a war being fought on many fronts against powerful enemies. This paper will look at the role of the military in this war from the perspective of two of history's most influential military strategists: Sun Tzu and Carl Von Clausewitz. First, the paper will explore whether or not these strategists would have recommended military involvement and second, if involved, what kind of strategies would they have advocated? Obviously, the historical settings have changed from the days of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz. Their thoughts on strategy, however, still can be quite useful in analyzing America's growing war.

American involvement in the war on drugs began 20 years ago with President Nixon's initial declaration of war on 24 October 1969.¹ Every U.S. president since Nixon has escalated the war, most recently with President Bush's address to the nation on 5 September 1989. Like all wars, the United States is engaged because of a perceived threat to our national interests. The Government Accounting Office (GAO) reported to Congress that drug abuse and trafficking threaten national security by degrading the nation's moral fiber and health, adversely affecting its economy, and undermining its foreign security interests.² The President's Commission on Organized Crime echoed the GAO when it stated, "Beyond threats to friendly democracies, international drug trafficking should be considered a threat to our national security because they comprise a direct attack on the physical and social well-being of our country."³

With our national security interests threatened and an expanding war, what should be the role of the military in this conflict? From the beginning, the military has been reluctant to get involved, allocating a very small fraction of one percent of the DOD budget to combat the drug war. The reasons for this

reluctance are many and are beyond the scope of this paper; however, the primary reason was clearly stated by Secretary of Defense Carlucci when he testified before Congress that, "I remain absolutely opposed to the assignment of a *law enforcement* mission to the Department of Defense."⁴ The fact remains, however, that the armed forces are slowly being drawn into the war against drugs. What advice then would Sun Tzu give to President Bush on whether the armed forces should become involved in this conflict, and if engaged, what kind of strategy would he recommend?

The U. S. war on drugs, a war not involving competing nations, states, or sovereigns, would have been a foreign concept for Sun Tzu. Although the modern concept of nation or state did not exist in Chinese antiquity, wars were fought between conflicting peoples ruled by established feudal governments. The U.S. war on drugs, unlike war during Sun Tzu's time, is partially a "civil war" between citizens of the same state (drug users, suppliers, etc versus government agencies, health services, religious groups, etc) and partially a violent war against foreign "corporations" competing for U.S. markets.

Sun Tzu would caution President Bush that war should never be undertaken thoughtlessly or recklessly -- that there must be an objective to the war. Sun Tzu would question the president on whether he has a complete understanding of what the armed forces were going to do in this war. Then Sun Tzu would remind him that, "For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."⁵ Does the U.S. then need to use armed forces in combat or could we win this war without armed battles, and are there other more viable options for defeating the enemy?

Sun Tzu would also advise President Bush that the objective of war is victory, not lengthy operations, however brilliantly conducted. "Victory is the main object in war. If this is long delayed, weapons are blunted and morale

depressed . . . there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited."⁶ The very nature of the drug war makes it a protracted struggle, a concept Mao would be more familiar with than Sun Tzu. In his article, "The Army and the Drug War: Politics or National Security", LTC Abbott, states that, "If we are unwilling to commit to a long-term solution, we may achieve a few short-term victories but will not win the war."⁷

And finally, Sun Tzu would warn the president to keep the moral influence with the people during the war. By moral influence, Sun Tzu meant, "that which causes the people to be in harmony with their leaders."⁸ An almost sure way to lose this harmony is for the armed forces to become entangled in corruption. Because of the billions of dollars involved, corruption is a fact of life in the world of illegal drugs -- "permeating even law enforcement agencies."⁹ The GAO warned Congress that public opinion could turn against an increased DOD role in the war on drugs.¹⁰ Following an almost inevitable drug scandal involving members of the U.S. armed forces, it may be difficult to keep the harmony Sun Tzu preached was necessary between the people, the leaders, and the armed forces.

Based on the above observations, it is difficult to imagine Sun Tzu recommending the use of armed forces in a "war" on drugs. Since, however, we are already involved in the war, Sun Tzu would deplore America's lack of understanding of both the enemy and our own forces. Sun Tzu's famous axiom, "If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril"¹¹ definitely applies to the U.S. drug war. The drug problem has many facets from a global illicit drug trade, to money-laundering networks, to organized crime. One of America's biggest weaknesses is a lack of understanding on "who" the enemy is -- their size and scope -- not to mention the lack of a clear understanding of the roles, functions, and responsibilities of all the

government (federal, state, county, city, etc) agencies involved.¹²

A second piece of advice Sun Tzu would offer on the U.S. drug war is, "that what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy."¹³ The enemy's strategy is to manufacture drugs outside the U.S. (100% of the cocaine and heroin and 85% of the marijuana consumed in the U.S. is imported.)¹⁴ and then smuggle the drugs into the U.S. for distribution and sales. The vulnerability of the enemy's strategy is at the production (input) and sales (output) of the system. The armed forces strategy, however, is primarily a defensive one of interdicting the flow of drugs (thru put) as they are shipped to the United States. Although the armed forces are involved in other areas such as military assistance programs, the major focus continues to be interdiction. This strategy is aimed at the very strength of the enemy's operation. Drugs are smuggled into the U.S. in many ways and only a very small percentage are ever seized. According to the GAO, "... interdiction alone will achieve only a short-term, relatively small reduction in drug availability. . . traffickers can quickly and effectively adapt to interdiction efforts by shifting their smuggling methods and routes. . . ." ¹⁵

The drug cartels are heeding Sun Tzu's advice in their operations against the United States. In the Art of War, Sun Tzu stated, "The enemy must not know where I intend to give battle. For if he does not know where I intend to give battle he must prepare in a great many places, those I have to fight in any one place will be few."¹⁶ This statement clearly shows the enemy's strength and America's weakness in the current strategy of interdiction.

Sun Tzu would have problems with the U.S. armed forces involvement in the war on drugs and would oppose a strategy primarily focused on interdiction. Clausewitz would also question America's efforts. His famous dictum that, "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of

political intercourse, carried on with other means"¹⁷ clearly defends the very political nature of the drug war. The U.S. policy to combat drugs has expanded to incorporate the military instrument. Clausewitz would ask, however, what the ultimate objective of the war was. He stated in On War, "No one starts a war -- or rather no one in his senses ought to do so -- without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."¹⁸ Clausewitz goes on to say, "The aim of war should be what its very concept applies -- to defeat the enemy."¹⁹ The question Clausewitz would then ask is who is the enemy and is the United States really serious in its rhetoric calling for their defeat?

Unfortunately, according to Scott B. MacDonald, a noted author on the drug problem, "part of the reality of the situation requires us to acknowledge that there will never be a total victory in drug use eradication. . . ." ²⁰ The reason for the military not being able to totally defeat the enemy is that part of the "enemy" is the American people -- the users, or the demand side of the drug war. This would cause problems for Clausewitz and his concept that war is waged by a "remarkable trinity" of the government, armed services, and the people. At what point does this trinity break down during a "civil war" when a substantial minority of the population are the "enemy" by their very use of drugs?

Assuming that Clausewitz would have approved of the U.S. military involvement in the war on drugs because of its political objective, what would his comments have been on the military strategy? One of the first things Clausewitz would have asked in assessing U.S. strategy is: what is the enemy's center of gravity? In On War, Clausewitz stated, ". . . one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all powers and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point which all of our energies should be

directed."²¹

Clausewitz believed that an enemy's center of gravity could usually be found in either his army, capital, or primary ally. On the supply side of the drug war, the enemys' armies are small, heavily armed mobile group of mercenaries financed by the drug cartels and in some South American countries supported by leftist guerrillas. These "armies" are not the enemy's center of gravity, however, because as long as the cartels have ample supplies of money they can continually raise replacement forces.

As "corporations," the drug cartels do not have capitals as such, however, they do have armed drug camps which function as their capitals. The United States has targeted these camps in the past with limited success such as the U.S. Army operation Blast Furness in Bolivia during 1986.²² Blast Furness proved, however, that these camps are mobile targets which can easily disperse, only to reappear again. Because they are easily moved or replaced, the enemy's capitals should not be considered their center of gravity.

The drug cartels also do not have formal allies in the traditional sense, however, they do get support from various elements of the governments they have corrupted and from governments such as Panama, Cuba, and Nicaragua. Without both the direct and indirect support from their allies it would be almost impossible for the cartels to continue with the same level of success. Therefore, on the supply side of the war, this would appear to be the enemy's center of gravity and Clausewitz would look for a strategy aimed at attacking this center. Unfortunately, as previously discussed, the military strategy is aimed at the enemy's strength, their distribution system and not their center of gravity.

Like Sun Tzu, Clausewitz would recommend that the United States adopt a strategy which sought a rapid victory. Clausewitz stated, "No conquest can be

carried out too quickly, and that to spread it out over a longer period than the minimum needed to complete it makes it not less difficult, but more."²³ Faced with political restrictions, the military strategy, however, is forced into a protracted strategy of interdiction.

A final recommendation Clausewitz would probably make regarding U.S. strategy is to go on the offensive. Only by use of the offensive can victory be achieved. According to Clausewitz, "If defense is the strongest form of war, yet has a negative object, it follows that it should be used only so long as weakness compels, and be abandoned as soon as we are strong enough to pursue a positive object."²⁴ Once again political and legal restrictions preclude an offensive military strategy.

There is no question that the United States is seriously threatened by an ever-growing drug problem. There is also no doubt that drastic actions are required to deal with this crisis. The question has to be asked, however, whether this is a mission for the United States military. Congress and the administration believe it is. Out of frustration, they have turned to the Department of Defense to apply military technology in ~~in~~ the war on drugs. With the focus on forces and technical capabilities and not on strategy, the DOD has been tasked to wage a war that in a democracy has traditionally been a law enforcement function. Sun Tzu and Clausewitz would both question the very nature of U.S. involvement, however, Clausewitz would probably have approved because of his view of war as a continuation of politics by other means. Both theorists, however, would seriously argue against the military strategy forced on the DOD because of legal and political restrictions and a strategy driven by the DOD's technological capabilities. Only the future will tell whether a faulty strategy can succeed when applied by a technologically competent and highly professional military force.

FOOTNOTES

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