

Sun Tzu Compared to Clausewitz

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Many philosophers have tried to understand warfare in its various forms, or have tried to define it and quantify it in absolute terms. War, by its very nature, is fluid and always changing making it difficult to define. Two notable military philosophers from very different eras, Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz have very different approaches to the philosophy of war. Sun Tzu was a prominent military advisor to Chinese nobility around 500 B.C. Carl von Clausewitz was a Prussian officer who lived in the late 18th and early 19th century. Sun Tzu teaches a philosophy on war that is elegant and simple. Carl von Clausewitz's philosophy is plain brutal. The writings of Sun Tzu are still widely applicable to modern warfare and are writings which the author can relate to.

Tzu's overriding concern is winning, but he does not advocate sacrificing in order to accomplish victory. His primary goal is to find a way to defeat the enemy without actually fighting him. According to Tzu, this should be the first goal of any commander. In war, if a commander can force his enemy to capitulate without either side paying a high price in blood, the resulting peace is likely to be arrived at more quickly, and be easier to manage. Bitterness and animosity built up over long periods of fighting leave deep scars and foster grudges between enemies. According to Sun Tzu, this is less of a problem by a quicker and less costly war. Tzu promotes fluidity, flexibility, surprise, deception and intelligence over sheer military might. According to him, the proper application of these principles will allow the wise commander to win. Wise commanders who seek to keep their enemy guessing, off balance and reacting instead of acting is well on their way to victory. Tzu sees the use of force almost as a last resort in war. The beauty of Tzu's principles is that they focus on victory with the least damage and the swiftest resolution. This approach preserves lives, property, and public support for the government or commanders who apply it wisely.

Clausewitz's approach to military philosophy was very different from Sun Tzu. Clausewitz was largely preoccupied with the massive application of force and attempts to mitigate friction in combat operations. He defined friction as suffering, confusion, exhaustion, and fear. The problem with his line of thinking is that he became a slave to the concept of a single definable center of gravity. Clausewitz stressed the importance of finding the center of gravity, or the critical point at the critical time, upon which the outcome of the conflict depended. In this author's view, Clausewitz makes a mistake in not recognizing that combat often presents multiple smaller centers of gravity. These multiple smaller centers of gravity can be individually exploited and isolated in the pursuit of overall advantage. By exploiting several centers of gravity simultaneously, the enemy can be quickly thrown off balance.

Clausewitz did not see the importance of unconventional operations and how they could decrease the effectiveness of large opposing forces without the need for a decisive clash of massed strength. He also did not pay attention to how friction could be used against the enemy. Instead, he focused on how to limit friction's impact on one's own forces. His concentration on the importance of destroying the enemy in combat using strength against strength goes against Sun Tzu's concept of attacking the enemy's strategy.

The brutality of Clausewitz's approach is illustrated by the bloody attrition warfare of World War I in Europe. Repeated human wave assaults focused on the strongest points of enemy defenses, while attempting to smash the enemy into defeat. This mentality served only to bleed both sides at similar and alarming rates. The new automatic weapons of the day made human wave assaults little more than mass suicide. The tanks and aircraft of that era were not fast or powerful enough to play a decisive role in gaining advantage through maneuverability.

Clausewitz also focused intently on destruction of the enemy's army and occupation of his territory as the overriding goals of warfare. Sun Tzu tends to lean more toward a goal of victory regardless of method. His focus is directed at forcing the enemy to do one's will and sue for peace as a result. Destruction of enemy forces is not necessarily a prerequisite.

The writings of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, by comparison, could not be more different. Clausewitz's *On War* is a large work that is difficult to follow, redundant in places and contradictory in others. Clausewitz produced almost 600 pages of material, which always seems to lead back to his concept of mass and center of gravity. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is less than 100 pages, but much deeper in substance and much easier to understand and apply. Sun Tzu stresses the importance of out-thinking the enemy, while Clausewitz focuses on destroying the enemy's army and occupying his lands. Sun Tzu focuses on the end, while Clausewitz stresses only one means to that end. Destruction and occupation are simply methods to achieve victory through force, according to Clausewitz. While not discouraging the use of force, Sun Tzu openly examines other methods for achieving victory

which require more flexibility, creativity and foresight than brute force alone. Sun Tzu's writings are as pertinent today as they were when written in 500 B.C.

Bibliography

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