

Strategy, Part 1 **From Sun Tzu to Liddell Hart**

by Steve Winter

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To ensure that your whole host may withstand the brunt of the enemy's attack and remain unshaken, use maneuvers direct and indirect. In all fighting, the direct method may be used for joining battle, but indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory.

Indirect tactics, efficiently applied, are as inexhaustible as Heaven and Earth, unending as the flow of rivers and streams; like the sun and moon, they end but to begin anew; like the four seasons, they pass away but to return once more.

-- Sun Tzu

Those brilliant, immortal words, penned by the master Chinese strategist Sun Tzu (or Sun Tzu Wu) sometime in the sixth century B.C., can rightly be called the basis of all progressive thinking on strategy. Sun Tzu's book, [*The Art of War*](#), is the classic text on strategy and warfare. It was widely circulated, annotated, and plagiarized in ancient China. Legend holds that its secrets were key components in Napoleon's brilliant campaigns -- it is at least possible, given that a French translation was published in 1782. It was not translated into English, however, until 1905, 23 centuries after the author's death. A second, more accessible translation appeared in 1910.

For decades, however, Sun Tzu's book was treated more as a historical curiosity than as a military guidebook. Only the most enlightened generals, it seems, were interested in the military philosophizing of a general who commanded chariots. *The Art of War* enjoyed a flowering of popularity in the 1980s when it was adopted by businessmen and stock traders who saw commerce as a model of warfare (typified by Michael Douglas's Sun Tzu-quoting character, Gordon Gecko, in the 1987 film "Wall Street").

The problem, to paraphrase Jamie Lee Curtis from another film, "A Fish Called Wanda," is that while gorillas do read philosophy, they don't understand it. Sun Tzu's brilliant 13 chapters are poetic, evocative, at times blunt, but more often than not, impenetrable to present-day readers. The quote that introduces this article is a fine example. The author clearly is making an important point -- to win, you must use indirect tactics.

What are indirect tactics? We are told only that they are "as inexhaustible as Heaven and Earth" and that "they end but to begin anew." If you have limitless time to study the text and think deeply about Sun Tzu's words, the message becomes clear, but few of us have the time, the training, or the inclination to do that.

Fortunately, someone else has already done the hard intellectual work for you. That someone is [B. H. Liddell Hart](#), a brilliant British military strategist who contributed much to revolutionizing modern war with his pre- and post-WW2 writings. (Marshall Rommel said of his work, "The British would have been able to prevent the greatest part of their defeats if they had paid attention to the modern theories expounded by Liddell Hart before the war.")

In 1954, Liddell Hart published a book simply titled *Strategy*. (The book's genesis goes back further, however, to 1929, when it was published as *The Decisive Wars of History*. The first edition obviously contained none of the chapters on or discussion of WW2.) It begins with 13 quotes from Sun Tzu. Although Liddell Hart claims most of the analytical thought to be his own, it is clear that he was well versed in Sun Tzu's towering work that preceded him by more than 2,000 years. In a very real sense, *Strategy* is a massive expansion, update, and clarification of *The Art of War* for the 20th century and beyond.

The book is divided into four parts:

- Strategy from Fifth Century B.C. to Twentieth Century A.D.
- Strategy of the First World War
- Strategy of the Second World War
- Fundamentals of Strategy and Grand Strategy

The first three sections are examinations of history. In them, Liddell Hart analyzes important military campaigns and provides examples of strategies both good and bad, beginning with the Greek wars of Epaminondas, Philip of Macedon, and Alexander the Great and ending with the fall of Berlin in 1945. (An appendix written by General Yigael Yadin discusses how Liddell Hart's strategic theories influenced the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948.)

The first section focuses down to the point that out of 30 decisive pre-20th century wars involving 280 distinct campaigns, only six were decided by direct strategy. The bulk of the campaigns were won by indirect tactics, "unending as the flow of rivers and streams."

In Part 2, World War One shines as the zenith of direct strategy failing to achieve success.

Part 3, the examination of World War 2, is an intriguing study of both direct and indirect strategies. Discerning readers and students of Liddell Hart's earlier theories will find much to think about in this section. Some might argue that he stretches his points too thin. Whether you agree or disagree, his arguments are fascinating.

Part 4 is the real meat and potatoes of the book. Here the author lays out his strategic theory in simple, direct language. "Fundamentals of Strategy and Grand Strategy" is a 20th century distillation of *The Art of War* that a philosophy-reading gorilla can understand.

In [Part 2](#) of this article, I will examine Liddell Hart's (and Sun Tzu's) strategic theory of the indirect approach in detail. [Part 3](#) considers how that theory can be applied to games in general and Avalon Hill wargames in particular.

Strategy, Part 2

The Eight Maxims

In [Part 1](#) of this series, we looked briefly at the origins of strategic philosophy and discussed the difficulty of understanding the writings of Sun Tzu. In this installment, we examine B. H. Liddell Hart's distillation of the essentials of strategy.

Chapter XX of *Strategy* is "The Concentrated Essence of Strategy and Tactics." You won't find this information presented any more straightforwardly than that.

Liddell Hart outlines eight maxims in Chapter XX. Six of them are positive maxims (they tell you what to do), and two are defensive (telling you what not to do).

If a single principle underlies all eight maxims, it is that of concentrating your strength against the enemy's weakness. In other words, hit your enemy as hard as possible when and where he's least able to defend himself. Liddell Hart and Sun Tzu call this indirect strategy.

If you, like most of us, were raised to value fair play, that approach might seem unsporting. Remember that we're talking about war here, not shuffleboard. Victory is mandatory. A lot of the losers don't get to go home.

You can maximize your chances of getting back home by studying and understanding these eight principles.

1. Adjust your ends to your means.

Look at the situation dispassionately and logically. Who is stronger: you or the enemy? If the balance of forces is such that you can't realistically hope to crush the opposing force, then it is folly to try. By concentrating your strength against the enemy's weakness, however, you might create an imbalanced situation where you have excellent odds of crushing a small but key part of the enemy's force. If you aren't strong enough to take the whole town, aim instead to capture or destroy the bridge that the town depends on for supplies. If you aren't strong enough to attack, then look for ways to induce the enemy into attacking under conditions that are favorable to you. If you are fortunate enough to have overwhelming force, then use it all to best effect. Don't hold back, and don't bite off more than you can chew. This maxim has both a physical and a moral constituent. Fighting when there is little chance for success not only increases your army's losses, it also fuels a sense of defeat and futility in your soldiers, which reduces their effectiveness on every level for the future.

2. Keep your object always in mind, while adapting your plan to circumstances.

There almost always is more than one way to get from here to there. In choosing between those alternatives, the first consideration has to be "will this plan achieve my objective?" The second consideration must be, "are the steps in this plan worth taking?" Just because an enemy-held town lies between you and the final objective doesn't mean that town is worth the time and cost of capturing it. Yes, your advance might be simplified if the town is captured. You might also spend so much material in

the process that your army is too weak to take the final objective, or spend so much time that the enemy can reinforce the final objective. Keep your eyes on the prize, and avoid distractions.

3. Choose the line (or course) of least expectation.

The enemy is least likely to be prepared for an attack that he doesn't expect. That is a weakness. You want to concentrate your effort against the enemy's weakness. Try to think like the enemy. If you were in his situation, what would you expect? Where would you put your limited resources to meet the most likely advance? Where does that leave you weak? That's the point to focus on.

4. Exploit the line of least resistance, so long as it can lead you to any objective which would contribute to your underlying object.

Aiming at the enemy's weak spot doesn't apply just to the initial assault but throughout the entire battle. Tactically, this has a lot to do with where you commit your reserves. Strategically, it affects how you commit resources overall. Reinforce success, not failure. Assume, for example, that the assault went fine, the enemy crumbled, and you've broken through the target position. Your ultimate objective still lies somewhere ahead. The enemy will be bringing in reinforcements. Where do you attack next? The criteria don't change. You still attack the enemy where he is least able to defend himself -- but there's a rider. As in the second maxim, the target that you choose must bring you closer to achieving your objective. Not necessarily geographically closer, although that's good, but militarily closer. Consider the enemy-occupied town between you and the objective. It may be held very lightly, making it the easiest capture in the vicinity. If the garrison is weak, however, it also means the town presents very little threat to you. Another target may be tougher yet contribute more to the final goal. Don't do more work than you need to, and be sure that the work you're doing needs to be done.

5. Take a line of operations which offers alternative objectives.

This is vital for two reasons. First, if you have more than one objective to choose from, then your odds of seizing at least one of them are very high. Second, if you have multiple objectives to choose from along your line of operations, you keep the enemy guessing about which one is your true goal. He will be forced to either split his force, weakening every objective, or defend some strongly and others weakly, giving you easy targets to capture. Do not confuse multiple objectives with multiple lines of advance. It's best to focus all your effort along a single line. Point that line so that it threatens several targets.

6. Ensure that both plans and dispositions are flexible -- adaptable to circumstances.

Know what your next step will be before action becomes necessary. That means you must decide ahead of time what you will do if your plan succeeds, if it fails, or if part of it succeeds and part of it fails. Position reserves where they can exploit success or fend off disaster. Be mindful that even if things go well in front of you where you've concentrated your strength against the enemy's weakness, they might go badly on your flanks where you had to pull out units for the attack force. If you're not ready for that, all your success could be for naught. Remember maxim #1.

**7. Do not throw your weight into a stroke whilst your opponent is on guard -
- whilst he is well placed to parry or evade it.**

Very few battles or campaigns have been waged successfully against an enemy that wasn't first disorganized or demoralized. If the enemy is still capable of putting up a strong fight and willing to do so, then only overwhelming force will carry the day. The enemy's capacity to resist can be cut drastically by spreading confusion or by persuading the enemy that the odds are against him. Confusion is caused by cutting the enemy's communications, capturing his headquarters, or simply forcing the situation to change more rapidly than the enemy can react. The situation looks hopeless when the enemy is skillfully forced into an unfavorable position, when small attacks against weak positions inflict disproportional casualties without the enemy being able to respond, and when your force generally demonstrates that it can move and act as it pleases. In other words, psychological warfare is a direct result of effective physical warfare. Both play their part in softening up the enemy, and the enemy must be softened up before he can be finished off.

8. Do not renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has once failed.

If at first you don't succeed, don't try again. Find a different approach. Hitting the same spot with a harder punch is almost guaranteed to fail. If you had the stronger punch available, you should have used it the first time. The enemy is likely to reinforce just as quickly as you, plus his success the first time around leaves his troops in high spirits and eager to inflict more damage. Probe for a different weak spot. Keep the enemy guessing.

Dislocation and Exploitation

Everything about these eight maxims is geared toward maximizing dislocation and exploitation. Dislocation happens primarily before the attack and consists of throwing the enemy off-balance, either by making him believe that he can't win or by attacking at the time and place that he least expects. Exploitation happens after the attack. Its purpose is simply to complete the dislocation that was begun before the attack. A successful attack creates confusion; the attacking force exploits that confusion to alter the situation in ways that further surprise and confuse the enemy; the confusion spreads into demoralization; and demoralization leads to surrender or disorganized retreat, which can be further exploited. The attack itself, whatever form it takes, is relatively straightforward compared to what comes before and after it.