Stratagems in the Western Tradition
(Reflections and Response)

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A commentator’s function is to perpetrate a stratagem on the audience. He must create the illusion—however brief—that the commentator somehow knows more about a topic than the previous speakers. Given the brief time afforded the previous speakers for rebuttal, the commentator can usually disorient the audience’s perceptions sufficiently to accomplish his mission. With all due modesty and respect for my fellow speakers in this session, I renounce any intention of deception, though let the audience beware that the most openly scrupulous are the best deceivers.

Dr. Caddell has offered a visually impressive survey of how an early 21st-century Western superpower chooses to define deception, and he has presented a brief overview of basic concepts of “how to do it.” Historically, however, that is, viewing events from 1776 on, this superpower is not known for real expertise in deception, an activity that clashes with its national persona of truth, justice, and the American way of democracy and freedom for all. Nor before World War II did this superpower seem to care much about deception. According to some scholars, Americans had to learn the arts of deception from the British during that conflict. This is not to say that no skeletons of espionage and covert operations were found in the American closet before 1941, nor that questionable pretexts for war, contrived to rouse public support and justification, cannot be cited. The words “American” and “deception” are, historically speaking, a fairly recent combination.

As this conference targets the role of strategic deception in modern democracies, my only supplement to Dr. Caddell’s presentation is to put deception itself into a broader context. Deception, in its strict sense, denoting deceit, creation of illusions, and disinformation, represents a subcategory of the broader concept of military trickery in general. Historically, military trickery is best called stratagem, although in modern Anglophone military parlance stratagem is often used as a synonym for ruse, a French word of late medieval vintage and militarily denoting trickery of a tactical rather than a strategic nature. Yet stratagem, from strategema, an ancient Greek term for a general’s clever act, became already in antiquity the rubric for military trickery of any kind. Stratagem involves, besides deception, ambush, surprise attack, feigned retreat, conditioning an enemy to expect a pattern of behavior, technological or tactical surprise, feints, demonstrations, and the “indirect approach.” But the concept also can include bribery, inducement of treason or betrayal, assassination, use of poison or magic, and sophistic interpretation of pacts, such as surrender terms, truces, or treaties. Stratagem can produce strategic or tactical surprise, but these are not its only functions. Although from a universal perspective national military establishments do not agree on the terminology for stratagem and deception, the Chinese concept of deception is, I suggest, closer to Western stratagem than English “deception” in its strict sense.
Dr. Pillsbury has demonstrated the continued fascination of the contemporary Chinese military establishment with Sun Tzu and classical Chinese military theory, which traditionally emphasizes deception and stratagems. We must thank Dr. Pillsbury for a paper that raises many stimulating specific and broader issues. Do the Chinese continue to study their culture’s ancient military texts for strategic paradigms and “lessons” because there is something unique in Chinese theory, or is this nationalistic ethnocentrism?

The Western fascination with Sun Tzu—and the proliferation of English translations continues with no end in sight—generally began ca 1949. Mao Zedong read Sun Tzu; Mao in turn influenced Che Guevera; and other guerilla-war treatises owed inspiration to Mao or Che. Hence an intensification of interest in Sun Tzu as *Urquelle* in the 1960s and a cult was born. If Sun Tzu now ranks with Clausewitz as the two quintessential philosophers of war on every war college officer’s reading list, both are in reality much more “period pieces” than often admitted. The intertwining of politics and strategy may be common to both, but Clausewitz’s advocacy of battle and Sun Tzu’s preference for deception in lieu of battle reinforce a false dichotomy of a Western way of war featuring open battle vs. Oriental trickery. Clausewitz could no more escape the *Zeitgeist* of the Napoleonic “great man” and the swirling eddies of early Romantic *Sturm und Drang*, than Sun Tzu could ignore the philosophical doctrines of fourth century B.C. China. Sun Tzu’s advocacy of avoiding battle, in fact, owes much to the abhorrence of bloodshed among philosophers in an era of Warring States. Further, how much Sun Tzu really influenced Mao is debated and some scholars query how little we see of Sun Tzu in actual Chinese policy since 1949. But, as Dr. Pillsbury astutely points out, is the openness with which the Chinese are currently exposing their interest in Sun Tzu and deception an act of deception in itself?

Conceptually, however, there is little in Sun Tzu not found in Western theorists. At the same time, that is, the fourth century B.C., that Sun Tzu declared that deception is the *tao* of war, the Greek Xenophon was preaching that every general must be a contriver of stratagems and that stratagems produce the greatest effects in war. As I pointed out in a paper of many years ago, the origins of military theory in Greece and China are simultaneous, derived from similar historical circumstances, and advocate identical major themes: stratagem and the definition of the good general. The difference between China and the West is that the treatise attributed to a Sun Tzu offers in its standard, second-century A.D. edition, a succinct, highly polished handbook filled with handy aphorisms for memorization. In contrast, the obscure sophistic style and profundity of thought of a Thucydides are less accessible, and much of the rest of Graeco-Roman military thought, though advocating many of the same stratagematic principles as Sun Tzu, appears scattered and technologically irrelevant. The real difference is not a matter of tactical or strategic principles, but rather a Chinese reverence for their ancestral doctrine and Western lip service or scorn of theirs. I shall return to the Western tradition of stratagem later.

If, as I argue, the operational concepts of stratagem and deception in Chinese theory are not unique, this in no way qualifies the value of knowing what a potential enemy is thinking and, more significantly, how he thinks. Cross-cultural perspectives remain important. The current cult of Sun Tzu may exaggerate his intrinsic merits, but in a multi-cultural world we cannot ignore other cultural traditions of stratagem. Kautilya, the Hindu Machiavelli, composed his *Arthashastra*, allegedly ca 300 B.C. This Hindu tradition, though often ignored and moribund for centuries, may have future relevance, if India as a nuclear power learns to harness its mass population in a meaningful way. Not least should we ignore the Islamic tradition of stratagems, which has attracted attention in recent years in the form of terrorism. An ancient Arab proverb
asserts that a trick is worth more than a tribe. Religion and stratagems have a long history, but medieval Muslim stratagem collections exist, though perhaps not totally divorced from Graeco-Roman models.

Since World War II we have been living in an age of stratagem. Both periods of balance of power or situations of asymmetrical relationships of power promote stratagems. The nuclear balance of terror in the Cold War fuelled deception, just as stratagems, the tools of the weak against powers numerically, logistically, and technologically superior, manifest themselves in the strategy and tactics of guerrillas and terrorists. Perhaps it does not go too far to postulate that we are currently witnessing a return to primitive or, to use the PC term, pre-state warfare. The concept of the nation-state is under siege by international corporate conglomerates, unification of states into federal unions, the re-emergence of ethnic and religious tribalism, humanitarian international law’s assaults on the principle of sovereignty, and not least the threats posed by transnational terrorists with little or no fixed assets to strike militarily.

Stratagem and deception are the chief characteristics of primitive warfare, but primitive warfare can also feature ritualistic open battles. Often the preference for one alternative or the other correlates with whether the conflict involves intra-cultural or inter-cultural opponents. This model is certainly simplistic and variations from culture to culture occur. But the primitive hero can be either the contriver of an ambush or the warrior who best displayed his manliness in open battle. This duality of alternative means in warfare also characterizes the Western tradition of stratagem, where this conflict is clear in military theory, ethical debates, and laws of war. In the Western tradition we find a series of competing values: brains vs. brawn, the secret vs. the open, the expedient vs. the just/good. These may be summarized by what I prefer to call in Homeric fashion the Odysseus ethos and the Achilles ethos. The Achilles ethos espouses chivalry, honor, face-to-face confrontation, open battle, and the use of force, whereas the Odysseus ethos promotes the superiority of trickery, deceit, indirect means, and avoidance of pitched battle, though not the use of force or battle, if advantageous.

If the Achilles ethos seems to have held sway in the West, it has constantly been contested and at times overcome by the Odysseus ethos. The traditional truism of Western honor and open use of force vs. Oriental trickery paints a false black and white picture. Just as concepts of chivalry and honor exist in the Chinese, Japanese, and Hindu traditions of war, so too in the West the Odysseus ethos has competed with that of Achilles for favor. Advocates of a Western way of war school with the false notion of a Greek invention of the concept of decisive battle simply have misread or failed to read what Western treatises of military theory really say. Of course the message of the Western way of war school has a subtext in firing salvoes in the cultural wars.

Graeco-Roman military theory emphasizes stratagems and avoidance of battle, if possible, for chance, not skill, determines the outcome of a pitched battle. Battle should be only a last resort or joined only with caution under favorable circumstances. A genre of stratagem collections, anthologies of cases and lessons, flourished in antiquity. Two of these by Frontinus and Polyaenus survive. These treatises enjoyed a renewed popularity in the Renaissance and Early Modern Europe. Polyaenus was also a Byzantine favorite in a civilization basing its survival on astute diplomacy and stratagems. Vegetius, the most widely read Western theorist before Clausewitz, can by no means be turned into an advocate of battle. Vegetius and Frontinus figure prominently in Christine de Pizan’s *Book of Chivalry*, the first secular manual of its genre, and of course in Machiavelli. Neither of these writers can be claimed for the Achilles ethos.
A decline in the tremendous Graeco-Roman influence on contemporary military theory can first be detected in the age of Louis XIV and Frederick the Great, though Classical concepts in theory remained prominent in the 18th century and not least in Frederick’s own writings. In the later 18th century, however, stratagem as a word was often demoted from general works to the new specialized treatises on “small war” (klein Krieg, petite guerre). C.E. Caldwell’s 1906 manual of “lessons” from Victorian colonial wars perpetuated this type of guerrilla-war manual. A sharp break in the Western stratagematic tradition came with Napoleon and the 19th century. The two major interpreters of Napoleonic warfare, Jomini and Clausewitz, had little interest in stratagems and deception. In general nineteenth-century commanders and theorists, haunted by Napoleon’s ghost, saw only his big battalions in their efforts to combine huge conscript armies with technological advances in weaponry. Forgotten was the Napoleon of 1806 and earlier, whose basic premise was toujours confondre.

A revival of stratagemic doctrine begins with the British theorist G.F.R. Henderson, whose writings on Stonewall Jackson are in a sense a plea for the return of movement, deception, and surprise. Henderson’s students, Edmund Allenby in WWI and A.P. Wavell in WWII, would not forget their mentor’s teachings. Likewise Winston Churchill became an advocate of stratagems. Nor should I omit the writings of T.E. Lawrence, of Arabia fame, a theorist of guerrilla warfare, but also a translator of the Odyssey. The two subjects are not unrelated.

World War I also bequeathed new tactical and technological opportunities for deception. Camouflage, the ancient principle of disguise elevated to a higher plane to counter aerial reconnaissance, is surprisingly a product of the Great War. Its development cannot be divorced from the Gesalt movement in psychology and cubism in art. Likewise the radio spawned the new field of signals intelligence. The inter-war years would see Liddell Hart, a reader of Sun Tzu by the way, develop his strategy of indirect approach, and in 1938 the German Waldemar Erfurt would publish his Überraschung (Surprise), the first treatise devoted to stratagems in nearly a century. Then of course in WWII the stratagematic floodgates opened and their closure has not been contemplated.

If this excessively brief and lacunose survey of stratagems and deception in the Western military tradition must suffice for my allotted time, I would be remiss to ignore the Western ethical and legal aspects of the Odysseus ethos, whose Classical roots are no less deep than the military. The tension between the Achilles and the Odysseus ethos necessitated that Western attitudes to stratagems would always be ambivalent. War has always had its rules, unwritten more than written, and stratagem derives its essence from bending, breaking, or ignoring rules. Stratagems have never been illegal; their disdain comes from countering expectations about an opponent’s conduct and breeching an assumed code of honor.

But remarkably the rules of the game have changed little since antiquity. As I demonstrated some years ago in an analysis of Frontinus’ stratagem collection using the U.S. Army’s field manual on the laws of war as a guide, 91% of the stratagems in Frontinus would be legitimate acts of war today. The difference lies in the modern, chiefly 20th c., development of restrictions on treacherous killing and wounding, outlawing various types of weapons, and humanitarian considerations. But basic rules of conduct have not changed. Greeks and Romans prohibited perjury, meaning violation of an oath sworn to the gods, and all treaties, terms of surrender, etc. received their sanction from an oath sworn to the gods. Perjury then was an act of sacrilege. Ambassadors and heralds as representatives of the gods were also immune from violence, as
were temples and holy shrines. The use of poison, whether on weapons or in food and water supplies, was also prohibited, as was magic. In the fifth century B.C. some Greek sophists developed a doctrine of just deceit and promoted the approval of whatever was expedient. Xenophon and Plato could put in the mouth of Socrates that lying to an enemy was permissible; Xenophon even approved the right of a general to lie to his own troops. These issues continued to foster debate in Hellenistic philosophical schools, especially Stoicism, as seen in Cicero’s *De officiis* (On Duties). Stratagems and deception were permitted, provided that *bona fides* was not violated and pacts sanctioned by oath must be kept (*pacta conservanda*). Good faith, however, need not be kept with outlaws and barbarians, who stood outside the civilized human community. Hence with Cicero begins a tradition of qualification of restraints on military conduct and the application of the laws of war and international law. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance rules applied only when fighting other Christians, not in wars with infidels. Later the standard became observance of rules only with civilized states. This qualification on restraints ended only with the UN Charter of 1945, which assumes that all states are civilized and part of an international community.

But I should also note two other major events in the legalization of stratagems in the Western tradition. Roman jurists under the influence of Stoic doctrine converted the sophistic notion of just deceit into a Roman concept of *bonus dolus*, the good trick. Stratagems thus became a part of Roman law, of which the influence on later international law requires no commentary. St. Augustine found biblical evidence to support Christian approval of stratagems in Joshua’s use of feigned retreat and ambush at the city of Ai. St. Thomas Aquinas later endorsed St. Augustine’s view and thus stratagem entered modern international law on the basis of both Roman law and Christian doctrine. I must leave for other speakers further details and discussions of many of these ethical and legal issues.

In concluding this overview of the Western tradition on stratagems and deception and its meaning for modern democracies, I offer a few general thoughts. First, we live in an age of stratagems, but we also seem to be entering a new age of lawlessness in international behavior. Avengers are often as guilty as the initial perpetrators. Second, Xenophon espoused that a general could lie to his own troops. The assumption in this case, as with a head of state lying to his own people, is that the leader is acting *raison d’etat* and knows what is best. But is that always true?

Finally, the case of the Athenian expedition to Sicily in 416 B.C., the turning point in the generation-long Peloponnesian War between the coalition of Sparta and the Athenian Empire, seems particularly apt for this conference. Athens, the most democratic government in history, was also a shamelessly imperialistic power. Athenian ambitions extended to a desire to add Sicily to its empire and Sicily had already been a minor theater in the war. Envoys came from the western Sicilian city of Segesta requesting Athenian aid in a local war with a neighboring city. An investigative Athenian commission went to Sicily and returned with Segestan funds to finance the first month’s campaign and supposed proof of sufficient Segestan wealth to continue financing the war in Sicily. The Athenian assembly, enticed by dreams of a fantastic new expansion of their empire in the West, voted for the expedition. Although the experienced general Nicias opposed this expedition both from a concern for its expense and its violation of Pericles’ policy to refrain from expansion during the war with Sparta, the Athenian people would not listen to rational arguments. As Thucydides tells us, the common people and the army saw this expedition as profit for the present and financial security for the future. Alcibiades justified
this expedition with arguments of preventive war: Athens must strike first, capturing Sicily and its grain-producing potential and especially the city of Syracuse, whose powerful navy could turn the tide of the war, if Sparta secured its services. In the end, Athens mounted the largest amphibious strike force ever seen up to that time in Greek history. It was opening a new front in a long war that it had not yet won at a time when its own resources were strained to the limit. But the Athenians became the victims of deception. Segesta did not have sufficient resources to finance this war and indecisive Athenian leadership at the front led to a three-year campaign that resulted in total annihilation of the grand expeditionary force. It was the beginning of the end of the Athenian Empire and the Peloponnesian War.

The parallels of Athens’ misfortune with the ventures of contemporary would-be empire-builders are striking. Yes, Athens was deceived and its leadership at home and in the field was guilty of miscalculations and poor planning, but democracy of all forms of government runs the risk of self-deception both in accepting justifications for war from its elected leaders and in pursuing personal or private gain. The problems of deception and democracy are also part of the Western tradition of stratagems.

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