



The Strategist

Analysis Using the Principles of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*

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Misreporting War

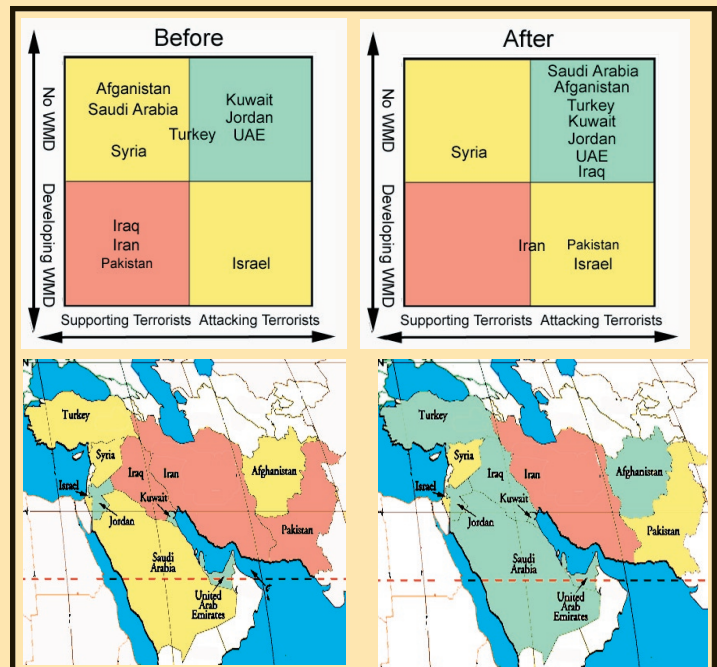
Five Ways the Mainstream Media Supports Terrorist Strategy

The terrorists are fighting a media war. The mainstream media's ignorance of basic strategic principles plays into their hands. First explained 2,500 years ago in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, the principles of strategy put the War on Terror into a readily understood framework that illustrates how the media's confusion prolongs the conflict and makes the world a more dangerous place.

Spinning the Moral Compass

First, the media ignores the philosophical differences that are the basis of all wars. Since Sun Tzu's time, all strategists have understood that philosophy, not force, is the foremost factor in war. Only philosophies that attract willing fighters are successful. Unfortunately, the recent trend toward moral relativism in the media has destroyed the mainstream press's ability to recognize, much less report on, the appeal of the philosophies that frame the War on Terror. In a misguided dedication to impartiality, the mainstream media attempts to describe both parties as morally neutral and using means that are morally equivalent.

Because of this, terrorists are more likely to be characterized inaccurately in neutral (to the press) terms such as



The Media Fails to Report Progress: The relative threat positions of Middle Eastern countries before and after War on Terror.

“anti-capitalist” or “anti-American” rather than in the more accurate but judgmental terms of “anti-freedom,” “anti-secular,” and, to a large degree, “anti-life.” The press comfortably uses Cold War terms of political and economic struggle rather than addressing the moral questions of using mass murder to establish religious tyranny. Since, as Sun Tzu says, “war is a philosophy of deception,” the terrorists leverage the media's reluctance to their own advantage to gain popular support, a key ingredient in their success.

The Importance of Position

Second, because reporters and editors lack training in military strategy, they consistently confuse casualties with strategic losses. The terrorists can rely on the media's inclination to report the sacrifice of soldiers and murder of

Requirements for Terrorist Success:

- Popular Support
- Bases for Training
- Financial Resources
- Publicity of Deaths
- Access to WMD

innocents outside of any larger strategic context. Since the sixth century B.C., military defeat has been defined specifically as losing control of key positions. Controlling a key position may cost lives, but it protects many more lives. For example, in World War II the Allies accepted 22,851 casualties in 36 days to secure Iwo Jima because many more lives were protected by quickly destroying the island base. For terrorists, bases are needed for training, financial coordination, and accessing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Al-Qaeda recognizes the value of strategic bases in its very name, which means “the base” or “the fortress” in Arabic, but, in media coverage, casualties always trump strategic position.

In reporting the war, every death is mourned as a strategic loss, with no balancing discussion of the value of the strategic positions won, lost, or maintained. Since the stated goal of terrorists is to obtain the resources needed to kill hundreds of thousands of Americans, forward positions in Afghanistan and Iraq are invaluable in thwarting them. As Sun Tzu taught, successful wars are always fought on the opponent’s territory. In ignoring the inestimable value of key positions, the mainstream press trivializes the sacrifices of our soldiers and misrepresents the true situation.

Similarly, recent attacks on civilians in Saudi Arabia and Turkey are tragic, but they are far from the strategic failures characterized in the press. Strategically, these attacks have prompted both Islamic nations to more actively root out the base (*al Qaeda*) of support for terrorism within their popula-

tions. If reports of casualties were balanced with reports of corresponding changes in strategic activity, the media’s reporting on the war on terrorism would be much less reassuring to terrorists.

Is It Peace Yet?

Third, even when obvious victories are won in the war, media reports almost immediately denigrate them because no victory is final and perfect. Victory never instantly transforms the battlefield into utopia, but since reporters cannot discuss strategy, they report conditions. The terms “defeat,” “quagmire,” and “losing the peace” appear almost reflexively after every successful advance. Terrorists logically expect this media drumbeat of false defeat in the face of real victory to eventually destroy our will to fight.

Strategic science defines victory as winning a key position. Every advance provides more leverage for future activities, but it never creates an ideal or idyllic situation. Each advance is a stepping-stone and frequently puts forces in greater danger. In the press, however, difficulties are thoroughly covered while opportunities are largely ignored. Expecting problems to vanish after a victory is the same as expecting your workload to decline after getting a promotion or your romance to become bliss after getting mar-

The Media Recipe for Supporting Terror:

- **Moral Relativism**
- **Promote Losses**
- **Ignore Victories**
- **Political Correctness**
- **Free Publicity of Terrorist Success**



Political Incorrectness: *Even Baghdad Bob's reports were given the benefit of the doubt.*

ried. Children may hold such expectations, but adults should know better.

Propping Up Propaganda

Fourth, as *The Art of War* teaches, we must “know our enemy.” Unfortunately, the mainstream media labors under the burden of political correctness, which prohibits the critical discussion of “minority views.” The media therefore cannot discuss aberrant terrorist psychology in the larger terms of Islamic culture or history but instead accepts the self-serving claims of the terrorists themselves. Worse, the media has occasionally traded favorable portraits for access. This leads to an inaccurate picture of terrorism. It also creates predictions that are as dire as they are inaccurate. A good example is the repeated claim that the Muslim “street” would erupt if we sent forces into Afghanistan and Iraq.

Sun Tzu teaches that strategy demands evaluating opponents by their actions, not their words. Though terrorists express their willingness to die, they are not directly attacking American soldiers in soft targets in Muslim countries. Islamic governments have responded, not by turning on the United States, but by cracking down on homegrown terrorism. The Muslim street,

unlike the European street, has remained quiet throughout. What do these actions tell us about the acceptance of the perverted viewpoints of terrorists in the larger Islamic world versus the picture portrayed in the media?

The Battlefield Is Us

This brings us to the fifth and most serious mainstream media misunderstanding about strategy in the War on Terror. From Sun Tzu’s time, military leaders have based their strategic plans on choosing the right battlefields. Successful military leaders fight only on battlefields on which they have an advantage and on which they control ground that nullifies an opponent’s strengths. This raises the question of the terrorists’ choice of battlefields. What ground are they trying to control?

Terrorists are fighting a media war. The ground that they seek to control is the television screen and the newspaper front page. Except in Syria or Iran, terrorists do not have the physical force necessary to win strategic control of a single street in any city in the world. Instead, they have discovered that they can use emotional force to leverage the murder of innocents into an advertising campaign, which they then use to spread their poisonous philosophy.

Imagine if, instead of terrorists, a corporation was publicly murdering people in order to advertise its product. Would members of the press cooperate in the same way as they have with terrorism? Would they ignore the corporation’s underlying philosophy if that philosophy were as morally repugnant as greed, rather than the morally neutral “anti-Americanism”?

Would they overlook progress in fighting murderous corporate greed and instead report the fight in such a way as to sell the corporation's products? Would they denigrate victories against greedy murder so as to make banning the practice seem futile? Would they promote the corporation's view that normal people want products promoted by murdering innocents, children if possible? We hope that the media would not act this way, and yet, this is exactly how it behaves in the War on Terror.

An End to Terror

The purpose of this article is not to attack the media. Its purpose is to show how the widespread ignorance of strategic principles plays into the terrorists' hands, and how, if the media changed its reporting, we could defeat the terrorist strategy.

Sun Tzu teaches us that strategic opportunities are not created but discovered. Starting a few decades ago, the terrorists discovered that they could use to their advantage gradual shifts in the way reporters covered conflict. Historically, local outbreaks of terrorism were routinely savaged by morally indignant, rather than morally neutral, editors. Reporters applauded the brave sacrifices made to stop terrorism. Victories were celebrated. Terrorists were portrayed as madmen that no normal population could support. The media respected its moral compass and accurately reported strategic positions.

The changes in media that make terrorism possible are not reversed by less reporting. Terrorism can be stopped by more complete and accurate reporting reflecting the strategic nature of the war itself.

Understanding Terrorist Philosophy

The Evolution of a Death Cult and How to Fight It

*It starts with your philosophy.
Command your people in a way that
gives them a higher shared purpose.
You can lead them to death.
You can lead them to life.
They must never fear danger or
dishonesty.*

THE ART OF WAR 1:1.14-18

In order to understand the worldwide Islamic terrorist movement, we must know its philosophy. In this article, we will examine the organizing principles of the worldwide Islamic terrorist movement and how they can be countered.

All wars are based on philosophy. When Sun Tzu wrote *The Art of War* 2,500 years ago, he described philosophy as the first and foremost factor in strategic analysis. He defined philosophy as an organization's "higher shared purpose." Philosophy unifies an organization and focuses it on its goals. Sun Tzu teaches that the methods of an organization arise directly from its philosophy.

Though the philosophy of Islamic terrorists is often described in Cold War terms of political or economic anti-Americanism, this characterization is simply wrong. The philosophy of terror arises from a long tradition of fanatical Islamic conservatism coupled with two recent philosophical innovations.

Fundamentalist Philosophy

First, Sun Tzu admonishes us to learn from the history of war. Fundamentalist battles within the Islamic world are as old as the religion itself. The first major schism took

place in 657, just 25 years after Mohammed's death, when the Kharijites became Islam's first dogmatic, fanatical sect. The pattern of fundamentalist schism has been repeated many times through Islamic history, most recently with the Wahhabis, who started as puritanical reformers and rose to conquer Mecca in 1806, only to be later defeated by the Turks. The Ikhwan, the Wahhabi followers of Ibn Saud, reconquered Mecca in 1924, and Saudi Arabia, the country founded by Ibn Saud, is the main source of today's Wahhabi movement.

From the Kharijites to the Ikhwan, fundamentalist Islamic sects made war not on non-Muslims but on their Islamic brothers whose faith was not "pure" enough. They defined other Muslims as infidels and fought them as such.

History also teaches us how these movements were defeated. They were each resisted and eventually stopped by the mainstream Muslim community itself. Ali, the fourth caliph and Mohammed's son-in-law, defeated the Kharijites in 658 at Nahrawan. Similarly, Ibn Saud turned against the Ikhwan and destroyed them at the Battle of Sibilla in 1929.

Like these earlier sects, today's fundamentalist fanatics want to forcibly reform their less dogmatic fellow Muslims, but outside of Iran, their numbers are too few to do this successfully. So, without changing their goal, they reformed their philosophy to build up their number of supporters over time so they could eventually conquer mainstream Muslims.

Philosophical Innovation

The Art of War teaches that innovation is the key to momentum. The worldwide Islamic terrorist movement brought innovation to the traditional fundamentalist philosophy in two important ways.

First, terrorist leaders discovered that by directing their efforts against non-Muslims, they could get broader support for fundamentalism from within the Muslim world. Fundamentalist revolutionary movements are discouraged by all Islamic governments, but these same governments are willing to export fundamentalists to fight elsewhere. The Taliban attracted like-minded Muslims to fight the Russians in Afghanistan, and Afghanistan became the key base for organizing similar groups for attacks on foreigners elsewhere.

The second philosophical innovation was leveraging death as advertising (*see previous article*) to build up terrorist organizations and finances. The murder of innocents in war is specifically prohibited by the Quran, but the pragmatic terrorists ignore this. Bin Laden justified attacks on



Fundamentally irreligious:
Bin Laden redefines combatant to avoid Quranic prohibition of terror.

foreign noncombatants through the reasoning that since they pay taxes, they are supporting armies and are therefore fair game. However, this fig leaf of justification doesn't cover the fact that terrorists readily target children or foreign aid workers from nonmilitary countries, just the horrors the Quran tries to prevent.

A basic precept of strategy is that we must understand where our philosophy leads us. For the terrorists, what started as a battle for press attention by leveraging death has transformed the worldwide terrorist movement into a true death cult. Death now overshadows all other aspects of its philosophy.

Celebrating Death

Sun Tzu said 2,500 hundred years ago that philosophies can lead people to life or to death. The terrorists have chosen death. All major religions believe in an afterlife, but none of them celebrate death. The lone exception is the Islamic terrorist movement.

Terrorist organizations attract only two kinds of people: those who want to kill or those who want to die. Death started as advertising but it has become an end in itself. Death is celebrated when innocent people are killed. It is also as celebrated when people kill themselves in acts of terror.

Much of this celebration is coerced. Families of suicides have reported that they are forced to smile at their teenagers' funerals even when they felt their children had simply been used as pawns. Islamic children are encouraged to paint pictures of funerals as celebrations. Where does the propaganda stop and the reality of worshipping death begin?

Death to the Secular

For a movement based on death, the secular world must be portrayed as evil. In this regard, America is just the most visible symbol of the evils of the secular world.

If America were a more visibly Christian country, it would be less easy to demonize the sins of the secular world. Many religious people want to protect their children from the corrupting influences of promiscuity, homosexuality, and drug use, and the Islamic fundamentalist blames this decadence on the lack of a religious government.

Since the secular world is so obviously evil, death is preferable to a life in sin.

Death to Freedom

The terrorist death cult also actively opposes personal freedom. If given a choice, few would choose death. Even some of the 9/11 hijackers may not have known that they were marked for suicide.

It is inaccurate to call the terrorists anti-democratic. The terrorists support majority rule as long as the majority forbids personal freedom. At its core, the fundamentalist vision is totalitarian. The population must be forced to behave in strict accordance with sharia, Islamic law, where death is the only appropriate punishment for the apostate. Personal freedom, even under



Celebrating Death: A child's picture of a terrorist's funeral as a celebration of death.



Celebrating Life and Mourning Death: The normal human reactions of Muslims are the best weapons in the War on Terror.



a religious government, would lead to corruption. The Taliban used Kabul's soccer field to turn religious execution into a spectator sport.

Death to the Foreign

Sun Tzu teaches us that all forces follow the path of least resistance. For the terrorists, killing foreigners is the easiest place to start.

Again, it is inaccurate to call the philosophy anti-American. Foreigners of any type are considered viable targets, as attacks on the UN and Red Cross workers have shown. If the goal is death, it is wise to start with outsiders.

While the average Muslim wants to emulate the material success of the non-Muslim world, the terrorist wants to punish us for our success. Since Allah cannot favor the infidel over the Muslim, the wealth of the non-Muslim world is proof that its success has been acquired through evil means and is punishable by death.

Attacking the Death Cult

Sun Tzu teaches us to attack an opponents' philosophy in order to divide its followers. It also teaches that people always prefer life to death.

First, we must remember that fanatical Islamic movements have always been op-

posed and eventually defeated by the Muslim mainstream. Temporarily, terrorists may have redefined every death as a victory for Muslims, but we can use normal human reactions to reverse that message.

The key here is positioning terrorists as false Muslims who celebrate death instead of worshipping Allah, readily violating the Quran in the cause of death. We must counter the terrorists' pro-death marketing by spreading the message that life is worth living and that a better world is coming.

Can the mainstream media aid in this effort? Yes, but only if they change the mindsets that have thus far made the terrorist campaign possible. If the media is unwilling to change, money must be invested to give the Muslim world a more accurate view of terrorism and its philosophy of death.

To separate Muslims from terrorists, we must target each part of the death philosophy. Terrorists may be anti-secular, but terror itself violates the Quran. Most Muslims are pragmatic and willing to equate freedom with prosperity rather than sin. Terror may target foreigners, but the victims are usually Muslim. Nothing works better than the truth. If the terrorists cannot promote death, they cannot survive.