

Tobacco: the Third World War – advice from General Sun Tzu*

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Written in 6th century BC China, General Sun Tzu's *Art of War* has long been regarded as a classic work on military strategy, tactics, logistics and espionage.¹ The *Art of War* remains full of sound, relevant thinking and instruction on traditional combat and warfare, applicable to the current war against tobacco which is increasingly being waged in the Third World.²

The objectives of the tobacco war are similar to those of most wars: to protect countries from being invaded and overpowered; to save people from being killed by tobacco; to return land to growing food; to improve the economy; and to protect the environment.

One confusion in this war is that it can be difficult to determine who are on the opposing side – smokers, governments, the media, the medical profession, or only the tobacco industry?

Sun Tzu believed that the outcome of war could be forecast if it were known which party had the stronger moral cause, the advantage of climate and terrain, the better general, and the superior army. The health army has the stronger cause, but the tobacco industry has the largest paid army, the most disciplined troops, the most efficient global communications, and trained commando forces ready to fly anywhere in the world to put down local threats to their empire. Their generals are far more powerful, financially and politically, but what calibre of person would want to join an army with such a tarnished reputation?

The health army remains a tiny visionary force, lacking a commander in charge and usually operating without any well thought out long term strategic battle plan. The army consists mainly of disparate pockets of inspired volunteer guerrillas chivvying (and sometimes harrasing) governments and organisations into action. The legal profession recently entered the western front with heavy artillery, resulting in a success³ akin to El Alamein. There are war manuals, articles, and a war journal *Tobacco Control*, which report global progress, and every few years the battle weary meet at a world conference to discuss the overall progress of the war.

What would Sun Tzu have made of such troops, so different from his hierarchical and disciplined army? He would have to admit that this health army, for all its limitations, had achieved considerable success.

Sun Tzu's summary of planning a battle parallels a modern day funding proposal for a tobacco control project: measure the distances, estimate the expenses, evaluate the forces, assess the possibilities, and plan for victory. The General believed that careful planning would lead to success and careless planning to defeat. Yet often the outnumbered health army can do no more than react to invasion or the more outrageous consequences of war. We can rely on the ferocity of the opposing army to indicate which battles to fight. The tobacco industry concentrates its fight on only two main issues – bans on tobacco promotion and tobacco tax increases – a good indication that we should concentrate our forces on these two battles. Conversely, the tobacco companies never oppose bans on sales to minors, a good litmus test that this is a relatively ineffective measure, especially in developing countries where cigarettes are sold by street vendors.

Sun Tzu states that information on enemy tactics cannot be obtained by offering prayers to the gods and spirits, but only from those who have a thorough knowledge of enemy conditions – spies. He says that none should be more favourably regarded, liberally rewarded, and clothed in secrecy than spies. There are an increasing number of tobacco employees revealing inside information which has often led to government action. For example, after a tip-off that smokeless tobacco was about to be introduced into the territory, the Hong Kong government performed a pre-emptive strike and banned the manufacture, importation, and sale of smokeless tobacco.

Sun Tzu notes that in the early stages of battle the fighting spirit is strong, but later it tends to flag. This burn-out is evident in the tobacco control movement, with very few warriors fighting for more than 20 years. Most grow weary and move on to other jobs.

But which is the more demoralised army? A decade ago tobacco executives started to feel under seige.⁴ Studies from Australia⁵ and the USA^{6,7} showed their low standing in the public mind. Comic strips, such as *Doonesbury*, regularly ridicule the tobacco industry. In the UK one young executive said mournfully: "At dinner parties people compare me to a Nazi", while another responded: "Sure, I'm a drug dealer – but do you know how much I make?"⁸

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This war will be longer than the Hundred Years war and casualties will be greater than in any other war in history. Winning will be keeping the enemy at bay, rather than annihilation.

There have been some successes – for example, increasing awareness of the health risks, decreasing social acceptability of smoking, implementation of control measures, reduction of prevalence and, in a few places where the battle has been raging for decades, reduction of disease and death.

It is remarkable that the health army has won any battles at all. Perhaps having truth on our side or, as Sun Tzu would put it, a “just and noble cause” more than compensates for structural shortcomings in this seemingly unequal battle. However, vast areas of the world

remain where these battles are still to be fought, and the populations liberated from the bondage of nicotine addiction.

- 1 *The Art of War: A Treatise on Chinese Military Science*. Compiled about 500 BC. Translators: A & G Chen. Singapore: Graham Brash (Pte) Ltd, 1982.
- 2 Peto R, Lopez AD, Boreham J, Thun M, Heath C Jr. *Mortality from smoking in developed countries 1950–2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994:101–3.
- 3 Payouts disappear in puff of smoke. *South China Morning Post* 15 March 1996:13 (from *The Inquirer*, Philadelphia).
- 4 Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights Update. *They know what they're selling*. Winter 1986.
- 5 Health Department of Western Australia. West Australians are unlikely to believe statements made by the tobacco industry. *Media Release* 10 June 1988:1–3.
- 6 Gallup G Jr. Cancer society given highest ratings in test of special interest groups. *The Gallup Poll Press Release* 16 April 1989.
- 7 Janofsky M. Tobacco firms' trust rating 'up in smoke'. *South China Morning Post* 2 May 1994:17.
- 8 Parker I. Turning over an old leaf. *The Sunday Review, The Independent on Sunday* 21 August 1994:4–8.