

RUSES DE GUERRE:

THE ART OF WAR AND THE UTILITY OF MYTH

. . . summus utrinque

Inde furor vulgo, quod numina vicinorum

Odit uterque locus . . .

-- Juvenal "Satires"¹

Juvenal writes that a "heart-burning rage" existed between the cities of Ombos and Tentyra because of the hatred each bore the other's gods. In "Julius Caesar" Shakespeare describes the "Fierce fiery warriors fought up in the clouds" (II: ii, 19). The art of war is a mythologically related art. The Japanese speak not of the pen's being mightier than the sword but of "the pen together with the sword." Undeniably war is primarily an exercise of power, but myth can also play a significant role. Perhaps the need for military imagination was the reason that the Winnebago and other tribes required their war leader to qualify by having a dream experience. The French sent the magician Houdin to the tribesmen of North Africa because he could appear to catch bullets between his teeth. Warriors primed on being transported into the arms of houris or valkyries are more likely to perform courageous acts than those without such mythology. Joshua and Krishna both hold back the sun on the battlefield.² A strong belief in the divine mission of the cause is an aid to combat. Hence the politician may rationalize the "cause" in mythological terms. Hitler not only concocted an entire Aryan mythology but engineered the Reichstag fire to serve his propaganda purposes. Strategy is also involved. The Sun Tzu counsels the use of de-

ception to confuse the enemy.³ Myth can also be used to rationalize defeat as in the Serbian epic of the Battle of Kossovo in which a heavenly kingdom prevails over an earthly one:

There flies a grey bird, a falcon,
From Jerusalem the holy,
And in its beak a swallow.

That is no falcon, no grey bird,
But it is the Saint Elijah.

He carries no swallow,
But a book from the Mother of God.

He comes to the Tsar at Kossovo . . .

"Dear God, where are these things, and how are they!

What kingdom shall I choose?

Shall I choose a heavenly kingdom?

Shall I choose an earthly kingdom?"⁴

The Tsar chooses heaven. The Turks win the battle.

In military situations myth-making may appear in many different guises, simple camouflage, for example, which aims at altering the enemy's perception of reality. If a second-hand uniform at K penick can intimidate city hall, arrest the mayor, and empty the city treasury, what will an Austrian corporal's outfit do? The classics of warfare are full of "Trojan horse" type stratagems. On the eve of World War I, President Wilson sent Colonel House to visit the Kaiser's General Staff. Since the Prussian could not distinguish a Texas ("bull") colonel from an army ("bird") colonel, they attempted to pry the secrets of America's preparedness from their visitor, who obliged magnificently in the Texas tall-tale fashion. Col. House certainly had a worthy competitor in Sir Edward Backhouse, the British sinophile, who not only fabricated Chinese historical documents regarding the Empress Dowager but shiploads of fake armies and munitions.⁵ Backhouse's views were certainly influential in structuring Britain's

Chinese policies. Of course, the supporting diaries were subjected to less intense scrutiny than the Hitler diaries, the Mormon forgeries, and the Texfake documents. In retrospect it is easy to see that Hitler's handwriting should have changed as a result of his partial paralysis. With the "Salamander Letter" and the "Blessing to Joseph Smith Jr.," the forger was working on the Mormon's worst fears, which is also the best point for political or military leverage. Disinformation may divert resources. Aerial propaganda may demoralize the troops. In the Eastern tradition both Musashi and Kautalya advocate the use of mythological stratagems to obtain military advantages. Musashi who was a fine artist as well as a great samurai used wooden swords with devastating effect against the steel blades of his opponents. As Eiji Yoshikawa writes: "Kojiro had put his confidence in the sword of strength and skill. Musashi trusted in the sword of the spirit."⁶ He was a connoisseur, a "polisher of souls" in the "floating world," who could draw Holmesian inferences from the cutting of a peony stem or the turning of a china cup. Musashi's Go Rin No Sho, "A Book of Five Rings," provides an important key to the comprehension of Japanese military and corporate strategy.⁷ The way of the warrior, bushido, and the concept of duty, giri, are reinforced by Japanese cultural myths. Let no one doubt the fanatic devotion of the kamikaze pilots, the "fallen cherry petals," or the revival, Yukio Mishima.

In generating and supporting power myth has a number of military uses. First, the mythological perspective of the opponent must be thoroughly assessed and understood. The psychological impact of the astrologers on the Vietnamese (Tet), Wallenstein, or Hitler, provides a different parameter for timing operations. Churchill for example, hired Louis de Wohl not because he believed in astrology but because he believed that Hitler did. Second, deceptive or clever stratagems may be used to obtain results which are difficult to achieve directly through the use of force. Such manipulations have a highly mythological dimension. Third, myths may create a mass hallucination, or even hysteria, which enables the troops to seize the objective.

In the simplest instance myth is used to obtain power in the absence of actual military resources. Dust clouds or campfires simulate large bodies of soldiers. Dummy cannons are used for real ones. Forty some years ago the insurgents in Guatemala

the "fair god." Neither was it merely a question of mobilizing the considerable mythological armoury of the Church, the "deus vult," the lance of Longinus at Antioch during the crusades. Cortez made the natives think that horses and riders were a composite centaur-like creature. Gunpowder was used with maximum effect to simulate thunder. Secret burials were arranged to make the Aztecs think that the conquistadores were immortal. Cortez was also not above converting defeats into reports of victory. In some ways, especially given the available technology, Cortez's efforts rival those of Desert Storm.

During World War II there were several significant uses of myth, "The Man Who Never Was" was fabricated by allied intelligence to deceive Hitler. Equally important were the efforts of Jasper Maskelyne, "The War Magician," against Rommel in North Africa. In both of these instances myth was used with devastating effect to create illusions in the mind of the enemy.

"The Man Who Never Was" was a corpse dumped into the Atlantic off the Iberian coast. On it were planted secret dispatches which revealed the Allies' intent to divert and distract German intelligence. As Lord Ismay wrote: "To mystify and mislead the enemy has always been one of the cardinal principles of war."⁹ "Mincemeat" took German attention away from Sicily, even hinting at Sardinia with the joke that sardines were "on points" at headquarters. Reinforced by a fake General Patton (with dog) and thousands of messages from a non-existent army group, the stratagems presumably succeeded.

Similarly British strategists employed Jasper Maskelyne to deceive Rommel in North Africa.¹⁰ Dummy tanks, even sporting dummy shadows, were graciously exposed to real reconnaissance and bombs. Dummies decoyed panzers into sandtraps. Maskelyne also used camouflage to disguise both Alexandria and the Suez Canal. In protecting Alexandria he blacked out the lights of the real city and lit up a dummy port several miles away. In dealing with the difficult problem of the canal he installed beacons, searchlights, and rotating tinfoil to disorient the German pilots, some of whom crashed. Hitler was not entirely slow at imitating such stratagems and indeed camouflaged his own V-2 rocket factory. The army constructed a dummy to

attract Allied bombers. The Allies, however, dumped a single wooden bomb on the installation with the caption: "Hitler, we know you're a fake!" Frankly some Potemkin villages are built a great deal more cleverly than others, and there are noteworthy limits to what mythology can accomplish. All the mythology in the world could not defend the old Anabaptists, as we shall see, who attempted to attack the army besieging Munster during the Reformation.

Besides the clever mythological stratagem, or the conscious arrangement of illusion, there are cases in which hallucinations or hysteria spread among the troops. According to Iraqi reports in Desert Storm soldiers saw angels in the skies plucking up American airplanes. Other angels protected the Iraqis against American bombs and helped them load ammunition. Others called for a jihad, a holy war against the infidel. Of course, these visions may have been anything from battle fatigue to Saddam Hussein's propaganda, and they did not have the effect of intimidating American missiles.

There are many instances in European military history in which the troops have seen a hero or saint leading them: St. George, St. Michael, St. Joan. The Battle of Edgehill, where Charles vowed to fight "come life come death" supposedly continued for years between phantom armies in the skies¹¹ William Lilly, who cast his prophecies regarding Naseby, was indicted more for making his predictions come true than for prophesying. The appearance of an angel at Mons during World War I has been hotly debated. The vision may have been created a posteriori by Arthur Machen. Although we may choose to reject the authenticity of the apparition at Mons along with Poggio's much earlier report of the Monk of Vallombroso's sighting of phantom armies marching towards Germany, there are still some curious tales to deal with. The Serbian General Mishitch, for example, reported that at the Battle of Prilip his men thought they were ordered to advance by the fourteenth century hero, Kral Marko, whose castle stood in the vicinity. The Serbians won the battle against fearful odds.¹² Does it really matter to what order of reality the vision belonged?

The balance of the evidence lies in the direction of the utility of myth for military purposes although we may debate how successful stratagems such as "Star

Wars" has been. Here the belief that the opponent possesses a doomsday device may be sufficient to prevent attack. Lesser belief structures were manipulated during the Vietnam War by military intelligence teams. For example individuals who were suspected of supporting the Viet Cong, were brought before a tent in the village, which would light up and make noises at the approach of a guilty party. It was presumably a Rube Golberg device which in turn resembled the mechanical throne of the Byzantine emperors used to intimidate visiting ambassadors. The Cong detector mechanism was actually triggered by a hidden informer. Eventually the informer was rendered unnecessary since guilty persons were unwilling to approach the machine. In another instance known members of the Viet Cong were portrayed on posters urging the fellow members to defect. Presumably the enemy took care of its own. Military myths exemplify the broader uses of mythology in the art of war. Machiavelli's "art" indeed may be as fine or not as fine as other art forms.

NOTES:

1. Juvenal, Satires, 1739 ed. (1978), p. 306.
2. Hocart, Kingship, pp. 104-105.
3. Sun-tzu, The Art of War, James Clavell, ed. (1988).
4. Dame Rebecca West, Black Lamb and Gray Falcon: The Record of a Journey Through Yuoslavia in 1937 (1942), p. 293, cites the epic of the Battle of Kossovo.
5. H.R. Trevor-Roper, Hermit of Peking (1977) provides an expose of Backhouse's activities; Cf. Carl Zuckmeyer (John Clifford Mortimer, trans.), "The Captain of K penick" (1971); Alexander Klein, Grand Deception (1956).
6. Eiji Yoshikawa, Musashi (1981), p. 970. Although a fictionalized account covering only the early part of Musashi's career, the book lies somewhere between James Clavell and Margaret Mitchell as Dr. Reischauer points out in the "Foreword."
7. Miyamoto Musashi, A Book of Five Rings (1974).
8. Albert Leon Guerard, Reflections on the Napoleonic Legend (1924).
9. Ewen Montagu, The Man Who Never Was, p. 11 (Lord Ismay).
10. David Fisher, The War Magician (1983).
11. Richard Rainey, Phantom Armies (1990).
12. Vojislav Maksim Petrovic, Hero Tales and Legends of the Serbians (1914), pp. 64-65.