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# opinion

A Call to Alms

Humanitarian Action  
and the Art of War

Hugo Slim

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# Opinion

## A Call to Alms Humanitarian Action and the Art of War<sup>1</sup>

Hugo Slim

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Sean Lowrie at the Sphere Project for inviting me to address the Sphere trainers and so starting the process that led to this paper and also to David Petrsek, Andy Andrea, Antonia Potter and Robert Archer for their comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the analysis of humanitarianism's "disease" comes from the report of an international mapping and inter-agency consultation exercise usefully compiled by the Feinstein International Famine Centre at Tufts University entitled: *The Future of Humanitarian Action: Implications of Iraq and Other Recent Crises*, January 2004.

<sup>3</sup> In this case David Rieff had been humanitarianism's obituarist, first in his Newsweek article *The Death of Humanitarianism* (1999) and then more at length in his book *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, Vintage, 2002.

Recently I had the pleasure of talking to some 30 international humanitarian workers from a variety of different agencies at the ICRC's training centre at Ecogia outside Geneva. Before my arrival I was rather anxious to see how they would look. I have been hearing terrible things about the state of humanitarianism of late. Reports have emerged from Iraq, Afghanistan and the east coast of the United States which claim that 'humanitarianism is in crisis'. Rumours have reached me that humanitarians are enduring a demoralising malaise and that humanitarianism is suffering a terrible and potentially fatal illness<sup>2</sup>. This news came on top of a previous report, first heard in Bosnia, that humanitarianism is already dead<sup>3</sup>.

So, I was somewhat relieved to see my 30 humanitarians looking much like they have always looked. They were quite scruffy, very committed, a bit troubled, self-critical, sceptical, affectionate, tolerant, practical and humorous. Despite the bemusing growth of their profession, the threats of violence ranged against them and the ever-nagging feeling that they are being used, they still seemed 'on for it' and not like a group on the point of surrender. At first glance, at least, they did not appear to be plagued with the scabby pustules of politicization or bent double with the terrible intestinal cramps of sub-contraction. And they were not

obviously deluded with a psychosis of co-option and its split personality. None of them spoke in a strange voice that suggested possession by some US/UK alter ego. All still seemed to be themselves.

After my meeting with them, I remain optimistic. In this paper, I want to stick with my hunch that humanitarianism is not so desperately ill and to take issue with humanitarian pessimists who have diagnosed so dangerous an illness in the humanitarian body politic. I think they are wrong. I think we humanitarians are alive, well and in our usual tight spot. I think we have got a lot to play for in the world of war today and that we need to spend less time taking our temperature and more time being strategic, cunning and as effective as we can.

In these typically difficult times it is better for us to focus our humanitarian minds on engagement and not complaint. Instead of lamenting about the forces ranged against us, we should be planning and preparing, making relationships and building alliances, persuading or outwitting our opponents. We need to get tactical: to win where we can and to retreat where we cannot. Now is not the time, as some are advocating, to invest in yet more interminable debates that pander to a culture of complaint and seek to 're-define humanitarian action' from first principles once again. Nor is it the time to form a square and defend humanitarian values. They are simply not that threatened. Instead, it is the time to get decisive about where we can and cannot operate and to get innovative about how we do things. It is the time to be creative about humanitarian agency rather than to wallow in humanitarian agony.

In this paper, I want to see if we might learn a thing or two from the ancient Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, about how to survive and win in the current political climate. By looking at our own short history as a profession, I also want to emphasise that it is the nature of humanitarian work to operate in extreme political environments. There is no particular reason to panic about this one.

What follows addresses three main questions. How can we think optimistically about the future of the humanitarian movement? What can we learn from our past? What can military art teach us about being cunning and effective against our opponents in the present?

## **The Humanitarian Future**

What different possible scenarios can we foresee for humanitarian action in the years ahead? Standing in the present it is virtually impossible to say if a social movement, a business or an art form is in its prime, on the verge of major transformation or about to be rendered extinct. In 1928, stockbrokers on Wall Street were probably making comfortable estimates for dividends and yields in 1929. And then came the crash. In the eighteenth century, many people were continuing to invest in the manufacture of brass buckles for shoes. Then someone

suddenly invented shoe laces. The buckle-makers either went broke or had to diversify fast. In the early part of the twentieth century, farmers and merchants all over Bengal were operating a massive industry in jute that made sacks and bags for a huge global market. And then someone invented plastic and the jute industry was rendered virtually extinct by the plastic bag.

This sort of sudden crash or extinction may – as some imply – be the fate of humanitarianism as we know it today. Perhaps the large system of white-dominated, service-providing agencies is a creaking structure on the point of collapse. But the possibility of a major change in humanitarian method – from buckles to laces or jute to plastic – does not endanger humanitarian action itself, but challenges the way of doing it. Just as shoes will always need fixing to feet, money will always need investing and things will always need carrying in sacks of some kind, so too people in war will always need to be helped and protected.

War persists alongside compassion and restraint. The present norm of international policy and sentiment still leans more to the humanitarian than not. So the current problem is not *if* there will be a future for humanitarian action but rather *how* humanitarian action is best enacted in that future. Unless a dramatic new global totalitarian and genocidal politics breaks in upon the world, the current crisis of humanitarianism is not likely to be an exceptional crisis of *values* but a more immediate crisis of *agency*. And it is the responsibility of humanitarians in each new generation to consider new forms of humanitarian agency and to take the right shape for the times.

Like the world of technological invention, the world of musical composition also encourages us to believe that we can find new ways of doing old things. Reviewing Hayden's 104th (and last) symphony in London in 1795, the music critic of the *Morning Chronicle* stated with great confidence that Hayden had firmly set the seal on the symphonic form and that:

*'...for fifty years to come, musical composers would be little better than imitators of Hayden'.<sup>4</sup>*

The idea that this was now the only way to do symphonies must have been a fairly deadening prospect for young composers at the time. But only eight years later, one of Hayden's more ungrateful students, Ludwig van Beethoven, composed his *Eroica* symphony to transform and renew the *genre* and show just how much more the symphonic form could hold in the hands of a daring and politically engaged genius. The symphony went on to develop more differently still in the hands of Gustav Mahler and continues to do so to this day as composers find it still offers them a grand but surprisingly personal space to present every conceivable idea and explore new musical forms.

I think it is with shoe laces and Beethoven that we can answer humanitarian pessimists. Contemporary humanitarianism need not feel

4 Cited by David Wyn Jones in *The BBC Proms Pocket Guide to Great Symphonies*, ed Nicholas Kenyon, Faber and Faber, London, 2003, p118.

cornered and stuck. It need not feel stranded on an increasingly small dry humanitarian space while the rising waters of politicization, co-option, rejection and resentment swirl around it. And it should not stand there crying out for some kind of insulation from these political realities. Instead, it should take hold of its great idea and dive back into the waters to swim around in the very thick of things trying to change and adapt as cleverly and as carefully as possible in the best interests of those it seeks to help.

## The Humanitarian Past

In thinking about what to do next, it makes sense to look back at humanitarian history to see what we know already. Much of today's rather defeatist analysis seems to be based on the idea that something significant has changed in humanitarian affairs and that things used to be much better. Even a brief glance at humanitarian history shows this to be a rather eccentric view at best.

It is hard to look back and find a golden age of humanitarian action when most people welcomed humanitarian values and principles in war, kept politics out of compassion and respected humanitarian emblems. In fact, ironically, if one were to look for the closest thing to such golden days it would be now. A stranger to humanitarian shores might arrive and look at the last 125 years of organized humanitarian endeavour and deduce that today's humanitarians have never had it so good. Never have humanitarians been this rich, this powerful or this numerous. Never has humanitarian law been so mainstream in international consciousness. And never have humanitarians complained so much about the pitiful state of their project!

Our professional history shows us that humanitarian action and its agencies have always operated in tight spaces with the risks of outright rejection, resentment, politicization and co-option. Many of the risks faced today are no greater than they were and humanitarianism is certainly no sicker. A brief look at humanitarian challenges during the Cold War might help to illustrate the point and give us a sense of perspective on the present.

The main concerns around politicization today turn on two main themes:

- the inadequate, selective and inequitable application of humanitarian budgets across the vast spectrum of human need;
- the problem of humanitarian co-option into war aims posed by belligerent funding and military encroachment into humanitarian activity which is seen as causing a dangerous blurring of belligerent and humanitarian interests and action.

Are either of these dangers distinctly new? Not really. Humanitarian spending by democracies and non-democracies alike has always been

**“ Governments have to work for multiple public goods instead of the single goods that humanitarians demand.**

highly selective according to political priority from the 1960s onwards. Politically opposed countries have always been semi-sanctioned unless western powers had evidence to show that aid might actually serve to undermine these antithetical governments. Politically marginal countries have frequently been neglected until the last minute in a major catastrophe. In the main, aid and politics have always been considered together in a way that makes sense for governments that have to work for multiple public goods instead of the single good that humanitarians demand.

The question of belligerent donors seems to be a particular worry at the moment because for so many leading humanitarians – especially those in the USA and UK – they are ‘our belligerents’. But we must not forget that these same western governments were very active belligerents (albeit less directly sometimes) throughout the five decades of the Cold War. Often the same governments that gave humanitarian aid were simultaneously devising, supplying and advising the insurgency or counter-insurgency warfare that created the need for aid in so many parts of Central America, Africa and Asia. What is different about belligerent funding in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2004 compared to belligerent funding in Guatemala, Mozambique and Afghanistan (again) in the 1980s?

The problem of military-humanitarian blurring is also an old one. Today’s joint civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan are tiny compared to the massive “pacification” programmes led by USAID in Vietnam with military and CIA support. The UK’s Civil Action Groups in the Malaya insurgency were also much larger than anything we are seeing today and represented a fully integrated political-military-humanitarian response. And, of course, Mao Tse-Tung explicitly mixed militarism, politics and aid amongst the rural population in his long struggle to power. This model was then taken up by many other communist and counter-communist groups with whom humanitarians have dealt during the Cold War.

Perhaps one of the most intimate examples of western aid agencies operating with blurred political, military and humanitarian lines occurred in Ethiopia, the great humanitarian emergency of the 1980s. In Eritrea and Tigray humanitarian agencies worked very closely with the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) to support what was a deeply integrated military, political and humanitarian endeavour by these two armed people’s movements.

At the same time, sections of the Ethiopian government also did all they could to co-opt and limit humanitarian action in line with their war aims against the Eritreans and Tigrayans. Denial of humanitarian access by the Mengistu government meant that humanitarian agencies could only give certain things to certain people in certain places at certain times. This ensured that humanitarian aid was shaped in such a

“ It is rather like a coral diver complaining that he gets wet every time he dives for coral.

way as to be a key part of (and certainly no threat to) Mengistu’s military objectives in Tigray and Eritrea as well as his wider policy of mass resettlement. Throughout the war and famine, humanitarian cooperation with Ethiopian government ministries was intense and always swung agonizingly between collaboration and humanitarian pragmatism.

Outright rejection, politicization, co-optation, belligerent funding and blurring are not new. Neither are they necessarily catastrophic problems for humanitarianism. Instead, they are our perennial problems as humanitarians. They are always with us. For what other reasons have humanitarians not always been able to save every life that they have wanted to save? To complain about rejection, politicization and co-optation and to suggest that they somehow need to be eradicated before any pure humanitarian action can take place is bizarre. It is rather like a coral diver complaining that he gets wet every time he dives for coral. Coral lives in the sea. There is no other place to find it. In the same way, human suffering and humanitarian action in war exist in highly politicized and militarized environments. Where else would you expect to be as a humanitarian worker?

## The Art of War

To help recapture a more cunning and offensive spirit of humanitarian engagement in the midst of our current context, I want to explore how the military art of the fierce Chinese sage, Sun Tzu, might inform humanitarian agency and method today. Sun Tzu has provided great inspiration to the militarists and politicians with whom humanitarians need to deal. His classic text on military strategy, *The Art of War*, was written in the 4th century BC during a long 250 year period of war in China<sup>5</sup>. Many hundreds of years later, the book’s ideas had a profound influence on Mao Tse-Tung’s approach to guerrilla warfare which in turn has shaped the strategies of resistance, insurgency and counter-insurgency that dominate so many contemporary contexts in which humanitarians find themselves. And, of course, Sun Tzu is also something of a guru to several generations of business people around the world.

Paradoxically, perhaps, there is a lot in Sun Tzu’s thinking that can help humanitarians to play their part in war more effectively too. Above all, Sun Tzu may encourage humanitarians towards a greater sense of initiative, strategy and cunning that will stand them in good stead at this time. The basic theme of Sun Tzu’s book is that by knowing oneself and one’s opponent, a good general can raise a confident and effective army and use a creative combination of terrain, energy and circumstance to shape his force in such a way as to “create victory”.

To do this one needs an understanding of one’s environment, of one’s enemy, of one’s aim and then the strategy and tactics to achieve it. So, first, I want to examine the operational context of humanitarians’ current challenge and identify their opponents.

<sup>5</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated and edited by Samuel B. Griffith, Oxford University Press, 1963.

# The Current Challenge

For more than forty years before the 1990s, Cold War logic determined much humanitarian action in line with the supreme geo-political conflict between communism and capitalism. Both sides assisted or turned a blind eye to the violations of their respective proxies in the many wars of the period and contained or expanded humanitarian action accordingly. Now, after a short break in the decade after the Cold War, the international political and military environment is dominated once again by one main geo-strategic conflict: global terrorism and the war against it.

Since September 2001, the USA and other coalition partners have recognized a very singular political priority, required by the emergence of global, extreme and potentially genocidal terrorist movements ranged against them. Alongside this security imperative, and integral to it, the neo-liberal values, including humanitarian ones, which came to typify international policy in the 1990s still rank highly. But, there can be no doubt that after a 10 year lull, absolutist security logic guides US military and political policy. It is one which the US government expects others to understand and support, and which is unlikely to change in essence with a new government in Washington.

The primacy of this counter-terrorism logic now renders many other concerns secondary. This poses significant operational challenges for humanitarian agencies today – particularly perhaps agencies from the United States who feel the immense pressure to conform to current White House doctrine more than most. This geo-political conflict creates a significant meta-context for humanitarian action as the world's major powers go to war again in various ways. But, to date, at least in relation to the protection of civilian lives, they have done so in ways that show significant respect for humanitarian values – in marked contrast to their conduct in many Cold War confrontations.

But the dynamics of terror and counter-terror do not dominate every setting where humanitarian action is required. It would be a massive mistake 'to Iraq' or 'to Afghanistan' the whole analysis of humanitarian action today. While there is a risk that a strategy to attack humanitarian agencies as soft western targets may domino to other areas where US and coalition forces conduct counter-terror operations, other settings may remain untouched. In many places, the challenges are different or even minimal. The atrocities of the LRA in northern Uganda are a horror of their own. Liberia and Cote D'Ivoire have proved conventionally problematic in the manner of the 1990s. Despite the new geo-strategic logic of global terror and counter-terror, the overall analysis of humanitarian challenge is likely to remain something of a patchwork that requires a nuanced and not a singular interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This point is well made in a recent paper for the Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response (SCHR) by Paul Smith-Lomas of Oxfam GB, entitled: *Declining Humanitarian Space within the New Security Agenda*, January 2004.



# Humanitarian Opponents

In this patchwork of operational environments, humanitarian action today faces a range of specific threats and opponents. Threats of outright rejection and assault arise from Islamic militancy, Iraqi resistance and violent war economies. Extreme restriction or containment of humanitarian action is experienced in the policy of the Russian, Indonesian and Sudanese governments in Chechnya, Aceh and Darfur respectively. Humanitarian values and action are challenged regularly by the ongoing conflict in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Strategic and tactical co-optation is a serious risk in operations with donor Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. But humanitarian co-optation of some kind remains a risk wherever governments or armed factions are at war. Violent economic activity also continues to pose threats to humanitarian organizations who are deliberate or unwitting witnesses to it. Resentment against humanitarians and their organizations continues as a cumulative threat wherever humanitarian action is excessively colonial and invasive in its style or felt to be arrogant, ignorant, disempowering and culturally insensitive in its behaviour.

“ **The highest form of military art is to subdue your opponent without fighting.** ”

These external opponents present significant challenges to impartial and effective humanitarian action. It is hard for Christian or secular agencies to adapt successfully to Islamic fundamentalism because it is not really possible to become ‘a bit fundamentalist’. It is hard to find a humanitarian shape and tone that fits within the Russian approach to humanitarian containment in Chechnya. In Iraq, it is hard not to be seen as a collaborator to an invading force by partisans who want to scupper any possibility of that invasion succeeding. It is equally hard not to be exploited as a critical instrument of pacification in the counter-insurgency strategy of US and UK forces determined to win the battle for the Iraqi people. And it is simply downright dangerous to be around people who are mining and stealing as hard as they can in DRC and who do not want to be seen doing so.

And there are, as ever, internal enemies too within the humanitarian project itself. Inter-agency competition still fosters an element of land-grabbing in humanitarian operations. Government donors demand that humanitarian aid is delivered in certain ways that limit experimentation. NGO proliferation diffuses humanitarian objectives in a given war. Poor performance often leaves humanitarian action falling far short of its promise. Humanitarian careerism thwarts innovation. Glass ceilings continue to exist between international (mainly white) staff and national (mainly black) staff. A sense of neo-colonial guilt, which can verge on self-hatred, lurks just below the surface of many individual humanitarian vocations and has a pernicious effect on humanitarian purpose and morale.

So, how best to respond to these internal and external opponents? What do the principles of Sun Tzu’s military art have to offer to shape new strategic and tactical thinking for humanitarian action? To explore this,

“ True success engages the humanitarian responsibility of others to ensure respect for humanitarian norms.

it is best to start with a short examination of strategic humanitarian aims followed by a longer analysis of the kind of tactics required to achieve them.

## Humanitarian Aim

For Sun Tzu, success in the art of war is victory. The aim of military strategy is to subdue your opponent. Interestingly, the highest form of military art is to do this without even fighting. He who overpowers his enemy by undermining his will to fight or who contrives to put him in such a situation that only surrender is an option is the greatest of military strategists. But when a fight is inevitable, the aim becomes the destruction of one's enemy. Importantly, in such a direct confrontation, the focus is always on the enemy rather than on territory. If you defeat the enemy, the territory will fall into your hands. To become obsessed with taking territory or winning space is to disperse your force and to be dangerously distracted from destroying your opponent.

These two points of strategy already have immediate resonance for definitions of humanitarian success. The first highlights the importance of an overpowering humanitarian influence and the second hints at the risks of a territorial model of humanitarian space.

## Exerting Unbeatable Humanitarian Influence

The aim of humanitarian action is the protection and assistance of the civilian population and those *hors de combat* in war. According to Sun Tzu, the highest art in such protection would be to achieve it without having to launch a humanitarian field programme. This involves humanitarians and their allies winning the argument for humanitarian protection in a given war so that their own humanitarian action is not needed.

This high form of humanitarian victory relies upon a profound and powerful humanitarian influence. This is the ability to join with others to create a deep culture of respect for humanitarian values in society so that civilian protection holds high priority in the conduct of a war. It is to co-generate a powerful humanitarian contract between people and power in society. True success of this kind engages the humanitarian responsibility of others to ensure respect for humanitarian norms across a given conflict. In moments of crisis when such moral conviction wavers within the warring parties and the humanitarian contract looks to be in danger, the skills of advocacy, campaigning and personal *demarche* become the urgent instruments of humanitarian art by which the contract is sustained.

To fully appreciate Sun Tzu's injunction, humanitarian art might go further still to prevent war before it starts or actively to stop it when

it is underway. This preventive art acts on a deep humanitarian conviction to deter or disarm warring parties and to help free them from a military logic that will be devastating for civilians. It is a very upstream aspect of humanitarian art but one that might be prized in new cooperation between humanitarian agencies and peace-brokers which ensures that humanitarian access is at the heart of ceasefires and peace processes as they are developed.

## Focusing on Opponents not Territory

The last 10 years have seen the emergence of the phrase “humanitarian space” to describe that freedom of movement and access to territory that humanitarians feel is rightly theirs in war. But a reading of Sun Tzu suggests that such a territorial conceptualization of humanitarian aim is to mistake the main strategic challenge facing humanitarians.

The primary humanitarian aim is not to occupy as much of humanitarian territory as possible. Even if you can occupy it, it is unlikely you will be able to hold it, or do all you want on it, if you have not first overcome those who do not want you to have it. Instead, the strategic aim is rather to protect and assist the civilians on this territory and to defeat your opponents who are causing their suffering or preventing their protection. To achieve this may not involve taking humanitarian space or discussing humanitarian access at all.

For example, if a determined government is denying you access to a region of its country where it is fighting a protracted war against a secessionist rebel movement causing thousands to be displaced, it makes little sense to focus only on humanitarian possession of that territory by going obsessively every morning to ask government and rebels alike for a permit in your most persuasive manner. This would be to focus on a territorial aim alone. It might make more sense to have someone keep going to these offices every morning to make them think that permit persistence is your only strategy. In the meantime, you might invest most of your agency effort working with others to lure the government and rebels into a much more public and powerful showdown on the subject somewhere else. You might also invest in indirect strategies for protecting civilians by working through third parties within the contested area to gather sound information and extend a network of cash relief and health advice through community structures. Or you might prepare for people’s flight into safer areas where they can then reach you directly.

# Humanitarian Tactics

When the strategic aim of a humanitarian programme is clear and well conceived, the real practical challenge is to design the tactics that will achieve it. Most humanitarians are highly tactical but Sun Tzu's art may challenge them to be even more so and, in particular, to be more innovative in their tactics. There is much that is deeply conventional in humanitarian programming. According to Sun Tzu, success comes most to those who are thoughtful and prepared to be daring and unconventional.

## Energy, Shape and Deception

The heart of Sun Tzu's art turns on ideas of energy or force and one's ability to use it to change shape and confuse your opponent at speed. This involves the distinction between *cheng* and *ch'i* force.

*Cheng* force is a direct, conventional force which is driven straight at the enemy to hold, check or distract him where he stands. A *ch'i* force is an indirect and unorthodox application of force. Often, an indirect and unconventional *ch'i* force will be directed at the enemy's side or rear alongside a head-on *cheng* force. Alternatively, a general may use a small force to misrepresent itself to the enemy as a large conventional *cheng* force which attracts the enemy's main force while a truly large *ch'i* force travels many miles to strike and take strategic targets well behind the enemy.

This type of shape-shifting and misrepresentation of force is enormously important to Sun Tzu who states quite clearly that 'all warfare is based on deception'. Therefore, 'when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity'<sup>7</sup>. Deceiving the enemy is the beginning of defeating him. This idea makes it important to have good intelligence of the enemy and to feed false intelligence to him.

<sup>7</sup> Sun Tzu, Op cit, Book I, para 17-18.

Deception may be a difficult principle for humanitarian agencies to adopt wholeheartedly but I'm sure most agencies can relate to the idea. Shape-shifting or image management may be more palatable terms and there is no doubt that on occasion a lot of humanitarian persuasion and advocacy is driven by conveying a disproportionate sense of agency power both at field level and in the corridors of power.

Some of the legendary humanitarian operations of the past have involved a subtle mix of *cheng* and *ch'i*. During the Holocaust in Budapest, ICRC's Fredrich Born managed to represent ICRC's status as massively more powerful than it was so as to insist that as many Jewish people as possible were placed under ICRC protection. He projected enormous personal power and had official-looking ICRC forms stuck to the door of Jewish safe-houses in Budapest. This was *ch'i* energy feigning as *cheng* and it worked to a degree that was unparalleled

8 Caroline Moorehead (1998) *Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross*, Harper Collins, London, pp445–454.

9 Maggie Black (1992) *A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam - the First Fifty Years*, Oxford University Press, pp222–224.

in other humanitarian action in the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> It was also an act of what Jewish people would call, *chutzpah*, which is an important aspect of *ch'i* energy. In 1979, Oxfam's Guy Stringer and Jim Howard mounted a similar *ch'i* move to great effect when, on their own initiative, they chartered a barge in Singapore, filled it with relief supplies and sailed it straight to Kompong Som in Cambodia – making the point that aid could and should be delivered into Vietnamese occupied Cambodia and attracting significant international attention.<sup>9</sup>

*Cheng* and *ch'i* energy are both essential to humanitarian action and need to be thought through and tactically deployed in combination. There are signs today that, at the operational level, the emerging practice of humanitarian protection seems to be employing highly tactical combinations of *cheng* assistance programming with *ch'i* protection monitoring or vice versa. An agency's conventional assistance presence is often deployed as a holding force while protection activities like human rights monitoring and off-stage advocacy are run on the side.

It is also well known to many agencies that a full scale *cheng* health programme complete with conventional medics, drugs and clinics may well be far more energy consuming and less effective than a more lateral *ch'i* programme that seconds a single medic into a key position within an existing health system to supply cash and advice rather than commodities. Similarly, so-called off-shore or 'briefcase NGOs' (which are very much a *ch'i* force model) have a long tradition of success bringing money, ideas and solidarity to networks in occupied territories or as a light and fast way of providing cash relief after floods in Asia. Many such unconventional programmes are more easily run behind the distraction of a conventional *cheng* action.

## Infinite Variety

The humanitarian community has often spent much time looking for winning programme models which can then be replicated globally. Interestingly, Sun Tzu has a horror of repetition and replication in military strategy. In his view, each new victory is likely to require a new series of military shapes so that

10 Sun Tzu, Op cit, Book VI, p100.

*'...when I have won a victory I do not repeat my tactics but respond to circumstances in an infinite variety of ways'.<sup>10</sup>*

Humanitarian agencies do not change shape enough and they do not apply differential energy as much as they might. In Sun Tzu's terminology, they are prone to large conventional *cheng* aid programmes which are easily blocked by conventional *cheng* repostes by warring parties blocking access or donors refusing funds. Most humanitarian agency programming is deeply predictable. It is easily read, anticipated and obstructed by their opponents. This is partly the result of donor expectations and their demands for certain programme

**“ Sun Tzu might regard SPHERE as an essential discipline... but the global roll-out of formulaic solutions might worry him.**

types. But it is also, despite complaints to the contrary, because humanitarians have become too accustomed to getting the resources they need for an operation. Writing the big budget and waiting for the grant to come through can be bad for creativity. Where there are few external resources, necessity becomes the mother of invention and works directly with context. Interesting *cheng/ch'i* combinations are then born and humanitarian art can become self-reliant and more daring while also sticking to key principles and certain standards.

The careerist investment humanitarians have in being experts in conventional response is also another drag on experimenting with humanitarian shape. Skills and expertise are vital but humanitarians should always be ready to skill-up, down or sideways to meet a particular opponent and environment.

Sun Tzu's approach is in stark contrast to the deeply formulaic approach that has tended to pervade humanitarian action. Certain basic standards of assessment and provision do need to be kept to ensure health and wellbeing so it is unclear where Sun Tzu might stand on SPHERE. He might regard it as the essential discipline that binds a force together and enables it to work effectively. But the global roll-out of formulaic solutions to meet such standards - epitomized in something like UNHCR's Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) or even Oxfam's water kits - might worry him. Such replication certainly makes humanitarians very easy to predict and contain. It involves operational habit-forming that might stifle variety. And it usually means that people in need are required to organize themselves around agency practices rather than the other way round.

One way of fostering infinite variety in humanitarian work is to make a strength out of a perceived weakness in the sector: the multiplicity and proliferation of humanitarian agencies. The long cherished dream of humanitarian coordination might best be set aside for the more effective (and more achievable) vision of strategic variation. If all agencies can agree with Sun Tzu's wariness of replication and his emphasis on *cheng/ch'i* combinations, then the range of humanitarian agencies in a given context might agree to being tactically different and liaise accordingly. In practice agencies often do this.

## Avoidance and Retreat

Sun Tzu continually repeats the principle that if one cannot find advantage in a given situation or an imminent confrontation one should avoid them and the potential losses they may involve. Retreating and avoiding the enemy when engagement is unprofitable is a vitally important part of the art of war for Sun Tzu. Going round an obstacle that you cannot surmount is highly regarded. Such an approach embodies two key aspects of military art: avoiding your opponent's strong points in favour of attacks on his weak points and choosing the ground on which you fight.

**“ Avoiding an unprofitable clash with political power must be a critical part of any humanitarian tactic.**

Humanitarians often find it hard to really own the principle of avoidance and retreat because of the urgent and extreme sense of moral mission that they give themselves. NGOs in particular often make their reputation by simply being there. But retreating from obvious danger or avoiding an unprofitable clash with political power must be a critical part of any humanitarian tactic. It makes sense to plan when and where you want to close with your opponent and to lure them or race them there accordingly.

A key part of avoidance and retreat concerns organizational survival. Some people see a concern for organizational survival as clashing with a more proper concern for humanitarian principles. For example, some view the refusal of agencies to stand up to the USA and its insistence that US agencies work in Iraq as some kind of cowardice driven by the low morals of organizational survival rather than the high morals of humanitarian principle. But there is an important moral obligation to take care of humanitarian organizations and to avoid devastating clashes. There is no sense at all in rejoicing in some drastic pyrrhic victory whereby one wins a moral argument but loses an organization. Moral satisfaction is hardly recompense for a loss of jobs and an even larger loss of future opportunity. For Sun Tzu, the trick in such a situation might be to make a strength out of this apparent weakness by using your inevitable presence to gain valuable knowledge of the region and its people that might stand you in good stead in the years ahead.

## Using Weather and Terrain

Weather and terrain are two of Sun Tzu's five 'fundamental factors' of appraisal in war and humanitarians need to consider them carefully for they are the context in which we also act. It makes sense to think of weather and terrain both metaphorically and literally: metaphorically as political climate and landscape; literally as physical geography.

As humanitarians, there is little point in complaining about the political climate or the terrain in which we find ourselves. There is every point, as Sun Tzu would advise, to use the both weather and terrain to our advantage as we aim to win within them. There are both hazards and advantages in weather. Fog and rain can slow you down but it can also conceal you. The same holds true of terrain. Sun Tzu recognizes six different types of terrain: 'accessible, entrapping, indecisive, constricted, precipitous, and distant'.<sup>11</sup> Each type carries different disadvantages for defender or attacker alike and must be evaluated differently depending on troop levels. Humanitarians need to think hard about the physical or political terrain which they are on in order to decide how best to use it or whether to move off it to a more favourable piece of country. Climatically, humanitarian action may sometimes be well placed in bright sunlight and open ground in the full glare of the global media and transparent to all parties. At other times, agencies might make the most of the political backhills and their mist.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, Chapter X.

Physically, agencies also need to continue to think of new relief spaces and new programme shapes. Increasing creativity needs to be brought to ways of moving beyond simple camps and distribution centres towards a new focus on enabling networks of support that do not suck people's energy inwards towards the agency but accelerate it outwards to one another.

## Creating Winning Situations

All these elements together accumulate in Sun Tzu's idea of 'creating situations' to which the enemy must conform. This ability, above all perhaps, is the defining mark of a great general – that he or she can create situations out of weather, terrain, force, circumstance and the temperament of the enemy that can give an unmatched advantage. Much of this turns on the general's ability to lure the enemy into the situation of his own choosing and to draw the best energy from his own force in a given terrain.

The famous analogy Sun Tzu gives for combining force, shape, energy and terrain to best effect is that of rolling logs and stones downhill:

<sup>12</sup> Ibid Chapter V, p95.

*'Now the nature of logs and stones is that on stable ground they are static; on unstable ground, they move. If square, they stop; if round they roll.'*<sup>12</sup>

By analogy, therefore, square stones or angular logs on flat surfaces do not make for rapid movement and optimal force. They require massive energy for little result. The art of the general is to hone a rounded force and create a situation whereby his forces are at the top of a hill while his enemy is at the bottom. Like heavy rounded logs, he then just has to release his force which then rolls effortlessly downhill amassing its maximum energy as it tumbles upon its powerless enemy below.

I realise that this is not usual humanitarian imagery! However, it does offer a useful picture of an equally ideal humanitarian operation – taking the share, and being in the right position at the best time with the right humanitarian energy allows for maximum humanitarian impact from minimal effort.

## Encouraging Humanitarian Leadership

No victory is possible without great generalship and Sun Tzu focuses a lot on the qualities of a good general.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, Chapter X, p136.

*"It is the business of a general to be serene and inscrutable, impartial and self-controlled."*<sup>13</sup>

A general must inspire the confidence of his forces, share their



privations, hold them in affection and be able to instil them with the highest morale. Sun Tzu calls this ‘moral influence’ and it is perhaps the most important of all five fundamental factors because from good leadership all else flows. He explains:

*“By moral influence I mean that which causes people to be in harmony with their leaders, so that they will accompany them in life and unto death without fear of mortal peril”.*<sup>14</sup>

A General’s forces must love and fear him. They must be motivated by him, always trusting in his strategy and his ability to win.

This kind of decisive, connected and enthusing leadership is greatly needed in humanitarian agencies where the model of the corporate CEO rather than the general is currently more to the fore. The phrase ‘humanitarian generalship’ throws down a useful challenge to a sector which has too often felt awkward about the role that leaders might play in taking humanitarian action into difficult territory. Good leaders need to be cultivated within humanitarian organizations or imported into them – not least because humanitarians’ opponents in politics and war are some of the most effective and charismatic leaders around.

Sun Tzu is determined that there are no basic rules which can be applied routinely by generals to ensure success. Strategies which take account of differing patterns of weather, terrain, enemy temperament and energy are always responding to circumstance where any number of variables may be in operation at a given time. Circumstance is the general’s constant and ever-changing challenge. His judgement is what sets him apart to deal with it. And his judgement must be allowed free rein. Sun Tzu is insistent that because of the primacy and volatility of circumstance in war, the General’s judgment on the spot must always be allowed to over-rule the sovereign’s order from afar.

This emphasis on operational judgement and autonomy has important implications for humanitarian leadership and management which must put operational flexibility in the hands of the leader in the field. The tendency of new communications technology to encourage HQ staff to micro-manage field operations from a distance must be resisted if humanitarian programming is going to be diverse and responsive to context and circumstance. Like Admiral Nelson, the person on the spot must still be enabled to put a telescope to a blind eye if the moment so demands.

## Developing Humanitarian Cunning

All this talk of enemies, force, deception, intelligence, generalship and military art may sound bizarre and deeply inappropriate as a discussion of humanitarian strategy and action. And if carried to extremes, it

certainly would be inappropriate. However, by drawing on Sun Tzu my intention is to rouse the sector from the sense of fatalism and failure that has gripped it in some quarters and to encourage people to be bold and take the initiative again. In short, to foster an element of humanitarian cunning in the way we plan and direct our work. Think not only about what is ranged against you but about what you have and how you might use it in response. Many contexts in which humanitarian workers find themselves are profoundly difficult but this requires ever more careful and practical thinking and not a sense of pessimism and conspiracy. The thought of Sun Tzu is a call to return to the offensive and to think strategically about how to apply humanitarian energy directly, indirectly or by a cunning combination of the two.

14 Ibid, Chapter III, p82-83.

In doing so, it is obvious that we cannot save all the people all of the time. But it is important to try to take new shapes, do new things and make the best of what we have. So, to conclude, here are Sun Tzu's 'five circumstances in which victory may be predicted'<sup>14</sup>. I hope they neatly summarise the more cumbersome discussion above.

- He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious
- He who understands how to use both large and small forces will be victorious
- He whose ranks are united in purpose will be victorious
- He who is prudent and lies in wait for an enemy, who is not, will be victorious
- He whose generals are able and not interfered with will be victorious.

If they have not got a copy already, perhaps some humanitarians will buy a copy of Sun Tzu for themselves and keep it to hand next to the Geneva Conventions and SPHERE standards. I hope it will then help us talk of humanitarian initiative and not humanitarian disease, of optimism not pessimism and of trying instead of debating.

## **Hugo Slim**

Hugo Slim is the Chief Scholar at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. He has a degree in Theology from Oxford University (1983) and a PhD in Humanitarian Ethics from Oxford Brookes University (2003). Before joining the Centre he was Reader in International Humanitarianism at Oxford Brookes University (1994–2003). Before becoming an academic, he worked for Save the Children UK and the United Nations in Morocco, Sudan, Ethiopia and the Palestinian Territories (1983–1994). He has published widely on various aspects of humanitarian action in war and is on the Council of Oxfam GB, an International Adviser to the British Red Cross, a Patron of Merlin and an Academic Adviser to the Aegis Trust for the Prevention of Genocide.