

## The Thirty-Six Strategies, Chapter 36

### IF ALL ELSE FAILS, RETREAT

If greatly outnumbered, then retreat. While it is possible for a small force to put up a great fight, in the end it will lose to superior numbers.

### SUN ZI

If it becomes obvious that your current course of action will lead to defeat, then retreat and regroup. When your side is losing, there are only three choices remaining: surrender, compromise, or escape. Surrender is complete defeat, compromise is half defeat, but escape is not defeat. As long as you are not defeated, you still have a chance.

### SPRING AND AUTUMN PERIOD CHINA

In 597 B.C. the states of Chu and Jin fought the battle of Bi. For days before the battle the two armies faced each other, unsure whether or not a battle would actually take place. Several small skirmishes were fought to release the energies of the officers, but it appeared that a peace treaty would be negotiated instead.

On the Jin side the commander of the left wing, Shi Hui, advised caution saying, "It would be well to take precautions. If Chu has no hostile intent, then we can do away with the precautions and conclude an alliance. But if Chu should come charging down on us, the precautions will prevent our defeat. Even when the Lords come together at a meeting, they take care not to dismiss their personal bodyguards."

But the commander of the main body, Xian Gu, disagreed, and only Shi Hui took the precaution of stationing troops in ambush near his positions. The next day, during a small skirmish, the Chu forces misunderstood the commotion for an attack by Jin and launched a full scale assault. The Chu charged forth with such speed and determination that the Jin lines collapsed from the impact.

Another Chu division made ready to attack the Jin left wing commanded by Shi Hui. An officer rode up to Shi Hui and asked, "Should we wait for their attack?"

Shi Hui replied, "The Chu army is now at the peak of its vigor. If they make a concerted attack on us, our army is bound to be wiped out! Better to gather up our forces and quit the field. Though we will still share the disgrace with the other divisions, we at least spare the lives of our men. Is that not the best that could be had from this situation?"

Shi Hui had the men stationed in ambush fight a rear guard action, enabling him to retreat with almost his entire division intact. The main Jin troops suffered a resounding defeat with heavy casualties. Commander Xian Gu, who had so thoughtlessly disregarded the advice to take precautions, was found guilty of incompetence and executed.

### WARRING STATES PERIOD CHINA

When Wang Chu was hostage in Yan the king wanted him executed, and so he fled. While trying to cross the border he was captured by a border guard. "The king of Yan wants me killed," said Wang Chu to the guard, "because someone told him I have a pearl of great value and he wants it."

In truth, I lost it long ago, but the king refuses to believe me. If you turn me in I shall say that you took the pearl from me and swallowed it. Your king will have you killed and turn you entrails inside out to find it. If you want to turn me over to your ruler I cannot dissuade you by offering you anything, but remember, if I am taken, it is your vitals which will be chopped to pieces." The guard promptly let Chu go.

## MING DYNASTY CHINA

The Ming emperor Huidi had disposed of all his uncles except one who feigned madness (see Chapter 27). In 1403 this very uncle, the prince of Yan, led a huge army to the capital of Nanjing to seize the throne. The city was surrounded and the emperor was considering suicide when he was stopped by a eunuch who told him that his grandfather, Emperor Hong Wu, had left a chest in his care with orders that, should any great crisis occur to threaten the dynasty, the reigning emperor should open the chest.

"Let us open it at once then," said the emperor, "and see what my grandfather would do were he here now"

When the lid was lifted the box was found to contain the robes of a Buddhist monk, a diploma, a razor, and ten ingots of silver. The emperor understood the meaning at once and with a handful of attendants fled the palace through a secret tunnel to a Buddhist temple. There he shaved his head and put on the robes. He made his way out of the city and all the way to Sichuan province where he lived in obscurity in a remote monastery. Meanwhile the palace had burned down during the fighting and it was assumed that the emperor had died in the fire.

Forty years later during the reign of Emperor Ying Zong (the fourth since Huidi's time), an old Buddhist priest arrived at court and claimed to be the old emperor Huidi. It turned out the man was an impostor, but a rumor began that Huidi was still alive. To quell the rumors and settle the issue, an official investigation was made which discovered that Huidi was indeed still alive and living as a Buddhist priest. The old emperor was invited back to the capital with great ceremony and he lived out his last days as a guest in the palace. However, he was kept under a watchful eye!

## SUMMARY

The ancient Daoist sages invented the principle of "non-action," or "following the course of the times." To not take advantage of an opportunity presented is a violation of this principle. Conversely, to fight a battle that cannot be won is an equal violation of heaven's law. In the art of war an often overlooked but vital talent is knowing when to run.