

Mo Brotherhood

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The young mother wheeled the pram along the street crowded with holiday shoppers. She demurely returned the smiles of the passersby who connected the swaddled form in the carriage with thoughts of the nativity. What hopeless bitterness impelled her toward the entryway of the busy department store? Her progress led past a bell-ringing Santa and girl scouts at a table selling fudge. The small form beneath the blankets shared with the fudge a certain dry amorphous gooeyness. Protruding from where the navel should have been was a small metallic cylinder connected by wires to a button on the pram's handle. When pressed, this button would create enough voltage to cause the detonation cap in the midst of the baby-shaped C-4, rolling now toward the department store entrance, to set off a chain reaction made more lethal by the nails and other bits of metal packed under the blankets. Our young mother paused to let the path to the door clear and an avuncular beat-cop leaned over the carriage making cooing sounds. He reached his hand to adjust the baby's blanket and hers reached for the button.

The passengers on the local bus eyed each other intently, hoping by careful observation to prevent the moment when one of their fellows would reach for the secret switch and turn a quiet ride into an eternal instant of blinding, searing, shrapnel-filled destruction. The police reported another murder/suicide today. A young man made desperate by nurtured injustice ended the lives of 27 strangers when he detonated the explosive device he was wearing on a crowded bus. The killer then turned the bomb on himself. It was the seventh such incident in the past eight weeks.

At the capitol, in the deepest heart of the defense bureaucracy, senior agents of all the appropriate departments explored contingencies, all of which answered with varying degrees of persuasiveness the question, "What can we attack and destroy that will disincentivize the terrorist operatives from self-termination while in lethal proximity to friendly nationals?"

That all the men around the table understood the question was testament to the closeness of the culture that produced the military-bureaucratic leaders in command of the most awesome destructive forces in human history. The various answers were a mixture of brilliance and subtlety, they reflected experience and

ingenuity, were buttressed by the wisest expressions of the greatest sages of strategy. Clausewitz was invoked to deny Lao Tsu, who was employed to enlarge upon Machiavelli, to qualify Marcus Aurelius, and so on. The erudition was not forced nor did it seem out of place. These men were, after all, the most capable officers of a mighty power and charged with the preservation of a free society. Still, they were military.

A general officer with an impressive festoon of ribbon and brass proposed destroying the home village of the most notorious “terrorist” leader. To strengthen his position he quoted Sean Connery in “The Untouchables.” “You wanta get Capone? I’ll tell ya how to get Capone. They put one of yours in the hospital, you put two of theirs in the morgue,” a satisfying if ominous sentiment.

Even these men, familiar as they were with the uses and effects of violence, realized that such a move would look bad and probably squander the genuine sympathy that had arisen since the bombing attacks began. It might even cause allies to withhold their somewhat shaky strategic assistance. The men around the table knew that however satisfying it might be to meet violence with even better violence, this war, like all wars, must be fought with righteousness. This struggle was for the hearts and minds of bystanders.

Another brass-bedecked specimen pushed for a move against a rogue state, it didn’t really matter, any rogue state would do as long as we could win such a war quickly. We might even trade in a bad leader who hated us for a bad leader who didn’t. As long as it was done quickly it needn’t destabilize the shaky politics of the region and we could pretend that their raw materials still belonged to them. At least we could punish a bad man and at most demonstrate the awesome might of the military forces of our freedom-loving people. The military supervision of the strategic natural resources belonging to the rogue state was a bonus. The difficulty of selling preemptive war to this freedom-loving people and their allies could be overcome, but the considerable costs gave pause to the men around the table.

While these and other stratagems were being proposed and rejected, one slightly-less-senior member allowed his mind to wonder to what he saw as the fundamental flaw in the reasoning around the table. No amount of force, short of complete annihilation, could forestall terrorists who were willing to die in meeting their objectives. Those willing to die are hardly threatened by death. If we can’t get them to quit by threatening them, and we can bring ourselves to kill them and

all their people, if, in other words, force is not an effective means of ending suicide bombers, what then is?

The philosophers of tactics suggested an answer, however unhelpfully vague. When what you can think of won't work, think of something else. What was the current cliché? Think outside the box. When your enemy expects you to come from over there, come from somewhere else. If the organizers of terror expected, indeed desired, a violent response, what was the alternative? Obviously non-violence. But how could non-violence solve the problem? If we can't use force, what can we use?

If the philosophers of war are no help what about the philosophers of, of what, of peace? Who were they? Jesus was the first name that came to mind but there was an odd dissonance with invoking Jesus' name in this circumstance. Those nations which professed to be the most Christian controlled the most destructive forces in human history, and one, at least, seemed ready, even eager, to use them. The leader of this most-Christian nation was a well-known born-again. What was it, our less senior military strategist tried to recall, that Harry Truman had said about praying out loud? Oh well, what did it matter? That hen house had been pilfered long ago.

So on he pondered. At long last, after silently considering and passing over Gandhi and King, St. Francis and Mandela, all of whom exemplified the power of peace in one form or another but whose wisdom didn't seem to apply to the immediate problem, he remembered a minor figure of Chinese philosophy who might fit the bill.

He remembered Motsu, Master Mo, who had emerged in the warring states period about 2500 years ago on the plains of the Yellow River in what would become known as China. Mo had advised the local potentates on the best means of avoiding the destructive effects of almost constant warfare.

This seemed more promising. For Mo, good was defined as that which did the greatest good for the greatest number. Whether a thing was true was determined by comparing it to the evidence of one's senses. The metaphors of determination were the plumb and level, the square and the rule, the tools of the common people. He began with comparing a thing to the established wisdom, and then tested its consistency with the experience of the people. The final test was the result, its conduciveness to desirable ends when put into operation.

Results were desirable if they brought harmony and prosperity to as many as possible. This made a nice little circle of reasoning.

Our not-so senior military man had the time for these ruminations because others occupied the attention of the meeting in the order of rank and seniority, and by this system it would be a while before he need weigh in with his thoughts on the suicide-bombing situation. Where was he? Oh yes, trying to extract something useful from the fragmentary writings of a sage from two and a half millennia ago, all the while listening to the conversation around the table with one ear. Fortunately for his predicament the conversation was so predictable that one ear was plenty. As the table paused to consider the quantity of material required to bomb the previously-mentioned rogue state back into the Stone Age and the increments in tonnage necessary for each year's further regression, our man's thoughts turned once again to the warring states period and Master Mo.

The problem for Mo had been lack of harmony. That was certainly an apt description of the current state of affairs. Mo had been a consulting philosopher, traveling from place to place offering his wisdom regarding a variety of things. Turning to the laptop and punching a few keys produced a web site that provided Mo's writings reduced to the basics. From it he read,

Upon entering a country one should locate the need and work on that. If the country is upset in confusion, teach them with Exaltation of the Virtuous and Identification with the Superior. If the country is in poverty, teach them with Economy of Expenditures and Simplicity in Funeral. If the country is indulging in music and wine, teach them the condemnation of Music and Anti-fatalism. If the country is insolent and without propriety, teach them to reverence Heaven and worship the spirits. If the country is engaged in conquest and oppression, teach them with Universal Love and condemnation of Offensive War. Hence we say, One should locate the need and work with that.¹

There was plenty here to puzzle out, but one theme stood out – find what was out of balance and restore that balance. Our junior general skimmed down the pages and from the commentary learned that Mo was the anti-Confucian. Where Confucius had taught honoring deceased ancestors with expensive ceremony was the highest duty, Mo had countered with simplicity in funerals. Resources were needed for the living and the well-being of the people came first.

Then there was a bit about Universal Love. In the midst of what must have been horrendous destruction and confusion, Mo had made two interesting choices. The first was to teach. Whatever the need or provocation his response had been to teach balance and harmony. He had himself risen to sage-dom from very humble beginnings and had known first hand that for poor laboring people living at the edge of survival, harmony and balance were more than aesthetic values. To these downtrodden, war and dislocation meant ruin. On their behalf Mo had turned to teaching, to persuasion, the strength of the powerless.

The second choice had been to develop the concept of Universal Love. The best way to ensure your own well-being was to concern yourself with everybody else's. And to do so for no loftier reason than self-interest, because it was the most effective way to end the cycle of violence and reprisal that had made the lives of the ordinary people so miserable for so long. For a brilliant instant, our outside-the-box thinker saw the face of Mo, smiling across 2500 years of man's inhumanity to man, of rape and ruination, butchery and bloodshed, conquest and plunder, of devastation, destruction, desecration, of despoliation and desolation, all done for the sake of conquest and momentary empire, and he thought he detected in that smile the sadness that it might have been otherwise and the conviction that it could still be otherwise. And he knew when the attention of the table turned to him and his input he could say, and he should say, to the uniformed masters of mayhem who were his friends and colleagues that there was a better way. He could say and he should say that instead of revenge and ruination we should teach these martyrs-for-a-cause who sought our downfall that we didn't have to be enemies, that we were interested in the same things after all, that the ordinary people who were dying and would be asked to do more dying weren't so very different from one another. That if we

¹ Mei Yi-Pao. The Ethical and Political Works of Motse. London: Probsthain, 1929.

could restore the balance we could preserve ourselves by wanting the same things for our enemies that we wanted for ourselves, that we could learn something after all and escape the cycle of killing-for-the-sake-of-revenge that had consumed so many generations of poor struggling people, too poor to pay attention to the wisdom in the idea of Universal Love.

The sound of throats clearing brought him back to the present moment and he looked into the faces of the men who were expecting him to make his contribution. By the steeliness of their eyes and the set of their shoulders he knew the futility of suggesting anything out of the normal channels of military thinking, and he came back inside the box. He asked a few questions about logistics and firepower, about political camouflage and acceptable casualties, and passed the baton to the next slightly-less-senior military man. He sank back in his chair and knew he had saved his career and lost something else, something he might never again have, the belief that it doesn't have to be this way.

I don't pretend to wisdom enough to say whether it has to be this way or not, but I would like to believe. Belief in a thing is, perhaps, the first step toward manifestation. In this season of reflection and renewal, for all the men in this room, whose wisdom and fellowship have meant so much, I offer a seasonal wish – that all those with whom you must share this world will care as much about your well-being as they do their own. And I have a wish for them as well.
