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# THE ART OF MILITARY COMMAND: An 11th Century View

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**T**HE art of warfare has undergone constant and far-reaching changes during the course of history. In most aspects warfare as practiced in 500 B.C., for example, when Sun Tzu wrote *The Art of War*—the oldest military treatise known to exist—bears little resemblance to warfare today. Through the centuries, however, one element of warfare has changed but little: the art of military command. Other things being equal, the army most competently commanded usually has achieved victory.

This vital role of military command always has been recognized by writers who concerned themselves with the art of warfare, whether they represented small obscure states or the major empires of their day. This article will examine the observations on the role of a military commander as set forth by a little-known Central Asiatic writer of the 11th century. If, in detail, some of his observations have lost their relevancy, the basic concept—an army's success depends largely on the qualities possessed by its commander—remains valid.

From the eighth to the 12th centuries, the Uigurs, under the Karakhanid dynasty, constituted the ruling people in that part of Central Asia centered about Kashgar, the principal city of the area now known as Sinkiang. It was in the year 1069 A.D. that Yusuf Khass Hajib, a

native of Kashgar and a member of the Khan's court, completed a work entitled *Kutadgu Bilig (The Art of Reigning)*.

## Duties of the Commander

In his discussion of the structure of the contemporary government and society, Yusuf devoted one chapter to the duties of the military commander in chief and to the qualities which the Khan must seek in those appointed to that important post (only the Khan himself ranked higher).

Yusuf wrote:

*The chief tasks of a commander are to command soldiers, to organize armies, and to defeat the enemy. All of these require a man of experience and strong will. . . . The commander must be a brave man, hard as steel and known for past heroisms, who will not quaver when he sees the enemy. . . . He must be brave, intelligent, wise, and merciful.*

Warfare in the 11th century was, of course, a matter of hand-to-hand combat in which all ranks participated, hence Yusuf's emphasis on bravery. He returns to this theme again and again:

*He must be brave, for if the commander is brave even the coward acquires courage. But one coward can destroy the whole army. . . . When an army is defeated, one*

*One element of warfare—the art of military command—has changed but little during the course of history. An army's success continues to depend largely on the qualities possessed by a competent commander*

*soldier corrupts another. . . . Let the commander not fear death. . . . The appointed time of death is fixed for everyone and only he who forgets death will defeat the enemy. . . . [Therefore] the commander must be brave so that the soldiers may draw courage from him. If the commander is brave, the whole army will be brave. If a lion acts as a guide for dogs, all the dogs . . . will be lions. But if a dog guides lions, all the lions will be like dogs.*

Planning and intelligence were recognized as essential elements of warfare. "The commander," wrote Yusuf, "must be alert and cautious . . . and must never be subjected to an unexpected attack. . . . He must always be alert and informed about the enemy."

The armies of Yusuf's day generally were animated more by hopes of booty than by sentiments of loyalty, national pride, outrage, or vengeance, and this frequently led to disaster when soldiers abandoned the fight prematurely to stop and collect booty. In a later day this was to lead Genghis Khan to decree the death penalty for any soldier who turned to looting before the standard had left the field. Yusuf was aware of this problem, and his solution was to urge upon the commander a generosity which would instill in the soldiery a measure of personal loyalty and would satisfy their cupidity:

*[The commander] must be generous, for he can organize armies only by distributing much money to the soldiers. . . . He must himself be indifferent to such things as family and wealth. . . . He should di-*

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*vide his wealth among his soldiers, retaining for himself only a horse, clothes, and weapons. . . . He must feed, water, and clothe his cavalry and foot soldiers and must give them much.*

Yusuf recognized that a successful commander must possess certain qualities. Speaking in his usual epigrammatic style, he declared that "the commander must not drink wine and must avoid dissipation, for authority flees before these two acts." Other traits to be avoided are falsehood, pride, and parsimony:

*The commander must always speak the truth, for if the great lie the people will have no confidence in them. . . . Pride is not becoming to a commander, for it will lead him to stray from the path of justice. . . . He must eschew parsimony, for no one approaches a miser.*

In summing up the requisites for a successful military leader, Yusuf concluded that ". . . four qualities are necessary for a commander: a straight tongue, generosity, courage, and an ability to recognize tricks."

#### Army and the State

Yusuf then turned his attention to the role of the army in the state and the relationship which should exist between it and the civilian arm of the government. The Uigurs of his day were essentially peace-loving agricultural and pastoral people, but they understood the importance of an army. In that era, as in most others of history, the people, regardless of how devoted to peaceful pursuits, had to be ready to fight when necessary if the state were to be preserved. Yusuf framed this idea in these words:

*An army is necessary for the state. . . . The Khan must be rich in order to raise an army. And for the Khan to be rich the people must be rich. Therefore, just laws are necessary . . . for the well-being*

*of the people. If one of these factors disappears all four [that is, army, rich Khan, rich people, just laws] will disappear. And if all four disappear the state too will disappear.*

While Yusuf thus acknowledged the vital importance of an army to the survival of the state, he emphasized that the army was not to be considered as all-important and that the civilian arm was equally necessary. He wrote:

*Two officials are necessary for the state: the vizier and the army commander. One wields the pen, the other the sword. These two organize the state, and if they cooperate no one can divide them. Territories*

*are taken by the sword but they are governed by the pen.*

#### Conclusion

Yusuf concludes his chapter on the art of military command with a thought on the role of the army as an instrument of national policy, which might well have served as the inspiration for Teddy Roosevelt's famous dictum, "Speak softly but carry a big stick." As our 11th century author phrased it:

**Three things are necessary for the Khan, the country, and the government: a sword in the right hand, a gift in the left hand, and soft words in the mouth.**

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