

In this journal, I will defend Sun Tzu's argument of applying morals to decision-making in war as embedded in the concept of "Tao" within the chapter "Incendiary Attack" in the *Art of Warfare*. Without following "Tao" as described above, any war will be concluded to be morally unjustifiable. I will apply this principle to analyze the Vietnam War, infer it is an example of a morally unjustifiable war and suggest why a state needs to consider war only as a last resort. The premise is as follows: a state should only "deploy the[ir] troops" into battles where the "gain" clearly outweighs the lives of soldiers it would risk.<sup>1</sup>

The Vietnam War is consistent with the definition of an unjustifiable war because of the injustices caused by the war, such as death and suffering, which overshadowed America's "gain" from the war. Many North Vietnamese who had been attacked had no understanding of why America was bombing and killing so many of their people. For example, one survivor of the Vietnam War said that "People didn't even know what communism was...they just knew what was going on with their lives"<sup>2</sup> while thousands of Vietnamese corpses, body parts and people clinging on the edge of death were strewn about villages. Sun Tzu argues the best moral path to follow is to prioritize "keep[ing] one's own state intact"<sup>3</sup> which is the greatest "gain" but America lost an estimated number of 48,000 soldiers in the Vietnam War. There are thousands of American civilian and soldier accounts of the Vietnam War, and the accounts I have chosen come from soldiers who fought in the bloodiest battle in the Vietnam War - the Battle of Khe Sanh. "All hell broke loose" one soldier named Pipes recounts, as he remembers the soldiers and friends he and his squad had to leave behind while they themselves struggled to survive. The soldiers left behind all died, and some soldiers even questioned whether they deserved to survive.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid (Kindle Locations 1921-1922).

<sup>2</sup> Rosen, Elisabeth. "The Other Side of Vietnam: How the Winners Remember the War." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 16 Apr. 2015, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/the-vietnam-war-as-seen-by-the-north-vietnamese/390627/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/the-vietnam-war-as-seen-by-the-north-vietnamese/390627/).

<sup>3</sup> Ames, Roger T.. Ames, Roger T.. *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare* (Kindle Location 1431). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

One soldier said, “I carry major survivor’s guilt,” he said. “I don’t understand why I’m alive and they aren’t. I don’t understand why I’m here.” However, the war’s injustices had to continue for America to seek “gain”. The American soldiers “charg[ed] at the line” hoping to “kill a lot of North Vietnamese Army”. America’s involvement in the Vietnam War obligated soldiers to commit morally impermissible acts that caused Vietnamese peoples’ suffering and caused American soldiers to suffer as they were forced to kill thousands of Vietnamese to survive. Sun Tzu’s moral path argues against unnecessary suffering purely for “gain”, but the Vietnam War made American and Vietnamese people unnecessarily suffer because of an immoral unjustified war where the “gains” did not outweigh the injustices caused.

Many people claim that it is important to fight for what you believe in, but when fighting for what you believe in is grounded in injustice and morally impermissible acts, it is more important to weigh the justice and injustices of one’s beliefs to prevent suffering. In the case of the Vietnam War, many people did not even understand, agree with or believe that the price they were paying was worth the injustices caused by the war. It is true that people die in every war and death itself is never justified, but there is a right path to follow in waging a war as Sun Tzu has made clear the cause of people’s deaths in war has varying levels of justifiability.

Some American soldiers who died in the Vietnam War may have believed that their deaths were justified because they believed eradicating communism to be a “gain” worthy of their sacrifice. Yet, is the “gain” worth the casualties of 212,000 Americans, 1.1 million North Vietnamese fighters and 2 million civilians?<sup>4</sup> I think Sun Tzu’s view best answers the question:

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<sup>4</sup> Spector, Ronald H. “Vietnam War.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 10 Sept. 2020, [www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War](http://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War).

“He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.”<sup>5</sup> The greatest “gain” is avoiding unnecessary death, especially when that unnecessary death is the result of injustice.

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<sup>5</sup> Ames, Roger T.. *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare* (Kindle Location 1460). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.