

Name of the Paper : BUSINESS STANDARD

Place of Publication : NEW DELHI

Dated : 19 JUN 2005

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Of all three-letter words in common use, "art" and "war" evoke the widest range of responses. So it is interesting in itself when the two are united for the title of a book, as the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu did more than two millennia before the American humorist Stanley Bing gave it a real shot.

This book, written by a former Indian Major, *S.T.R.I.P.T.E.A.S.E.: The Art of Corporate Warfare*, is dead serious. It is frightfully well marketed too. The title, riddled with dots, is illustrated on the cover jacket with an executive suited waist-down in camouflage—inviting you to join the dots. And it rallies readers with a three-word battle cry (heard in Ridley Scott's adrenalin-pumping *Gladiator*): "Stay with me!"

If that still doesn't grab your attention, this should. Major (ret'd) Mukul Deva's book begins with an extract from *The Charge of The Light Brigade*, Alfred Tennyson's plaintive poem on a suicidal attack, and ends with a much more general one from the Geeta, a profoundly nerve-steeling poem in its own right.

So, personal consequences be

Mukul Deva
Penguin Viking
Pages: xviii+200; Price: Rs 325

S.T.R.I.P.T.E.A.S.E. THE ART OF CORPORATE WARFARE



damned, can the author lay claim to the courage of his convictions? Does he shrug off wrapper after wrapper—mere fabric, y'know—as he goes along? Does he do what he's "gotta do", as Americans often say?

In a particular sense, yes. Deva is no stranger to cross-disciplinary thinking. Nor to an organisational culture that puts a premium on discipline as much as frankness—it could be a matter of life and death. In the Crimean War of 1854, the British field commander of the Light Brigade did something crazy. He misunderstood the general's orders (from atop a hill), and bravely led his men—the "not to reason why" men—into such an iron-

spiked clutch of Russians, that the only survivors were the few spared as a chivalrous salute to the audacity of the offense.

Trained in warfare at Pune's National Defence Academy (NDA) and Dehradun's Indian Military Academy (IMA), Deva left the Army as a Major after 15 years of service to start a security business. As the chief of MSD Security Private Ltd and Delta Investigations, he claims to have encountered breathtaking bouts of stultifying stupidity in corporate corridors.

Now, portrayals of executives as aimless ego maniacs are rare in Indian business literature, and while Deva doesn't tell the reader enough to

Stay with me!

make an independent assessment of his judgments, it is obvious that ruffled clients don't bother him.

To the business reader, if that doesn't grate, the puerility of some of the war-business parallels surely would. Some sound contrived. Others seem boxed-in. Gillette's loss-leader razor strategy against Bic's disposables, for instance, is unlikely to elicit much awe...

... unless, of course, there's more to be revealed after the first round of "but naturally" utterances. Anyway, stay with me. This book is a "call to return to the basics", as the preface puts it.

It runs through all the regulars of Tzu vintage, from know-thy-enemy to win-without-fighting, and dusts off some harder advice from Clausewitz too. While at it, *S.T.R.I.P.T.E.A.S.E.* offers trivia that isn't just trivia: did you know, for instance, that the Allies undertook 108,000 Iraq sorties over six weeks in the 1991 Gulf War—more than half as many sorties the British Air Force flew in six years of the Second World War?

And it's not even over yet. But, hey, just what is *S.T.R.I.P.T.E.A.S.E.*?

S for Selection of an aim
T for Total concentration of force
R for Relentless offensive action
I for Inherent flexibility
P for Proactive security
T for The maintenance of morale
E for Extensive cooperation
A for Administration
S for Surprise
E for Economy of effort
Does any of it apply to business?

Well, partially—enough to make a satisfying read anyway. Deva is reasonably well attuned to the basics of business competition in a free market. Like a good marketer, he thinks of the battlefield as the consumer's mind, and reasons quite eloquently that asking the consumer what she wants is no way to win, since the competition can do that too.

Intellectual courage, thus, is virtually everything. It gives Lyra-like adaptive flexibility, the fourth letter in the *S.T.R.I.P.T.E.A.S.E.* And it also explains the Thucydides quote in the preface (refer xviii): "The Nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools." In peace, as in war.