

Understanding the war against GMOs

I recently finished Robert Greene's marvelous book, [*The 33 Strategies of War*](#). A ridiculously descriptive title, it embarks on a 33-stage journey in destroying your enemies: on the battlefield; in politics; in the office; and other scenarios as explicated in the book explained via historical examples. As I was reading this delightful compendium of strategy, history, bloodshed, and intrigue I couldn't help but think that a lot of the strategies seemed strangely familiar to me; an odd *déjà vu*, if you will.

"*That's funny*," I thought to myself, "*last time I checked I wasn't a war monger*." (In fact, I've never been in a fight in my life.) It was such a strange puzzle that certain strategies of war were familiar to me. With this strange sense of *déjà vu*, and due to the absorbing nature of the material, I continued reading...until, at last, it hit me about the halfway mark: *I didn't know these strategies, I had seen these strategies...from the anti-GMO brigade!*

At first, it struck me as an odd realization. Yet, as I continued reading the similarities in tactics and strategy were just too uncanny...it made total sense, the pieces just...fit perfectly. It is no surprise then that, oftentimes, they (the antis) themselves claim they are waging a war. It not much of a leap then from being in a self-proclaimed war to using the strategies of war. It is rather funny to think that Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and your local organic hippie may very well be war mongers. (Note: a recent study from the Environmental and Development Economic of Cambridge Journal calculated the [lost life years](#) due to opposition to genetically modified golden rice; thanks in no small part, to Greenpeace. In all, it estimated that 1.4 million human life years have been lost as a direct result of such opposition...collateral damage?)

From a *not-so-careful* analysis of Greene's 33 strategies, which have been lifted from thousands of years of history, I surmise that the antis uses about half. It is a funny thing, isn't it, to be writing about hippies waging war. However, it should be done. As Greene writes early in the book: "*[Judge] people by the results of their actions, the deeds that can be seen and measured, the maneuvers they have used to gain power*," and not their intentions. (This is the philosophical system of consequentialism, where actions form the ultimate basis of judgment of rightness or wrongness. If, on the other hand, you prefer to judge people by their intentions and meaning behind the actions, that is inconsequentialism.)

Greene's strategies of war are quite diverse. The first strategy, *Declare War on your Enemies*, is perhaps the most evident in use: It is no surprise that in basically any hit-piece on GMOs, an enemy is named — usually it's Monsanto at which the hatred, but more importantly energy, is directed toward. This strategy, as Greene recounts, is the most important. Why? It helps to reduce infighting among one's camp and makes it easier to evaluate strategies by asking a simple question: *will this hurt my enemy?* If the answer is "no," abandon it to find one that does.

The fourth and seventh strategies: *Create a Sense of Urgency*; and *Transform your War into a Moral Crusade* are prevalent and so self-explanatory in my view that I shan't meander into an explanation — just read anything from online media mogul Mike Adams or renowned academic Vandana Shiva to see them in action.

The tenth and twentieth, respectively: *Create A Threatening Presence*; and *Maneuver Them Into Weakness* are the MOs of the Food Babe and her #foodbabearmy. They are large and loud enough that corporations have trouble ignoring the Food Babe's demands. The problem for the corporations is that often enough and, it seems, by design, they are left in a position where they're '*damned if they do*' (respond to her simpleton demands) or '*damned if they don't*' (ignore her, which would be used as evidence against them). Coincidentally, both of these outcomes also happen to fulfil the fifteenth and twenty-eighth strategies: *Control the Dynamic*; and *Give Your Rivals Enough Rope to Hang Themselves*. (As [scientifically illiterate](#) as the Food Babe is, you gotta give her props as a general.)

Strategy twenty-three, *Weave a Seamless Blend of Fact and Fiction* is, without doubt, the most used strategy. There are just enough grains of truth in any article lambasting GMOs that the fictions, when present (read: basically always) are swallowed wholly and gullibly by readers. (Note: Generally those truths are the percentage of crops in the USA that are genetically modified. You can safely ignore just about everything else, though occasionally they will accurately describe the process of genetic modification...occasionally.)

There are, of course, many more such strategies — most being used liberally. Chief among them, and perhaps the most troubling aspect of this self-proclaimed *battle royale* is the candor and manner in which scientists and science journalists are treated when dealing with these scientific subjects. This subject is one of the very reasons that science journalism exists: to communicate the benefits and risks to the public, and they have been almost universally sidelined. There are many reports of both scientists and science writers being threatened: mostly online, but sometimes offline (strategy 30: *Penetrate their Minds*). Also, in some extreme cases, the physical acts of destroying labs have been carried out (strategy 33: *Sow Uncertainty and Panic Through Acts of Terror*). How — perhaps why is the better question — did it come to this? Would the public be up in arms against electricians strongly holding to lighting multi-light fixtures in *parallel electrical* configuration if, say, the general population were of the mind that such fixtures should use a *series electrical* configuration? No, it is a non-issue for precisely the reason that people understand that an electrician knows more than they do on electrical theory. Somehow, change the subject to molecular biology, a vastly more complicated subject, and all hell breaks loose.

The crux of the issue really comes to this: why can't ideas defend themselves?* The historical purpose of criticism — especially of the scientific kind—has been to strengthen an idea through argumentation. If an idea cannot survive a routine round of criticism (be it logical, moral, philosophical, ethical, experimentally etc.), the idea is modified (to be criticized again) or, more usually, thrown out due to the simple fact that most ideas are wrong. At this juncture, the idea holder has two options: forget the idea; or, defend it.

The latest psychological research leaves very little doubt that most human beings will choose the latter (commonly known as [conservatism bias](#): the failure to revise one's beliefs in light of new evidence), and

the next steps are, unfortunately, just as predictable as the first: In the process of defending a failed idea (GMOs are, ipso facto, dangerous) requires the liberal use of logical fallacies, charges of conspiracy, and invention of false knowledge in support of said idea. Add further, at least in the case of biotechnology, the strategies of war to give the failed idea an unfair advantage in the marketplace of ideas, where even scientific ideas must compete, pushing out the opposing ideas. (It is similar to the [teach the controversy](#) movement). However, another way to put it is this: why do the ideas of the anti-GMO movement need the strategies of war to be taken seriously?

From a scientific perspective, it simply doesn't matter how babe-licious the Food Babe is, how green Greenpeace are (or claim to be), or how friendly Friends of the Earth is: currently approved GMOs are safe. How, then, does the anti-GMO movement continually gain political strength? Why are they the de facto trusted sources of information on the science of biotechnology? Strategy 27 to the rescue: *Seem to Work for the Interests of Others While Furthering Your Own*.

P.S. * – The meme “*Why can't ideas defend themselves*” may not be word-for-word. I can't find an attribution to it, though I believe Carl Sagan is the original source, but I cannot find an attribution.

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