

## Interpretation

A Chinese proverb compares friends to the jaws and teeth of a dangerous animal: If you are not careful, you will find them chewing you up. Emperor Sung knew the jaws he was passing between when he assumed the throne: His “friends” in the army would chew him up like meat, and if he somehow survived, his “friends” in the government would have him for supper. Emperor Sung would have no truck with “friends”—he bribed his fellow generals with splendid estates and kept them far away. This was a much better way to emasculate them than killing them, which would only have led other generals to seek vengeance. And Sung would have nothing to do with “friendly” ministers. More often than not, they would end up drinking his famous cup of poisoned wine.

Instead of relying on friends, Sung used his enemies, one after the other, transforming them into far more reliable subjects. While a friend expects more and more favors, and seethes with jealousy, these former enemies expected nothing and got everything. A man suddenly spared the guillotine is a grateful man indeed, and will go to the ends of the earth for the man who has pardoned him. In time, these former enemies became Sung’s most trusted friends.

*Pick up a bee from kindness, and learn the limitations of kindness.*

SUFI PROVERB

And Sung was finally able to break the pattern of coups, violence, and civil war—the Sung Dynasty ruled China for more than three hundred years.

*In a speech Abraham Lincoln delivered at the height of the Civil War, he referred to the Southerners as fellow human beings who were in error. An elderly lady chastised him for not calling them irreconcilable enemies who must be destroyed. “Why, madam,” Lincoln replied, “do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”*

## KEYS TO POWER

It is natural to want to employ your friends when you find yourself in times of need. The world is a harsh place, and your friends soften the harshness. Besides, you know them. Why depend on a stranger when you have a friend at hand?

*Men are more ready to repay an injury than a benefit, because gratitude is a burden and revenge a pleasure.*

TACITUS, c. A.D. 55-120

The problem is that you often do not know your friends as well as you imagine. Friends often agree on things in order to avoid an argument. They cover up their unpleasant qualities so as to not offend each other. They laugh extra hard at each other's jokes. Since honesty rarely strengthens friendship, you may never know how a friend truly feels. Friends will say that they love your poetry, adore your music, envy your taste in clothes—maybe they mean it, often they do not.

When you decide to hire a friend, you gradually discover the qualities he or she has kept hidden. Strangely enough, it is your act of kindness that unbalances everything. People want to feel they deserve their good fortune. The receipt of a favor can become oppressive: It means you have been chosen because you are a friend, not necessarily because you are deserving. There is almost a touch of condescension in the act of hiring friends that secretly afflicts them. The injury will come out slowly: A little more honesty, flashes of resentment and envy here and there, and before you know it your friendship fades. The more favors and gifts you supply to revive the friendship, the less gratitude you receive.

Ingratitude has a long and deep history. It has demonstrated its powers for so many centuries, that it is truly amazing that people continue to underestimate them. Better to be wary. If you never expect gratitude from a friend, you will be pleasantly surprised when they do prove grateful.

The problem with using or hiring friends is that it will inevitably limit your power. The friend is rarely the one who is most able to help you; and in the end, skill and competence are far more important than friendly

feelings. (Michael III had a man right under his nose who would have steered him right and kept him alive: That man was Bardas.)

## PROFITING BY OUR ENEMIES

*King Hiero chanced upon a time, speaking with one of his enemies, to be told in a reproachful manner that he had stinking breath. Whereupon the good king, being somewhat dismayed in himself, as soon as he returned home chided his wife, "How does it happen that you never told me of this problem?" The woman, being a simple, chaste, and harmless dame, said, "Sir, I had thought all men breath had smelled so." Thus it is plain that faults that are evident to the senses, gross and corporal, or otherwise notorious to the world, we know by our enemies sooner than by our friends and familiars.*

PLUTARCH, C. A.D. 46-120

All working situations require a kind of distance between people. You are trying to work, not make friends; friendliness (real or false) only obscures that fact. The key to power, then, is the ability to judge who is best able to further your interests in all situations. Keep friends for friendship, but work with the skilled and competent.

Your enemies, on the other hand, are an untapped gold mine that you must learn to exploit. When Talleyrand, Napoleon's foreign minister, decided in 1807 that his boss was leading France to ruin, and the time had come to turn against him, he understood the dangers of conspiring against the emperor; he needed a partner, a confederate—what friend could he trust in such a project? He chose Joseph Fouché, head of the secret police, his most hated enemy, a man who had even tried to have him assassinated. He knew that their former hatred would create an opportunity for an emotional reconciliation. He knew that Fouché would expect nothing from him, and in fact would work to prove that he was worthy of Talleyrand's choice; a person who has something to prove will move mountains for you. Finally, he knew that his relationship with Fouché would be based on mutual self-interest, and would not be contaminated by personal feeling. The selection proved perfect; although the conspirators did not succeed in toppling Napoleon, the union of such powerful but unlikely partners generated much interest in the cause; opposition to the emperor slowly began to spread. And from then on, Talleyrand and Fouché had a fruitful working relationship.

Whenever you can, bury the hatchet with an enemy, and make a point of putting him in your service.

As Lincoln said, you destroy an enemy when you make a friend of him. In 1971, during the Vietnam War, Henry Kissinger was the target of an unsuccessful kidnapping attempt, a conspiracy involving, among others, the renowned antiwar activist priests the Berrigan brothers, four more Catholic priests, and four nuns. In private, without informing the Secret Service or the Justice Department, Kissinger arranged a Saturday-morning meeting with three of the alleged kidnappers. Explaining to his guests that he would have most American soldiers out of Vietnam by mid-1972, he completely charmed them. They gave him some “Kidnap Kissinger” buttons and one of them remained a friend of his for years, visiting him on several occasions. This was not just a onetime ploy: Kissinger made a policy of working with those who disagreed with him. Colleagues commented that he seemed to get along better with his enemies than with his friends.

Without enemies around us, we grow lazy. An enemy at our heels sharpens our wits, keeping us focused and alert. It is sometimes better, then, to use enemies as enemies rather than transforming them into friends or allies.

Mao Tse-tung saw conflict as key in his approach to power. In 1937 the Japanese invaded China, interrupting the civil war between Mao’s Communists and their enemy, the Nationalists.

Fearing that the Japanese would wipe them out, some Communist leaders advocated leaving the Nationalists to fight the Japanese, and using the time to recuperate. Mao disagreed: The Japanese could not possibly defeat and occupy a vast country like China for long. Once they left, the Communists would have grown rusty if they had been out of combat for several years, and would be ill prepared to reopen their struggle with the Nationalists. To fight a formidable foe like the Japanese, in fact, would be the perfect training for the Communists’ ragtag army. Mao’s plan was adopted, and it worked: By the time the Japanese finally retreated, the Communists had gained the fighting experience that helped them defeat the Nationalists.

Years later, a Japanese visitor tried to apologize to Mao for his country’s invasion of China. Mao interrupted, “Should I not thank you instead?” Without a worthy opponent, he explained, a man or group cannot grow stronger.

Mao's strategy of constant conflict has several key components. First, be certain that in the long run you will emerge victorious. Never pick a fight with someone you are not sure you can defeat, as Mao knew the Japanese would be defeated in time. Second, if you have no apparent enemies, you must sometimes set up a convenient target, even turning a friend into an enemy. Mao used this tactic time and again in politics. Third, use such enemies to define your cause more clearly to the public, even framing it as a struggle of good against evil. Mao actually encouraged China's disagreements with the Soviet Union and the United States; without clear-cut enemies, he believed, his people would lose any sense of what Chinese Communism meant. A sharply defined enemy is a far stronger argument for your side than all the words you could possibly put together.

Never let the presence of enemies upset or distress you—you are far better off with a declared opponent or two than not knowing where your real enemies lie. The man of power welcomes conflict, using enemies to enhance his reputation as a surefooted fighter who can be relied upon in times of uncertainty.

Image: The Jaws of ingratitude. Knowing what would happen if you put a finger in the mouth of a lion, you would stay clear of it. With friends you will have no such caution, and if you hire them, they will eat you alive with ingratitude.

Authority: Know how to use enemies for your own profit. You must learn to grab a sword not by its blade, which would cut you, but by the handle, which allows you to defend yourself. The wise man profits more from his enemies, than a fool from his friends. (Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658)

## REVERSAL

Although it is generally best not to mix work with friendship, there are times when a friend can be used to greater effect than an enemy. A man of power, for example, often has dirty work that has to be done, but for the sake of appearances it is generally preferable to have other people do it for him; friends often do this the best, since their affection for him makes them willing to take chances. Also, if your plans go awry for some reason, you can use a friend as a convenient scapegoat. This “fall of the favorite” was a trick often used by kings and sovereigns: They would let their closest friend at court take the fall for a mistake, since the public would not believe that they would deliberately sacrifice a friend for such a purpose. Of course, after you play that card, you have lost your friend forever. It is best, then, to reserve the scapegoat role for someone who is close to you but not too close.

Finally, the problem about working with friends is that it confuses the boundaries and distances that working requires. But if both partners in the arrangement understand the dangers involved, a friend often can be employed to great effect. You must never let your guard down in such a venture, however; always be on the lookout for any signs of emotional disturbance such as envy and ingratitude. Nothing is stable in the realm of power, and even the closest of friends can be transformed into the worst of enemies.

## LAW 3

### CONCEAL YOUR INTENTIONS

#### JUDGMENT

*Keep people off-balance and in the dark by never revealing the purpose behind your actions. If they have no clue what you are up to, they cannot prepare a defense. Guide them far enough down the wrong path, envelop them in enough smoke, and by the time they realize your intentions, it will be too late.*

## **PART I: USE DECOYED OBJECTS OF DESIRE AND RED HERRINGS TO THROW PEOPLE OFF THE SCENT**

*If at any point in the deception you practice people have the slightest suspicion as to your intentions, all is lost. Do not give them the chance to sense what you are up to: Throw them off the scent by dragging red herrings across the path. Use false sincerity, send ambiguous signals, set up misleading objects of desire. Unable to distinguish the genuine from the false, they cannot pick out your real goal.*



## TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

Over several weeks, Ninon de Lenclos, the most infamous courtesan of seventeenth-century France, listened patiently as the Marquis de Sevigné explained his struggles in pursuing a beautiful but difficult young countess. Ninon was sixty-two at the time, and more than experienced in matters of love; the marquis was a lad of twenty-two, handsome, dashing, but hopelessly inexperienced in romance. At first Ninon was amused to hear the marquis talk about his mistakes, but finally she had had enough. Unable to bear ineptitude in any realm, least of all in seducing a woman, she decided to take the young man under her wing. First, he had to understand that this was war, and that the beautiful countess was a citadel to which he had to lay siege as carefully as any general. Every step had to be planned and executed with the utmost attention to detail and nuance.

Instructing the marquis to start over, Ninon told him to approach the countess with a bit of distance, an air of nonchalance. The next time the two were alone together, she said, he would confide in the countess as would a friend but not a potential lover. This was to throw her off the scent. The countess was no longer to take his interest in her for granted—perhaps he was only interested in friendship.

Ninon planned ahead. Once the countess was confused, it would be time to make her jealous. At the next encounter, at a major fête in Paris, the marquis would show up with a beautiful young woman at his side. This beautiful young woman had equally beautiful friends, so that wherever the countess would now see the marquis, he would be surrounded by the most stunning young women in Paris. Not only would the countess be seething with jealousy, she would come to see the marquis as someone who was desired by others. It was hard for Ninon to make the marquis understand, but she patiently explained that a woman who is interested in a man wants to see that other women are interested in him, too. Not only does that give him instant value, it makes it all the more satisfying to snatch him from their clutches.

Once the countess was jealous but intrigued, it would be time to beguile her. On Ninon's instructions, the marquis would fail to show up at affairs

where the countess expected to see him. Then, suddenly, he would appear at salons he had never frequented before, but that the countess attended often. She would be unable to predict his moves. All of this would push her into the state of emotional confusion that is a prerequisite for successful seduction.

These moves were executed, and took several weeks. Ninon monitored the marquis's progress: Through her network of spies, she heard how the countess would laugh a little harder at his witticisms, listen more closely to his stories. She heard that the countess was suddenly asking questions about him. Her friends told her that at social affairs the countess would often look up at the marquis, following his steps. Ninon felt certain that the young woman was falling under his spell. It was a matter of weeks now, maybe a month or two, but if all went smoothly, the citadel would fall.

A few days later the marquis was at the countess's home. They were alone. Suddenly he was a different man: This time acting on his own impulse, rather than following Ninon's instructions, he took the countess's hands and told her he was in love with her. The young woman seemed confused, a reaction he did not expect. She became polite, then excused herself. For the rest of the evening she avoided his eyes, was not there to say good-night to him. The next few times he visited he was told she was not at home. When she finally admitted him again, the two felt awkward and uncomfortable with each other. The spell was broken.

## Interpretation

Ninon de Lenclos knew everything about the art of love. The greatest writers, thinkers, and politicians of the time had been her lovers—men like La Rochefoucauld, Molière, and Richelieu. Seduction was a game to her, to be practiced with skill. As she got older, and her reputation grew, the most important families in France would send their sons to her to be instructed in matters of love.

Ninon knew that men and women are very different, but when it comes to seduction they feel the same: Deep down inside, they often sense when they are being seduced, but they give in because they enjoy the feeling of being led along. It is a pleasure to let go, and to allow the other person to detour you into a strange country. Everything in seduction, however, depends on suggestion. You cannot announce your intentions or reveal them directly in words. Instead you must throw your targets off the scent. To surrender to your guidance they must be appropriately confused. You have to scramble your signals—appear interested in another man or woman (the decoy), then hint at being interested in the target, then feign indifference, on and on. Such patterns not only confuse, they excite.

Imagine this story from the countess's perspective: After a few of the marquis's moves, she sensed the marquis was playing some sort of game, but the game delighted her. She did not know where he was leading her, but so much the better. His moves intrigued her, each of them keeping her waiting for the next one—she even enjoyed her jealousy and confusion, for sometimes any emotion is better than the boredom of security. Perhaps the marquis had ulterior motives; most men do. But she was willing to wait and see, and probably if she had been made to wait long enough, what he was up to would not have mattered.

The moment the marquis uttered that fatal word “love,” however, all was changed. This was no longer a game with moves, it was an artless show of passion. His intention was revealed: He was seducing her. This put everything he had done in a new light. All that before had been charming now seemed ugly and conniving; the countess felt embarrassed and used. A door closed that would never open again.

Do not be held a cheat, even though it is *impossible* to live today without  
being one.

Let your greatest cunning lie in covering up what looks like cunning.

*Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658*