TAKE SMALL BITES

THE FAIT ACCOMPLI STRATEGY

If you seem too ambitious, you stir up resentment in other people; overt power grabs and sharp rises to the top are dangerous, creating envy, distrust, and suspicion. Often the best solution is to take small bites, swallow little territories, playing upon people's relatively short attention spans. Stay under the radar and they won't see your moves. And if they do, it may already be too late; the territory is yours, a fait accompli. You can always claim you acted out of self-defense. Before people realize it, you have accumulated an empire.

PIECEMEAL CONQUEST

On June 17, 1940, Winston Churchill, prime minister of England, received a surprise visit from the French general Charles de Gaulle. The Germans had begun their blitzkrieg invasion of the Low Countries and France a mere five weeks earlier, and they had advanced so far so fast that not only France's military but its government as well had already collapsed. The French authorities had fled, either to parts of France not yet occupied by the Germans or to French colonies in North Africa. None, however, had fled to England--but here was General de Gaulle, a solitary exile seeking refuge and offering his services to the Allied cause.

The two men had met before, when de Gaulle had briefly served as France's undersecretary of state for war during the weeks of the blitzkrieg. Churchill had admired his courage and resolution at that difficult moment, but de Gaulle was a strange fellow. At the age of fifty, he had a somewhat undistinguished military record and could hardly be considered an important political figure. But he always acted as if he were at the center of things. And here he was now, presenting himself as the man who could help rescue France, although many other Frenchmen could be considered more suitable for the role. Nevertheless, de Gaulle might be someone whom Churchill could mold and use for his purposes.

Within hours of de Gaulle's arrival in England, the French military sued for peace with the Germans. Under the agreement the two nations worked out, the unoccupied parts of France were to be ruled by a French government friendly to the invaders and based in Vichy. That same evening de Gaulle presented

Churchill with a plan: Broadcasting on BBC Radio, he would address all Frenchmen still loyal to a free France and would urge them to not lose heart. He would also call on any who had managed to get to England to contact him. Churchill was reluctant: he did not want to offend the new French government, with which he might have to deal. But de Gaulle promised to say nothing that could be read as treachery to the Vichy government, and at the last minute he was given permission.

De Gaulle delivered the speech much as he had outlined it--except that he ended it with the promise he would be back on the air the next day. This was news to Churchill, yet once the promise had been made, it might look bad to keep de Gaulle off the air, and anything that would hearten the French during these dark days seemed worthwhile.

In the next broadcast, de Gaulle was decidedly bolder. "Any Frenchman who still has weapons," he announced, "has the absolute duty to continue the resistance." He even went so far as to instruct his fellow generals still in France to disobey the enemy. Those who rallied to him in England, he said, would form part of a nation without territory to be called Free France and of a new army to be called Fighting France, the spearhead of an eventual liberation of mainland France from the Germans.

Occupied with other matters and believing de Gaulle's audience to be small, Churchill overlooked the general's indiscretions and allowed him to continue his broadcasts--only to find that each new program made it harder to pull the plug. De Gaulle was transforming himself into a celebrity. The performance of the French military and government during the blitzkrieg had been widely seen as a disgrace, and in the aftermath no one had stepped forward to alter this perception of cowardice--except de Gaulle. His voice radiated confidence, and his face and tall figure stood out in photographs and newsreels. Most important, his appeals had effect: his Fighting France grew from a few hundred soldiers in July 1940 to several thousand a month later.

Soon de Gaulle was clamoring to lead his forces on a campaign to liberate French colonies in Central and Equatorial Africa from the Vichy government. The area was mostly desert and rain forest and was far from the more strategic regions of North Africa on the Mediterranean, but it contained some seaports that might be useful, and so Churchill gave de Gaulle his backing. The French forces were able to take Chad, Cameroon, the French Congo, and Gabon with relative ease.

When de Gaulle returned to England late in 1940, he now had thousands of square miles of territory under his control. His command meanwhile had swelled to close to 20,000 soldiers, and his bold venture had captured the imagination of

the British public. No longer the low-order general who had sought refuge months before, he was now a military and political leader. And de Gaulle was equal to this change in status: he was now making demands of the English and acting in a rather aggressive manner. Churchill was beginning to regret giving him so much leeway.

The following year British intelligence discovered that de Gaulle had been making important contacts among the growing French Resistance movement. The Resistance, which was dominated by communists and socialists, had started off chaotic, lacking a coherent structure. De Gaulle had personally chosen an official in the prewar socialist government, Jean Moulin, who had come to England in October 1941, to help unify this underground force. Of all de Gaulle's maneuverings, this was the one that could benefit the Allies most directly; an efficient Resistance would be invaluable. So, with Churchill's blessing, Moulin was parachuted into southern France in early 1942.

> Chien/Development (Gradual Progress)
> *This hexagram is made up of Sun (wood, penetration) above, i.e., without, and Ken (mountain, stillness) below, i.e., within. A tree on a mountain develops slowly according to the law of its being and consequently stands firmly rooted. This gives the idea of a development that proceeds gradually, step by step. The attributes of the trigrams also point to this: within is tranquility, which guards against precipitate actions, and without is penetration, which makes development and progress possible.*
>
> *THE I CHING*, CHINA, CIRCA EIGHTH CENTURY B.C.

By the end of that year, the increasingly imperious de Gaulle had so offended many within the Allied governments and armies--particularly U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt--that a plan was discussed to replace him with someone more malleable. The Americans believed they had found the perfect man for the job: General Henri Giraud, one of France's most respected military officials, a man with a record far more distinguished than de Gaulle's. Churchill approved, and Giraud was named commander in chief of French forces in North Africa. Sensing the allied plot, de Gaulle requested a personal meeting with Giraud to discuss the situation; after much bureaucratic wrangling, he was granted permission and arrived in Algiers in May 1943.

The two men were at each other's throats almost immediately, each making demands to which the other could never agree. Finally de Gaulle compromised:

proposing a committee that would prepare to lead a postwar France, he drafted a document naming Giraud as commander in chief of the armed forces and copresident of France with de Gaulle. In return de Gaulle got the committee to be expanded in size and cleansed of officials with Vichy connections. Giraud was satisfied and signed on. Shortly thereafter, however, Giraud left Algiers for a visit to the United States, and de Gaulle, in his absence, filled the expanded committee with Gaullist sympathizers and Resistance members. Upon Giraud's return he discovered that he had been stripped of much of his political power. Isolated on a committee that he had helped to form, he had no way to defend himself, and in a matter of months de Gaulle was named sole president, then commander in chief. Giraud was quietly retired.

Roosevelt and Churchill watched these developments with increasing alarm. They tried to intervene, making various threats, but in the end they were powerless. Those BBC broadcasts that had started out so innocently were now listened to avidly by millions of Frenchmen. Through Moulin, de Gaulle had gained almost complete control of the French Resistance; a break with de Gaulle would put the Allies' relationship with the Resistance in jeopardy. And the committee that de Gaulle had helped form to govern postwar France was now recognized by governments around the world. To take on the general in any kind of political struggle would be a public-relations nightmare destructive to the war effort.

Somehow this once undistinguished general had forged a kind of empire under his control. And there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Interpretation

When General Charles de Gaulle fled to England, he had one goal: to restore the honor of France. He intended to do this by leading a military and political organization that would work to liberate France. He wanted his country to be seen as an equal among the Allies, rather than as a vanquished nation dependent on others to regain its freedom.

Had de Gaulle announced his intentions, he would have been seen as a dangerous mix of delusion and ambition. And had he grabbed for power too quickly, he would have shown those intentions. Instead, supremely patient and with an eye on his goal, he took one small bite at a time. The first bite--always the most important--was to gain himself public exposure with first one BBC broadcast, then, through clever maneuvering, an ongoing series. Here, exploiting his keen dramatic instincts and hypnotic voice, he quickly established a larger-than-life presence. This allowed him to create and build up his military group Fighting France.

He took his next bite by bringing those African territories under the control of Fighting France. His control over a large geographical area, no matter how isolated, gave him unassailable political power. Then he insinuated himself into the Resistance, taking over a group that had been a communist bastion. Finally he created--and, bite by bite, gained complete control of--a committee to govern the free France of the future. Because he proceeded in such a piecemeal fashion, no one really noticed what he was up to. When Churchill and Roosevelt realized how far he had insinuated himself into the Resistance, and into the minds of the British and American publics as France's destined postwar leader, it was too late to stop him. His preeminence was a fait accompli.

It is not easy to make one's way in this world, to strive with energy to get what you want without incurring the envy or antipathy of others who may see you as aggressive and ambitious, someone to thwart. The answer is not to lower your ambitions but rather to disguise them. A piecemeal approach to conquest of anything is perfect for these political times, the ultimate mask of aggression. The key to making it work is to have a clear sense of your objective, the empire you want to forge, and then to identify the small, outlying areas of the empire that you will first gobble up. Each bite must have a logic in an overall strategy but must be small enough that no one senses your larger intentions. If your bites are too big, you will take on more than you are ready for and find yourself overwhelmed by problems; if you bite too fast, other people will see what you are up to. Let the passage of time masterfully disguise your intentions and give you the appearance of someone of modest ambition. By the time your rivals wake up to what you have consumed, they risk being consumed themselves if they stand in your way.

Ambition can creep as well as soar.

--Edmund Burke (1729-1797)

KEYS TO WARFARE

At first glance we humans might seem hopelessly violent and aggressive. How else to account for history's endless series of wars, which continue into the present? But in fact this is somewhat of an illusion. Standing out dramatically from daily life, war and conflict compel disproportionate attention. The same can be said of those aggressive individuals in the public realm who are constantly grabbing for more.

The truth is that most people are conservative by nature. Desperate to keep what they have, they dread the unforeseen consequences and situations that conflict inevitably brings. They hate confrontation and try to avoid it. (That is

why so many people resort to passive aggression to get what they want.) You must always remember this fact of human nature as you plot your way through life. It is also the foundation for any fait accompli strategy.

The strategy works as follows: Suppose there is something you want or need for your security and power. Take it without discussion or warning and you give your enemies a choice, either to fight or to accept the loss and leave you alone. Is whatever you have taken, and your unilateral action in taking it, worth the bother, cost, and danger of waging war? Which costs more, the war (which might easily escalate into something large) or the loss? Take something of real value and they will have to choose carefully; they have a big decision to make. Take something small and marginal, though, and it is almost impossible for your opponents to choose battle. There are likely to be many more reasons for leaving you alone than for fighting over something small. You have played to your enemy's conservative instincts, which are generally stronger than their acquisitive ones. And soon your ownership of this property becomes a fait accompli, part of the status quo, which is always best left alone.

Sooner or later, as part of this strategy, you will take another small bite. This time your rivals are warier; they are starting to see a pattern. But what you have taken is once again small, and once again they must ask themselves if fighting you is worth the headache. They didn't to do it before--why now? Execute a fait accompli strategy subtly and well, as de Gaulle did, and even though a time may come when your goal becomes clear, and when they regret their previous pacifism and consider war, by that time you will have altered the playing field: you are neither so small nor so easy to defeat. To take you on now entails a different kind of risk; there is a different, more powerful reason for avoiding conflict. Only nibble at what you want and you never spark enough anger, fear, or mistrust to make people overcome their natural reluctance to fight. Let enough time pass between bites and you will also play to the shortness of people's attention spans.

The key to the fait accompli strategy is to act fast and without discussion. If you reveal your intentions before taking action, you will open yourself to a slew of criticisms, analyses, and questions: "How dare you think of taking that bite! Be happy with what you have!" It is part of people's conservatism to prefer endless discussion to action. You must bypass this with a rapid seizure of your target. The discussion is foreclosed. No matter how small your bite, taking it also distinguishes you from the crowd and earns you respect and weight.

When Frederick the Great became king of Prussia in 1740, Prussia was a minor European power. Frederick's father had built up the Prussian army, at great expense, but had never really used it; the minute he put the army in play, he

knew, the other European powers would have united against him, fearing any threat to the status quo. Frederick, though massively ambitious, understood what had kept his father in check.

The same year he took the throne, however, an opportunity presented itself. Prussia's great nemesis was Austria, where a new leader, Maria Theresa, had recently become empress. There were many who questioned her legitimacy, though, and Frederick decided to exploit this political instability by moving his army into the small Austrian province of Silesia. Maria Theresa, wanting to prove her toughness, decided to fight to take it back. The war lasted several years--but Frederick had judged the moment well; he finally threatened to take more territory than Silesia alone, and in the end the empress sued for peace.

> *All the conceptions born of impatience and aimed at obtaining speedy victory could only be gross errors.... It was necessary to accumulate thousands of small victories to turn them into a great success.*
>
> GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP, 1911-

Frederick would repeat this strategy again and again, taking over small states here and there that weren't worth fighting for, at least not hard. In this way, almost before anyone noticed, he made Prussia a great power. Had he begun by invading some larger territory, he would have shown his ambitions too clearly and brought down upon himself an alliance of powers determined to maintain the status quo. The key to his piecemeal strategy was an opportunity that fell into his lap. Austria was at a weak moment; Silesia was small, yet by incorporating this neighboring state, Prussia enriched its resources and put itself in position for further growth. The two combined gave him momentum and allowed him space to slowly expand from small to large.

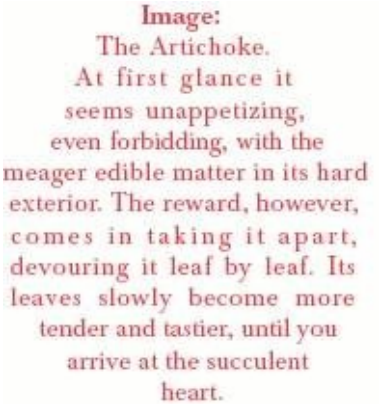
The problem that many of us face is that we have great dreams and ambitions. Caught up in the emotions of our dreams and the vastness of our desires, we find it very difficult to focus on the small, tedious steps usually necessary to attain them. We tend to think in terms of giant leaps toward our goals. But in the social world as in nature, anything of size and stability grows slowly. The piecemeal strategy is the perfect antidote to our natural impatience: it focuses us on something small and immediate, a first bite, then how and where a second bite can get us closer to our ultimate objective. It forces us to think in terms of a process, a sequence of connected steps and actions, no matter how small, which has immeasurable psychological benefits as well. Too often the magnitude of our desires overwhelms us; taking that small first step makes them seem realizable. There is nothing more therapeutic than action.

In plotting this strategy, be attentive to sudden opportunities and to your enemies' momentary crises and weaknesses. Do not be tempted, however, to try to take anything large; bite off more than you can chew and you will be consumed with problems and disproportionately discouraged if you fail to cope with them.

The fait accompli strategy is often the best way to take control of a project that would be ruined by divided leadership. In almost every film Alfred Hitchcock made, he had to go through the same wars, gradually wresting control of the film from the producer, the actors, and the rest of the team. His struggles with screenwriters were a microcosm of the larger war. Hitchcock always wanted his vision for a film to be exactly reflected in the script, but too firm a hand on his writer's neck would get him nothing except resentment and mediocre work. So instead he moved slowly, starting out by giving the writer room to work loosely off his notes, then asking for revisions that shaped the script his way. His control became obvious only gradually, and by that time the writer was emotionally tied to the project and, however frustrated, was working for his approval. A very patient man, Hitchcock let his power plays unfold over time, so that producer, writer, and stars understood the completeness of his domination only when the film was finished.

To gain control of any project, you must be willing to make time your ally. If you start out with complete control, you sap people's spirit and stir up envy and resentment. So begin by generating the illusion that you're all working together on a team effort; then slowly nibble away. If in the process you make people angry, do not worry. That's just a sign that their emotions are engaged, which means they can be manipulated.

Finally, the use of the piecemeal strategy to disguise your aggressive intentions is invaluable in these political times, but in masking your manipulations you can never go too far. So when you take a bite, even a small one, make a show of acting out of self-defense. It also helps to appear as the underdog. Give the impression your objectives are limited by taking a substantial pause between bites--exploiting people's short attention spans--while proclaiming to one and all that you are a person of peace. In fact, it would be the height of wisdom to make your bite a little larger upon occasion and then giving back some of what you have taken. People see only your generosity and your limited actions, not the steadily increasing empire you are amassing.



Authority: To multiply small successes is precisely to build one treasure after another. In time one becomes rich without realizing how it has come about.

--Frederick the Great (1712-1786)

REVERSAL

Should you see or suspect that you yourself are being attacked bite by bite, your only counterstrategy is to prevent any further progress or faits accomplis. A quick and forceful response will usually be enough to discourage the nibblers, who often resort to this strategy out of weakness and cannot afford many battles. If they are tougher and more ambitious, like Frederick the Great, that forceful response becomes more crucial still. Letting them get away with their bites, however small, is too dangerous--nip them in the bud.