Oysters open completely when the moon is full; and when the crab sees one it throws a piece of stone or seaweed into it and the oyster cannot close again so that it serves the crab for meat. Such is the fate of him who opens his mouth too much and thereby puts himself at the mercy of the listener.
Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

In the court of Louis XIV, nobles and ministers would spend days and nights debating issues of state. They would confer, argue, make and break alliances, and argue again, until finally the critical moment arrived: Two of them would be chosen to represent the different sides to Louis himself, who would decide what should be done. After these persons were chosen, everyone would argue some more: How should the issues be phrased? What would appeal to Louis, what would annoy him? At what time of day should the representatives approach him, and in what part of the Versailles palace? What expression should they have on their faces?

Finally, after all this was settled, the fateful moment would finally arrive. The two men would approach Louis—always a delicate matter—and when they finally had his ear, they would talk about the issue at hand, spelling out the options in detail.

Louis would listen in silence, a most enigmatic look on his face. Finally, when each had finished his presentation and had asked for the king's opinion, he would look at them both and say, "I shall see." Then he would walk away.

The ministers and courtiers would never hear another word on this subject from the king—they would simply see the result, weeks later, when he would come to a decision and act. He would never bother to consult them on the matter again.

Undutiful words of a subject do often take deeper root than the memory of ill deeds.... The late Earl of Essex told Queen Elizabeth that her conditions were as crooked as her carcass; but it cost him his head, which his insurrection had not cost him but for that speech.
SIR WALTER RALEIGH. 1554-1618

Interpretation

Louis XIV was a man of very few words. His most famous remark is *"L'état, c'est moi"* ("I am the state"); nothing could be more pithy yet more eloquent. His infamous "I shall see" was one of several extremely short phrases that he would apply to all manner of requests.

Louis was not always this way; as a young man he was known for talking at length, delighting in his own eloquence. His later taciturnity was self-imposed, an act, a mask he used to keep everybody below him off-balance. No one knew exactly where he stood, or could predict his reactions. No one could try to deceive him by saying what they thought he wanted to hear, because no one *knew* what he wanted to hear. As they talked on and on to the silent Louis, they revealed more and more about themselves, information he would later use against them to great effect.

In the end, Louis's silence kept those around him terrified and under his thumb. It was one of the foundations of his power. As Saint-Simon wrote, "No one knew as well as he how to sell his words, his smile, even his glances. Everything in him was valuable because he created differences, and his majesty was enhanced by the sparseness of his words."

It is even more damaging for a minister to say foolish things than to do them.
Cardinal de Retz, 1613-1679

KEYS TO POWER

Power is in many ways a game of appearances, and when you say less than necessary, you inevitably appear greater and more powerful than you are. Your silence will make other people uncomfortable. Humans are machines of interpretation and explanation; they have to know what you are thinking. When you carefully control what you reveal, they cannot pierce your intentions or your meaning.

Your short answers and silences will put them on the defensive, and they will jump in, nervously filling the silence with all kinds of comments that will reveal valuable information about them and their weaknesses. They will leave a meeting with you feeling as if they had been robbed, and they will go home and ponder your every word. This extra attention to your brief comments will only add to your power.

Saying less than necessary is not for kings and statesmen only. In most areas of life, the less you say, the more profound and mysterious you appear. As a young man, the artist Andy Warhol had the revelation that it was generally impossible to get people to do what you wanted them to do by talking to them. They would turn against you, subvert your wishes, disobey you out of sheer perversity. He once told a friend, “I learned that you actually have more power when you shut up.”

In his later life Warhol employed this strategy with great success. His interviews were exercises in oracular speech: He would say something vague and ambiguous, and the interviewer would twist in circles trying to figure it out, imagining there was something profound behind his often meaningless phrases. Warhol rarely talked about his work; he let others do the interpreting. He claimed to have learned this technique from that master of enigma Marcel Duchamp, another twentieth-century artist who realized early on that the less he said about his work, the more people talked about it. And the more they talked, the more valuable his work became.

By saying less than necessary you create the appearance of meaning and power. Also, the less you say, the less risk you run of saying something foolish, even dangerous. In 1825 a new czar, Nicholas I, ascended the throne of Russia. A rebellion immediately broke out, led by liberals

demanding that the country modernize—that its industries and civil structures catch up with the rest of Europe. Brutally crushing this rebellion (the Decembrist Uprising), Nicholas I sentenced one of its leaders, Kondraty Ryleyev, to death. On the day of the execution Ryleyev stood on the gallows, the noose around his neck. The trapdoor opened—but as Ryleyev dangled, the rope broke, dashing him to the ground. At the time, events like this were considered signs of providence or heavenly will, and a man saved from execution this way was usually pardoned. As Ryleyev got to his feet, bruised and dirtied but believing his neck had been saved, he called out to the crowd, “You see, in Russia they don’t know how to do anything properly, not even how to make rope!”

A messenger immediately went to the Winter Palace with news of the failed hanging. Vexed by this disappointing turnabout, Nicholas I nevertheless began to sign the pardon. But then: “Did Ryleyev say anything after this miracle?” the czar asked the messenger. “Sire,” the messenger replied, “he said that in Russia they don’t even know how to make rope.”

“In that case,” said the Czar, “let us prove the contrary,” and he tore up the pardon. The next day Ryleyev was hanged again. This time the rope did not break.

Learn the lesson: Once the words are out, you cannot take them back. Keep them under control. Be particularly careful with sarcasm: The momentary satisfaction you gain with your biting words will be outweighed by the price you pay.

Image:
The Oracle at Delphi.
When visitors consulted the
Oracle, the priestess would utter
a few enigmatic words that seemed
full of meaning and import. No one
disobeyed the words of the Oracle—
they held power over life and death.

Authority: Never start moving your own lips and teeth before the subordinates do. The longer I keep quiet, the sooner others move their lips and teeth. As they move their lips and teeth, I can thereby understand their

real intentions.... If the sovereign is not mysterious, the ministers will find opportunity to take and take. (Han-fei-tzu, Chinese philosopher, third century B.C.)

REVERSAL

There are times when it is unwise to be silent. Silence can arouse suspicion and even insecurity, especially in your superiors; a vague or ambiguous comment can open you up to interpretations you had not bargained for. Silence and saying less than necessary must be practiced with caution, then, and in the right situations. It is occasionally wiser to imitate the court jester, who plays the fool but knows he is smarter than the king. He talks and talks and entertains, and no one suspects that he is more than just a fool.

Also, words can sometimes act as a kind of smoke screen for any deception you might practice. By bending your listener's ear with talk, you can distract and mesmerize them; the more you talk, in fact, the less suspicious of you they become. The verbose are not perceived as sly and manipulative but as helpless and unsophisticated. This is the reverse of the silent policy employed by the powerful: By talking more, and making yourself appear weaker and less intelligent than your mark, you can practice deception with greater ease.

LAW 5

SO MUCH DEPENDS ON REPUTATION—GUARD IT WITH YOUR LIFE

JUDGMENT

Reputation is the cornerstone of power. Through reputation alone you can intimidate and win; once it slips, however, you are vulnerable, and will be attacked on all sides. Make your reputation unassailable. Always be alert to potential attacks and thwart them before they happen. Meanwhile, learn to destroy your enemies by opening holes in their own reputations. Then stand aside and let public opinion hang them.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW I

During China's War of the Three Kingdoms (A.D. 207-265), the great general Chuko Liang, leading the forces of the Shu Kingdom, dispatched his vast army to a distant camp while he rested in a small town with a handful of soldiers. Suddenly sentinels hurried in with the alarming news that an enemy force of over 150,000 troops under Sima Yi was approaching. With only a hundred men to defend him, Chuko Liang's situation was hopeless. The enemy would finally capture this renowned leader.

Without lamenting his fate, or wasting time trying to figure out how he had been caught, Liang ordered his troops to take down their flags, throw open the city gates, and hide. He himself then took a seat on the most visible part of the city's wall, wearing a Taoist robe. He lit some incense, strummed his lute, and began to chant. Minutes later he could see the vast enemy army approaching, an endless phalanx of soldiers. Pretending not to notice them, he continued to sing and play the lute.

Soon the army stood at the town gates. At its head was Sima Yi, who instantly recognized the man on the wall.

Even so, as his soldiers itched to enter the unguarded town through its open gates, Sima Yi hesitated, held them back, and studied Liang on the wall. Then, he ordered an immediate and speedy retreat.

THE ANIMALS STRICKEN WITH THE PLAGUE

A frightful epidemic sent
To earth by Heaven intent to vent
Its fury on a sinful world, to call
It by its rightful name, the pestilence,
That Acheron-filling vial of virulence
Had fallen on every animal.
Not all were dead, but all lay near to dying,
And none was any longer trying
To find new fuel to feed life's flickering fires.
No foods excited their desires;
No more did wolves and foxes rove

In search of harmless, helpless prey;
And dove would not consort with dove,
For love and joy had flown away.
The Lion assumed the chair to say:
“Dear friends,
I doubt not it’s for heaven’s high ends
That on us sinners woe must fall.
Let him of us who’s sinned the most
Fall victim to the avenging heavenly host,
And may he win salvation for us all;
For history teaches us that in these crises
We must make sacrifices.
Undeceived and stern-eyed, let’s inspect
Our conscience.
As I recollect,
To put my greedy appetite to sleep,
I’ve banqueted on many a sheep
Who’d injured me in no respect,
And even in my time been known to try
Shepherd pie.
If need be, then
I’ll die.
Yet I suspect
That others also ought to own their sins.
It’s only fair that all should do their best
To single out the guiltiest.”
“Sire, you’re too good a king,“the Fox begins;
“Such scruples are too delicate.
My word,
To eat sheep, that profane and vulgar herd.
That’s sin? Nay. Sire, enough for such a crew
To be devoured by such as you;
While of the shepherds we may say
That they deserved the worst they got.
Theirs being the lot that over us beasts plot
A flimsy dream-begotten sway.”
Thus spake the Fox, and toady cheers rose high,

While none dared cast too cold an eye
On Tiger's, Bear's, and other eminences
Most unpardonable offences
Each, of never mind what currish breed,
Was really a saint, they all agreed.
Then came the Ass, to say: "I do recall
How once I crossed an abbey-mead
Where hunger, grass in plenty, and withal,
I have no doubt, some imp of greed.
Assailed me, and I shaved a tongue's-breadth wide
Where frankly I'd no right to any grass.
"All forthwith fell full cry upon the Ass:
A Wolf of some book-learning testified
That that curst beast must suffer their despite,
That gallskinned author of their piteous plight.
They judged him fit for nought but gallows-bait:
How vile, another's grass to sequestrate!
His death alone could expiate
A crime so heinous, as full well he learns.
The court, as you're of great or poor estate,
Will paint you either white or black by turns.
THE BEST FABLES OF LA FONTAINE, JEAN DE LA FONTAINE, 1621-1695

Interpretation

Chuko Liang was commonly known as the “Sleeping Dragon.” His exploits in the War of the Three Kingdoms were legendary. Once a man claiming to be a disaffected enemy lieutenant came to his camp, offering help and information. Liang instantly recognized the situation as a setup; this man was a false deserter, and should be beheaded. At the last minute, though, as the ax was about to fall, Liang stopped the execution and offered to spare the man’s life if he agreed to become a double agent. Grateful and terrified, the man agreed, and began supplying false information to the enemy. Liang won battle after battle.

On another occasion Liang stole a military seal and created false documents dispatching his enemy’s troops to distant locations. Once the troops had dispersed, he was able to capture three cities, so that he controlled an entire corridor of the enemy’s kingdom. He also once tricked the enemy into believing one of its best generals was a traitor, forcing the man to escape and join forces with Liang. The Sleeping Dragon carefully cultivated his reputation of being the cleverest man in China, one who always had a trick up his sleeve. As powerful as any weapon, this reputation struck fear into his enemy.

Sima Yi had fought against Chuko Liang dozens of times and knew him well. When he came on the empty city, with Liang praying on the wall, he was stunned. The Taoist robes, the chanting, the incense—this had to be a game of intimidation. The man was obviously taunting him, daring him to walk into a trap. The game was so obvious that for one moment it crossed Yi’s mind that Liang actually *was* alone, and desperate. But so great was his fear of Liang that he dared not risk finding out. Such is the power of reputation. It can put a vast army on the defensive, even force them into retreat, without a single arrow being fired.

For, as Cicero says, even those who argue against fame still want the books they
write against it to bear their name in the title and hope to become famous for
despising it. Everything else is subject to barter: we will let our friends have our goods and our lives if need be; but a case of sharing our fame and

making someone else the gift of our reputation is hardly to be found.
Montaigne, 1533-1592

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW II

In 1841 the young P. T. Barnum, trying to establish his reputation as America's premier showman, decided to purchase the American Museum in Manhattan and turn it into a collection of curiosities that would secure his fame. The problem was that he had no money. The museum's asking price was $15,000, but Barnum was able to put together a proposal that appealed to the institution's owners even though it replaced cash up front with dozens of guarantees and references. The owners came to a verbal agreement with Barnum, but at the last minute, the principal partner changed his mind, and the museum and its collection were sold to the directors of Peale's Museum. Barnum was infuriated, but the partner explained that business was business—the museum had been sold to Peale's because Peale's had a reputation and Barnum had none.

Barnum immediately decided that if he had no reputation to bank on, his only recourse was to ruin the reputation of Peale's. Accordingly he launched a letter-writing campaign in the newspapers, calling the owners a bunch of "broken-down bank directors" who had no idea how to run a museum or entertain people. He warned the public against buying Peale's stock, since the business's purchase of another museum would invariably spread its resources thin. The campaign was effective, the stock plummeted, and with no more confidence in Peale's track record and reputation, the owners of the American Museum reneged on their deal and sold the whole thing to Barnum.

It took years for Peale's to recover, and they never forgot what Barnum had done. Mr. Peale himself decided to attack Barnum by building a reputation for "high-brow entertainment," promoting his museum's programs as more scientific than those of his vulgar competitor. Mesmerism (hypnotism) was one of Peale's "scientific" attractions, and for a while it drew big crowds and was quite successful. To fight back, Barnum decided to attack Peale's reputation yet again.

Barnum organized a rival mesmeric performance in which he himself apparently put a little girl into a trance. Once she seemed to have fallen deeply under, he tried to hypnotize members of the audience—but no matter