

## Interpretation

Louis XIV came to power at the end of a terrible civil war, the Fronde. A principal instigator of the war had been the nobility, which deeply resented the growing power of the throne and yearned for the days of feudalism, when the lords ruled their own fiefdoms and the king had little authority over them. The nobles had lost the civil war, but they remained a fractious, resentful lot.

The construction of Versailles, then, was far more than the decadent whim of a luxury-loving king. It served a crucial function: The king could keep an eye and an ear on everyone and everything around him. The once proud nobility was reduced to squabbling over the right to help the king put on his robes in the morning. There was no possibility here of privacy—no possibility of isolation. Louis XIV very early grasped the truth that for a king to isolate himself is gravely dangerous. In his absence, conspiracies will spring up like mushrooms after rain, animosities will crystallize into factions, and rebellion will break out before he has the time to react. To combat this, sociability and openness must not only be encouraged, they must be formally organized and channeled.

These conditions at Versailles lasted for Louis's entire reign, some fifty years of relative peace and tranquillity. Through it all, not a pin dropped without Louis hearing it.

*Solitude is dangerous to reason, without being favorable to virtue....*

*Remember that the solitary mortal is certainly luxurious,  
probably superstitious, and possibly mad.*

*Dr. Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784*

## KEYS TO POWER

Machiavelli makes the argument that in a strictly military sense a fortress is invariably a mistake. It becomes a symbol of power's isolation, and is an easy target for its builders' enemies. Designed to defend you, fortresses actually cut you off from help and cut into your flexibility. They may appear impregnable, but once you retire to one, everyone knows where you are; and a siege does not have to succeed to turn your fortress into a prison. With their small and confined spaces, fortresses are also extremely vulnerable to the plague and contagious diseases. In a strategic sense, the isolation of a fortress provides no protection, and actually creates more problems than it solves.

Because humans are social creatures by nature, power depends on social interaction and circulation. To make yourself powerful you must place yourself at the center of things, as Louis XIV did at Versailles. All activity should revolve around you, and you should be aware of everything happening on the street, and of anyone who might be hatching plots against you. The danger for most people comes when they feel threatened. In such times they tend to retreat and close ranks, to find security in a kind of fortress. In doing so, however, they come to rely for information on a smaller and smaller circle, and lose perspective on events around them. They lose maneuverability and become easy targets, and their isolation makes them paranoid. As in warfare and most games of strategy, isolation often precedes defeat and death.

In moments of uncertainty and danger, you need to fight this desire to turn inward. Instead, make yourself more accessible, seek out old allies and make new ones, force yourself into more and more different circles. This has been the trick of powerful people for centuries.

The Roman statesman Cicero was born into the lower nobility, and had little chance of power unless he managed to make a place for himself among the aristocrats who controlled the city. He succeeded brilliantly, identifying everyone with influence and figuring out how they were connected to one another. He mingled everywhere, knew everyone, and had

such a vast network of connections that an enemy here could easily be counterbalanced by an ally there.

The French statesman Talleyrand played the game the same way. Although he came from one of the oldest aristocratic families in France, he made a point of always staying in touch with what was happening in the streets of Paris, allowing him to foresee trends and troubles. He even got a certain pleasure out of mingling with shady criminal types, who supplied him with valuable information. Every time there was a crisis, a transition of power—the end of the Directory, the fall of Napoleon, the abdication of Louis XVIII—he was able to survive and even thrive, because he never closed himself up in a small circle but always forged connections with the new order.

This law pertains to kings and queens, and to those of the highest power: The moment you lose contact with your people, seeking security in isolation, rebellion is brewing. Never imagine yourself so elevated that you can afford to cut yourself off from even the lowest echelons. By retreating to a fortress, you make yourself an easy target for your plotting subjects, who view your isolation as an insult and a reason for rebellion.

Since humans are such social creatures, it follows that the social arts that make us pleasant to be around can be practiced only by constant exposure and circulation. The more you are in contact with others, the more graceful and at ease you become. Isolation, on the other hand, engenders an awkwardness in your gestures, and leads to further isolation, as people start avoiding you.

In 1545 Duke Cosimo I de' Medici decided that to ensure the immortality of his name he would commission frescoes for the main chapel of the church of San Lorenzo in Florence. He had many great painters to choose from, and in the end he picked Jacopo da Pontormo. Getting on in years, Pontormo wanted to make these frescoes his *chef d'oeuvre* and legacy. His first decision was to close the chapel off with walls, partitions, and blinds. He wanted no one to witness the creation of his masterpiece, or to steal his ideas. He would outdo Michelangelo himself. When some young men broke into the chapel out of curiosity, Jacopo sealed it off even further.

Pontormo filled the chapel's ceiling with biblical scenes—the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, on and on. At the top of the middle wall he painted Christ in his majesty, raising the dead on Judgment Day. The artist worked on the chapel for eleven years, rarely leaving it, since he had

developed a phobia for human contact and was afraid his ideas would be stolen.

Pontormo died before completing the frescoes, and none of them has survived. But the great Renaissance writer Vasari, a friend of Pontormo's who saw the frescoes shortly after the artist's death, left a description of what they looked like. There was a total lack of proportion. Scenes bumped against scenes, figures in one story being juxtaposed with those in another, in maddening numbers. Pontormo had become obsessed with detail but had lost any sense of the overall composition. Vasari left off his description of the frescoes by writing that if he continued, "I think I would go mad and become entangled in this painting, just as I believe that in the eleven years of time Jacopo spent on it, he entangled himself and anyone else who saw it." Instead of crowning Pontormo's career, the work became his undoing.

These frescoes were visual equivalents of the effects of isolation on the human mind: a loss of proportion, an obsession with detail combined with an inability to see the larger picture, a kind of extravagant ugliness that no longer communicates. Clearly, isolation is as deadly for the creative arts as for the social arts. Shakespeare is the most famous writer in history because, as a dramatist for the popular stage, he opened himself up to the masses, making his work accessible to people no matter what their education and taste. Artists who hole themselves up in their fortress lose a sense of proportion, their work communicating only to their small circle. Such art remains cornered and powerless.

Finally, since power is a human creation, it is inevitably increased by contact with other people. Instead of falling into the fortress mentality, view the world in the following manner: It is like a vast Versailles, with every room communicating with another. You need to be permeable, able to float in and out of different circles and mix with different types. That kind of mobility and social contact will protect you from plotters, who will be unable to keep secrets from you, and from your enemies, who will be unable to isolate you from your allies. Always on the move, you mix and mingle in the rooms of the palace, never sitting or settling in one place. No hunter can fix his aim on such a swift-moving creature.

Image: The Fortress. High  
up on the hill, the citadel be-  
comes a symbol of all that is  
hateful in power and authority.

The citizens of the town betray  
you to the first enemy that comes.  
Cut off from communication and in-  
telligence, the citadel falls with ease.

Authority: A good and wise prince, desirous of maintaining that character, and to avoid giving the opportunity to his sons to become oppressive, will never build fortresses, so that they may place their reliance upon the good will of their subjects, and not upon the strength of citadels. (Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527)

## REVERSAL

It is hardly ever right and propitious to choose isolation. Without keeping an ear on what is happening in the streets, you will be unable to protect yourself. About the only thing that constant human contact cannot facilitate is thought. The weight of society's pressure to conform, and the lack of distance from other people, can make it impossible to think clearly about what is going on around you. As a temporary recourse, then, isolation can help you to gain perspective. Many a serious thinker has been produced in prisons, where we have nothing to do but think. Machiavelli could write *The Prince* only once he found himself in exile and isolated on a farm far from the political intrigues of Florence.

The danger is, however, that this kind of isolation will sire all kinds of strange and perverted ideas. You may gain perspective on the larger picture, but you lose a sense of your own smallness and limitations. Also, the more isolated you are, the harder it is to break out of your isolation when you choose to—it sinks you deep into its quicksand without your noticing. If you need time to think, then, choose isolation only as a last resort, and only in small doses. Be careful to keep your way back into society open.

## LAW 19

### KNOW WHO YOU'RE DEALING WITH—DO NOT OFFEND THE WRONG PERSON

#### JUDGMENT

*There are many different kinds of people in the world, and you can never assume that everyone will react to your strategies in the same way. Deceive or outmaneuver some people and they will spend the rest of their lives seeking revenge. They are wolves in lambs' clothing. Choose your victims and opponents carefully, then—never offend or deceive the wrong person.*

OPPONENTS, SUCKERS, AND VICTIMS: Preliminary Typology In your rise to power you will come across many breeds of opponent, sucker, and victim. The highest form of the art of power is the ability to distinguish the wolves from the lambs, the foxes from the hares, the hawks from the vultures. If you make this distinction well, you will succeed without needing to coerce anyone too much. But if you deal blindly with whomever crosses your path, you will have a life of constant sorrow, if you even live that long. Being able to recognize types of people, and to act accordingly, is critical. The following are the five most dangerous and difficult types of mark in the jungle, as identified by artists—con and otherwise—of the past.

*When you meet a swordsman, draw your sword: Do not recite poetry to one who is not a poet.*

FROM A CH'AN BUDDHIST CLASSIC, QUOTED IN THUNDER IN THE SKY, TRANSLATED BY THOMAS CLEARY, 1993

The Arrogant and Proud Man. Although he may initially disguise it, this man's touchy pride makes him very dangerous. Any perceived slight will lead to a vengeance of overwhelming violence. You may say to yourself, "But I only said such-and-such at a party, where everyone was drunk...." It does not matter. There is no sanity behind his overreaction, so do not waste

time trying to figure him out. If at any point in your dealings with a person you sense an oversensitive and overactive pride, flee. Whatever you are hoping for from him isn't worth it.

## THE REVENGE OF LOPE DE AGUIRRE

*[Lope de] Aguirre's character is amply illustrated in an anecdote from the chronicle of Garcilaso de la Vega, who related that in 1548 Aguirre was a member of a platoon of soldiers escorting Indian slaves from the mines at Potosi [Bolivia] to a royal treasury depot. The Indians were illegally burdened with great quantities of silver, and a local official arrested Aguirre, sentencing him to receive two hundred lashes in lieu of a fine for oppressing the Indians. "The soldier Aguirre, having received a notification of the sentence, besought the alcalde that, instead of flogging him, he would put him to death, for that he was a gentleman by birth.... All this had no effect on the alcalde, who ordered the executioner to bring a beast, and execute the sentence. The executioner came to the prison, and put Aguirre on the heast.... The beast was driven on, and he received the lashes. ..."* When freed, Aguirre announced his intention of killing the official who had sentenced him, the alcalde Esquivel. Esquivel's term of office expired and he fled to Lima, three hundred twenty leagues away, but within fifteen days Aguirre had tracked him there. The frightened judge journeyed to Quito, a trip of four hundred leagues, and in twenty days Aguirre arrived. "When Esquivel heard of his presence," according to Garcilaso, "he made another journey of five hundred leagues to Cuzco; but in a few days Aguirre also arrived, having travelled on foot and without shoes, saying that a whipped man has no business to ride a horse, or to go where he would be seen by others. In this way, Aguirre followed his judge for three years, and four months." Wearying of the pursuit, Esquivel remained at Cuzco, a city so sternly governed that he felt he would be safe from Aguirre. He took a house near the cathedral and never ventured outdoors without a sword and a dagger. "However, on a certain Monday, at noon, Aguirre entered his house, and having walked all over it, and having traversed a corridor, a saloon, a chamber, and an inner chamber where the judge kept his books, he at last found him asleep over one of his books, and stabbed him to death. The murderer then went out, but when he came to the door of the house, he



*found that he had forgotten his hat, and had the temerity to return and fetch it, and then walked down the street.”*

THE GOLDEN DREAM: SEEKERS OF EL DORADO, WALKER  
CHAPMAN, 1967

**The Hopelessly Insecure Man.** This man is related to the proud and arrogant type, but is less violent and harder to spot. His ego is fragile, his sense of self insecure, and if he feels himself deceived or attacked, the hurt will simmer. He will attack you in bites that will take forever to get big enough for you to notice. If you find you have deceived or harmed such a man, disappear for a long time. Do not stay around him or he will nibble you to death.

**Mr. Suspicion.** Another variant on the breeds above, this is a future Joe Stalin. He sees what he wants to see—usually the worst—in other people, and imagines that everyone is after him. Mr. Suspicion is in fact the least dangerous of the three: Genuinely unbalanced, he is easy to deceive, just as Stalin himself was constantly deceived. Play on his suspicious nature to get him to turn against other people. But if you do become the target of his suspicions, watch out.

**The Serpent with a Long Memory.** If hurt or deceived, this man will show no anger on the surface; he will calculate and wait. Then, when he is in a position to turn the tables, he will exact a revenge marked by a cold-blooded shrewdness. Recognize this man by his calculation and cunning in the different areas of his life. He is usually cold and unaffectionate. Be doubly careful of this snake, and if you have somehow injured him, either crush him completely or get him out of your sight.

**The Plain, Unassuming, and Often Unintelligent Man.** Ah, your ears prick up when you find such a tempting victim. But this man is a lot harder to deceive than you imagine. Falling for a ruse often takes intelligence and imagination—a sense of the possible rewards. The blunt man will not take the bait because he does not recognize it. He is that unaware. The danger

with this man is not that he will harm you or seek revenge, but merely that he will waste your time, energy, resources, and even your sanity in trying to deceive him. Have a test ready for a mark—a joke, a story. If his reaction is utterly literal, this is the type you are dealing with. Continue at your own risk.