that, but at what price? Apply this standard to everything, including whether to collaborate with other people or come to their aid. In the end, life is short, opportunities are few, and you have only so much energy to draw on. And in this sense time is as important a consideration as any other. Never waste valuable time, or mental peace of mind, on the affairs of others—that is too high a price to pay.

Power is a social game. To learn and master it, you must develop the ability to study and understand people. As the great seventeenth-century thinker and courtier Baltasar Gracián wrote: "Many people spend time studying the properties of animals or herbs; how much more important it would be to study those of people, with whom we must live or die!" To be a master player you must also be a master psychologist. You must recognize motivations and see through the cloud of dust with which people surround their actions. An understanding of people's hidden motives is the single greatest piece of knowledge you can have in acquiring power. It opens up endless possibilities of deception, seduction, and manipulation.

People are of infinite complexity and you can spend a lifetime watching them without ever fully understanding them. So it is all the more important, then, to begin your education now. In doing so you must also keep one principle in mind: Never discriminate as to whom you study and whom you trust. Never trust anyone completely and study everyone, including friends and loved ones.

Finally, you must learn always to take the indirect route to power. Disguise your cunning. Like a billiard ball that caroms several times before it hits its target, your moves must be planned and developed in the least obvious way. By training yourself to be indirect, you can thrive in the modern court, appearing the paragon of decency while being the consummate manipulator.

Consider The 48 Laws of Power a kind of handbook on the arts of indirection. The laws are based on the writings of men and women who have studied and mastered the game of power. These writings span a period of more than three thousand years and were created in civilizations as disparate as ancient China and Renaissance Italy; yet they share common threads and themes, together hinting at an essence of power that has yet to be fully articulated. The 48 laws of power are the distillation of this accumulated wisdom, gathered from the writings of the most illustrious

strategists (Sun-tzu, Clausewitz), statesmen (Bismarck, Talleyrand), courtiers (Castiglione, Gracián), seducers (Ninon de Lenclos, Casanova), and con artists ("Yellow Kid" Weil) in history.

The laws have a simple premise: Certain actions almost always increase one's power (the observance of the law), while others decrease it and even ruin us (the transgression of the law). These transgressions and observances are illustrated by historical examples. The laws are timeless and definitive.

The 48 Laws of Power can be used in several ways. By reading the book straight through you can learn about power in general. Although several of the laws may seem not to pertain directly to your life, in time you will probably find that all of them have some application, and that in fact they are interrelated. By getting an overview of the entire subject you will best be able to evaluate your own past actions and gain a greater degree of control over your immediate affairs. A thorough reading of the book will inspire thinking and reevaluation long after you finish it.

The book has also been designed for browsing and for examining the law that seems at that particular moment most pertinent to you. Say you are experiencing problems with a superior and cannot understand why your efforts have not lead to more gratitude or a promotion. Several laws specifically address the master-underling relationship, and you are almost certainly transgressing one of them. By browsing the initial paragraphs for the 48 laws in the table of contents, you can identify the pertinent law.

Finally, the book can be browsed through and picked apart for entertainment, for an enjoyable ride through the foibles and great deeds of our predecessors in power. A warning, however, to those who use the book for this purpose: It might be better to turn back. Power is endlessly seductive and deceptive in its own way. It is a labyrinth—your mind becomes consumed with solving its infinite problems, and you soon realize how pleasantly lost you have become. In other words, it becomes most amusing by taking it seriously. Do not be frivolous with such a critical matter. The gods of power frown on the frivolous; they give ultimate satisfaction only to those who study and reflect, and punish those who skim the surfaces looking for a good time.

Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence a prince who wants to keep his authority must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires.

THE PRINCE, *Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527*

LAW 1

NEVER OUTSHINE THE MASTER

JUDGMENT

Always make those above you feel comfortably *superior.* In your desire to please and impress them, do not go too *far in displaying your talents or you might accomplish the opposite—inspire fear and insecurity. Make your masters appear more brilliant than they are and you will attain the heights of power.*

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

Nicolas Fouquet, Louis XIV's finance minister in the first years of his reign, was a generous man who loved lavish parties, pretty women, and poetry. He also loved money, for he led an extravagant lifestyle. Fouquet was clever and very much indispensable to the king, so when the prime minister, Jules Mazarin, died, in 1661, the finance minister expected to be named the successor. Instead, the king decided to abolish the position. This and other signs made Fouquet suspect that he was falling out of favor, and so he decided to ingratiate himself with the king by staging the most spectacular party the world had ever seen. The party's ostensible purpose would be to commemorate the completion of Fouquet's château, Vaux-le-Vicomte, but its real function was to pay tribute to the king, the guest of honor.

The most brilliant nobility of Europe and some of the greatest minds of the time—La Fontaine, La Rochefoucauld, Madame de Sévigné attended the party. Molière wrote a play for the occasion, in which he himself was to perform at the evening's conclusion. The party began with a lavish seven-course dinner, featuring foods from the Orient never before tasted in France, as well as new dishes created especially for the night. The meal was accompanied with music commissioned by Fouquet to honor the king.

After dinner there was a promenade through the château's gardens. The grounds and fountains of Vaux-le-Vicomte were to be the inspiration for Versailles.

Fouquet personally accompanied the young king through the geometrically aligned arrangements of shrubbery and flower beds. Arriving at the gardens' canals, they witnessed a fireworks display, which was followed by the performance of Molière's play. The party ran well into the night and everyone agreed it was the most amazing affair they had ever attended.

The next day, Fouquet was arrested by the king's head musketeer, D'Artagnan. Three months later he went on trial for stealing from the country's treasury. (Actually, most of the stealing he was accused of he had done on the king's behalf and with the king's permission.) Fouquet was found guilty and sent to the most isolated prison in France, high in the

Pyrenees Mountains, where he spent the last twenty years of his life in solitary confinement.

Interpretation

Louis XIV, the Sun King, was a proud and arrogant man who wanted to be the center of attention at all times; he could not countenance being outdone in lavishness by anyone, and certainly not his finance minister. To succeed Fouquet, Louis chose Jean-Baptiste Colbert, a man famous for his parsimony and for giving the dullest parties in Paris. Colbert made sure that any money liberated from the treasury went straight into Louis's hands. With the money, Louis built a palace even more magnificent than Fouquet's—the glorious palace of Versailles. He used the same architects, decorators, and garden designer. And at Versailles, Louis hosted parties even more extravagant than the one that cost Fouquet his freedom.

Let us examine the situation. The evening of the party, as Fouquet presented spectacle on spectacle to Louis, each more magnificent than the one before, he imagined the affair as demonstrating his loyalty and devotion to the king. Not only did he think the party would put him back in the king's favor, he thought it would show his good taste, his connections, and his popularity, making him indispensable to the king and demonstrating that he would make an excellent prime minister. Instead, however, each new spectacle, each appreciative smile bestowed by the guests on Fouquet, made it seem to Louis that his own friends and subjects were more charmed by the finance minister than by the king himself, and that Fouquet was actually flaunting his wealth and power. Rather than flattering Louis XIV, Fouquet's elaborate party offended the king's vanity. Louis would not admit this to anyone, of course—instead, he found a convenient excuse to rid himself of a man who had inadvertently made him feel insecure.

Such is the fate, in some form or other, of all those who unbalance the master's sense of self, poke holes in his vanity, or make him doubt his pre-eminence.

When the evening began, Fouquet was at the top of the world.
By the time it had ended, he was at the bottom.
Voltaire, 1694-1778