

In addition, we would like to thank Susan Petersen and Barbara Grossman, the Penguin publishers for believing in this book; Molly Stern, editor, who oversaw the whole project for Viking Penguin. Sophia Murer, for her new classic design. David Frankel, for editing the text. Roni Axelrod, Barbara Campo, Jaye Zimet, Joe Eagle, Radha Pancham, Marie Timell, Michael Fragnito, and Eng-San Kho.

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Table of Contents

[About the Authors](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[PREFACE](#)

[LAW 1 - NEVER OUTSHINE THE MASTER](#)

[LAW 2 - NEVER PUT TOO MUCH TRUST IN FRIENDS, LEARN HOW TO USE ENEMIES](#)

[LAW 3 - CONCEAL YOUR INTENTIONS](#)

[LAW 4 - ALWAYS SAY LESS THAN NECESSARY](#)

[LAW 5 - SO MUCH DEPENDS ON REPUTATION—GUARD IT WITH YOUR LIFE](#)

[LAW 6 - COURT ATTENTION AT ALL COST](#)

[LAW 7 - GET OTHERS TO DO THE WORK FOR YOU, BUT ALWAYS TAKE THE CREDIT](#)

[LAW 8 - MAKE OTHER PEOPLE COME TO YOU—USE BAIT IF NECESSARY](#)

[LAW 9 - WIN THROUGH YOUR ACTIONS, NEVER THROUGH ARGUMENT](#)

[LAW 10 - INFECTION: AVOID THE UNHAPPY AND UNLUCKY](#)

[LAW 11 - LEARN TO KEEP PEOPLE DEPENDENT ON YOU](#)

[LAW 12 - USE SELECTIVE HONESTY AND GENEROSITY TO DISARM YOUR VICTIM](#)

[LAW 13 - WHEN ASKING FOR HELP, APPEAL TO PEOPLE'S SELF-INTEREST, NEVER TO THEIR ...](#)

[LAW 14 - POSE AS A FRIEND, WORK AS A SPY](#)

[LAW 15 - CRUSH YOUR ENEMY TOTALLY](#)

[LAW 16 - USE ABSENCE TO INCREASE RESPECT AND HONOR](#)

[LAW 17 - KEEP OTHERS IN SUSPENDED TERROR: CULTIVATE AN AIR OF UNPREDICTABILITY](#)

LAW 18 - DO NOT BUILD FORTRESSES TO PROTECT YOURSELF—
ISOLATION IS DANGEROUS

LAW 19 - KNOW WHO YOU'RE DEALING WITH—DO NOT OFFEND
THE WRONG PERSON

LAW 20 - DO NOT COMMIT TO ANYONE

LAW 21 - PLAY A SUCKER TO CATCH A SUCKER—SEEM DUMBER
THAN YOUR MARK

LAW 22 - USE THE SURRENDER TACTIC: TRANSFORM
WEAKNESS INTO POWER

LAW 23 - CONCENTRATE YOUR FORCES

LAW 24 - PLAY THE PERFECT COURTIER

LAW 25 - RE-CREATE YOURSELF

LAW 26 - KEEP YOUR HANDS CLEAN

LAW 27 - PLAY ON PEOPLE'S NEED TO BELIEVE TO CREATE A
CULTLIKE FOLLOWING

LAW 28 - ENTER ACTION WITH BOLDNESS

LAW 29 - PLAN ALL THE WAY TO THE END

LAW 30 - MAKE YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS SEEM EFFORTLESS

LAW 31 - CONTROL THE OPTIONS: GET OTHERS TO PLAY WITH
THE CARDS YOU DEAL

LAW 32 - PLAY TO PEOPLE'S FANTASIES

LAW 33 - DISCOVER EACH MAN'S THUMBSCREW

LAW 34 - BE ROYAL IN YOUR OWN FASHION: ACT LIKE A KING
TO BE TREATED LIKE ONE

LAW 35 - MASTER THE ART OF TIMING

LAW 36 - DISDAIN THINGS YOU CANNOT HAVE: IGNORING
THEM IS THE BEST REVENGE

LAW 37 - CREATE COMPELLING SPECTACLES

LAW 38 - THINK AS YOU LIKE BUT BEHAVE LIKE OTHERS

LAW 39 - STIR UP WATERS TO CATCH FISH

LAW 40 - DESPISE THE FREE LUNCH

LAW 41 - AVOID STEPPING INTO A GREAT MAN'S SHOES

LAW 42 - STRIKE THE SHEPHERD AND THE SHEEP WILL
SCATTER

LAW 43 - WORK ON THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF OTHERS

LAW 44 - DISARM AND INFURIATE WITH THE MIRROR EFFECT

LAW 45 - PREACH THE NEED FOR CHANGE, BUT NEVER REFORM
TOO MUCH AT ONCE

LAW 46 - NEVER APPEAR TOO PERFECT

LAW 47 - DO NOT GO PAST THE MARK YOU AIMED FOR; IN
VICTORY, LEARN WHEN TO STOP

LAW 48 - ASSUME FORMLESSNESS

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

INDEX

PREFACE

The feeling of having no power over people and events is generally unbearable to us—when we feel helpless we feel miserable. No one wants less power; everyone wants more. In the world today, however, it is dangerous to seem too power hungry, to be overt with your power moves. We have to seem fair and decent. So we need to be subtle—congenial yet cunning, democratic yet devious.

This game of constant duplicity most resembles the power dynamic that existed in the scheming world of the old aristocratic court. Throughout history, a court has always formed itself around the person in power—king, queen, emperor, leader. The courtiers who filled this court were in an especially delicate position: They had to serve their masters, but if they seemed to fawn, if they curried favor too obviously, the other courtiers around them would notice and would act against them. Attempts to win the master's favor, then, had to be subtle. And even skilled courtiers capable of such subtlety still had to protect themselves from their fellow courtiers, who at all moments were scheming to push them aside.

Meanwhile the court was supposed to represent the height of civilization and refinement. Violent or overt power moves were frowned upon; courtiers would work silently and secretly against any among them who used force. This was the courtier's dilemma: While appearing the very paragon of elegance, they had to outwit and thwart their own opponents in the subtlest of ways. The successful courtier learned over time to make all of his moves indirect; if he stabbed an opponent in the back, it was with a velvet glove on his hand and the sweetest of smiles on his face. Instead of using coercion or outright treachery, the perfect courtier got his way through seduction, charm, deception, and subtle strategy, always planning several moves ahead. Life in the court was a never-ending game that required constant vigilance and tactical thinking. It was civilized war.

Today we face a peculiarly similar paradox to that of the courtier: Everything must appear civilized, decent, democratic, and fair. But if we play by those rules too strictly, if we take them too literally, we are crushed by those around us who are not so foolish. As the great Renaissance

diplomat and courtier Niccolò Machiavelli wrote, “Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good.” The court imagined itself the pinnacle of refinement, but underneath its glittering surface a cauldron of dark emotions—greed, envy, lust, hatred—boiled and simmered. Our world today similarly imagines itself the pinnacle of fairness, yet the same ugly emotions still stir within us, as they have forever. The game is the same. Outwardly, you must seem to respect the niceties, but inwardly, unless you are a fool, you learn quickly to be prudent, and to do as Napoleon advised: Place your iron hand inside a velvet glove. If, like the courtier of times gone by, you can master the arts of indirection, learning to seduce, charm, deceive, and subtly outmaneuver your opponents, you will attain the heights of power. You will be able to make people bend to your will without their realizing what you have done. And if they do not realize what you have done, they will neither resent nor resist you.

Courts are, unquestionably, the seats of politeness and good breeding; were they not so, they would be the seats of slaughter and desolation. Those who now smile upon and embrace, would affront and stab, each other, if manners did not interpose....

LORD CHESTERFIELD, 1694-1773

To some people the notion of consciously playing power games—no matter how indirect—seems evil, asocial, a relic of the past. They believe they can opt out of the game by behaving in ways that have nothing to do with power. You must beware of such people, for while they express such opinions outwardly, they are often among the most adept players at power. They utilize strategies that cleverly disguise the nature of the manipulation involved. These types, for example, will often display their weakness and lack of power as a kind of moral virtue. But true powerlessness, without any motive of self-interest, would not publicize its weakness to gain sympathy or respect. Making a show of one’s weakness is actually a very effective strategy, subtle and deceptive, in the game of power (see Law 22, the Surrender Tactic).

There is nothing very odd about lambs disliking birds of prey, but this is no reason for holding it against large birds of prey that they carry off lambs. And when the lambs whisper among themselves, “These birds of prey are evil, and does this not give us a right to say that whatever is the opposite of

a bird of prey must be good?” there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such an argument—though the birds of prey will look somewhat quizzically and say, “We have nothing against these good lambs; in fact, we love them; nothing tastes better than a tender lamb.”

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, 1844-1900

Another strategy of the supposed nonplayer is to demand equality in every area of life. Everyone must be treated alike, whatever their status and strength. But if, to avoid the taint of power, you attempt to treat everyone equally and fairly, you will confront the problem that some people do certain things better than others. Treating everyone equally means ignoring their differences, elevating the less skillful and suppressing those who excel. Again, many of those who behave this way are actually deploying another power strategy, redistributing people’s rewards in a way that they determine.

Yet another way of avoiding the game would be perfect honesty and straightforwardness, since one of the main techniques of those who seek power is deceit and secrecy. But being perfectly honest will inevitably hurt and insult a great many people, some of whom will choose to injure you in return. No one will see your honest statement as completely objective and free of some personal motivation. And they will be right: In truth, the use of honesty is indeed a power strategy, intended to convince people of one’s noble, good-hearted, selfless character. It is a form of persuasion, even a subtle form of coercion.

Finally, those who claim to be nonplayers may affect an air of naïveté, to protect them from the accusation that they are after power. Beware again, however, for the appearance of naivete can be an effective means of deceit (see Law 21, Seem Dumber Than Your Mark). And even genuine naivete is not free of the snares of power. Children may be naive in many ways, but they often act from an elemental need to gain control over those around them. Children suffer greatly from feeling powerless in the adult world, and they use any means available to get their way. Genuinely innocent people may still be playing for power, and are often horribly effective at the game, since they are not hindered by reflection. Once again, those who make a show or display of innocence are the least innocent of all.

The only means to gain one’s ends with people are force and cunning. Love also, they say; but that is to wait for sunshine, and life needs every moment.

JOHANN VON GOETHE, 1749-1832

You can recognize these supposed nonplayers by the way they flaunt their moral qualities, their piety, their exquisite sense of justice. But since all of us hunger for power, and almost all of our actions are aimed at gaining it, the nonplayers are merely throwing dust in our eyes, distracting us from their power plays with their air of moral superiority. If you observe them closely, you will see in fact that they are often the ones most skillful at indirect manipulation, even if some of them practice it unconsciously. And they greatly resent any publicizing of the tactics they use every day.

The arrow shot by the archer may or may not kill a single person. But stratagems devised by a wise man can kill even babes in the womb.

KAUTILYA, INDIAN PHILOSOPHER, THIRD CENTURY B.C.

If the world is like a giant scheming court and we are trapped inside it, there is no use in trying to opt out of the game. That will only render you powerless, and powerlessness will make you miserable. Instead of struggling against the inevitable, instead of arguing and whining and feeling guilty, it is far better to excel at power. In fact, the better you are at dealing with power, the better friend, lover, husband, wife, and person you become. By following the route of the perfect courtier (see Law 24) you learn to make others feel better about themselves, becoming a source of pleasure to them. They will grow dependent on your abilities and desirous of your presence. By mastering the 48 laws in this book, you spare others the pain that comes from bungling with power—by playing with fire without knowing its properties. If the game of power is inescapable, better to be an artist than a denier or a bungler.

Learning the game of power requires a certain way of looking at the world, a shifting of perspective. It takes effort and years of practice, for much of the game may not come naturally. Certain basic skills are required, and once you master these skills you will be able to apply the laws of power more easily.

The most important of these skills, and power's crucial foundation, is the ability to master your emotions. An emotional response to a situation is the single greatest barrier to power, a mistake that will cost you a lot more than any temporary satisfaction you might gain by expressing your feelings.

Emotions cloud reason, and if you cannot see the situation clearly, you cannot prepare for and respond to it with any degree of control.

Anger is the most destructive of emotional responses, for it clouds your vision the most. It also has a ripple effect that invariably makes situations less controllable and heightens your enemy's resolve. If you are trying to destroy an enemy who has hurt you, far better to keep him off-guard by feigning friendliness than showing your anger.

Love and affection are also potentially destructive, in that they blind you to the often self-serving interests of those whom you least suspect of playing a power game. You cannot repress anger or love, or avoid feeling them, and you should not try. But you should be careful about how you express them, and most important, they should never influence your plans and strategies in any way.

Related to mastering your emotions is the ability to distance yourself from the present moment and think objectively about the past and future. Like Janus, the double-faced Roman deity and guardian of all gates and doorways, you must be able to look in both directions at once, the better to handle danger from wherever it comes. Such is the face you must create for yourself—one face looking continuously to the future and the other to the past.

I thought to myself with what means, with what deceptions, with how many varied arts, with what industry a man sharpens his wits to deceive another, and through these variations the world is made more beautiful.

FRANCESCO VETTORI, CONTEMPORARY AND FRIEND OF
MACHIAVELLI, EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY

For the future, the motto is, “No days unalert.” Nothing should catch you by surprise because you are constantly imagining problems before they arise. Instead of spending your time dreaming of your plan's happy ending, you must work on calculating every possible permutation and pitfall that might emerge in it. The further you see, the more steps ahead you plan, the more powerful you become.

The other face of Janus looks constantly to the past—though not to remember past hurts or bear grudges. That would only curb your power. Half of the game is learning how to forget those events in the past that eat away at you and cloud your reason. The real purpose of the backward-glancing eye is to educate yourself constantly—you look at the past to learn

from those who came before you. (The many historical examples in this book will greatly help that process.) Then, having looked to the past, you look closer at hand, to your own actions and those of your friends. This is the most vital school you can learn from, because it comes from personal experience.

There are no principles; there are only events. There is no good and bad, there are only circumstances. The superior man espouses events and circumstances in order to guide them. If there were principles and fixed laws, nations would not change them as we change our shirts and a man can not be expected to be wiser than an entire nation.

HONORÉ DE BALZAC, 1799-1850

You begin by examining the mistakes you have made in the past, the ones that have most grievously held you back. You analyze them in terms of the 48 laws of power, and you extract from them a lesson and an oath: “I shall never repeat such a mistake; I shall never fall into such a trap again.” If you can evaluate and observe yourself in this way, you can learn to break the patterns of the past—an immensely valuable skill.

Power requires the ability to play with appearances. To this end you must learn to wear many masks and keep a bag full of deceptive tricks. Deception and masquerade should not be seen as ugly or immoral. All human interaction requires deception on many levels, and in some ways what separates humans from animals is our ability to lie and deceive. In Greek myths, in India’s Mahabharata cycle, in the Middle Eastern epic of Gilgamesh, it is the privilege of the gods to use deceptive arts; a great man, Odysseus for instance, was judged by his ability to rival the craftiness of the gods, stealing some of their divine power by matching them in wits and deception. Deception is a developed art of civilization and the most potent weapon in the game of power.

You cannot succeed at deception unless you take a somewhat distanced approach to yourself—unless you can be many different people, wearing the mask that the day and the moment require. With such a flexible approach to all appearances, including your own, you lose a lot of the inward heaviness that holds people down. Make your face as malleable as the actor’s, work to conceal your intentions from others, practice luring people into traps. Playing with appearances and mastering arts of deception are among the

aesthetic pleasures of life. They are also key components in the acquisition of power.

If deception is the most potent weapon in your arsenal, then patience in all things is your crucial shield. Patience will protect you from making moronic blunders. Like mastering your emotions, patience is a skill—it does not come naturally. But nothing about power is natural; power is more godlike than anything in the natural world. And patience is the supreme virtue of the gods, who have nothing but time. Everything good will happen—the grass will grow again, if you give it time and see several steps into the future. Impatience, on the other hand, only makes you look weak. It is a principal impediment to power.

Power is essentially amoral and one of the most important skills to acquire is the ability to see circumstances rather than good or evil. Power is a game—this cannot be repeated too often—and in games you do not judge your opponents by their intentions but by the effect of their actions. You measure their strategy and their power by what you can see and feel. How often are someone's intentions made the issue only to cloud and deceive! What does it matter if another player, your friend or rival, intended good things and had only your interests at heart, if the effects of his action lead to so much ruin and confusion? It is only natural for people to cover up their actions with all kinds of justifications, always assuming that they have acted out of goodness. You must learn to inwardly laugh each time you hear this and never get caught up in gauging someone's intentions and actions through a set of moral judgments that are really an excuse for the accumulation of power.

It is a game. Your opponent sits opposite you. Both of you behave as gentlemen or ladies, observing the rules of the game and taking nothing personally. You play with a strategy and you observe your opponent's moves with as much calmness as you can muster. In the end, you will appreciate the politeness of those you are playing with more than their good and sweet intentions. Train your eye to follow the results of their moves, the outward circumstances, and do not be distracted by anything else.

Half of your mastery of power comes from what you do not do, what you do not allow yourself to get dragged into. For this skill you must learn to judge all things by what they cost you. As Nietzsche wrote, "The value of a thing sometimes lies not in what one attains with it, but in what one pays for it—what it costs us." Perhaps you will attain your goal, and a worthy goal at