LAW 3

CONCEAL YOUR INTENTIONS

JUDGMENT

Keep people off-balance and in the dark by never revealing the purpose behind your actions. If they have no clue what you are up to, they cannot prepare a defense. Guide them far enough down the wrong path, envelop them in enough smoke, and by the time they realize your intentions, it will be too late.

PART I: USE DECOYED OBJECTS OF DESIRE AND RED HERRINGS TO THROW PEOPLE OFF THE SCENT

If at any point in the deception you practice people have the slightest suspicion as to your intentions, all is lost. Do not give them the chance to sense what you are up to: Throw them off the scent by dragging red herrings across the path. Use false sincerity, send ambiguous signals, set up misleading objects of desire. Unable to distinguish the genuine from the false, they cannot pick out your real goal.

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

Over several weeks, Ninon de Lenclos, the most infamous courtesan of seventeenth-century France, listened patiently as the Marquis de Sevigné explained his struggles in pursuing a beautiful but difficult young countess. Ninon was sixty-two at the time, and more than experienced in matters of love; the marquis was a lad of twenty-two, handsome, dashing, but hopelessly inexperienced in romance. At first Ninon was amused to hear the marquis talk about his mistakes, but finally she had had enough. Unable to bear ineptitude in any realm, least of all in seducing a woman, she decided to take the young man under her wing. First, he had to understand that this was war, and that the beautiful countess was a citadel to which he had to lay siege as carefully as any general. Every step had to be planned and executed with the utmost attention to detail and nuance.

Instructing the marquis to start over, Ninon told him to approach the countess with a bit of distance, an air of nonchalance. The next time the two were alone together, she said, he would confide in the countess as would a friend but not a potential lover. This was to throw her off the scent. The countess was no longer to take his interest in her for granted—perhaps he was only interested in friendship.

Ninon planned ahead. Once the countess was confused, it would be time to make her jealous. At the next encounter, at a major fête in Paris, the marquis would show up with a beautiful young woman at his side. This beautiful young woman had equally beautiful friends, so that wherever the countess would now see the marquis, he would be surrounded by the most stunning young women in Paris. Not only would the countess be seething with jealousy, she would come to see the marquis as someone who was desired by others. It was hard for Ninon to make the marquis understand, but she patiently explained that a woman who is interested in a man wants to see that other women are interested in him, too. Not only does that give him instant value, it makes it all the more satisfying to snatch him from their clutches.

Once the countess was jealous but intrigued, it would be time to beguile her. On Ninon’s instructions, the marquis would fail to show up at affairs

where the countess expected to see him. Then, suddenly, he would appear at salons he had never frequented before, but that the countess attended often. She would be unable to predict his moves. All of this would push her into the state of emotional confusion that is a prerequisite for successful seduction.

These moves were executed, and took several weeks. Ninon monitored the marquis's progress: Through her network of spies, she heard how the countess would laugh a little harder at his witticisms, listen more closely to his stories. She heard that the countess was suddenly asking questions about him. Her friends told her that at social affairs the countess would often look up at the marquis, following his steps. Ninon felt certain that the young woman was falling under his spell. It was a matter of weeks now, maybe a month or two, but if all went smoothly, the citadel would fall.

A few days later the marquis was at the countess's home. They were alone. Suddenly he was a different man: This time acting on his own impulse, rather than following Ninon's instructions, he took the countess's hands and told her he was in love with her. The young woman seemed confused, a reaction he did not expect. She became polite, then excused herself. For the rest of the evening she avoided his eyes, was not there to say good-night to him. The next few times he visited he was told she was not at home. When she finally admitted him again, the two felt awkward and uncomfortable with each other. The spell was broken.

Interpretation

Ninon de Lenclos knew everything about the art of love. The greatest writers, thinkers, and politicians of the time had been her lovers—men like La Rochefoucauld, Molière, and Richelieu. Seduction was a game to her, to be practiced with skill. As she got older, and her reputation grew, the most important families in France would send their sons to her to be instructed in matters of love.

Ninon knew that men and women are very different, but when it comes to seduction they feel the same: Deep down inside, they often sense when they are being seduced, but they give in because they enjoy the feeling of being led along. It is a pleasure to let go, and to allow the other person to detour you into a strange country. Everything in seduction, however, depends on suggestion. You cannot announce your intentions or reveal them directly in words. Instead you must throw your targets off the scent. To surrender to your guidance they must be appropriately confused. You have to scramble your signals—appear interested in another man or woman (the decoy), then hint at being interested in the target, then feign indifference, on and on. Such patterns not only confuse, they excite.

Imagine this story from the countess's perspective: After a few of the marquis's moves, she sensed the marquis was playing some sort of game, but the game delighted her. She did not know where he was leading her, but so much the better. His moves intrigued her, each of them keeping her waiting for the next one—she even enjoyed her jealousy and confusion, for sometimes any emotion is better than the boredom of security. Perhaps the marquis had ulterior motives; most men do. But she was willing to wait and see, and probably if she had been made to wait long enough, what he was up to would not have mattered.

The moment the marquis uttered that fatal word "love," however, all was changed. This was no longer a game with moves, it was an artless show of passion. His intention was revealed: He was seducing her. This put everything he had done in a new light. All that before had been charming now seemed ugly and conniving; the countess felt embarrassed and used. A door closed that would never open again.

Do not be held a cheat, even though it is *impossible* to live today without being one.
Let your greatest cunning lie in covering up what looks like cunning.
Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

In 1850 the young Otto von Bismarck, then a thirty-five-year-old deputy in the Prussian parliament, was at a turning point in his career. The issues of the day were the unification of the many states (including Prussia) into which Germany was then divided, and a war against Austria, the powerful neighbor to the south that hoped to keep the Germans weak and at odds, even threatening to intervene if they tried to unite. Prince William, next in line to be Prussia's king, was in favor of going to war, and the parliament rallied to the cause, prepared to back any mobilization of troops. The only ones to oppose war were the present king, Frederick William IV, and his ministers, who preferred to appease the powerful Austrians.

Throughout his career, Bismarck had been a loyal, even passionate supporter of Prussian might and power. He dreamed of German unification, of going to war against Austria and humiliating the country that for so long had kept Germany divided. A former soldier, he saw warfare as a glorious business.

This, after all, was the man who years later would say, "The great questions of the time will be decided, not by speeches and resolutions, but by iron and blood."

Passionate patriot and lover of military glory, Bismarck nevertheless gave a speech in parliament at the height of the war fever that astonished all who heard it. "Woe unto the statesman," he said, "who makes war without a reason that will still be valid when the war is over! After the war, you will all look differently at these questions. Will you then have the courage to turn to the peasant contemplating the ashes of his farm, to the man who has been crippled, to the father who has lost his children?" Not only did Bismarck go on to talk of the madness of this war, but, strangest of all, he praised Austria and defended her actions. This went against everything he had stood for. The consequences were immediate. Bismarck was against the war—what could this possibly mean? Other deputies were confused, and several of them changed their votes. Eventually the king and his ministers won out, and war was averted.

A few weeks after Bismarck’s infamous speech, the king, grateful that he had spoken for peace, made him a cabinet minister. A few years later he became the Prussian premier. In this role he eventually led his country and a peace-loving king into a war against Austria, crushing the former empire and establishing a mighty German state, with Prussia at its head.

Interpretation

At the time of his speech in 1850, Bismarck made several calculations. First, he sensed that the Prussian military, which had not kept pace with other European armies, was unready for war—that Austria, in fact, might very well win, a disastrous result for the future. Second, if the war were lost and Bismarck had supported it, his career would be gravely jeopardized. The king and his conservative ministers wanted peace; Bismarck wanted power. The answer was to throw people off the scent by supporting a cause he detested, saying things he would laugh at if said by another. A whole country was fooled. It was because of Bismarck's speech that the king made him a minister, a position from which he quickly rose to be prime minister, attaining the power to strengthen the Prussian military and accomplish what he had wanted all along: the humiliation of Austria and the unification of Germany under Prussia's leadership.

Bismarck was certainly one of the cleverest statesman who ever lived, a master of strategy and deception. No one suspected what he was up to in this case. Had he announced his real intentions, arguing that it was better to wait now and fight later, he would not have won the argument, since most Prussians wanted war at that moment and mistakenly believed that their army was superior to the Austrians. Had he played up to the king, asking to be made a minister in exchange for supporting peace, he would not have succeeded either: The king would have distrusted his ambition and doubted his sincerity.

By being completely insincere and sending misleading signals, however, he deceived everyone, concealed his purpose, and attained everything he wanted. Such is the power of hiding your intentions.

KEYS TO POWER

Most people are open books. They say what they feel, blurt out their opinions at every opportunity, and constantly reveal their plans and intentions. They do this for several reasons. First, it is easy and natural to always want to talk about one's feelings and plans for the future. It takes effort to control your tongue and monitor what you reveal. Second, many believe that by being honest and open they are winning people's hearts and showing their good nature. They are greatly deluded. Honesty is actually a blunt instrument, which bloodies more than it cuts. Your honesty is likely to offend people; it is much more prudent to tailor your words, telling people what they want to hear rather than the coarse and ugly truth of what you feel or think. More important, by being unabashedly open you make yourself so predictable and familiar that it is almost impossible to respect or fear you, and power will not accrue to a person who cannot inspire such emotions.

If you yearn for power, quickly lay honesty aside, and train yourself in the art of concealing your intentions. Master the art and you will always have the upper hand. Basic to an ability to conceal one's intentions is a simple truth about human nature: Our first instinct is to always trust appearances. We cannot go around doubting the reality of what we see and hear—constantly imagining that appearances concealed something else would exhaust and terrify us. This fact makes it relatively easy to conceal one's intentions. Simply dangle an object you seem to desire, a goal you seem to aim for, in front of people's eyes and they will take the appearance for reality. Once their eyes focus on the decoy, they will fail to notice what you are really up to. In seduction, set up conflicting signals, such as desire and indifference, and you not only throw them off the scent, you inflame their desire to possess you.

A tactic that is often effective in setting up a red herring is to appear to support an idea or cause that is actually contrary to your own sentiments. (Bismarck used this to great effect in his speech in 1850.) Most people will believe you have experienced a change of heart, since it is so unusual to play so lightly with something as emotional as one's opinions and values.

The same applies for any decoyed object of desire: Seem to want something in which you are actually not at all interested and your enemies will be thrown off the scent, making all kinds of errors in their calculations.

During the War of the Spanish Succession in 1711, the Duke of Marlborough, head of the English army, wanted to destroy a key French fort, because it protected a vital thoroughfare into France. Yet he knew that if he destroyed it, the French would realize what he wanted—to advance down that road. Instead, then, he merely captured the fort, and garrisoned it with some of his troops, making it appear as if he wanted it for some purpose of his own. The French attacked the fort and the duke let them recapture it. Once they had it back, though, they destroyed it, figuring that the duke had wanted it for some important reason. Now that the fort was gone, the road was unprotected, and Marlborough could easily march into France.

Use this tactic in the following manner: Hide your intentions not by closing up (with the risk of appearing secretive, and making people suspicious) but by talking endlessly about your desires and goals—just not your real ones. You will kill three birds with one stone: You appear friendly, open, and trusting; you conceal your intentions; and you send your rivals on time-consuming wild-goose chases.

Another powerful tool in throwing people off the scent is false sincerity. People easily mistake sincerity for honesty. Remember—their first instinct is to trust appearances, and since they value honesty and want to believe in the honesty of those around them, they will rarely doubt you or see through your act. Seeming to believe what you say gives your words great weight. This is how Iago deceived and destroyed Othello: Given the depth of his emotions, the apparent sincerity of his concerns about Desde mona's supposed infidelity, how could Othello distrust him? This is also how the great con artist Yellow Kid Weil pulled the wool over suckers' eyes: Seeming to believe so deeply in the decoyed object he was dangling in front of them (a phony stock, a touted racehorse), he made its reality hard to doubt. It is important, of course, not to go too far in this area. Sincerity is a tricky tool: Appear overpassionate and you raise suspicions. Be measured and believable or your ruse will seem the put-on that it is.

To make your false sincerity an effective weapon in concealing your intentions, espouse a belief in honesty and forthrightness as important social values. Do this as publicly as possible. Emphasize your position on this

subject by occasionally divulging some heartfelt thought—though only one that is actually meaningless or irrelevant, of course. Napoleon's minister Talleyrand was a master at taking people into his confidence by revealing some apparent secret. This feigned confidence—a decoy—would then elicit a real confidence on the other person's part.

Remember: The best deceivers do everything they can to cloak their roguish qualities. They cultivate an air of honesty in one area to disguise their dishonesty in others. Honesty is merely another decoy in their arsenal of weapons.

PART II: USE SMOKE SCREENS TO DISGUISE YOUR ACTIONS

Deception is always the best strategy, but the best deceptions require a screen of smoke to distract people attention from your real purpose. The bland exterior—like the unreadable poker face—is often the perfect smoke screen, hiding your intentions behind the comfortable and familiar. If you lead the sucker down a familiar path, he won't catch on when you lead him into a trap.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW I

In 1910, a Mr. Sam Geezil of Chicago sold his warehouse business for close to $1 million. He settled down to semiretirement and the managing of his many properties, but deep inside he itched for the old days of deal-making. One day a young man named Joseph Weil visited his office, wanting to buy an apartment he had up for sale. Geezil explained the terms: The price was $8,000, but he only required a down payment of $2,000. Weil said he would sleep on it, but he came back the following day and offered to pay the full $8,000 in cash, if Geezil could wait a couple of days, until a deal Weil was working on came through. Even in semiretirement, a clever businessman like Geezil was curious as to how Weil would be able to come up with so much cash (roughly $150,000 today) so quickly. Weil seemed reluctant to say, and quickly changed the subject, but Geezil was persistent. Finally, after assurances of confidentiality, Weil told Geezil the following story.

JEHU, KING OF ISRAEL FEIGNS WORSHIP OF THE IDOL BA‘AL

Then Jehu assembled all the people, and said to them, “Ahab served Ba‘al a little; but Jehu will serve him much more. Now therefore call to me all the prophets of Ba’al, all his worshippers and all his priests; let none be missing, for I have a great sacrifice to offer to Ba‘al; whoever is missing shall not live.” But Jehu did it with cunning in order to destroy the worshippers of Ba’al. And Jehu ordered, “Sanctify a solemn assembly for Ba‘al. “So they proclaimed it. And Jehu sent throughout all Israel; and all the worshippers of Ba’al came, so that there was not a man left who did not come. And they entered the house of Ba‘al, and the house of Ba’al was filled from one end to the other.... Then Jehu went into the house of Ba‘al ... and he said to the worshippers of Ba’al, “Search, and see that there is no servant of the LORD here among you, but only the worshippers of Ba‘al.“Then he went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. Now Jehu had stationed eighty men outside, and said, “The man who allows any of those whom I give into your hands to escape shall forfeit his life.” So as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, Jehu said to the

guard and to the officers, "Go in and slay them; let not a man escape." So when they put them to the sword, the guard and the officers cast them out and went into the inner room of the house of Ba'al and they brought out the pillar that was in the house of Ba'al and burned it. And they demolished the pillar of Ba'al and demolished the house of Ba'al, and made it a latrine to this day. Thus Jehu wiped out Ba'al from Israel.
OLD TESTAMENT, 2 KINGS 10:18-28

Weil's uncle was the secretary to a coterie of multimillionaire financiers. These wealthy gentlemen had purchased a hunting lodge in Michigan ten years ago, at a cheap price. They had not used the lodge for a few years, so they had decided to sell it and had asked Weil's uncle to get whatever he could for it. For reasons—good reasons—of his own, the uncle had been nursing a grudge against the millionaires for years; this was his chance to get back at them. He would sell the property for $35,000 to a set up man (whom it was Weil's job to find). The financiers were too wealthy to worry about this low price. The set-up man would then turn around and sell the property again for its real price, around $155,000. The uncle, Weil, and the third man would split the profits from this second sale. It was all legal and for a good cause—the uncle's just retribution.

Geezil had heard enough: He wanted to be the set-up buyer. Weil was reluctant to involve him, but Geezil would not back down: The idea of a large profit, plus a little adventure, had him champing at the bit. Weil explained that Geezil would have to put up the $35,000 in cash to bring the deal off. Geezil, a millionaire, said he could get the money with a snap of his fingers. Weil finally relented and agreed to arrange a meeting between the uncle, Geezil, and the financiers, in the town of Galesburg, Illinois.

On the train ride to Galesburg, Geezil met the uncle—an impressive man, with whom he avidly discussed business. Weil also brought along a companion, a somewhat paunchy man named George Gross. Weil explained to Geezil that he himself was a boxing trainer, that Gross was one of the promising prizefighters he trained, and that he had asked Gross to come along to make sure the fighter stayed in shape. For a promising fighter, Gross was unimpressive looking—he had gray hair and a beer belly—but Geezil was so excited about the deal that he didn't really think about the man's flabby appearance.

Once in Galesburg, Weil and his uncle went to fetch the financiers while Geezil waited in a hotel room with Gross, who promptly put on his boxing

trunks. As Geezil half watched, Gross began to shadowbox. Distracted as he was, Geezil ignored how badly the boxer wheezed after a few minutes of exercise, although his style seemed real enough. An hour later, Weil and his uncle reappeared with the financiers, an impressive, intimidating group of men, all wearing fancy suits. The meeting went well and the financiers agreed to sell the lodge to Geezil, who had already had the $35,000 wired to a local bank.

This minor business now settled, the financiers sat back in their chairs and began to banter about high finance, throwing out the name “J. P. Morgan” as if they knew the man. Finally one of them noticed the boxer in the corner of the room. Weil explained what he was doing there. The financier countered that he too had a boxer in his entourage, whom he named. Weil laughed brazenly and exclaimed that his man could easily knock out their man. Conversation escalated into argument. In the heat of passion, Weil challenged the men to a bet. The financiers eagerly agreed and left to get their man ready for a fight the next day.

As soon as they had left, the uncle yelled at Weil, right in front of Geezil; They did not have enough money to bet with, and once the financiers discovered this, the uncle would be fired. Weil apologized for getting him in this mess, but he had a plan: He knew the other boxer well, and with a little bribe, they could fix the fight. But where would the money come from for the bet? the uncle replied. Without it they were as good as dead. Finally Geezil had heard enough. Unwilling to jeopardize his deal with any ill will, he offered his own $35,000 cash for part of the bet. Even if he lost that, he would wire for more money and still make a profit on the sale of the lodge. The uncle and nephew thanked him. With their own $15,000 and Geezil’s $35,000 they would manage to have enough for the bet. That evening, as Geezil watched the two boxers rehearse the fix in the hotel room, his mind reeled at the killing he was going to make from both the boxing match and the sale of the lodge.

The fight took place in a gym the next day. Weil handled the cash, which was placed for security in a locked box. Everything was proceeding as planned in the hotel room. The financiers were looking glum at how badly their fighter was doing, and Geezil was dreaming about the easy money he was about to make. Then, suddenly, a wild swing by the financier’s fighter hit Gross hard in the face, knocking him down. When he hit the canvas, blood spurted from his mouth. He coughed, then lay still. One of the

financiers, a former doctor, checked his pulse; he was dead. The millionaires panicked: Everyone had to get out before the police arrived-they could all be charged with murder.

Terrified, Geezil hightailed it out of the gym and back to Chicago, leaving behind his $35,000 which he was only too glad to forget, for it seemed a small price to pay to avoid being implicated in a crime. He never wanted to see Weil or any of the others again.

After Geezil scurried out, Gross stood up, under his own steam. The blood that had spurted from his mouth came from a ball filled with chicken blood and hot water that he had hidden in his cheek. The whole affair had been masterminded by Weil, better known as “the Yellow Kid,” one of the most creative con artists in history. Weil split the $35,000 with the financiers and the boxers (all fellow con artists)—a nice little profit for a few days’ work.

SNEAK ACROSS THE OCEAN IN BROAD DAYLIGHT

This means to create a front that eventually becomes imbued with an atmosphere or impression of familiarity, within which the strategist may maneuver unseen while all eyes are trained to see obvious familiarities.
“THE THIRTY-SIX STRATEGIES.” QUOTED IN THE JAPANESE ART OF WAR.
THOMAS CLEARY, 1991

Interpretation

The Yellow Kid had staked out Geezil as the perfect sucker long before he set up the con. He knew the boxing-match scam would be the perfect ruse to separate Geezil from his money quickly and definitively. But he also knew that if he had begun by trying to interest Geezil in the boxing match, he would have failed miserably. He had to conceal his intentions and switch attention, create a smoke screen—in this case the sale of the lodge.

On the train ride and in the hotel room Geezil's mind had been completely occupied with the pending deal, the easy money, the chance to hobnob with wealthy men. He had failed to notice that Gross was out of shape and middle-aged at best. Such is the distracting power of a smoke screen. Engrossed in the business deal, Geezil's attention was easily diverted to the boxing match, but only at a point when it was already too late for him to notice the details that would have given Gross away. The match, after all, now depended on a bribe rather than on the boxer's physical condition. And Geezil was so distracted at the end by the illusion of the boxer's death that he completely forgot about his money.

Learn from the Yellow Kid: The familiar, inconspicuous front is the perfect smoke screen. Approach your mark with an idea that seems ordinary enough—a business deal, financial intrigue. The sucker's mind is distracted, his suspicions allayed. That is when you gently guide him onto the second path, the slippery slope down which he slides helplessly into your trap.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW II

In the mid-1920s, the powerful warlords of Ethiopia were coming to the realization that a young man of the nobility named Haile Selassie, also known as Ras Tafari, was outcompeting them all and nearing the point where he could proclaim himself their leader, unifying the country for the first time in decades. Most of his rivals could not understand how this wispy, quiet, mild-mannered man had been able to take control. Yet in 1927, Selassie was able to summon the warlords, one at a time, to come to Addis Ababa to declare their loyalty and recognize him as leader.

Some hurried, some hesitated, but only one, Dejazmach Balcha of Sidamo, dared defy Selassie totally. A blustery man, Balcha was a great warrior, and he considered the new leader weak and unworthy. He pointedly stayed away from the capital. Finally Selassie, in his gentle but stern way, commanded Balcha to come. The warlord decided to obey, but in doing so he would turn the tables on this pretender to the Ethiopian throne: He would come to Addis Ababa at his own speed, and with an army of 10,000 men, a force large enough to defend himself, perhaps even start a civil war. Stationing this formidable force in a valley three miles from the capital, he waited, as a king would. Selassie would have to come to him.

Selassie did indeed send emissaries, asking Balcha to attend an afternoon banquet in his honor. But Balcha, no fool, knew history—he knew that previous kings and lords of Ethiopia had used banquets as a trap. Once he was there and full of drink, Selassie would have him arrested or murdered. To signal his understanding of the situation, he agreed to come to the banquet, but only if he could bring his personal bodyguard—600 of his best soldiers, all armed and ready to defend him and themselves. To Balcha's surprise, Selassie answered with the utmost politeness that he would be honored to play host to such warriors.

On the way to the banquet, Balcha warned his soldiers not to get drunk and to be on their guard. When they arrived at the palace, Selassie was his charming best. He deferred to Balcha, treated him as if he desperately needed his approval and cooperation. But Balcha refused to be charmed, and he warned Selassie that if he did not return to his camp by nightfall, his

army had orders to attack the capital. Selassie reacted as if hurt by his mistrust. Over the meal, when it came time for the traditional singing of songs in honor of Ethiopia's leaders, he made a point of allowing only songs honoring the warlord of Sidamo. It seemed to Balcha that Selassie was scared, intimidated by this great warrior who could not be outwitted. Sensing the change, Balcha believed that he would be the one to call the shots in the days to come.

At the end of the afternoon, Balcha and his soldiers began their march back to camp amidst cheers and gun salutes. Looking back to the capital over his shoulder, he planned his strategy—how his own soldiers would march through the capital in triumph within weeks, and Selassie would be put in his place, his place being either prison or death. When Balcha came in sight of his camp, however, he saw that something was terribly wrong. Where before there had been colorful tents stretching as far as the eye could see, now there was nothing, only smoke from doused fires. What devil's magic was this?

A witness told Balcha what had happened. During the banquet, a large army, commanded by an ally of Selassie's, had stolen up on Balcha's encampment by a side route he had not seen. This army had not come to fight, however: Knowing that Balcha would have heard a noisy battle and hurried back with his 600-man bodyguard, Selassie had armed his own troops with baskets of gold and cash. They had surrounded Balcha's army and proceeded to purchase every last one of their weapons. Those who refused were easily intimidated. Within a few hours, Balcha's entire force had been disarmed and scattered in all directions.

Realizing his danger, Balcha decided to march south with his 600 soldiers to regroup, but the same army that had disarmed his soldiers blocked his way. The other way out was to march on the capital, but Selassie had set a large army to defend it. Like a chess player, he had predicted Balcha's moves, and had checkmated him. For the first time in his life, Balcha surrendered. To repent his sins of pride and ambition, he agreed to enter a monastery.

Interpretation

Throughout Selassie's long reign, no one could quite figure him out. Ethiopians like their leaders fierce, but Selassie, who wore the front of a gentle, peace-loving man, lasted longer than any of them. Never angry or impatient, he lured his victims with sweet smiles, lulling them with charm and obsequiousness before he attacked. In the case of Balcha, Selassie played on the man's wariness, his suspicion that the banquet was a trap—which in fact it was, but not the one he expected. Selassie's way of allaying Balcha's fears—letting him bring his bodyguard to the banquet, giving him top billing there, making him feel in control—created a thick smoke screen, concealing the real action three miles away.

Remember: The paranoid and wary are often the easiest to deceive. Win their trust in one area and you have a smoke screen that blinds their view in another, letting you creep up and level them with a devastating blow. A helpful or apparently honest gesture, or one that implies the other person's superiority—these are perfect diversionary devices.

Properly set up, the smoke screen is a weapon of great power. It enabled the gentle Selassie to totally destroy his enemy, without firing a single bullet.

Do not underestimate the power of Tafari. He creeps
like a mouse but he has jaws like a lion.
Bacha of Sidamo's last words before entering the monastery

KEYS TO POWER

If you believe that deceivers are colorful folk who mislead with elaborate lies and tall tales, you are greatly mistaken. The best deceivers utilize a bland and inconspicuous front that calls no attention to themselves. They know that extravagant words and gestures immediately raise suspicion. Instead, they envelop their mark in the familiar, the banal, the harmless. In Yellow Kid Weil's dealings with Sam Geezil, the familiar was a business deal. In the Ethiopian case, it was Selassie's misleading obsequiousness—exactly what Balcha would have expected from a weaker warlord.

Once you have lulled your suckers' attention with the familiar, they will not notice the deception being perpetrated behind their backs. This derives from a simple truth: people can only focus on one thing at a time. It is really too difficult for them to imagine that the bland and harmless person they are dealing with is simultaneously setting up something else. The grayer and more uniform the smoke in your smoke screen, the better it conceals your intentions. In the decoy and red herring devices discussed in Part I, you actively distract people; in the smoke screen, you lull your victims, drawing them into your web. Because it is so hypnotic, this is often the best way of concealing your intentions.

The simplest form of smoke screen is facial expression. Behind a bland, unreadable exterior, all sorts of mayhem can be planned, without detection. This is a weapon that the most powerful men in history have learned to perfect. It was said that no one could read Franklin D. Roosevelt's face. Baron James Rothschild made a lifelong practice of disguising his real thoughts behind bland smiles and nondescript looks. Stendhal wrote of Talleyrand, "Never was a face less of a barometer." Henry Kissinger would bore his opponents around the negotiating table to tears with his monotonous voice, his blank look, his endless recitations of details; then, as their eyes glazed over, he would suddenly hit them with a list of bold terms. Caught off-guard, they would be easily intimidated. As one poker manual explains it, "While playing his hand, the good player is seldom an actor. Instead he practices a bland behavior that minimizes readable patterns, frustrates and confuses opponents, permits greater concentration."

An adaptable concept, the smoke screen can be practiced on a number of levels, all playing on the psychological principles of distraction and misdirection. One of the most effective smoke screens is the noble gesture. People want to believe apparently noble gestures are genuine, for the belief is pleasant. They rarely notice how deceptive these gestures can be.

The art dealer Joseph Duveen was once confronted with a terrible problem. The millionaires who had paid so dearly for Duveen's paintings were running out of wall space, and with inheritance taxes getting ever higher, it seemed unlikely that they would keep buying. The solution was the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which Duveen helped create in 1937 by getting Andrew Mellon to donate his collection to it. The National Gallery was the perfect front for Duveen. In one gesture, his clients avoided taxes, cleared wall space for new purchases, and reduced the number of paintings on the market, maintaining the upward pressure on their prices. All this while the donors created the appearance of being public benefactors.

Another effective smoke screen is the *pattern*, the establishment of a series of actions that seduce the victim into believing you will continue in the same way. The pattern plays on the psychology of anticipation: Our behavior conforms to patterns, or so we like to think.

In 1878 the American robber baron Jay Gould created a company that began to threaten the monopoly of the telegraph company Western Union. The directors of Western Union decided to buy Gould's company up— they had to spend a hefty sum, but they figured they had managed to rid themselves of an irritating competitor. A few months later, though, Gould was it at again, complaining he had been treated unfairly. He started up a second company to compete with Western Union and its new acquisition. The same thing happened again: Western Union bought him out to shut him up. Soon the pattern began for the third time, but now Gould went for the jugular: He suddenly staged a bloody takeover struggle and managed to gain complete control of Western Union. He had established a pattern that had tricked the company's directors into thinking his goal was to be bought out at a handsome rate. Once they paid him off, they relaxed and failed to notice that he was actually playing for higher stakes. The pattern is powerful in that it deceives the other person into expecting the opposite of what you are really doing.

Another psychological weakness on which to construct a smoke screen is the tendency to mistake appearances for reality—the feeling that if someone seems to belong to your group, their belonging must be real. This habit makes the seamless blend a very effective front. The trick is simple: You simply blend in with those around you. The better you blend, the less suspicious you become. During the Cold War of the 1950s and ’60s, as is now notorious, a slew of British civil servants passed secrets to the Soviets. They went undetected for years because they were apparently decent chaps, had gone to all the right schools, and fit the old-boy network perfectly. Blending in is the perfect smoke screen for spying. The better you do it, the better you can conceal your intentions.

Remember: It takes patience and humility to dull your brilliant colors, to put on the mask of the inconspicuous. Do not despair at having to wear such a bland mask—it is often your unreadability that draws people to you and makes you appear a person of power.

Image: A Sheep’s Skin.
A sheep never marauds,
a sheep never deceives,
a sheep is magnificently
dumb and docile. With a
sheepskin on his back,
a fox can pass right
into the chicken coop.

Authority: Have you ever heard of a skillful general, who intends to surprise a citadel, announcing his plan to his enemy? Conceal your purpose and hide your progress; do not disclose the extent of your designs until they cannot be opposed, until the combat is over. Win the victory before you declare the war. In a word, imitate those warlike people whose designs are not known except by the ravaged country through which they have passed. (Ninon de Lenclos, 1623-1706)

REVERSAL

No smoke screen, red herring, false sincerity, or any other diversionary device will succeed in concealing your intentions if you already have an established reputation for deception. And as you get older and achieve success, it often becomes increasingly difficult to disguise your cunning. Everyone knows you practice deception; persist in playing naive and you run the risk of seeming the rankest hypocrite, which will severely limit your room to maneuver. In such cases it is better to own up, to appear the honest rogue, or, better, the repentant rogue. Not only will you be admired for your frankness, but, most wonderful and strange of all, you will be able to continue your stratagems.

As P. T. Barnum, the nineteenth-century king of humbuggery, grew older, he learned to embrace his reputation as a grand deceiver. At one point he organized a buffalo hunt in New Jersey, complete with Indians and a few imported buffalo. He publicized the hunt as genuine, but it came off as so completely fake that the crowd, instead of getting angry and asking for their money back, was greatly amused. They knew Barnum pulled tricks all the time; that was the secret of his success, and they loved him for it. Learning a lesson from this affair, Barnum stopped concealing all of his devices, even revealing his deceptions in a tell-all autobiography. As Kierkegaard wrote, “The world wants to be deceived.”

Finally, although it is wiser to divert attention from your purposes by presenting a bland, familiar exterior, there are times when the colorful, conspicuous gesture is the right diversionary tactic. The great charlatan mountebanks of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe used humor and entertainment to deceive their audiences. Dazzled by a great show, the public would not notice the charlatans’ real intentions. Thus the star charlatan himself would appear in town in a night-black coach drawn by black horses. Clowns, tightrope walkers, and star entertainers would accompany him, pulling people in to his demonstrations of elixirs and quack potions. The charlatan made entertainment seem like the business of the day; the business of the day was actually the sale of the elixirs and quack potions.

Spectacle and entertainment, clearly, are excellent devices to conceal your intentions, but they cannot be used indefinitely. The public grows tired and suspicious, and eventually catches on to the trick. And indeed the charlatans had to move quickly from town to town, before word spread that the potions were useless and the entertainment a trick. Powerful people with bland exteriors, on the other hand—the Talleyrands, the Rothschilds, the Selassies—can practice their deceptions in the same place throughout their lifetimes. Their act never wears thin, and rarely causes suspicion. The colorful smoke screen should be used cautiously, then, and only when the occasion is right.