

## LAW 15

### CRUSH YOUR ENEMY TOTALLY

#### JUDGMENT

*All great leaders since Moses have known that a feared enemy must be crushed completely. (Sometimes they have learned this the hard way.) If one ember is left alight, no matter how dimly it smolders, a fire will eventually break out. More is lost through stopping halfway than through total annihilation: The enemy will recover, and will seek revenge. Crush him, not only in body but in spirit.*

## TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

No rivalry between leaders is more celebrated in Chinese history than the struggle between Hsiang Yu and Liu Pang. These two generals began their careers as friends, fighting on the same side. Hsiang Yu came from the nobility; large and powerful, given to bouts of violence and temper, a bit dull witted, he was yet a mighty warrior who always fought at the head of his troops. Liu Pang came from peasant stock. He had never been much of a soldier, and preferred women and wine to fighting; in fact, he was something of a scoundrel. But he was wily, and he had the ability to recognize the best strategists, keep them as his advisers, and listen to their advice. He had risen in the army through these strengths.

*The remnants of an enemy can become active like those of a disease or fire. Hence, these should be exterminated completely... One should never ignore an enemy, knowing him to be weak. He becomes dangerous in due course, like the spark of fire in a haystack.*

KAUTILYA, INDIAN PHILOSOPHER, THIRD CENTURY B.C.

In 208 B.C., the king of Ch'u sent two massive armies to conquer the powerful kingdom of Ch'in. One army went north, under the generalship of Sung Yi, with Hsiang Yu second in command; the other, led by Liu Pang, headed straight toward Ch'in. The target was the kingdom's splendid capital, Hsien-yang. And Hsiang Yu, ever violent and impatient, could not stand the idea that Liu Pang would get to Hsien-yang first, and perhaps would assume command of the entire army.

## THE TRAP AT SINIGAGLIA

*On the day Ramiro was executed, Cesare [Borgia] quit Cesena, leaving the mutilated body on the town square, and marched south. Three days later he arrived at Fano, where he received the envoys of the city of Ancona, who assured him of their loyalty. A messenger from Vitellozzo Vitelli announced that the little Adriatic port of Sinigaglia had surrendered to the condottieri [mercenary soldiers]. Only the citadel, in charge of the Genoese Andrea Doria, still held out, and Doria refused to hand it over to anyone except*

*Cesare himself. [Borgia] sent word that he would arrive the next day, which was just what the condottieri wanted to hear. Once he reached Sinigaglia. Cesare would be an easy prey, caught between the citadel and their forces ringing the town.... The condottieri were sure they had military superiority, believing that the departure of the French troops had left Cesare with only a small force.*

*In fact, according to Machiavelli. [Borgia] had left Cesena with ten thousand infantry-men and three thousand horse, taking pains to split up his men so that they would march along parallel routes before converging on Sinigaglia. The reason for such a large force was that he knew, from a confession extracted from Ramiro de Lorca, what the condottieri had up their sleeve. He therefore decided to turn their own trap against them. This was the masterpiece of trickery that the historian Paolo Giovio later called "the magnificent deceit." At dawn on December 31 [1502], Cesare reached the outskirts of Sinigaglia.... Led by Michelotto Corella, Cesare's advance guard of two hundred lances took up its position on the canal bridge.... This control of the bridge effectively prevented the conspirators' troops from withdrawing....*

*Cesare greeted the condottieri effusively and invited them to join him.... Michelotto had prepared the Palazzo Bernardino for Cesare's use, and the duke invited the condottieri inside.... Once indoors the men were quietly arrested by guards who crept up from the rear.... [Cesare] gave orders for an attack on Vitelli's and Orsini's soldiers in the outlying areas.... That night, while their troops were being crushed, Michelotto throttled Oliveretto and Vitelli in the Bernardino palace.... At one fell swoop, [Borgia] had got rid of his former generals and worst enemies.*

THE BORGHIAS, IVAN CLOULAS, 1989

At one point on the northern front, Hsiang's commander, Sung Yi, hesitated in sending his troops into battle. Furious, Hsiang entered Sung Yi's tent, proclaimed him a traitor, cut off his head, and assumed sole command of the army. Without waiting for orders, he left the northern front and marched directly on Hsien-yang. He felt certain he was the better soldier and general than Liu, but, to his utter astonishment, his rival, leading a smaller, swifter army, managed to reach Hsien-yang first. Hsiang had an adviser, Fan Tseng, who warned him, "This village headman [Liu Pang]

used to be greedy only for riches and women, but since entering the capital he has not been led astray by wealth, wine, or sex. That shows he is aiming high.”

Fan Tseng urged Hsiang to kill his rival before it was too late. He told the general to invite the wily peasant to a banquet at their camp outside Hsien-yang, and, in the midst of a celebratory sword dance, to have his head cut off. The invitation was sent; Liu fell for the trap, and came to the banquet. But Hsiang hesitated in ordering the sword dance, and by the time he gave the signal, Liu had sensed a trap, and managed to escape. “Bah!” cried Fan Tseng in disgust, seeing that Hsiang had botched the plot. “One cannot plan with a simpleton. Liu Pang will steal your empire yet and make us all his prisoners.”

Realizing his mistake, Hsiang hurriedly marched on Hsien-yang, this time determined to hack off his rival’s head. Liu was never one to fight when the odds were against him, and he abandoned the city. Hsiang captured Hsien-yang, murdered the young prince of Ch’in, and burned the city to the ground. Liu was now Hsiang’s bitter enemy, and he pursued him for many months, finally cornering him in a walled city. Lacking food, his army in disarray, Liu sued for peace.

Again Fan Tseng warned Hsiang, “Crush him now! If you let him go again, you will be sorry later.” But Hsiang decided to be merciful. He wanted to bring Liu back to Ch’u alive, and to force his former friend to acknowledge him as master. But Fan proved right: Liu managed to use the negotiations for his surrender as a distraction, and he escaped with a small army. Hsiang, amazed that he had yet again let his rival slip away, once more set out after Liu, this time with such ferocity that he seemed to have lost his mind. At one point, having captured Liu’s father in battle, Hsiang stood the old man up during the fighting and yelled to Liu across the line of troops, “Surrender now, or I shall boil your father alive!” Liu calmly answered, “But we are sworn brothers. So my father is your father also. If you insist on boiling your own father, send me a bowl of the soup!” Hsiang backed down, and the struggle continued.

A few weeks later, in the thick of the hunt, Hsiang scattered his forces unwisely, and in a surprise attack Liu was able to surround his main garrison. For the first time the tables were turned. Now it was Hsiang who sued for peace. Liu’s top adviser urged him to destroy Hsiang, crush his

army, show no mercy. “To let him go would be like rearing a tiger—it will devour you later,” the adviser said. Liu agreed.

Making a false treaty, he lured Hsiang into relaxing his defense, then slaughtered almost all of his army. Hsiang managed to escape. Alone and on foot, knowing that Liu had put a bounty on his head, he came upon a small group of his own retreating soldiers, and cried out, “I hear Liu Pang has offered one thousand pieces of gold and a fief of ten thousand families for my head. Let me do you a favor.” Then he slit his own throat and died.

## Interpretation

Hsiang Yu had proven his ruthlessness on many an occasion. He rarely hesitated in doing away with a rival if it served his purposes. But with Liu Pang he acted differently. He respected his rival, and did not want to defeat him through deception; he wanted to prove his superiority on the battlefield, even to force the clever Liu to surrender and to serve him. Every time he had his rival in his hands, something made him hesitate—a fatal sympathy with or respect for the man who, after all, had once been a friend and comrade in arms. But the moment Hsiang made it clear that he intended to do away with Liu, yet failed to accomplish it, he sealed his own doom. Liu would not suffer the same hesitation once the tables were turned.

This is the fate that faces all of us when we sympathize with our enemies, when pity, or the hope of reconciliation, makes us pull back from doing away with them. We only strengthen their fear and hatred of us. We have beaten them, and they are humiliated; yet we nurture these resentful vipers who will one day kill us. Power cannot be dealt with this way. It must be exterminated, crushed, and denied the chance to return to haunt us. This is all the truer with a former friend who has become an enemy. The law governing fatal antagonisms reads: Reconciliation is out of the question. Only one side can win, and it must win totally.

Liu Pang learned this lesson well. After defeating Hsiang Yu, this son of a farmer went on to become supreme commander of the armies of Ch'u. Crushing his next rival—the king of Ch'u, his own former leader—he crowned himself emperor, defeated everyone in his path, and went down in history as one of the greatest rulers of China, the immortal Han Kao-tsu, founder of the Han Dynasty.

*To have ultimate victory, you must be ruthless.*

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE, 1769-1821

Those who seek to achieve things should show no mercy.

*Kautilya, Indian philosopher third century B.C.*

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

Wu Chao, born in A.D. 625, was the daughter of a duke, and as a beautiful young woman of many charms, she was accordingly attached to the harem of Emperor T'ai Tsung.

The imperial harem was a dangerous place, full of young concubines vying to become the emperor's favorite. Wu's beauty and forceful character quickly won her this battle, but, knowing that an emperor, like other powerful men, is a creature of whim, and that she could easily be replaced, she kept her eye on the future.

Wu managed to seduce the emperor's dissolute son, Kao Tsung, on the only possible occasion when she could find him alone: while he was relieving himself at the royal urinal. Even so, when the emperor died and Kao Tsung took over the throne, she still suffered the fate to which all wives and concubines of a deceased emperor were bound by tradition and law: Her head shaven, she entered a convent, for what was supposed to be the rest of her life. For seven years Wu schemed to escape. By communicating in secret with the new emperor, and by befriending his wife, the empress, she managed to get a highly unusual royal edict allowing her to return to the palace and to the royal harem. Once there, she fawned on the empress, while still sleeping with the emperor. The empress did not discourage this—she had yet to provide the emperor with an heir, her position was vulnerable, and Wu was a valuable ally.

In 654 Wu Chao gave birth to a child. One day the empress came to visit, and as soon as she had left, Wu smothered the newborn—her own baby. When the murder was discovered, suspicion immediately fell on the empress, who had been on the scene moments earlier, and whose jealous nature was known by all. This was precisely Wu's plan. Shortly thereafter, the empress was charged with murder and executed. Wu Chao was crowned empress in her place. Her new husband, addicted to his life of pleasure, gladly gave up the reins of government to Wu Chao, who was from then on known as Empress Wu.

Although now in a position of great power, Wu hardly felt secure. There were enemies everywhere; she could not let down her guard for one

moment. Indeed, when she was forty-one, she began to fear that her beautiful young niece was becoming the emperor's favorite. She poisoned the woman with a clay mixed into her food. In 675 her own son, touted as the heir apparent, was poisoned as well. The next-eldest son—illegitimate, but now the crown prince—was exiled a little later on trumped-up charges. And when the emperor died, in 683, Wu managed to have the son after that declared unfit for the throne. All this meant that it was her youngest, most ineffectual son who finally became emperor. In this way she continued to rule.

Over the next five years there were innumerable palace coups. All of them failed, and all of the conspirators were executed. By 688 there was no one left to challenge Wu. She proclaimed herself a divine descendant of Buddha, and in 690 her wishes were finally granted: She was named Holy and Divine “Emperor” of China.

Wu became emperor because there was literally nobody left from the previous T'ang dynasty. And so she ruled unchallenged, for over a decade of relative peace. In 705, at the age of eighty, she was forced to abdicate.



## Interpretation

All who knew Empress Wu remarked on her energy and intelligence. At the time, there was no glory available for an ambitious woman beyond a few years in the imperial harem, then a lifetime walled up in a convent. In Wu's gradual but remarkable rise to the top, she was never naive. She knew that any hesitation, any momentary weakness, would spell her end. If, every time she got rid of a rival a new one appeared, the solution was simple: She had to crush them all or be killed herself. Other emperors before her had followed the same path to the top, but Wu—who, as a woman, had next to no chance to gain power—had to be more ruthless still.

Empress Wu's forty-year reign was one of the longest in Chinese history. Although the story of her bloody rise to power is well known, in China she is considered one of the period's most able and effective rulers.

*A priest asked the dying Spanish statesman and general Ramón María Narváez.*

*(1800-1868), "Does your Excellency forgive all your enemies ? "I do not have to forgive my enemies," answered Narváez, "I have had them all shot.*

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## KEYS TO POWER

It is no accident that the two stories illustrating this law come from China: Chinese history abounds with examples of enemies who were left alive and returned to haunt the lenient. “Crush the enemy” is a key strategic tenet of Sun-tzu, the fourth-century-B.C. author of *The Art of War*. The idea is simple: Your enemies wish you ill. There is nothing they want more than to eliminate you. If, in your struggles with them, you stop halfway or even three quarters of the way, out of mercy or hope of reconciliation, you only make them more determined, more embittered, and they will someday take revenge. They may act friendly for the time being, but this is only because you have defeated them. They have no choice but to bide their time.

The solution: Have no mercy. Crush your enemies as totally as they would crush you. Ultimately the only peace and security you can hope for from your enemies is their disappearance.

Mao Tse-tung, a devoted reader of Sun-tzu and of Chinese history generally, knew the importance of this law. In 1934 the Communist leader and some 75,000 poorly equipped soldiers fled into the desolate mountains of western China to escape Chiang Kai-shek’s much larger army, in what has since been called the Long March.

Chiang was determined to eliminate every last Communist, and by a few years later Mao had less than 10,000 soldiers left. By 1937, in fact, when China was invaded by Japan, Chiang calculated that the Communists were no longer a threat. He chose to give up the chase and concentrate on the Japanese. Ten years later the Communists had recovered enough to rout Chiang’s army. Chiang had forgotten the ancient wisdom of crushing the enemy; Mao had not. Chiang was pursued until he and his entire army fled to the island of Taiwan. Nothing remains of his regime in mainland China to this day.

The wisdom behind “crushing the enemy” is as ancient as the Bible: Its first practitioner may have been Moses, who learned it from God Himself, when He parted the Red Sea for the Jews, then let the water flow back over the pursuing Egyptians so that “not so much as one of them remained.” When Moses returned from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments and

found his people worshipping the Golden Calf, he had every last offender slaughtered. And just before he died, he told his followers, finally about to enter the Promised Land, that when they had defeated the tribes of Canaan they should “utterly destroy them... make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them.”

The goal of total victory is an axiom of modern warfare, and was codified as such by Carl von Clausewitz, the premier philosopher of war. Analyzing the campaigns of Napoleon, von Clausewitz wrote, “We do claim that direct annihilation of the enemy’s forces must always be the *dominant consideration*... Once a major victory is achieved there must be no talk of rest, of breathing space... but only of the pursuit, going for the enemy again, seizing his capital, attacking his reserves and anything else that might give his country aid and comfort.” The reason for this is that after war come negotiation and the division of territory. If you have only won a partial victory, you will inevitably lose in negotiation what you have gained by war.

The solution is simple: Allow your enemies no options. Annihilate them and their territory is yours to carve. The goal of power is to control your enemies completely, to make them obey your will. You cannot afford to go halfway. If they have no options, they will be forced to do your bidding. This law has applications far beyond the battlefield. Negotiation is the insidious viper that will eat away at your victory, so give your enemies nothing to negotiate, no hope, no room to maneuver. They are crushed and that is that.

Realize this: In your struggle for power you will stir up rivalries and create enemies. There will be people you cannot win over, who will remain your enemies no matter what. But whatever wound you inflicted on them, deliberately or not, do not take their hatred personally. Just recognize that there is no possibility of peace between you, especially as long as you stay in power. If you let them stick around, they will seek revenge, as certainly as night follows day. To wait for them to show their cards is just silly; as Empress Wu understood, by then it will be too late.

Be realistic: With an enemy like this around, you will never be secure. Remember the lessons of history, and the wisdom of Moses and Mao: Never go halfway.

It is not, of course, a question of murder, it is a question of banishment. Sufficiently weakened and then exiled from your court forever, your

enemies are rendered harmless. They have no hope of recovering, insinuating themselves and hurting you. And if they cannot be banished, at least understand that they are plotting against you, and pay no heed to whatever friendliness they feign. Your only weapon in such a situation is your own wariness. If you cannot banish them immediately, then plot for the best time to act.

Image: A Viper crushed beneath your foot but left alive, will rear up and bite you with a double dose of venom. An enemy that is left around is like a half-dead viper that you nurse back to health. Time makes the venom grow stronger.

Authority: For it must be noted, that men must either be caressed or else annihilated; they will revenge themselves for small injuries, but cannot do so for great ones; the injury therefore that we do to a man must be such that we need not fear his vengeance. (Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527)

## REVERSAL

This law should very rarely be ignored, but it does sometimes happen that it is better to let your enemies destroy themselves, if such a thing is possible, than to make them suffer by your hand. In warfare, for example, a good general knows that if he attacks an army when it is cornered, its soldiers will fight much more fiercely. It is sometimes better, then, to leave them an escape route, a way out. As they retreat, they wear themselves out, and are ultimately more demoralized by the retreat than by any defeat he might inflict on the battlefield. When you have someone on the ropes, then—but only when you are sure they have no chance of recovery—you might let them hang themselves. Let them be the agents of their own destruction. The result will be the same, and you won't feel half as bad.

Finally, sometimes by crushing an enemy, you embitter them so much that they spend years and years plotting revenge. The Treaty of Versailles had such an effect on the Germans. Some would argue that in the long run it would be better to show some leniency. The problem is, your leniency involves another risk—it may embolden the enemy, which still harbors a grudge, but now has some room to operate. It is almost always wiser to crush your enemy. If they plot revenge years later, do not let your guard down, but simply crush them again.