

## LAW 17

### KEEP OTHERS IN SUSPENDED TERROR: CULTIVATE AN AIR OF UNPREDICTABILITY

#### JUDGMENT

*Humans are creatures of habit with an insatiable need to see familiarity in other people's actions. Your predictability gives them a sense of control. Turn the tables: Be deliberately unpredictable. Behavior that seems to have no consistency or purpose will keep them off-balance, and they will wear themselves out trying to explain your moves. Taken to an extreme, this strategy can intimidate and terrorize.*

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

In May of 1972, chess champion Boris Spassky anxiously awaited his rival Bobby Fischer in Reykjavik, Iceland. The two men had been scheduled to meet for the World Championship of Chess, but Fischer had not arrived on time and the match was on hold. Fischer had problems with the size of the prize money, problems with the way the money was to be distributed, problems with the logistics of holding the match in Iceland. He might back out at any moment.

Spassky tried to be patient. His Russian bosses felt that Fischer was humiliating him and told him to walk away, but Spassky wanted this match. He knew he could destroy Fischer, and nothing was going to spoil the greatest victory of his career. "So it seems that all our work may come to nothing," Spassky told a comrade. "But what can we do? It is Bobby's move. If he comes, we play. If he does not come, we do not play. A man who is willing to commit suicide has the initiative."

Fischer finally arrived in Reykjavik, but the problems, and the threat of cancellation, continued. He disliked the hall where the match was to be fought, he criticized the lighting, he complained about the noise of the cameras, he even hated the chairs in which he and Spassky were to sit. Now the Soviet Union took the initiative and threatened to withdraw their man.

The bluff apparently worked: After all the weeks of waiting, the endless and infuriating negotiations, Fischer agreed to play. Everyone was relieved, no one more than Spassky. But on the day of the official introductions, Fischer arrived very late, and on the day when the "Match of the Century" was to begin, he was late again. This time, however, the consequences would be dire: If he showed up too late he would forfeit the first game. What was going on? Was he playing some sort of mind game? Or was Bobby Fischer perhaps afraid of Boris Spassky? It seemed to the assembled grand masters, and to Spassky, that this young kid from Brooklyn had a terrible case of the jitters. At 5:09 Fischer showed up, exactly one minute before the match was to be canceled.

The first game of a chess tournament is critical, since it sets the tone for the months to come. It is often a slow and quiet struggle, with the two

players preparing themselves for the war and trying to read each other's strategies. This game was different. Fischer made a terrible move early on, perhaps the worst of his career, and when Spassky had him on the ropes, he seemed to give up. Yet Spassky knew that Fischer never gave up. Even when facing checkmate, he fought to the bitter end, wearing the opponent down. This time, though, he seemed resigned. Then suddenly he broke out a bold move that put the room in a buzz. The move shocked Spassky, but he recovered and managed to win the game. But no one could figure out what Fischer was up to. Had he lost deliberately? Or was he rattled? Unsettled? Even, as some thought, insane?

After his defeat in the first game, Fischer complained all the more loudly about the room, the cameras, and everything else. He also failed to show up on time for the second game. This time the organizers had had enough: He was given a forfeit. Now he was down two games to none, a position from which no one had ever come back to win a chess championship. Fischer was clearly unhinged. Yet in the third game, as all those who witnessed it remember, he had a ferocious look in his eye, a look that clearly bothered Spassky. And despite the hole he had dug for himself, he seemed supremely confident. He did make what appeared to be another blunder, as he had in the first game—but his cocky air made Spassky smell a trap. Yet despite the Russian's suspicions, he could not figure out the trap, and before he knew it Fischer had checkmated him. In fact Fischer's unorthodox tactics had completely unnerved his opponent. At the end of the game, Fischer leaped up and rushed out, yelling to his confederates as he smashed a fist into his palm, "I'm crushing him with brute force!"

In the next games Fischer pulled moves that no one had seen from him before, moves that were not his style. Now Spassky started to make blunders. After losing the sixth game, he started to cry. One grand master said, "After this, Spassky's got to ask himself if it's safe to go back to Russia." After the eighth game Spassky decided he knew what was happening: Bobby Fischer was hypnotizing him. He decided not to look Fischer in the eye; he lost anyway.

After the fourteenth game he called a staff conference and announced, "An attempt is being made to control my mind." He wondered whether the orange juice they drank at the chess table could have been drugged. Maybe chemicals were being blown into the air. Finally Spassky went public, accusing the Fischer team of putting something in the chairs that was

altering Spassky's mind. The KGB went on alert: Boris Spassky was embarrassing the Soviet Union!

The chairs were taken apart and X-rayed. A chemist found nothing unusual in them. The only things anyone found anywhere, in fact, were two dead flies in a lighting fixture. Spassky began to complain of hallucinations. He tried to keep playing, but his mind was unraveling. He could not go on. On September 2, he resigned. Although still relatively young, he never recovered from this defeat.

## Interpretation

In previous games between Fischer and Spassky, Fischer had not fared well. Spassky had an uncanny ability to read his opponent's strategy and use it against him. Adaptable and patient, he would build attacks that would defeat not in seven moves but in seventy. He defeated Fischer every time they played because he saw much further ahead, and because he was a brilliant psychologist who never lost control. One master said, "He doesn't just look for the best move. He looks for the move that will disturb the man he is playing."

Fischer, however, finally understood that this was one of the keys to Spassky's success: He played on your predictability, defeated you at your own game. Everything Fischer did for the championship match was an attempt to put the initiative on his side and to keep Spassky off-balance. Clearly the endless waiting had an effect on Spassky's psyche. Most powerful of all, though, were Fischer's deliberate blunders and his appearance of having no clear strategy. In fact, he was doing everything he could to scramble his old patterns, even if it meant losing the first match and forfeiting the second.

Spassky was known for his sangfroid and levelheadedness, but for the first time in his life he could not figure out his opponent. He slowly melted down, until at the end he was the one who seemed insane.

Chess contains the concentrated essence of life: First, because to win you have to be supremely patient and farseeing; and second, because the game is built on patterns, whole sequences of moves that have been played before and will be played again, with slight alterations, in any one match. Your opponent analyzes the patterns you are playing and uses them to try to foresee your moves. Allowing him nothing predictable to base his strategy on gives you a big advantage. In chess as in life, when people cannot figure out what you are doing, they are kept in a state of terror—waiting, uncertain, confused.

*Life at court is a serious, melancholy game of chess, which requires us to  
draw  
up our pieces and batteries, form a plan, pursue it, parry that of our*

*adversary. Sometimes, however, it is better to take risks  
and play the most capricious, unpredictable move.  
Jean de La Bruyère, 1645-1696*

## KEYS TO POWER

Nothing is more terrifying than the sudden and unpredictable. That is why we are so frightened by earthquakes and tornadoes: We do not know when they will strike. After one has occurred, we wait in terror for the next one. To a lesser degree, this is the effect that unpredictable human behavior has on us.

Animals behave in set patterns, which is why we are able to hunt and kill them. Only man has the capacity to consciously alter his behavior, to improvise and overcome the weight of routine and habit. Yet most men do not realize this power. They prefer the comforts of routine, of giving in to the animal nature that has them repeating the same compulsive actions time and time again. They do this because it requires no effort, and because they mistakenly believe that if they do not unsettle others, they will be left alone. Understand: A person of power instills a kind of fear by deliberately unsettling those around him to keep the initiative on his side. You sometimes need to strike without warning, to make others tremble when they least expect it. It is a device that the powerful have used for centuries.

Filippo Maria, the last of the Visconti dukes of Milan in fifteenth-century Italy, consciously did the opposite of what everyone expected of him. For instance, he might suddenly shower a courtier with attention, and then, once the man had come to expect a promotion to higher office, would suddenly start treating him with the utmost disdain. Confused, the man might leave the court, when the duke would suddenly recall him and start treating him well again. Doubly confused, the courtier would wonder whether his assumption that he would be promoted had become obvious, and offensive, to the duke, and would start to behave as if he no longer expected such honor. The duke would rebuke him for his lack of ambition and would send him away.

The secret of dealing with Filippo was simple: Do not presume to know what he wants. Do not try to guess what will please him. Never inject your will; just surrender to *his will*. Then wait to see what happens. Amidst the confusion and uncertainty he created, the duke ruled supreme, unchallenged and at peace.

Unpredictability is most often the tactic of the master, but the underdog too can use it to great effect. If you find yourself outnumbered or cornered, throw in a series of unpredictable moves. Your enemies will be so confused that they will pull back or make a tactical blunder.

In the spring of 1862, during the American Civil War, General Stonewall Jackson and a force of 4,600 Confederate soldiers were tormenting the larger Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley. Meanwhile, not far away, General George Brinton McClellan, heading a force of 90,000 Union soldiers, was marching south from Washington, D.C., to lay siege to Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital. As the weeks of the campaign went by, Jackson repeatedly led his soldiers out of the Shenandoah Valley, then back to it.

His movements made no sense. Was he preparing to help defend Richmond? Was he marching on Washington, now that McClellan's absence had left it unprotected? Was he heading north to wreak havoc up there? Why was his small force moving in circles?

Jackson's inexplicable moves made the Union generals delay the march on Richmond as they waited to figure out what he was up to. Meanwhile, the South was able to pour reinforcements into the town. A battle that could have crushed the Confederacy turned into a stalemate. Jackson used this tactic time and again when facing numerically superior forces. "Always mystify, mislead, and surprise the enemy, if possible," he said, "... such tactics will win every time and a small army may thus destroy a large one."

This law applies not only to war but to everyday situations. People are always trying to read the motives behind your actions and to use your predictability against you. Throw in a completely inexplicable move and you put them on the defensive. Because they do not understand you, they are unnerved, and in such a state you can easily intimidate them.

Pablo Picasso once remarked, "The best calculation is the absence of calculation. Once you have attained a certain level of recognition, others generally figure that when you do something, it's for an intelligent reason. So it's really foolish to plot out your movements too carefully in advance. You're better off acting capriciously."

For a while, Picasso worked with the art dealer Paul Rosenberg. At first he allowed him a fair amount of latitude in handling his paintings, then one day, for no apparent reason, he told the man he would no longer give him any work to sell. As Picasso explained, "Rosenberg would spend the next



forty-eight hours trying to figure out why. Was I reserving things for some other dealer? I'd go on working and sleeping and Rosenberg would spend his time figuring. In two days he'd come back, nerves jangled, anxious, saying, 'After all, dear friend, you wouldn't turn me down if I offered you this much [naming a substantially higher figure] for those paintings rather than the price I've been accustomed to paying you, would you?'"

Unpredictability is not only a weapon of terror: Scrambling your patterns on a day-to-day basis will cause a stir around you and stimulate interest. People will talk about you, ascribe motives and explanations that have nothing to do with the truth, but that keep you constantly in their minds. In the end, the more capricious you appear, the more respect you will garner. Only the terminally subordinate act in a predictable manner.

Image: The Cyclone. A  
wind that cannot be fore  
seen. Sudden shifts in  
the barometer, in  
explicable changes  
in direction and  
velocity. There is  
no defense: A  
cyclone sows  
terror and  
confusion.

Authority: The enlightened ruler is so mysterious that he seems to dwell nowhere, so inexplicable that no one can seek him. He reposes in nonaction above, and his ministers tremble below. (Han-fei-tzu, Chinese philosopher, third century B.C.)

## REVERSAL

Sometimes predictability can work in your favor: By creating a pattern for people to be familiar and comfortable with, you can lull them to sleep. They have prepared everything according to their preconceived notions about you. You can use this in several ways: First, it sets up a smoke screen, a comfortable front behind which you can carry on deceptive actions. Second, it allows you on rare occasions to do something completely against the pattern, unsettling your opponent so deeply he will fall to the ground without being pushed.

In 1974 Muhammad Ali and George Foreman were scheduled to fight for the world heavyweight boxing championship. Everyone knew what would happen: Big George Foreman would try to land a knockout punch while Ali would dance around him, wearing him out. That was Ali's way of fighting, his pattern, and he had not changed it in more than ten years. But in this case it seemed to give Foreman the advantage: He had a devastating punch, and if he waited, sooner or later Ali would have to come to him. Ali, the master strategist, had other plans: In press conferences before the big fight, he said he was going to change his style and punch it out with Foreman. No one, least of all Foreman, believed this for a second. That plan would be suicide on Ali's part; he was playing the comedian, as usual. Then, before the fight, Ali's trainer loosened the ropes around the ring, something a trainer would do if his boxer were intending to slug it out. But no one believed this ploy; it had to be a setup.

To everyone's amazement, Ali did exactly what he had said he would do. As Foreman waited for him to dance around, Ali went right up to him and slugged it out. He completely upset his opponent's strategy. At a loss, Foreman ended up wearing himself out, not by chasing Ali but by throwing punches wildly, and taking more and more counterpunches. Finally, Ali landed a dramatic right cross that knocked out Foreman. The habit of assuming that a person's behavior will fit its previous patterns is so strong that not even Ali's announcement of a strategy change was enough to upset it. Foreman walked into a trap—the trap he had been told to expect.

A warning: Unpredictability can work against you sometimes, especially if you are in a subordinate position. There are times when it is better to let people feel comfortable and settled around you than to disturb them. Too much unpredictability will be seen as a sign of indecisiveness, or even of some more serious psychic problem. Patterns are powerful, and you can terrify people by disrupting them. Such power should only be used judiciously.