

LAW 22

USE THE SURRENDER TACTIC: TRANSFORM WEAKNESS INTO POWER

JUDGMENT

When you are weaker, never fight for honor's sake; choose surrender instead. Surrender gives you time to recover, time to torment and irritate your conqueror, time to wait for his power to wane. Do not give him the satisfaction of fighting and defeating you—surrender first. By turning the other cheek you infuriate and unsettle him. Make surrender a tool of power.

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

The island of Melos is strategically situated in the heart of the Mediterranean. In classical times, the city of Athens dominated the sea and coastal areas around Greece, but Sparta, in the Peloponnese, had been Melos's original colonizer. During the Peloponnesian War, then, the Melians refused to ally themselves with Athens and remained loyal to Mother Sparta. In 416 B.C. the Athenians sent an expedition against Melos. Before launching an all-out attack, however, they dispatched a delegation to persuade the Melians to surrender and become an ally rather than suffer devastation and defeat.

THE CHESTNUT AND THE FIG TREE

A man who had climbed upon a certain fig tree, was bending the boughs toward him and plucking the ripe fruit, which he then put into his mouth to destroy and gnaw with his hard teeth. The chestnut, seeing this, tossed its long branches and with tumultuous rustle exclaimed: "Oh Fig! How much less protected by nature you are than I. See how my sweet offspring are set in close array; first clothed in soft wrappers over which is the hard but softly lined husk. And not content with this much care, nature has also given us these sharp and close-set spines, so that the hand of man cannot hurt us." Then the fig tree began to laugh, and after the laughter it said: "You know well that man is of such ingenuity that he will bereave even you of your children. But in your case he will do it by means of rods and stones; and when they are felled he will trample them with his feet or hit them with stones, so that your offspring will emerge from their armor crushed and maimed; while I am touched carefully by his hands, and never, like you, with roughness"

LEONARDO DAVINCI, 1452-1519

"You know as well as we do," the delegates said, "that the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel, and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." When the Melians responded that this denied the notion of

fair play, the Athenians said that those in power determined what was fair and what was not. The Melians argued that this authority belonged to the gods, not to mortals. “Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men,” replied a member of the Athenian delegation, “lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can.”

The Melians would not budge. Sparta, they insisted, would come to their defense. The Athenians countered that the Spartans were a conservative, practical people, and would not help Melos because they had nothing to gain and a lot to lose by doing so.

Finally the Melians began to talk of honor and the principle of resisting brute force. “Do not be led astray by a false sense of honor,” said the Athenians. “Honor often brings men to ruin when they are faced with an obvious danger that somehow affects their pride. There is nothing disgraceful in giving way to the greatest city in Hellas when she is offering you such reasonable terms.” The debate ended. The Melians discussed the issue among themselves, and decided to trust in the aid of the Spartans, the will of the gods, and the rightness of their cause. They politely declined the Athenians’ offer.

A few days later the Athenians invaded Melos. The Melians fought nobly, even without the Spartans, who did not come to their rescue. It took several attempts before the Athenians could surround and besiege their main city, but the Melians finally surrendered. The Athenians wasted no time—they put to death all the men of military age that they could capture, they sold the women and children as slaves, and they repopulated the island with their own colonists. Only a handful of Melians survived.

Interpretation

The Athenians were one of the most eminently practical people in history, and they made the most practical argument they could with the Melians: When you are weaker, there is nothing to be gained by fighting a useless fight. No one comes to help the weak—by doing so they would only put themselves in jeopardy. The weak are alone and must submit. Fighting gives you nothing to gain but martyrdom, and in the process a lot of people who do not believe in your cause will die.

Weakness is no sin, and can even become a strength if you learn how to play it right. Had the Melians surrendered in the first place, they would have been able to sabotage the Athenians in subtle ways, or might have gotten what they could have out of the alliance and then left it when the Athenians themselves were weakened, as in fact happened several years later. Fortunes change and the mighty are often brought down. Surrender conceals great power: Lulling the enemy into complacency, it gives you time to recoup, time to undermine, time for revenge. Never sacrifice that time in exchange for honor in a battle that you cannot win.

Voltaire was living in exile in London at a time when anti-French sentiment was at its highest. One day walking through the streets, he found himself surrounded by an angry crowd. "Hang him. Hang the Frenchman," they yelled. Voltaire calmly addressed the mob with the following words: "Men of England' You wish to kill me because I am a Frenchman. Am I not punished enough in not being born an Englishman?" The crowd cheered his thoughtful words, and escorted him safely back to his lodgings.

THE LITTLE, BROWN BOOK OF ANECDOTES. CLIFTON FADIMAN, ED., 1985

*Weak people never give way when they ought to.
Cardinal de Retz, 1613-1679*

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

Sometime in the 1920s the German writer Bertolt Brecht became a convert to the cause of Communism. From then on his plays, essays, and poems reflected his revolutionary fervor, and he generally tried to make his ideological statements as clear as possible. When Hitler came to power in Germany, Brecht and his Communist colleagues became marked men. He had many friends in the United States—Americans who sympathized with his beliefs, as well as fellow German intellectuals who had fled Hitler. In 1941, accordingly, Brecht emigrated to the United States, and chose to settle in Los Angeles, where he hoped to make a living in the film business.

Over the next few years Brecht wrote screenplays with a pointedly anticapitalist slant. He had little success in Hollywood, so in 1947, the war having ended, he decided to return to Europe. That same year, however, the U.S. Congress's House Un-American Activities Committee began its investigation into supposed Communist infiltration in Hollywood. It began to gather information on Brecht, who had so openly espoused Marxism, and on September 19, 1947, only a month before he had planned to leave the United States, he received a subpoena to appear before the committee. In addition to Brecht, a number of other writers, producers, and directors were summoned to appear as well, and this group came to be known as the Hollywood 19.

Before going to Washington, the Hollywood 19 met to decide on a plan of action. Their approach would be confrontational. Instead of answering questions about their membership, or lack of it, in the Communist Party, they would read prepared statements that would challenge the authority of the committee and argue that its activities were unconstitutional. Even if this strategy meant imprisonment, it would gain publicity for their cause.

Brecht disagreed. What good was it, he asked, to play the martyr and gain a little public sympathy if in the process they lost the ability to stage their plays and sell their scripts for years to come? He felt certain they were all more intelligent than the members of the committee. Why lower themselves to the level of their opponents by arguing with them? Why not outfox the committee by appearing to surrender to it while subtly mocking it? The

Hollywood 19 listened to Brecht politely, but decided to stick to their plan, leaving Brecht to go his own way.

The committee finally summoned Brecht on October 30. They expected him to do what others among the Hollywood 19 who had testified before him had done: Argue, refuse to answer questions, challenge the committee's right to hold its hearing, even yell and hurl insults. Much to their surprise, however, Brecht was the very picture of congeniality. He wore a suit (something he rarely did), smoked a cigar (he had heard that the committee chairman was a passionate cigar smoker), answered their questions politely, and generally deferred to their authority.

Unlike the other witnesses, Brecht answered the question of whether he belonged to the Communist Party: He was not a member, he said, which happened to be the truth. One committee member asked him, "Is it true you have written a number of revolutionary plays?" Brecht had written many plays with overt Communist messages, but he responded, "I have written a number of poems and songs and plays in the fight against Hitler and, of course, they can be considered, therefore, as revolutionary because I, of course, was for the overthrow of that government." This statement went unchallenged.

Brecht's English was more than adequate, but he used an interpreter throughout his testimony, a tactic that allowed him to play subtle games with language. When committee members found Communist leanings in lines from English editions of his poems, he would repeat the lines in German for the interpreter, who would then retranslate them; and somehow they would come out innocuous. At one point a committee member read one of Brecht's revolutionary poems out loud in English, and asked him if he had written it. "No," he responded, "I wrote a German poem, which is very different from this." The author's elusive answers baffled the committee members, but his politeness and the way he yielded to their authority made it impossible for them to get angry with him.

After only an hour of questioning, the committee members had had enough. "Thank you very much," said the chairman, "You are a good example to the [other] witnesses." Not only did they free him, they offered to help him if he had any trouble with immigration officials who might detain him for their own reasons. The following day, Brecht left the United States, never to return.

Interpretation

The Hollywood 19's confrontational approach won them a lot of sympathy, and years later they gained a kind of vindication in public opinion. But they were also blacklisted, and lost valuable years of profitable working time. Brecht, on the other hand, expressed his disgust at the committee more indirectly. It was not that he changed his beliefs or compromised his values; instead, during his short testimony, he kept the upper hand by appearing to yield while all the time running circles around the committee with vague responses, outright lies that went unchallenged because they were wrapped in enigmas, and word games. In the end he kept the freedom to continue his revolutionary writing (as opposed to suffering imprisonment or detainment in the United States), even while subtly mocking the committee and its authority with his pseudo-obedience.

Keep in mind the following: People trying to make a show of their authority are easily deceived by the surrender tactic. Your outward sign of submission makes them feel important; satisfied that you respect them, they become easier targets for a later counterattack, or for the kind of indirect ridicule used by Brecht. Measuring your power over time, never sacrifice long-term maneuverability for the short-lived glories of martyrdom.

*When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.
Ethiopian proverb*

KEYS TO POWER

What gets us into trouble in the realm of power is often our own overreaction to the moves of our enemies and rivals. That overreaction creates problems we would have avoided had we been more reasonable. It also has an endless rebound effect, for the enemy then overreacts as well, much as the Athenians did to the Melians. It is always our first instinct to react, to meet aggression with some other kind of aggression. But the next time someone pushes you and you find yourself starting to react, try this: Do not resist or fight back, but yield, turn the other cheek, bend. You will find that this often neutralizes their behavior—they expected, even wanted you to react with force and so they are caught off-guard and confounded by your lack of resistance. By yielding, you in fact control the situation, because your surrender is part of a larger plan to lull them into believing they have defeated you.

This is the essence of the surrender tactic: Inwardly you stay firm, but outwardly you bend. Deprived of a reason to get angry, your opponents will often be bewildered instead. And they are unlikely to react with more violence, which would demand a reaction from you. Instead you are allowed the time and space to plot the countermoves that will bring them down. In the battle of the intelligent against the brutal and the aggressive, the surrender tactic is the supreme weapon. It does require self-control: Those who genuinely surrender give up their freedom, and may be crushed by the humiliation of their defeat. You have to remember that you only *appear* to surrender, like the animal that plays dead to save its hide.

We have seen that it can be better to surrender than to fight; faced with a more powerful opponent and a sure defeat, it is often also better to surrender than to run away. Running away may save you for the time being, but the aggressor will eventually catch up with you. If you surrender instead, you have an opportunity to coil around your enemy and strike with your fangs from close up.

In 473 B.C., in ancient China, King Goujian of Yue suffered a horrible defeat from the ruler of Wu in the battle of Fujiao. Goujian wanted to flee, but he had an adviser who told him to surrender and to place himself in the

service of the ruler of Wu, from which position he could study the man and plot his revenge. Deciding to follow this advice, Goujian gave the ruler all of his riches, and went to work in his conqueror's stables as the lowest servant. For three years he humbled himself before the ruler, who then, finally satisfied of his loyalty, allowed him to return home. Inwardly, however, Goujian had spent those three years gathering information and plotting revenge. When a terrible drought struck Wu, and the kingdom was weakened by inner turmoil, he raised an army, invaded, and won with ease. That is the power behind surrender: It gives you the time and the flexibility to plot a devastating counterblow. Had Goujian run away, he would have lost this chance.

When foreign trade began to threaten Japanese independence in the mid-nineteenth century, the Japanese debated how to defeat the foreigners. One minister, Hotta Masayoshi, wrote a memorandum in 1857 that influenced Japanese policy for years to come: "I am therefore convinced that our policy should be to conclude friendly alliances, to send ships to foreign countries everywhere and conduct trade, to copy the foreigners where they are at their best and so repair our own shortcomings, to foster our national strength and complete our armaments, and so gradually subject the foreigners to our influence until in the end all the countries of the world know the blessings of perfect tranquillity and our hegemony is acknowledged throughout the globe." This is a brilliant application of the Law: Use surrender to gain access to your enemy. Learn his ways, insinuate yourself with him slowly, outwardly conform to his customs, but inwardly maintain your own culture. Eventually you will emerge victorious, for while he considers you weak and inferior, and takes no precautions against you, you are using the time to catch up and surpass him. This soft, permeable form of invasion is often the best, for the enemy has nothing to react against, prepare for, or resist. And had Japan resisted Western influence by force, it might well have suffered a devastating invasion that would have permanently altered its culture.

Surrender can also offer a way of mocking your enemies, of turning their power against them, as it did for Brecht. Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke*, based on the author's experiences in a penal camp in Czechoslovakia, tells the story of how the prison guards organized a relay race, guards against prisoners. For the guards this was a chance to show off their physical superiority. The prisoners knew they were expected to lose, so they went

out of their way to oblige—miming exaggerated exertion while barely moving, running a few yards and collapsing, limping, jogging ever so slowly while the guards raced ahead at full speed. Both by joining the race and by losing it, they had obliged the guards obediently; but their “overobedience” had mocked the event to the point of ruining it.

Overobedience—surrender—was here a way to demonstrate superiority in a reverse manner. Resistance would have engaged the prisoners in the cycle of violence, lowering them to the guards’ level. *Overobeying* the guards, however, made them ridiculous, yet they could not rightly punish the prisoners, who had only done what they asked.

Power is always in flux—since the game is by nature fluid, and an arena of constant struggle, those with power almost always find themselves eventually on the downward swing. If you find yourself temporarily weakened, the surrender tactic is perfect for raising yourself up again—it disguises your ambition; it teaches you patience and self-control, key skills in the game; and it puts you in the best possible position for taking advantage of your oppressor’s sudden slide. If you run away or fight back, in the long run you cannot win. If you surrender, you will almost always emerge victorious.

Image: An Oak
Tree. The oak
that resists the
wind loses its
branches one
by one, and
with nothing
left to protect
it, the trunk fi-
nally snaps.

The oak that
bends lives long-
er, its trunk grow-
ing wider, its roots
deeper and more tenacious.

Authority: Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let them have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. (Jesus Christ, in *Matthew* 5:38-41)

REVERSAL

The point of surrendering is to save your hide for a later date when you can reassert yourself. It is precisely to avoid martyrdom that one surrenders, but there are times when the enemy will not relent, and martyrdom seems the only way out. Furthermore, if you are willing to die, others may gain power and inspiration from your example.

Yet martyrdom, surrender's reversal, is a messy, inexact tactic, and is as violent as the aggression it combats. For every famous martyr there are thousands more who have inspired neither a religion nor a rebellion, so that if martyrdom does sometimes grant a certain power, it does so unpredictably. More important, you will not be around to enjoy that power, such as it is. And there is finally something selfish and arrogant about martyrs, as if they felt their followers were less important than their own glory.

When power deserts you, it is best to ignore this Law's reversal. Leave martyrdom alone: The pendulum will swing back your way eventually, and you should stay alive to see it.