

LAW 29

PLAN ALL THE WAY TO THE END

JUDGMENT

The ending is everything. Plan all the way to it, taking into account all the possible consequences, obstacles, and twists of fortune that might reverse your hard work and give the glory to others. By planning to the end you will not be overwhelmed by circumstances and you will know when to stop. Gently guide fortune and help determine the future by thinking far ahead.

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

In 1510 a ship set out from the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) for Venezuela, where it was to rescue a besieged Spanish colony. Several miles out of port, a stowaway climbed out of a provision chest: Vasco Núñez de Balboa, a noble Spaniard who had come to the New World in search of gold but had fallen into debt and had escaped his creditors by hiding in the chest.

There are very few men—and they are the exceptions—who are able to think and feel beyond the present moment.

CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, 1780-1831

Balboa had been obsessed with gold ever since Columbus had returned to Spain from his voyages with tales of a fabulous but as yet undiscovered kingdom called El Dorado. Balboa was one of the first adventurers to come in search of Columbus's land of gold, and he had decided from the beginning that he would be the one to find it, through sheer audacity and single-mindedness. Now that he was free of his creditors, nothing would stop him.

Unfortunately the ship's owner, a wealthy jurist named Francisco Fernández de Enciso, was furious when told of the stowaway, and he ordered that Balboa be left on the first island they came across. Before they found any island, however, Enciso received news that the colony he was to rescue had been abandoned. This was Balboa's chance. He told the sailors of his previous voyages to Panama, and of the rumors he had heard of gold in the area. The excited sailors convinced Enciso to spare Balboa's life, and to establish a colony in Panama. Weeks later they named their new settlement "Darien."

Darien's first governor was Enciso, but Balboa was not a man to let others steal the initiative. He campaigned against Enciso among the sailors, who eventually made it clear that they preferred him as governor. Enciso fled to Spain, fearing for his life. Months later, when a representative of the

Spanish crown arrived to establish himself as the new, official governor of Darien, he was turned away. On his return voyage to Spain, this man drowned; the drowning was accidental, but under Spanish law, Balboa had murdered the governor and usurped his position.

Balboa's bravado had got him out of scrapes before, but now his hopes of wealth and glory seemed doomed. To lay claim to El Dorado, should he discover it, he would need the approval of the Spanish king—which, as an outlaw, he would never receive. There was only one solution. Panamanian Indians had told Balboa of a vast ocean on the other side of the Central American isthmus, and had said that by traveling south upon this western coast, he would reach a fabulous land of gold, called by a name that to his ears sounded like "Biru." Balboa decided he would cross the treacherous jungles of Panama and become the first European to bathe his feet in this new ocean. From there he would march on El Dorado. If he did this on Spain's behalf, he would obtain the eternal gratitude of the king, and would secure his own reprieve—only he had to act before Spanish authorities came to arrest him.

THE TWO FROGS

Two frogs dwelt in the same pool. The pool being dried up under the summer's heat, they left it, and set out together to seek another home. As they went along they chanced to pass a deep well, amply supplied with water, on seeing which one of the frogs said to the other: "Let us descend and make our abode in this well, it will furnish us with shelter and food." The other replied with greater caution: "But suppose the water should fail us, how can we get out again from so great a depth?" Do nothing without a regard to the consequences.

FABLES, AESOP, SIXTH CENTURY B.C.

In 1513, then, Balboa set out, with 190 soldiers. Halfway across the isthmus (some ninety miles wide at that point), only sixty soldiers remained, many having succumbed to the harsh conditions—the blood-sucking insects, the torrential rainfall, fever. Finally, from a mountaintop, Balboa became the first European to lay eyes on the Pacific Ocean. Days later he marched in his armor into its waters, bearing the banner of Castile

and claiming all its seas, lands, and islands in the name of the Spanish throne.

Look to the end, no matter what it is you are considering. Often enough, God gives a man a glimpse of happiness, and then utterly ruins him.

THE HISTORIES, HERODOTUS, FIFTH CENTURY B.C.

Indians from the area greeted Balboa with gold, jewels, and precious pearls, the like of which he had never seen. When he asked where these had come from, the Indians pointed south, to the land of the Incas. But Balboa had only a few soldiers left. For the moment, he decided, he should return to Darien, send the jewels and gold to Spain as a token of good will, and ask for a large army to aid him in the conquest of El Dorado.

When news reached Spain of Balboa's bold crossing of the isthmus, his discovery of the western ocean, and his planned conquest of El Dorado, the former criminal became a hero. He was instantly proclaimed governor of the new land. But before the king and queen received word of his discovery, they had already sent a dozen ships, under the command of a man named Pedro Arias Dávila, "Pedrarias," with orders to arrest Balboa for murder and to take command of the colony. By the time Pedrarias arrived in Panama, he had learned that Balboa had been pardoned, and that he was to share the governorship with the former outlaw.

All the same, Balboa felt uneasy. Gold was his dream, El Dorado his only desire. In pursuit of this goal he had nearly died many times over, and to share the wealth and glory with a newcomer would be intolerable. He also soon discovered that Pedrarias was a jealous, bitter man, and equally unhappy with the situation. Once again, the only solution for Balboa was to seize the initiative by proposing to cross the jungle with a larger army, carrying ship-building materials and tools. Once on the Pacific coast, he would create an armada with which to conquer the Incas. Surprisingly enough, Pedrarias agreed to the plan—perhaps sensing it would never work. Hundreds died in this second march through the jungle, and the timber they carried rotted in the torrential rains. Balboa, as usual, was undaunted—no power in the world could thwart his plan—and on arriving at the Pacific he began to cut down trees for new lumber. But the men remaining to him were too few and too weak to mount an invasion, and once again Balboa had to return to Darien.

Pedrarias had in any case invited Balboa back to discuss a new plan, and on the outskirts of the settlement, the explorer was met by Francisco Pizarro, an old friend who had accompanied him on his first crossing of the isthmus. But this was a trap: Leading one hundred soldiers, Pizarro surrounded his former friend, arrested him, and returned him to Pedrarias, who tried him on charges of rebellion. A few days later Balboa's head fell into a basket, along with those of his most trusted followers. Years later Pizarro himself reached Peru, and Balboa's deeds were forgotten.

THE KING, THE SUFI, AND THE SURGEON

In ancient times a king of Tartary was out walking with some of his noblemen. At the roadside was an abdal (a wandering Sufi), who cried out: "Whoever will give me a hundred dinars, I will give him some good advice." The king stopped, and said: "Abdal, what is this good advice for a hundred dinars?" "Sir," answered the abdal, "order the sum to be given to me, and I will tell it you immediately." The king did so, expecting to hear something extraordinary. The dervish said to him: "My advice is this: Never begin anything until you have reflected what will be the end of it." At this the nobles and everyone else present laughed, saying that the abdal had been wise to ask for his money in advance. But the king said: "You have no reason to laugh at the good advice this abdal has given me. No one is unaware of the fact that we should think well before doing anything. But we are daily guilty of not remembering, and the consequences are evil. I very much value this dervish's advice. "

The king decided to bear the advice always in his mind, and commanded it to be written in gold on the walls and even engraved on his silver plate. Not long afterward a plotter desired to kill the king. He bribed the royal surgeon with a promise of the prime ministership if he thrust a poisoned lancet into the king's arm. When the time came to let some of the king's blood, a silver basin was placed to catch the blood. Suddenly the surgeon became aware of the words engraved upon it: "Never begin anything until you have reflected what will be the end of it." It was only then that he realized that if the plotter became king he could have the surgeon killed instantly, and would not need to fulfill his bargain.

The king, seeing that the surgeon was now trembling, asked him what was wrong with him. And so he confessed the truth, at that very moment.

The plotter was seized; and the king sent for all the people who had been present when the abdal gave his advice, and said to them: "Do you still laugh at the dervish?"

CARAVAN OF DREAMS, IDRIES SHAH, 1968

Interpretation

Most men are ruled by the heart, not the head. Their plans are vague, and when they meet obstacles they improvise. But improvisation will only bring you as far as the next crisis, and is never a substitute for thinking several steps ahead and planning to the end.

Balboa had a dream of glory and wealth, and a vague plan to reach it. Yet his bold deeds, and his discovery of the Pacific, are largely forgotten, for he committed what in the world of power is the ultimate sin: He went part way, leaving the door open for others to take over. A real man of power would have had the prudence to see the dangers in the distance—the rivals who would want to share in the conquests, the vultures that would hover once they heard the word “gold.” Balboa should have kept his knowledge of the Incas secret until after he had conquered Peru. Only then would his wealth, and his head, have been secure. Once Pedrarias arrived on the scene, a man of power and prudence would have schemed to kill or imprison him, and to take over the army he had brought for the conquest of Peru. But Balboa was locked in the moment, always reacting emotionally, never thinking ahead.

What good is it to have the greatest dream in the world if others reap the benefits and the glory? Never lose your head over a vague, open-ended dream—plan to the end.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

In 1863 the Prussian premier Otto von Bismarck surveyed the chessboard of European power as it then stood. The main players were England, France, and Austria. Prussia itself was one of several states in the loosely allied German Federation. Austria, dominant member of the Federation, made sure that the other German states remained weak, divided and submissive. Bismarck believed that Prussia was destined for something far greater than servant boy to Austria.

This is how Bismarck played the game. His first move was to start a war with lowly Denmark, in order to recover the former Prussian lands of Schleswig-Holstein. He knew that these rumblings of Prussian independence might worry France and England, so he enlisted Austria in the war, claiming that he was recovering Schleswig-Holstein for their benefit. In a few months, after the war was decided, Bismarck demanded that the newly conquered lands be made part of Prussia. The Austrians of course were furious, but they compromised: First they agreed to give the Prussians Schleswig, and a year later they sold them Holstein. The world began to see that Austria was weakening and that Prussia was on the rise.

Bismarck's next move was his boldest: In 1866 he convinced King William of Prussia to withdraw from the German Federation, and in doing so to go to war with Austria itself. King William's wife, his son the crown prince, and the princes of the other German kingdoms vehemently opposed such a war. But Bismarck, undaunted, succeeded in forcing the conflict, and Prussia's superior army defeated the Austrians in the brutally short Seven Weeks War. The king and the Prussian generals then wanted to march on Vienna, taking as much land from Austria as possible. But Bismarck stopped them—now he presented himself as on the side of peace. The result was that he was able to conclude a treaty with Austria that granted Prussia and the other German states total autonomy. Bismarck could now position Prussia as the dominant power in Germany and the head of a newly formed North German Confederation.

The French and the English began to compare Bismarck to Attila the Hun, and to fear that he had designs on all of Europe. Once he had started

on the path to conquest, there was no telling where he would stop. And, indeed, three years later Bismarck provoked a war with France. First he appeared to give his permission to France's annexation of Belgium, then at the last moment he changed his mind. Playing a cat-and-mouse game, he infuriated the French emperor, Napoleon III, and stirred up his own king against the French. To no one's surprise, war broke out in 1870. The newly formed German federation enthusiastically joined in the war on France, and once again the Prussian military machine and its allies destroyed the enemy army in a matter of months. Although Bismarck opposed taking any French land, the generals convinced him that Alsace-Lorraine would become part of the federation.

Now all of Europe feared the next move of the Prussian monster, led by Bismarck, the "Iron Chancellor." And in fact a year later Bismarck founded the German Empire, with the Prussian king as the newly crowned emperor and Bismarck himself a prince. But then something strange happened: Bismarck instigated no more wars. And while the other European powers grabbed up land for colonies in other continents, he severely limited Germany's colonial acquisitions. He did not want more land for Germany, but more security. For the rest of his life he struggled to maintain peace in Europe and to prevent further wars. Everybody assumed he had changed, mellowing with the years. They had failed to understand: This was the final move of his original plan.

He who asks fortune-tellers the future unwittingly forfeits an inner intimation of coming events that is a thousand times more exact than anything they may say.

WALTER BENJAMIN, 1892-1940

Interpretation

There is a simple reason why most men never know when to come off the attack: They form no concrete idea of their goal. Once they achieve victory they only hunger for more. To stop—to aim for a goal and then keep to it—seems almost inhuman, in fact; yet nothing is more critical to the maintenance of power. The person who goes too far in his triumphs creates a reaction that inevitably leads to a decline. The only solution is to plan for the long run. Foresee the future with as much clarity as the gods on Mount Olympus, who look through the clouds and see the ends of all things.

From the beginning of his career in politics, Bismarck had one goal: to form an independent German state led by Prussia. He instigated the war with Denmark not to conquer territory but to stir up Prussian nationalism and unite the country. He incited the war with Austria only to gain Prussian independence. (This was why he refused to grab Austrian territory.) And he fomented the war with France to unite the German kingdoms against a common enemy, and thus to prepare for the formation of a united Germany.

Once this was achieved, Bismarck stopped. He never let triumph go to his head, was never tempted by the siren call of more. He held the reins tightly, and whenever the generals, or the king, or the Prussian people demanded new conquests, he held them back. Nothing would spoil the beauty of his creation, certainly not a false euphoria that pushed those around him to attempt to go past the end that he had so carefully planned.

Experience shows that, if one foresees from far away the designs to be undertaken, one can act with speed when the moment comes to execute them.

Cardinal Richelieu, 1585-1642

KEYS TO POWER

According to the cosmology of the ancient Greeks, the gods were thought to have complete vision into the future. They saw everything to come, right down to the intricate details. Men, on the other hand, were seen as victims of fate, trapped in the moment and their emotions, unable to see beyond immediate dangers. Those heroes, such as Odysseus, who were able to look beyond the present and plan several steps ahead, seemed to defy fate, to approximate the gods in their ability to determine the future. The comparison is still valid—those among us who think further ahead and patiently bring their plans to fruition seem to have a godlike power.

Because most people are too imprisoned in the moment to plan with this kind of foresight, the ability to ignore immediate dangers and pleasures translates into power. It is the power of being able to overcome the natural human tendency to react to things as they happen, and instead to train oneself to step back, imagining the larger things taking shape beyond one's immediate vision. Most people believe that they are in fact aware of the future, that they are planning and thinking ahead. They are usually deluded: What they are really doing is succumbing to their desires, to what they want the future to be. Their plans are vague, based on their imaginations rather than their reality. They may believe they are thinking all the way to the end, but they are really only focusing on the happy ending, and deluding themselves by the strength of their desire.

In 415 B.C., the ancient Athenians attacked Sicily, believing their expedition would bring them riches, power, and a glorious ending to the sixteen-year Peloponnesian War. They did not consider the dangers of an invasion so far from home; they did not foresee that the Sicilians would fight all the harder since the battles were in their own homeland, or that all of Athens's enemies would band together against them, or that war would break out on several fronts, stretching their forces way too thin. The Sicilian expedition was a complete disaster, leading to the destruction of one of the greatest civilizations of all time. The Athenians were led into this disaster by their hearts, not their minds. They saw only the chance of glory, not the dangers that loomed in the distance.

Cardinal de Retz, the seventeenth-century Frenchman who prided himself on his insights into human schemes and why they mostly fail, analyzed this phenomenon. In the course of a rebellion he spearheaded against the French monarchy in 1651, the young king, Louis XIV, and his court had suddenly left Paris and established themselves in a palace outside the capital. The presence of the king so close to the heart of the revolution had been a tremendous burden on the revolutionaries, and they breathed a sigh of relief. This later proved their downfall, however, since the court's absence from Paris gave it much more room to maneuver. "The most ordinary cause of people's mistakes," Cardinal de Retz later wrote, "is their being too much frightened at the present danger, and not enough so at that which is remote."

The dangers that are remote, that loom in the distance—if we can see them as they take shape, how many mistakes we avoid. How many plans we would instantly abort if we realized we were avoiding a small danger only to step into a larger one. So much of power is not what you do but what you do not do—the rash and foolish actions that you refrain from before they get you into trouble. Plan in detail before you act—do not let vague plans lead you into trouble. Will this have unintended consequences? Will I stir up new enemies? Will someone else take advantage of my labors? Unhappy endings are much more common than happy ones—do not be swayed by the happy ending in your mind.

The French elections of 1848 came down to a struggle between Louis-Adolphe Thiers, the man of order, and General Louis Eugène Cavaignac, the rabble-rouser of the right. When Thiers realized he was hopelessly behind in this high-stakes race, he searched desperately for a solution. His eye fell on Louis Bonaparte, grand-nephew of the great general Napoleon, and a lowly deputy in the parliament. This Bonaparte seemed a bit of an imbecile, but his name alone could get him elected in a country yearning for a strong ruler. He would be Thiers's puppet and eventually would be pushed offstage. The first part of the plan worked to perfection, and Napoleon was elected by a large margin. The problem was that Thiers had not foreseen one simple fact: This "imbecile" was in fact a man of enormous ambition. Three years later he dissolved parliament, declared himself emperor, and ruled France for another eighteen years, much to the horror of Thiers and his party.

The ending is everything. It is the end of the action that determines who gets the glory, the money, the prize. Your conclusion must be crystal clear,

and you must keep it constantly in mind. You must also figure out how to ward off the vultures circling overhead, trying to live off the carcass of your creation. And you must anticipate the many possible crises that will tempt you to improvise. Bismarck overcame these dangers because he planned to the end, kept on course through every crisis, and never let others steal the glory. Once he had reached his stated goal, he withdrew into his shell like a turtle. This kind of self-control is godlike.

When you see several steps ahead, and plan your moves all the way to the end, you will no longer be tempted by emotion or by the desire to improvise. Your clarity will rid you of the anxiety and vagueness that are the primary reasons why so many fail to conclude their actions successfully. You see the ending and you tolerate no deviation.

Image:
The Gods on
Mount Olympus.
Looking down on
human actions from the
clouds, they see in advance the
endings of all the great dreams that
lead to disaster and tragedy. And
they laugh at our inability to see beyond
the moment, and at how we delude ourselves.

Authority: How much easier it is never to get in than to get yourself out! We should act contrary to the reed which, when it first appears, throws up a long straight stem but afterwards, as though it were exhausted ... makes several dense knots, indicating that it no longer has its original vigor and drive. We must rather begin gently and coolly, saving our breath for the

encounter and our vigorous thrusts for finishing off the job. In their beginnings it is we who guide affairs and hold them in our power; but so often once they are set in motion, it is they which guide us and sweep us along. (Montaigne, 1533-1592)

REVERSAL

It is a cliché among strategists that your plan must include alternatives and have a degree of flexibility. That is certainly true. If you are locked into a plan too rigidly, you will be unable to deal with sudden shifts of fortune. Once you have examined the future possibilities and decided on your target, you must build in alternatives and be open to new routes toward your goal.

Most people, however, lose less from overplanning and rigidity than from vagueness and a tendency to improvise constantly in the face of circumstance. There is no real purpose in contemplating a reversal to this Law, then, for no good can come from refusing to think far into the future and planning to the end. If you are clear- and far-thinking enough, you will understand that the future is uncertain, and that you must be open to adaptation. Only having a clear objective and a far-reaching plan allows you that freedom.