

LAW 33

DISCOVER EACH MAN'S THUMBSCREW

JUDGMENT

Everyone has a weakness, a gap in the castle wall. That weakness is usually an insecurity, an uncontrollable emotion or need; it can also be a small secret pleasure. Either way, once found, it is a thumbscrew you can turn to your advantage.

FINDING THE THUMBSCREW: A Strategic Plan of Action

We all have resistances. We live with a perpetual armor around ourselves to defend against change and the intrusive actions of friends and rivals. We would like nothing more than to be left to do things our own way. Constantly butting up against these resistances will cost you a lot of energy. One of the most important things to realize about people, though, is that they all have a weakness, some part of their psychological armor that will not resist, that will bend to your will if you find it and push on it. Some people wear their weaknesses openly, others disguise them. Those who disguise them are often the ones most effectively undone through that one chink in their armor.

THE LION, THE CHAMOIS, AND THE FOX

A lion was chasing a chamois along a valley. He had all but caught it, and with longing eyes was anticipating a certain and a satisfying repast. It seemed as if it were utterly impossible for the victim to escape; for a deep ravine appeared to bar the way for both the hunter and the hunted. But the nimble chamois, gathering together all its strength, shot like an arrow from a bow across the chasm, and stood still on the rocky cliff on the other side. Our lion pulled up short. But at that moment a friend of his happened to be near at hand. That friend was the fox. "What!" said he, "with your strength and agility, is it possible that you will yield to a feeble chamois? You have only to will, and you will be able to work wonders. Though the abyss be deep, yet, if you are only in earnest, I am certain you will clear it. Surely you can confide in my disinterested friendship. I would not expose your life to danger if I were not so well aware of your strength and dexterity." The lion's blood waxed hot, and began to boil in his veins. He flung himself with all his might into space. But he could not clear the chasm; so down he tumbled headlong, and was killed by the fall. Then what did his dear friend do? He cautiously made his way down to the bottom of the ravine. and there, out in the open space and the free air, seeing that the lion wanted neither flattery nor obedience now, he set to work to pay the last sad rites to his dead friend, and in a month picked his bones clean.

FABLES, IVAN KRILOFF, 1768-1844

In planning your assault, keep these principles in mind:

Pay Attention to Gestures and Unconscious Signals. As Sigmund Freud remarked, “No mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.” This is a critical concept in the search for a person’s weakness—it is revealed by seemingly unimportant gestures and passing words.

The key is not only what you look for but where and how you look. Everyday conversation supplies the richest mine of weaknesses, so train yourself to listen. Start by always seeming interested—the appearance of a sympathetic ear will spur anyone to talk. A clever trick, often used by the nineteenth-century French statesman Talleyrand, is to appear to open up to the other person, to share a secret with them. It can be completely made up, or it can be real but of no great importance to you—the important thing is that it should *seem* to come from the heart. This will usually elicit a response that is not only as frank as yours but more genuine—a response that reveals a weakness.

If you suspect that someone has a particular soft spot, probe for it indirectly. If, for instance, you sense that a man has a need to be loved, openly flatter him. If he laps up your compliments, no matter how obvious, you are on the right track. Train your eye for details—how someone tips a waiter, what delights a person, the hidden messages in clothes. Find people’s idols, the things they worship and will do anything to get—perhaps you can be the supplier of their fantasies. Remember: Since we all try to hide our weaknesses, there is little to be learned from our conscious behavior. What oozes out in the little things outside our conscious control is what you want to know.

Find the Helpless Child. Most weaknesses begin in childhood, before the self builds up compensatory defenses. Perhaps the child was pampered or indulged in a particular area, or perhaps a certain emotional need went unfulfilled; as he or she grows older, the indulgence or the deficiency may

be buried but never disappears. Knowing about a childhood need gives you a powerful key to a person's weakness.

One sign of this weakness is that when you touch on it the person will often act like a child. Be on the lookout, then, for any behavior that should have been outgrown. If your victims or rivals went without something important, such as parental support, when they were children, supply it, or its facsimile. If they reveal a secret taste, a hidden indulgence, indulge it. In either case they will be unable to resist you.

Look for Contrasts. An overt trait often conceals its opposite. People who thump their chests are often big cowards; a prudish exterior may hide a lascivious soul; the uptight are often screaming for adventure; the shy are dying for attention. By probing beyond appearances, you will often find people's weaknesses in the opposite of the qualities they reveal to you.

Find the Weak Link. Sometimes in your search for weaknesses it is not what but who that matters. In today's versions of the court, there is often someone behind the scenes who has a great deal of power, a tremendous influence over the person superficially on top. These behind-the-scenes powerbrokers are the group's weak link: Win their favor and you indirectly influence the king. Alternatively, even in a group of people acting with the appearance of one will—as when a group under attack closes ranks to resist an outsider—there is always a weak link in the chain. Find the one person who will bend under pressure.

Fill the Void. The two main emotional voids to fill are insecurity and unhappiness. The insecure are suckers for any kind of social validation; as for the chronically unhappy, look for the roots of their unhappiness. The insecure and the unhappy are the people least able to disguise their weaknesses. The ability to fill their emotional voids is a great source of power, and an indefinitely prolongable one.

Feed on Uncontrollable Emotions. The uncontrollable emotion can be a paranoid fear—a fear disproportionate to the situation—or any base motive

such as lust, greed, vanity, or hatred. People in the grip of these emotions often cannot control themselves, and you can do the controlling for them.

IRVING LAZAR

[Hollywood super-agent] Irving Paul Lazar was once anxious to sell [studio mogul] Jack L. Warner a play. "I had a long meeting with him today," Lazar explained [to screenwriter Garson Kanin], "but I didn't mention it, I didn't even bring it up." "Why not?" I asked. "Because I'm going to wait until the weekend after next, when I go to Palm Springs." "I don't understand." "You don't? I go to Palm Springs every weekend, but Warner isn't going this weekend. He's got a preview or something. So he's not coming down till the next weekend, so that's when I'm going to bring it up." "Irving, I'm more and more confused." "Look," said Irving impatiently, "I know what I'm doing. I know how to sell Warner. This is a type of material that he's uneasy with, so I have to hit him with it hard and suddenly to get an okay." "But why Palm Springs?" "Because in Palm Springs, every day he goes to the baths at The Spa. And that's where I'm going to be when he's there. Now there's a thing about Jack: He's eighty and he's very vain, and he doesn't like people to see him naked. So when I walk up to him naked at The Spa—I mean he's naked—well, I'm naked too, but I don't care who sees me. He does. And I walk up to him naked, and I start to talk to him about this thing, he'll be very embarrassed. And he'll want to get away from me, and the easiest way is to say 'Yes,' because he knows if he says 'No,' then I'm going to stick with him, and stay right on it, and not give up. So to get rid of me, he'll probably say, 'Yes.'" Two weeks later, I read of the acquisition of this particular property by Warner Brothers. I phoned Lazar and asked how it had been accomplished. "How do you think?" he asked. "In the buff, that's how... just the way I told you it was going to work."

HOLLYWOOD, GARSON KANIN, 1974

OBSERVANCES OF THE LAW

Observance I

In 1615 the thirty-year-old bishop of Luçon, later known as Cardinal Richelieu, gave a speech before representatives of the three estates of France—clergy, nobility, and commoners. Richelieu had been chosen to serve as the mouthpiece for the clergy—an immense responsibility for a man still young and not particularly well known. On all of the important issues of the day, the speech followed the Church line. But near the end of it Richelieu did something that had nothing to do with the Church and everything to do with his career. He turned to the throne of the fifteen-year-old King Louis XIII, and to the Queen Mother Marie de' Médicis, who sat beside Louis, as the regent ruling France until her son reached his majority. Everyone expected Richelieu to say the usual kind words to the young king. Instead, however, he looked directly at and only at the queen mother. Indeed his speech ended in long and fulsome praise of her, praise so glowing that it actually offended some in the Church. But the smile on the queen's face as she lapped up Richelieu's compliments was unforgettable.

A year later the queen mother appointed Richelieu secretary of state for foreign affairs, an incredible coup for the young bishop. He had now entered the inner circle of power, and he studied the workings of the court as if it were the machinery of a watch. An Italian, Concino Concini, was the queen mother's favorite, or rather her lover, a role that made him perhaps the most powerful man in France. Concini was vain and foppish, and Richelieu played him perfectly—attending to him as if he were the king. Within months Richelieu had become one of Concini's favorites. But something happened in 1617 that turned everything upside down: the young king, who up until then had shown every sign of being an idiot, had Concini murdered and his most important associates imprisoned. In so doing Louis took command of the country with one blow, sweeping the queen mother aside.

Had Richelieu played it wrong? He had been close to both Concini and Marie de Médicis, whose advisers and ministers were now all out of favor,

some even arrested. The queen mother herself was shut up in the Louvre, a virtual prisoner. Richelieu wasted no time. If everyone was deserting Marie de Médicis, he would stand by her. He knew Louis could not get rid of her, for the king was still very young, and had in any case always been inordinately attached to her. As Marie's only remaining powerful friend, Richelieu filled the valuable function of liaison between the king and his mother. In return he received her protection, and was able to survive the palace coup, even to thrive. Over the next few years the queen mother grew still more dependent on him, and in 1622 she repaid him for his loyalty: Through the intercession of her allies in Rome, Richelieu was elevated to the powerful rank of cardinal.

By 1623 King Louis was in trouble. He had no one he could trust to advise him, and although he was now a young man instead of a boy, he remained childish in spirit, and affairs of state came hard to him. Now that he had taken the throne, Marie was no longer the regent and theoretically had no power, but she still had her son's ear, and she kept telling him that Richelieu was his only possible savior. At first Louis would have none of it—he hated the cardinal with a passion, only tolerating him out of love for Marie. In the end, however, isolated in the court and crippled by his own indecisiveness, he yielded to his mother and made Richelieu first his chief councilor and later prime minister.

Now Richelieu no longer needed Marie de Médicis. He stopped visiting and courting her, stopped listening to her opinions, even argued with her and opposed her wishes. Instead he concentrated on the king, making himself indispensable to his new master. All the previous premiers, understanding the king's childishness, had tried to keep him out of trouble; the shrewd Richelieu played him differently, deliberately pushing him into one ambitious project after another, such as a crusade against the Huguenots and finally an extended war with Spain. The immensity of these projects only made the king more dependent on his powerful premier, the only man able to keep order in the realm. And so, for the next eighteen years, Richelieu, exploiting the king's weaknesses, governed and molded France according to his own vision, unifying the country and making it a strong European power for centuries to come.

Interpretation

Richelieu saw everything as a military campaign, and no strategic move was more important to him than discovering his enemy's weaknesses and applying pressure to them. As early as his speech in 1615, he was looking for the weak link in the chain of power, and he saw that it was the queen mother. Not that Marie was obviously weak—she governed both France and her son; but Richelieu saw that she was really an insecure woman who needed constant masculine attention. He showered her with affection and respect, even toadying up to her favorite, Concini. He knew the day would come when the king would take over, but he also recognized that Louis loved his mother dearly and would always remain a child in relation to her. The way to control Louis, then, was not by gaining his favor, which could change overnight, but by gaining sway over his mother, for whom his affection would never change.

Once Richelieu had the position he desired—prime minister—he discarded the queen mother, moving on to the next weak link in the chain: the king's own character. There was a part of him that would always be a helpless child in need of higher authority. It was on the foundation of the king's weakness that Richelieu established his own power and fame.

Remember: When entering the court, find the weak link. The person in control is often not the king or queen; it is someone behind the scenes—the favorite, the husband or wife, even the court fool. This person may have more weaknesses than the king himself, because his power depends on all kinds of capricious factors outside his control.

Finally, when dealing with helpless children who cannot make decisions, play on their weakness and push them into bold ventures. They will have to depend on you even more, for you will become the adult figure whom they rely on to get them out of scrapes and to safety.

THE LITTLE THINGS COUNT

As time went on I came to look for the little weaknesses.... It's the little things that count. On one occasion, I worked on the president of a large bank in Omaha. The [phony] deal involved the purchase of the street

railway system of Omaha, including a bridge across the Mississippi River. My principals were supposedly German and I had to negotiate with Berlin. While awaiting word from them I introduced my fake mining-stock proposition. Since this man was rich, I decided to play for high stakes.... Meanwhile, I played golf with the banker, visited his home, and went to the theater with him and his wife. Though he showed some interest in my stock deal, he still wasn't convinced. I had built it up to the point that an investment of \$1,250,000 was required. Of this I was to put up \$900,000, the banker \$350,000. But still he hesitated. One evening when I was at his home for dinner I wore some perfume-Coty's "April Violets." It was not then considered effeminate for a man to use a dash of perfume. The banker's wife thought it very lovely. "Where did you get it?" "It is a rare blend," I told her, "especially made for me by a French perfumer. Do you like it?" "I love it," she replied. The following day I went through my effects and found two empty bottles. Both had come from France, but were empty. I went to a downtown department store and purchased ten ounces of Coty's "April Violets." I poured this into the two French bottles, carefully sealed them, wrapped them in tissue paper. That evening I dropped by the banker's home and presented the two bottles to his wife. "They were especially put up for me in Cologne," I told her. The next day the banker called at my hotel. His wife was enraptured by the perfume. She considered it the most wonderful, the most exotic fragrance she had ever used. I did not tell the banker he could get all he wanted right in Omaha. "She said," the banker added, "that I was fortunate to be associated with a man like you." From then on his attitude was changed, for he had complete faith in his wife's judgment He parted with \$350,000. This, incidentally was my biggest [con] score.

"YELLOW KID" WEIL, 1875-1976

Observance II

In December of 1925, guests at the swankiest hotel in Palm Beach, Florida, watched with interest as a mysterious man arrived in a Rolls-Royce driven by a Japanese chauffeur. Over the next few days they studied this handsome man, who walked with an elegant cane, received telegrams at all hours, and only engaged in the briefest of conversations. He was a count, they heard, Count Victor Lustig, and he came from one of the wealthiest families in Europe—but this was all they could find out.

Imagine their amazement, then, when Lustig one day walked up to one of the least distinguished guests in the hotel, a Mr. Herman Loller, head of an engineering company, and entered into conversation with him. Loller had made his fortune only recently, and forging social connections was very important to him. He felt honored and somewhat intimidated by this sophisticated man, who spoke perfect English with a hint of a foreign accent. Over the days to come, the two became friends.

Loller of course did most of the talking, and one night he confessed that his business was doing poorly, with more troubles ahead. In return, Lustig confided in his new friend that he too had serious money problems—Communists had seized his family estate and all its assets. He was too old to learn a trade and go to work. Luckily he had found an answer—“a money-making machine.” “You counterfeit?” Loller whispered in half-shock. No, Lustig replied, explaining that through a secret chemical process, his machine could duplicate any paper currency with complete accuracy. Put in a dollar bill and six hours later you had two, both perfect. He proceeded to explain how the machine had been smuggled out of Europe, how the Germans had developed it to undermine the British, how it had supported the count for several years, and on and on. When Loller insisted on a demonstration, the two men went to Lustig’s room, where the count produced a magnificent mahogany box fitted with slots, cranks, and dials. Loller watched as Lustig inserted a dollar bill in the box. Sure enough, early the following morning Lustig pulled out two bills, still wet from the chemicals.

Lustig gave the notes to Loller, who immediately took the bills to a local bank—which accepted them as genuine. Now the businessman feverishly

begged Lustig to sell him a machine. The count explained that there was only one in existence, so Loller made him a high offer: \$25,000, then a considerable amount (more than \$400,000 in today's terms). Even so, Lustig seemed reluctant: He did not feel right about making his friend pay so much. Yet finally he agreed to the sale. After all, he said, "I suppose it matters little what you pay me. You are, after all, going to recover the amount within a few days by duplicating your own bills." Making Loller swear never to reveal the machine's existence to other people, Lustig accepted the money. Later the same day he checked out of the hotel. A year later, after many futile attempts at duplicating bills, Loller finally went to the police with the story of how Count Lustig had conned him with a pair of dollar bills, some chemicals, and a worthless mahogany box. Interpretation Count Lustig had an eagle eye for other people's weaknesses. He saw them in the smallest gesture. Loller, for instance, overtipped waiters, seemed nervous in conversation with the concierge, talked loudly about his business. His weakness, Lustig knew, was his need for social validation and for the respect that he thought his wealth had earned him. He was also chronically insecure. Lustig had come to the hotel to hunt for prey. In Loller he homed in on the perfect sucker—a man hungering for someone to fill his psychic voids.

In offering Loller his friendship, then, Lustig knew he was offering him the immediate respect of the other guests. As a count, Lustig was also offering the newly rich businessman access to the glittering world of old wealth. And for the coup de grace, he apparently owned a machine that would rescue Loller from his worries. It would even put him on a par with Lustig himself, who had also used the machine to maintain his status. No wonder Loller took the bait.

Remember: When searching for suckers, always look for the dissatisfied, the unhappy, the insecure. Such people are riddled with weaknesses and have needs that you can fill. Their neediness is the groove in which you place your thumbnail and turn them at will.

Observance III

In the year 1559, the French king Henri II died in a jousting exhibition. His son assumed the throne, becoming Francis II, but in the background stood Henri's wife and queen, Catherine de' Médicis, a woman who had long ago proven her skill in affairs of state. When Francis died the next year, Catherine took control of the country as regent to her next son in line of succession, the future Charles IX, a mere ten years old at the time.

The main threats to the queen's power were Antoine de Bourbon, king of Navarre, and his brother, Louis, the powerful prince of Condé, both of whom could claim the right to serve as regent instead of Catherine, who, after all, was Italian—a foreigner. Catherine quickly appointed Antoine lieutenant general of the kingdom, a title that seemed to satisfy his ambition. It also meant that he had to remain in court, where Catherine could keep an eye on him. Her next move proved smarter still: Antoine had a notorious weakness for young women, so she assigned one of her most attractive maids of honor, Louise de Rouet, to seduce him. Now Antoine's intimate, Louise reported all of his actions to Catherine. The move worked so brilliantly that Catherine assigned another of her maids to Prince Condé, and thus was formed her *escadron volant*—"flying squadron"—of young girls whom she used to keep the unsuspecting males in the court under her control.

In 1572 Catherine married off her daughter, Marguerite de Valois, to Henri, the son of Antoine and the new king of Navarre. To put a family that had always struggled against her so close to power was a dangerous move, so to make sure of Henri's loyalty she unleashed on him the loveliest member of her "flying squadron," Charlotte de Beaune Semblançay, baroness of Sauves. Catherine did this even though Henri was married to her daughter. Within weeks, Marguerite de Valois wrote in her memoirs, "Mme. de Sauves so completely ensnared my husband that we no longer slept together, nor even conversed."

And while I am on the subject, there is another fact that deserves mention. It is this. A man shows his character just in the way in which he deals with trifles—for then he is off his guard. This will often afford a good opportunity of observing the boundless egoism of a man's nature, and his total lack of

consideration for others; and if these defects show themselves in small things, or merely in his general demeanour, you will find that they also underlie his action in matters of importance, although he may disguise the fact. This is an opportunity which should not be missed. If in the little affairs of every day—the trifles of life...—a man is inconsiderate and seeks only what is advantageous or convenient to himself, to the prejudice of others' rights; if he appropriates to himself that which belongs to all alike, you may be sure there is no justice in his heart, and that he would be a scoundrel on a wholesale scale, only that law and compulsion bind his hands.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, 1788-1860

The baroness was an excellent spy and helped to keep Henri under Catherine's thumb. When the queen's youngest son, the Duke of Alençon, grew so close to Henri that she feared the two might plot against her, she assigned the baroness to him as well. This most infamous member of the flying squadron quickly seduced Alençon, and soon the two young men fought over her and their friendship quickly ended, along with any danger of a conspiracy.

Interpretation

Catherine had seen very early on the sway that a mistress has over a man of power: Her own husband, Henri II, had kept one of the most infamous mistresses of them all, Diane de Poitiers. What Catherine learned from the experience was that a man like her husband wanted to feel he could win a woman over without having to rely on his status, which he had inherited rather than earned. And such a need contained a huge blind spot: As long as the woman began the affair by acting as if she had been conquered, the man would fail to notice that as time passed the mistress had come to hold power over him, as Diane de Poitiers did over Henri. It was Catherine's strategy to turn this weakness to her advantage, using it as a way to conquer and control men. All she had to do was unleash the loveliest women in the court, her "flying squadron," on men whom she knew shared her husband's vulnerability.

Remember: Always look for passions and obsessions that cannot be controlled. The stronger the passion, the more vulnerable the person. This may seem surprising, for passionate people look strong. In fact, however, they are simply filling the stage with their theatricality, distracting people from how weak and helpless they really are. A man's need to conquer women actually reveals a tremendous helplessness that has made suckers out of them for thousands of years. Look at the part of a person that is most visible—their greed, their lust, their intense fear. These are the emotions they cannot conceal, and over which they have the least control. And what people cannot control, you can control for them.

THE BATTLE AT PHARSALIA

When the two armies [Julius Caesar's and Pompey's] were come into Pharsalia, and both encamped there, Pompey's thoughts ran the same way as they had done before, against fighting.... But those who were about him were greatly confident of success ... as if they had already conquered.... The cavalry especially were obstinate for fighting, being splendidly armed and bravely mounted, and valuing themselves upon the fine horses they kept, and upon their own handsome persons; as also upon the advantage of their

numbers, for they were five thousand against one thousand of Caesar's. Nor were the numbers of the infantry less disproportionate, there being forty-five thousand of Pompey's against twenty-two thousand of the enemy. [The next day] whilst the infantry was thus sharply engaged in the main battle, on the flank Pompey's horse rode up confidently, and opened [his cavalry's] ranks very wide, that they might surround the right wing of Caesar. But before they engaged, Caesar's cohorts rushed out and attacked them, and did not dart their javelins at a distance, nor strike at the thighs and legs, as they usually did in close battle, but aimed at their faces. For thus Caesar had instructed them, in hopes that young gentlemen, who had not known much of battles and wounds, but came wearing their hair long, in the flower of their age and height of their beauty, would be more apprehensive of such blows, and not care for hazarding both a danger at present and a blemish for the future.

And so it proved, for they were so far from bearing the stroke of the javelins, that they could not stand the sight of them, but turned about, and covered their faces to secure them. Once in disorder, presently they turned about to fly; and so most shamefully ruined all. For those who had beat them back at once outflanked the infantry, and falling on their rear, cut them to pieces. Pompey, who commanded the other wing of the army, when he saw his cavalry thus broken and flying, was no longer himself, nor did he now remember that he was Pompey the Great, but, like one whom some god had deprived of his senses, retired to his tent without speaking a word, and there sat to expect the event, till the whole army was routed.

THE LIFE OF JULIUS CAESAR, PLUTARCH, c. A.D. 46-120

Observance IV

Arabella Huntington, wife of the great late-nineteenth-century railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington, came from humble origins and always struggled for social recognition among her wealthy peers. When she gave a party in her San Francisco mansion, few of the social elite would show up; most of them took her for a gold digger, not their kind. Because of her husband's fabulous wealth, art dealers courted her, but with such condescension they obviously saw her as an upstart. Only one man of consequence treated her differently: the dealer Joseph Duveen.

For the first few years of Duveen's relationship with Arabella, he made no effort to sell expensive art to her. Instead he accompanied her to fine stores, chatted endlessly about queens and princesses he knew, on and on. At last, she thought, a man who treated her as an equal, even a superior, in high society. Meanwhile, if Duveen did not try to sell art to her, he did subtly educate her in his aesthetic ideas—namely, that the best art was the most expensive art. And after Arabella had soaked up his way of seeing things, Duveen would act as if she always had exquisite taste, even though before she met him her aesthetics had been abysmal.

When Collis Huntington died, in 1900, Arabella came into a fortune. She suddenly started to buy expensive paintings, by Rembrandt and Velázquez, for example—and only from Duveen. Years later Duveen sold her Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* for the highest price ever paid for a work of art at the time, an astounding purchase for a family that previously had shown little interest in collecting.

Interpretation

Joseph Duveen instantly understood Arabella Huntington and what made her tick: She wanted to feel important, at home in society. Intensely insecure about her lower-class background, she needed confirmation of her new social status. Duveen waited. Instead of rushing into trying to persuade her to collect art, he subtly went to work on her weaknesses. He made her feel that she deserved his attention not because she was the wife of one of the wealthiest men in the world but because of her own special character—and this completely melted her. Duveen never condescended to Arabella; rather than lecturing to her, he instilled his ideas in her indirectly. The result was one of his best and most devoted clients, and also the sale of *The Blue Boy*.

People's need for validation and recognition, their need to feel important, is the best kind of weakness to exploit. First, it is almost universal; second, exploiting it is so very easy. All you have to do is find ways to make people feel better about their taste, their social standing, their intelligence. Once the fish are hooked, you can reel them in again and again, for years—you are filling a positive role, giving them what they cannot get on their own. They may never suspect that you are turning them like a thumbscrew, and if they do they may not care, because you are making them feel better about themselves, and that is worth any price.

Observance V

In 1862 King William of Prussia named Otto von Bismarck premier and minister for foreign affairs. Bismarck was known for his boldness, his ambition—and his interest in strengthening the military. Since William was surrounded by liberals in his government and cabinet, politicians who already wanted to limit his powers, it was quite dangerous for him to put Bismarck in this sensitive position. His wife, Queen Augusta, had tried to dissuade him, but although she usually got her way with him, this time William stuck to his guns.

Only a week after becoming prime minister, Bismarck made an impromptu speech to a few dozen ministers to convince them of the need to enlarge the army. He ended by saying, “The great questions of the time will be decided, not by speeches and resolutions of majorities, but by iron and blood.” His speech was immediately disseminated throughout Germany. The queen screamed at her husband that Bismarck was a barbaric militarist who was out to usurp control of Prussia, and that William had to fire him. The liberals in the government agreed with her. The outcry was so vehement that William began to be afraid he would end up on a scaffold, like Louis XVI of France, if he kept Bismarck on as prime minister.

Bismarck knew he had to get to the king before it was too late. He also knew he had blundered, and should have tempered his fiery words. Yet as he contemplated his strategy, he decided not to apologize but to do the exact opposite. Bismarck knew the king well.

When the two men met, William, predictably, had been worked into a tizzy by the queen. He reiterated his fear of being guillotined. But Bismarck only replied, “Yes, then we shall be dead! We must die sooner or later, and could there be a more respectable way of dying? I should die fighting for the cause of my king and master. Your Majesty would die sealing with your own blood your royal rights granted by God’s grace. Whether upon the scaffold or upon the battlefield makes no difference to the glorious staking of body and life on behalf of rights granted by God’s grace!” On he went, appealing to William’s sense of honor and the majesty of his position as head of the army. How could the king allow people to push him around? Wasn’t the honor of Germany more important than quibbling over words?

Not only did the prime minister convince the king to stand up to both his wife and his parliament, he persuaded him to build up the army—Bismarck's goal all along.

Interpretation

Bismarck knew the king felt bullied by those around him. He knew that William had a military background and a deep sense of honor, and that he felt ashamed at his cravenness before his wife and his government. William secretly yearned to be a great and mighty king, but he dared not express this ambition because he was afraid of ending up like Louis XVI. Where a show of courage often conceals a man's timidity, William's timidity concealed his need to show courage and thump his chest.

Bismarck sensed the longing for glory beneath William's pacifist front, so he played to the king's insecurity about his manhood, finally pushing him into three wars and the creation of a German empire. Timidity is a potent weakness to exploit. Timid souls often yearn to be their opposite—to be Napoleons. Yet they lack the inner strength. You, in essence, can become their Napoleon, pushing them into bold actions that serve your needs while also making them dependent on you. Remember: Look to the opposites and never take appearances at face value.

Image: The
Thumbscrew.
Your enemy
has secrets that
he guards, thinks
thoughts he will
not reveal. But
they come out in
ways he cannot
help. It is there some
where, a groove of
weakness on his head,
at his heart, over his
belly. Once you find the
groove, put your thumb in
it and turn him at will.

Authority: Find out each man's thumbscrew. 'Tis the art of setting their wills in action. It needs more skill than resolution. You must know where to

get at anyone. Every volition has a special motive which varies according to taste. All men are idolaters, some of fame, others of self-interest, most of pleasure. Skill consists in knowing these idols in order to bring them into play. Knowing any man's mainspring of motive you have as it were the key to his will. (Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658)

REVERSAL

Playing on people's weakness has one significant danger: You may stir up an action you cannot control.

In your games of power you always look several steps ahead and plan accordingly. And you exploit the fact that other people are more emotional and incapable of such foresight. But when you play on their vulnerabilities, the areas over which they have least control, you can unleash emotions that will upset your plans. Push timid people into bold action and they may go too far; answer their need for attention or recognition and they may need more than you want to give them. The helpless, childish element you are playing on can turn against you.

The more emotional the weakness, the greater the potential danger. Know the limits to this game, then, and never get carried away by your control over your victims. You are after power, not the thrill of control.