

LAW 35

MASTER THE ART OF TIMING

JUDGMENT

Never seem to be in a hurry-hurrying betrays a lack of control over yourself, and over time. Always seem patient, as if you know that everything will come to you eventually. Become a detective of the right moment; sniff out the spirit of the times, the trends that will carry you to power. Learn to stand back when the time is not yet ripe, and to strike fiercely when it has reached fruition.

SERTORIUS'S LESSON

Sertorius's strength was now rapidly increasing, for all the tribes between the Ebro and the Pyrenees came over to his side, and troops came flocking daily to join him from every quarter. At the same time he was troubled by the lack of discipline and the overconfidence of these newly arrived barbarians, who would shout at him to attack the enemy and had no patience with his delaying tactics, and he therefore tried to win them over by argument. But when he saw that they were discontented and persisted in pressing their demands regardless of the circumstances, he let them have their way and allowed them to engage the enemy; he hoped that they would suffer a severe defeat without being completely crushed, and that this would make them better disposed to obey his orders in future. The event turned out as he expected and Sertorius came to their rescue, provided a rallying point for the fugitives, and led them safely back to his camp. His next step was to revive their dejected spirits, and so a few days later he summoned a general assembly. Before it he produced two horses, one of them old and enfeebled, the other large and lusty and possessing a flowing tail, which was remarkable for the thickness and beauty of its hair. By the side of the weak horse stood a tall strong man, and by the side of the powerful horse a short

man of mean physique. At a signal the strong man seized the tail of his horse and tried with all his strength to pull it towards him, as if to tear it off, while the weak man began to pull the hairs one by one from the tail of the strong horse.

The strong man, after tugging with all his might to no purpose and causing the spectators a great deal of amusement in the process, finally gave up the attempt, while the weak man quickly and with very little trouble stripped his horse's tail completely bare. Then Sertorius rose to his feet and said, "Now you can see, my friends and allies, that perseverance is more effective than brute strength and that there are many difficulties that cannot be overcome if you try to do everything at once, but which will yield if you master them little by little. The truth is that a steady continuous effort is irresistible, for this is the way in which Time captures and subdues the greatest powers on earth. Now Time, you should remember, is a good friend and ally to those who use their intelligence to choose the right moment, but a most dangerous enemy to those who rush into action at the wrong one."

LIFE OF SERTORIUS, PLUTARCH, C.A.D. 46-120

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

Starting out in life as a nondescript French seminary-school teacher, Joseph Fouché wandered from town to town for most of the decade of the 1780s, teaching mathematics to young boys. Yet he never completely committed himself to the church, never took his vows as a priest—he had bigger plans. Patiently waiting for his chance, he kept his options open. And when the French Revolution broke out, in 1789, Fouché waited no longer: He got rid of his cassock, grew his hair long, and became a revolutionary. For this was the spirit of the times. To miss the boat at this critical moment could have spelt disaster. Fouché did not miss the boat: Befriending the revolutionary leader Robespierre, he quickly rose in the rebel ranks. In 1792 the town of Nantes elected Fouché to be its representative to the National Convention (created that year to frame a new constitution for a French republic).

When Fouché arrived in Paris to take his seat at the convention, a violent rift had broken out between the moderates and the radical Jacobins. Fouché sensed that in the long run neither side would emerge victorious. Power rarely ends up in the hands of those who start a revolution, or even of those who further it; power sticks to those who bring it to a conclusion. That was the side Fouché wanted to be on.

His sense of timing was uncanny. He started as a moderate, for moderates were in the majority. When the time came to decide on whether or not to execute Louis XVI, however, he saw that the people were clamoring for the king's head, so he cast the deciding vote—for the guillotine. Now he had become a radical. Yet as tensions came to the boil in Paris, he foresaw the danger of being too closely associated with any one faction, so he accepted a position in the provinces, where he could lie low for a while. A few months later he was assigned to the post of proconsul in Lyons, where he oversaw the execution of dozens of aristocrats. At a certain moment, however, he called a halt to the killings, sensing that the mood of the country was turning—and despite the blood already on his hands, the citizens of Lyons hailed him as a savior from what had become known as the Terror.

So far Fouché had played his cards brilliantly, but in 1794 his old friend Robespierre recalled him to Paris to account for his actions in Lyons.

Robespierre had been the driving force behind the Terror. He had sent heads on both the right and the left rolling, and Fouché, whom he no longer trusted, seemed destined to provide the next head. Over the next few weeks, a tense struggle ensued: While Robespierre railed openly against Fouché, accusing of him dangerous ambitions and calling for his arrest, the crafty Fouché worked more indirectly, quietly gaining support among those who were beginning to tire of Robespierre's dictatorial control. Fouché was playing for time. He knew that the longer he survived, the more disaffected citizens he could rally against Robespierre. He had to have broad support before he moved against the powerful leader. He rallied support among both the moderates and the Jacobins, playing on the widespread fear of Robespierre—everyone was afraid of being the next to go to the guillotine. It all came to fruition on July 27: The convention turned against Robespierre, shouting down his usual lengthy speech. He was quickly arrested, and a few days later it was Robespierre's head, not Fouché's, that fell into the basket.

When Fouché returned to the convention after Robespierre's death, he played his most unexpected move: Having led the conspiracy against Robespierre, he was expected to sit with the moderates, but lo and behold, he once again changed sides, joining the radical Jacobins. For perhaps the first time in his life he aligned himself with the minority. Clearly he sensed a reaction stirring: He knew that the moderate faction that had executed Robespierre, and was now about to take power, would initiate a new round of the Terror, this time against the radicals. In siding with the Jacobins, then, Fouché was sitting with the martyrs of the days to come—the people who would be considered blameless in the troubles that were on their way. Taking sides with what was about to become the losing team was a risky gambit, of course, but Fouché must have calculated he could keep his head long enough to quietly stir up the populace against the moderates and watch them fall from power. And indeed, although the moderates did call for his arrest in December of 1795, and would have sent him to the guillotine, too much time had passed. The executions had become unpopular with the people, and Fouché survived the swing of the pendulum one more time.

A new government took over, the Directoire. It was not, however, a Jacobin government, but a moderate one—more moderate than the government that had reimposed the Terror. Fouché, the radical, had kept his head, but now he had to keep a low profile. He waited patiently on the sidelines for several years, allowing time to soften any bitter feelings

against him, then he approached the Directoire and convinced them he had a new passion: intelligence-gathering. He became a paid spy for the government, excelled at the job, and in 1799 was rewarded by being made minister of police. Now he was not just empowered but required to extend his spying to every corner of France—a responsibility that would greatly reinforce his natural ability to sniff out where the wind was blowing. One of the first social trends he detected, in fact, came in the person of Napoleon, a brash young general whose destiny he right away saw was entwined with the future of France. When Napoleon unleashed a coup d'état, on November 9, 1799, Fouché pretended to be asleep. Indeed he slept the whole day. For this indirect assistance—it might have been thought his job, after all, to prevent a military coup—Napoleon kept him on as minister of police in the new regime.

Over the next few years, Napoleon came to rely on Fouché more and more. He even gave this former revolutionary a title, duke of Otranto, and rewarded him with great wealth. By 1808, however, Fouché, always attuned to the times, sensed that Napoleon was on the downswing. His futile war with Spain, a country that posed no threat to France, was a sign that he was losing a sense of proportion. Never one to be caught on a sinking ship, Fouché conspired with Talleyrand to bring about Napoleon's downfall. Although the conspiracy failed—Talleyrand was fired; Fouché stayed, but was kept on a tight leash—it publicized a growing discontent with the emperor, who seemed to be losing control. By 1814 Napoleon's power had crumbled and allied forces finally conquered him.

The next government was a restoration of the monarchy, in the form of King Louis XVIII, brother of Louis XVI. Fouché, his nose always sniffing the air for the next social shift, knew Louis would not last long—he had none of Napoleon's flair. Fouché once again played his waiting game, lying low, staying away from the spotlight. Sure enough, in February of 1815, Napoleon escaped from the island of Elba, where he had been imprisoned. Louis XVIII panicked: His policies had alienated the citizenry, who were clamoring for Napoleon's return. So Louis turned to the one man who could maybe have saved his hide, Fouché, the former radical who had sent his brother, Louis XVI, to the guillotine, but was now one of the most popular and widely admired politicians in France. Fouché, however, would not side with a loser: He refused Louis's request for help by pretending that his help was unnecessary—by swearing that Napoleon would never return to power

(although he knew otherwise). A short time later, of course, Napoleon and his new citizen army were closing in on Paris.

Seeing his reign about to collapse, feeling that Fouché had betrayed him, and certain that he did not want this powerful and able man on Napoleon's team, King Louis ordered the minister's arrest and execution. On March 16, 1815, policemen surrounded Fouché's coach on a Paris boulevard. Was this finally his end? Perhaps, but not immediately: Fouché told the police that an ex-member of government could not be arrested on the street. They fell for the story and allowed him to return home. Later that day, though, they came to his house and once again declared him under arrest. Fouché nodded—but would the officers be so kind as allow a gentleman to wash and to change his clothes before leaving his house for the last time? They gave their permission, Fouché left the room, and the minutes went by. Fouché did not return. Finally the policemen went into the next room—where they saw a ladder against an open window, leading down to the garden below.

That day and the next the police combed Paris for Fouché, but by then Napoleon's cannons were audible in the distance and the king and all the king's men had to flee the city. As soon as Napoleon entered Paris, Fouché came out of hiding. He had cheated the executioner once again. Napoleon greeted his former minister of police and gladly restored him to his old post. During the 100 days that Napoleon remained in power, until Waterloo, it was essentially Fouché who governed France. After Napoleon fell, Louis XVIII returned to the throne, and like a cat with nine lives, Fouché stayed on to serve in yet another government—by then his power and influence had grown so great that not even the king dared challenge him.

Mr. Shih had two sons: one loved learning; the other war. The first expounded his moral teachings at the admiring court of Ch'i and was made a tutor, while the second talked strategy at the bellicose court of Ch'u and was made a general. The impecunious Mr. Meng, hearing of these successes, sent his own two sons out to follow the example of the Shih boys. The first expounded his moral teachings at the court of Ch'in, but the King of Ch'in said: "At present the states are quarreling violently and every prince is busy arming his troops to the teeth. If I followed this prig's pratings we should soon be annihilated." So he had the fellow castrated. Meanwhile, the second brother displayed his military genius at the court of Wei. But the King of Wei said: "Mine is a weak state. If I relied on force instead of diplomacy, we should soon be wiped out. If, on the other hand, I

let this fire-eater go, he will offer his services to another state and then we shall be in trouble.” So he had the fellow’s feet cut off Both. families did exactly the same thing, but one timed it right, the other wrong. Thus success depends not on ratiocination but on rhythm.

LIEH TZU, QUOTED IN THE CHINESE LOOKING GLASS, DENNIS BLOODWORTH, 1967

Interpretation

In a period of unprecedented turmoil, Joseph Fouché thrived through his mastery of the art of timing. He teaches us a number of key lessons.

First, it is critical to recognize the spirit of the times. Fouché always looked two steps ahead, found the wave that would carry him to power, and rode it. You must always work with the times, anticipate twists and turns, and never miss the boat. Sometimes the spirit of the times is obscure: Recognize it not by what is loudest and most obvious in it, but by what lies hidden and dormant. Look forward to the Napoleons of the future rather than holding on to the ruins of the past.

Second, recognizing the prevailing winds does not necessarily mean running with them. Any potent social movement creates a powerful reaction, and it is wise to anticipate what that reaction will be, as Fouché did after the execution of Robespierre. Rather than ride the cresting wave of the moment, wait for the tide's ebb to carry you back to power. Upon occasion bet on the reaction that is brewing, and place yourself in the vanguard of it.

Finally, Fouché had remarkable patience. Without patience as your sword and shield, your timing will fail and you will inevitably find yourself a loser. When the times were against Fouché, he did not struggle, get emotional, or strike out rashly. He kept his cool and maintained a low profile, patiently building support among the citizenry, the bulwark in his next rise to power. Whenever he found himself in the weaker position, he played for time, which he knew would always be his ally if he was patient. Recognize the moment, then, to hide in the grass or slither under a rock, as well as the moment to bare your fangs and attack.

*Space we can recover, time never.
Napoleon Bonaparte, 1769-1821*

KEYS TO POWER

Time is an artificial concept that we ourselves have created to make the limitlessness of eternity and the universe more bearable, more human. Since we have constructed the concept of time, we are also able to mold it to some degree, to play tricks with it. The time of a child is long and slow, with vast expanses; the time of an adult whizzes by frighteningly fast. Time, then, depends on perception, which, we know, can be willfully altered. This is the first thing to understand in mastering the art of timing. If the inner turmoil caused by our emotions tends to make time move faster, it follows that once we control our emotional responses to events, time will move much more slowly. This altered way of dealing with things tends to lengthen our perception of future time, opens up possibilities that fear and anger close off, and allows us the patience that is the principal requirement in the art of timing.

The sultan [of Persia] had sentenced two men to death. One of them, knowing how much the sultan loved his stallion, offered to teach the horse to fly within a year in return for his life. The sultan, fancying himself as the rider of the only flying horse in the world, agreed. The other prisoner looked at his friend in disbelief “You know horses don’t fly. What made you come up with a crazy idea like that? You’re only postponing the inevitable.” “Not so,” said the (first prisoner). “I have actually given myself four chances for freedom. First, the sultan might die during the year. Second, I might die. Third, the horse might die. And fourth ... I might teach the horse to fly!”

THE CRAFT OF POWER, R.G.H. SIU, 1979

There are three kinds of time for us to deal with; each presents problems that can be solved with skill and practice. First there is *long time*: the drawn-out, years-long kind of time that must be managed with patience and gentle guidance. Our handling of long time should be mostly defensive—this is the art of not reacting impulsively, of waiting for opportunity. Next there is *forced time*: the short-term time that we can manipulate as an offensive weapon, upsetting the timing of our opponents. Finally there is

end time, when a plan must be executed with speed and force. We have waited, found the moment, and must not hesitate.

Long Time. The famous seventeenth-century Ming painter Chou Yung relates a story that altered his behavior forever. Late one winter afternoon he set out to visit a town that lay across the river from his own town. He was bringing some important books and papers with him and had commissioned a young boy to help him carry them. As the ferry neared the other side of the river, Chou Yung asked the boatman if they would have time to get to the town before its gates closed, since it was a mile away and night was approaching. The boatman glanced at the boy, and at the bundle of loosely tied papers and books—“Yes,” he replied, “if you do not walk too fast.”

As they started out, however, the sun was setting. Afraid of being locked out of the town at night, prey to local bandits, Chou and the boy walked faster and faster, finally breaking into a run. Suddenly the string around the papers broke and the documents scattered on the ground. It took them many minutes to put the packet together again, and by the time they had reached the city gates, it was too late.

When you force the pace out of fear and impatience, you create a nest of problems that require fixing, and you end up taking much longer than if you had taken your time. Hurriers may occasionally get there quicker, but papers fly everywhere, new dangers arise, and they find themselves in constant crisis mode, fixing the problems that they themselves have created. Sometimes not acting in the face of danger is your best move—you wait, you deliberately slow down. As time passes it will eventually present opportunities you had not imagined.

Waiting involves controlling not only your own emotions but those of your colleagues, who, mistaking action for power, may try to push you into making rash moves. In your rivals, on the other hand, you can encourage this same mistake: If you let them rush headlong into trouble while you stand back and wait, you will soon find ripe moments to intervene and pick up the pieces. This wise policy was the principal strategy of the great early-seventeenth-century emperor Tokugawa Ieyasu of Japan. When his predecessor, the headstrong Hideyoshi, whom he served as a general, staged a rash invasion of Korea, Ieyasu did not involve himself. He knew the invasion would be a disaster and would lead to Hideyoshi’s downfall. Better

to stand patiently on the sidelines, *even for many years*, and then be in position to seize power when the time is right—exactly what Ieyasu did, with great artistry.

THE TROUT AND THE GUDGEON

A fisherman in the month of May stood angling on the bank of the Thames with an artificial fly. He threw his bait with so much art, that a young trout was rushing toward it, when she was prevented by her mother. “Never,” said she, “my child, be too precipitate, where there is a possibility of danger. Take due time to consider, before you risk an action that may be fatal. How know you whether yon appearance be indeed a fly, or the snare of an enemy? Let someone else make the experiment before you. If it be a fly, he will very probably elude the first attack: and the second may be made, if not with success, at least with safety.” She had no sooner spoken, than a gudgeon seized the pretended fly, and became an example to the giddy daughter of the importance of her mother’s counsel.

FABLES, ROBERT DODSLEY, 1703-1764

You do not deliberately slow time down to live longer, or to take more pleasure in the moment, but the better to play the game of power. First, when your mind is uncluttered by constant emergencies you will see further into the future. Second, you will be able to resist the baits that people dangle in front of you, and will keep yourself from becoming another impatient sucker. Third, you will have more room to be flexible. Opportunities will inevitably arise that you had not expected and would have missed had you forced the pace. Fourth, you will not move from one deal to the next without completing the first one. To build your power’s foundation can take years; make sure that foundation is secure. Do not be a flash in the pan—success that is built up slowly and surely is the only kind that lasts.

Finally, slowing time down will give you a perspective on the times you live in, letting you take a certain distance and putting you in a less emotionally charged position to see the shapes of things to come. Hurriers will often mistake surface phenomena for a real trend, seeing only what

they want to see. How much better to see what is really happening, even if it is unpleasant or makes your task harder.

Forced Time. The trick in forcing time is to upset the timing of others—to make them hurry, to make them wait, to make them abandon their own pace, to distort their perception of time. By upsetting the timing of your opponent while you stay patient, you open up time for yourself, which is half the game.

In 1473 the great Turkish sultan Mehmed the Conqueror invited negotiations with Hungary to end the off-and-on war the two countries had waged for years. When the Hungarian emissary arrived in Turkey to start the talks, Turkish officials humbly apologized—Mehmed had just left Istanbul, the capital, to battle his longtime foe, Uzun Hasan. But he urgently wanted peace with Hungary, and had asked that the emissary join him at the front.

When the emissary arrived at the site of the fighting, Mehmed had already left it, moving eastward in pursuit of his swift foe. This happened several times. Wherever the emissary stopped, the Turks lavished gifts and banquets on him, in pleasurable but time-consuming ceremonies. Finally Mehmed defeated Uzun and met with the emissary. Yet his terms for peace with Hungary were excessively harsh. After a few days, the negotiations ended, and the usual stalemate remained in place. But this was fine with Mehmed. In fact he had planned it that way all along: Plotting his campaign against Uzun, he had seen that diverting his armies to the east would leave his western flank vulnerable. To prevent Hungary from taking advantage of his weakness and his preoccupation elsewhere, he first dangled the lure of peace before his enemy, then made them wait—all on his own terms.

Making people wait is a powerful way of forcing time, as long as they do not figure out what you are up to. You control the clock, they linger in limbo—and rapidly come unglued, opening up opportunities for you to strike. The opposite effect is equally powerful: You make your opponents hurry. Start off your dealings with them slowly, then suddenly apply pressure, making them feel that everything is happening at once. People who lack the time to think will make mistakes—so set their deadlines for them. This was the technique Machiavelli admired in Cesare Borgia, who, during negotiations, would suddenly press vehemently for a decision,

upsetting his opponent's timing and patience. For who would dare make Cesare wait?

Joseph Duveen, the famous art dealer, knew that if he gave an indecisive buyer like John D. Rockefeller a deadline—the painting had to leave the country, another tycoon was interested in it—the client would buy just in time. Freud noticed that patients who had spent years in psychoanalysis without improvement would miraculously recover just in time if he fixed a definite date for the end of the therapy. Jacques Lacan, the famous French psychoanalyst, used a variation on this tactic—he would sometimes end the customary hour session of therapy after only ten minutes, without warning. After this happened several times, the patient would realize that he had better make maximum use of the time, rather than wasting much of the hour with a lot of talk that meant nothing. The deadline, then, is a powerful tool. Close off the vistas of indecision and force people to make up their damn minds or get to the point never let them make you play on their excruciating terms. Never give them time.

Magicians and showmen are experts in forcing time. Houdini could often wriggle free of handcuffs in minutes, but he would draw the escape out to an hour, making the audience sweat, as time came to an apparent standstill. Magicians have always known that the best way to alter our perception of time is often to slow down the pace. Creating suspense brings time to a terrifying pause: The slower the magician's hands move, the easier it is to create the illusion of speed, making people think the rabbit has appeared instantaneously. The great nineteenth-century magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin took explicit notice of this effect: "The more slowly a story is told," he said, "the shorter it seems."

Going slower also makes what you are doing more interesting—the audience yields to your pace, becomes entranced. It is a state in which time whizzes delightfully by. You must practice such illusions, which share in the hypnotist's power to alter perceptions of time.

End Time. You can play the game with the utmost artistry—waiting patiently for the right moment to act, putting your competitors off their form by messing with their timing—but it won't mean a thing unless you know how to finish. Do not be one of those people who look like paragons of patience but are actually just afraid to bring things to a close: Patience is worthless unless combined with a willingness to fall ruthlessly on your

opponent at the right moment. You can wait as long as necessary for the conclusion to come, but when it comes it must come quickly. Use speed to paralyze your opponent, cover up any mistakes you might make, and impress people with your aura of authority and finality.

With the patience of a snake charmer, you draw the snake out with calm and steady rhythms. Once the snake is out, though, would you dangle your foot above its deadly head? There is never a good reason to allow the slightest hitch in your endgame. Your mastery of timing can really only be judged by how you work with end time—how you quickly change the pace and bring things to a swift and definitive conclusion.

Image: The Hawk. Patiently and silently it circles the sky, high above, all-seeing with its powerful eyes. Those below have no awareness that they are being tracked. Suddenly, when the moment arrives, the hawk swoops down with a speed that cannot be defended against; before its prey knows what has happened, the bird's viselike talons have carried it up into the sky.

Authority: There is a tide in the affairs of men, / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; / Omitted, all the voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in miseries. (*Julius Caesar*, William Shakespeare, 1564-1616)

REVERSAL

There is no power to be gained in letting go of the reins and adapting to whatever time brings. To some degree you must guide time or you will be its merciless victim. There is accordingly no reversal to this law.