

LAW 36

DISDAIN THINGS YOU CANNOT HAVE: IGNORING THEM
IS THE BEST REVENGE

JUDGMENT

By acknowledging a petty problem you give it existence and credibility. The more attention you pay an enemy, the stronger you make him; and a small mistake is often made worse and more visible when you try to fix it. It is sometimes best to leave things alone. If there is something you want but cannot have, show contempt for it. The less interest you reveal, the more superior you seem.

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

The Mexican rebel leader Pancho Villa started out as the chief of a gang of bandits, but after revolution broke out in Mexico in 1910, he became a kind of folk hero—robbing trains and giving the money to the poor, leading daring raids, and charming the ladies with romantic escapades. His exploits fascinated Americans—he seemed a man from another era, part Robin Hood, part Don Juan. After a few years of bitter fighting, however, General Carranza emerged as the victor in the Revolution; the defeated Villa and his troops went back home, to the northern state of Chihuahua. His army dwindled and he turned to banditry again, damaging his popularity. Finally, perhaps out of desperation, he began to rail against the United States, the gringos, whom he blamed for his troubles.

In March of 1916, Pancho Villa raided Columbus, New Mexico. Rampaging through the town, he and his gang killed seventeen American soldiers and civilians. President Woodrow Wilson, like many Americans, had admired Villa; now, however, the bandit needed to be punished. Wilson's advisers urged him to send troops into Mexico to capture Villa. For a power as large as the United States, they argued, not to strike back at an army that had invaded its territory would send the worst kind of signal. Furthermore, they continued, many Americans saw Wilson as a pacifist, a principle the public doubted as a response to violence; he needed to prove his mettle and manliness by ordering the use of force.

The pressure on Wilson was strong, and before the month was out, with the approval of the Carranza government, he sent an army of ten thousand soldiers to capture Pancho Villa. The venture was called the Punitive Expedition, and its leader was the dashing General John J. Pershing, who had defeated guerrillas in the Philippines and Native Americans in the American Southwest. Certainly Pershing could find and overpower Pancho Villa.

The Punitive Expedition became a sensational story, and carloads of U.S. reporters followed Pershing into action. The campaign, they wrote, would be a test of American power. The soldiers carried the latest in weaponry, communicated by radio, and were supported by reconnaissance from the air.

In the first few months, the troops split up into small units to comb the wilds of northern Mexico. The Americans offered a \$50,000 reward for information leading to Villa's capture. But the Mexican people, who had been disillusioned with Villa when he had returned to banditry, now idolized him for facing this mighty American army. They began to give Pershing false leads: Villa had been seen in this village, or in that mountain hideaway, airplanes would be dispatched, troops would scurry after them, and no one would ever see him. The wily bandit seemed to be always one step ahead of the American military.

THE FOX AND THE GRAPES

A starving fox ... saw a cluster of luscious-looking grapes of purplish luster Dangling above him on a trellis-frame. He would have dearly liked them for his lunch, but when he tried and failed to reach the bunch: "Ah well, it's more than likely they're not sweet—Good only for green fools to eat!"

Wasn't he wise to say they were unripe Rather than whine and gripe?
FABLES, JEAN DE LA FONTAINE, 1621-1695

Once when G. K. Chesterton's economic views were abused in print by George Bernard Shaw, his friends waited in vain for him to reply. Historian Hilaire Belloc reproached him. "My dear Belloc," Chesterton said, "I have answered him. To a man of Shaw's wit, silence is the one unbearable repartee.

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

By the summer of that year, the expedition had swelled to 123,000 men. They suffered through the stultifying heat, the mosquitoes, the wild terrain. Trudging over a countryside in which they were already resented, they infuriated both the local people and the Mexican government. At one point Pancho Villa hid in a mountain cave to recover from a gunshot wound he received in a skirmish with the Mexican army; looking down from his aerie, he could watch Pershing lead the exhausted American troops back and forth across the mountains, never getting any closer to their goal.

All the way into winter, Villa played his cat-and-mouse game. Americans came to see the affair as a kind of slapstick farce—in fact they began to admire Villa again, respecting his resourcefulness in eluding a superior force. In January of 1917, Wilson finally ordered Pershing's withdrawal. As the troops made their way back to American territory, rebel forces pursued them, forcing the U.S. Army to use airplanes to protect its rear flanks. The Punitive Expedition was being punished itself—it had turned into a retreat of the most humiliating sort.

Interpretation

Woodrow Wilson organized the Punitive Expedition as a show of force: He would teach Pancho Villa a lesson and in the process show the world that no one, large or small, could attack the mighty United States and get away with it. The expedition would be over in a few weeks, and Villa would be forgotten.

That was not how it played out. The longer the expedition took, the more it focused attention on the Americans' incompetence and on Villa's cleverness. Soon what was forgotten was not Villa but the raid that had started it all. As a minor annoyance became an international embarrassment, and the enraged Americans dispatched more troops, the imbalance between the size of the pursuer and the size of the pursued—who still managed to stay free—made the affair a joke. And in the end this white elephant of an army had to lumber out of Mexico, humiliated. The Punitive Expedition did the opposite of what it set out to do: It left Villa not only free but more popular than ever.

What could Wilson have done differently? He could have pressured the Carranza government to catch Villa for him. Alternatively, since many Mexicans had tired of Villa before the Punitive Expedition began, he could have worked quietly with them and won their support for a much smaller raid to capture the bandit. He could have organized a trap on the American side of the border, anticipating the next raid. Or he could have ignored the matter altogether for the time being, waiting for the Mexicans themselves to do away with Villa of their own accord.

THE ASS AND THE GARDENER

An ass had once by some accident lost his tail, which was a grievous affliction to him; and he was everywhere seeking after it, being fool enough to think he could get it set on again. He passed through a meadow, and afterwards got into a garden. The gardener seeing him, and not able to endure the mischief he was doing in trampling down his plants, fell into a violent rage, ran to the ass, and never standing on the ceremony of a pillory, cut off both his ears, and beat him out of the ground. Thus the ass,

who bemoaned the loss of his tail, was in far greater affliction when he saw himself without ears.

FABLES, PILPAY, INDIA, FOURTH CENTURY

THE PRODIGY OX

Once, when the Tokudaiji minister of the right was chief of the imperial police, he was holding a meeting of his staff at the middle gate when an ox belonging to an official named Akikane got loose and wandered into the ministry building. It climbed up on the dais where the chief was seated and lay there, chewing its cud. Everyone was sure that this was some grave portent, and urged that the ox be sent to a yin-yang diviner. However, the prime minister, the father of the minister of the right, said, "An ox has no discrimination. It has legs—there is nowhere it won't go. It does not make sense to deprive an underpaid official of the wretched ox he needs in order to attend court." He returned the ox to its owner and changed the matting on which it had lain. No untoward event of any kind occurred afterward. They say that if you see a prodigy and do not treat it as such, its character as a prodigy is destroyed.

ESSAYS IN IDLENESS, KENKO, JAPAN, FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Remember: You *choose* to let things bother you. You can just as easily choose not to notice the irritating offender, to consider the matter trivial and unworthy of your interest. That is the powerful move. What you do not react to cannot drag you down in a futile engagement. Your pride is not involved. The best lesson you can teach an irritating gnat is to consign it to oblivion by ignoring it. If it is impossible to ignore (Pancho Villa had in fact killed American citizens), then conspire in secret to do away with it, but never inadvertently draw attention to the bothersome insect that will go away or die on its own. If you waste time and energy in such entanglements, it is your own fault. Learn to play the card of disdain and turn your back on what cannot harm you in the long run.

*Just think—it cost your government \$130 million to try to get me. I took
them
over rough, hilly country. Sometimes for fifty miles at a stretch they had no*

water.

They had nothing but the sun and mosquitoes.... And nothing was gained.

Pancho Villa, 1878-1923

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

In the year 1527, King Henry VIII of England decided he had to find a way to get rid of his wife, Catherine of Aragon. Catherine had failed to produce a son, a male heir who would ensure the continuance of his dynasty, and Henry thought he knew why: He had read in the Bible the passage, “And if a man shall take his brother’s wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother’s nakedness; they shall be childless.” Before marrying Henry, Catherine had married his older brother Arthur, but Arthur had died five months later. Henry had waited an appropriate time, then had married his brother’s widow.

Catherine was the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, and by marrying her Henry had kept alive a valuable alliance. Now, however, Catherine had to assure him that her brief marriage with Arthur had never been consummated. Otherwise Henry would view their relationship as incestuous and their marriage as null and void. Catherine insisted that she had remained a virgin through her marriage to Arthur, and Pope Clement VII supported her by giving his blessing to the union, which he could not have done had he considered it incestuous. Yet after years of marriage to Henry, Catherine had failed to produce a son, and in the early 1520s she had entered menopause. To the king this could only mean one thing: She had lied about her virginity, their union was incestuous, and God had punished them.

There was another reason why Henry wanted to get rid of Catherine: He had fallen in love with a younger woman, Anne Boleyn. Not only was he in love with her, but if he married her he could still hope to sire a legitimate son. The marriage to Catherine had to be annulled. For this, however, Henry had to apply to the Vatican. But Pope Clement would never annul the marriage.

By the summer of 1527, rumors spread throughout Europe that Henry was about to attempt the impossible—to annul his marriage against Clement’s wishes. Catherine would never abdicate, let alone voluntarily enter a nunnery, as Henry had urged her. But Henry had his own strategy: He stopped sleeping in the same bed with Catherine, since he considered

her his sister-in-law, not his lawful wife. He insisted on calling her Princess Dowager of Wales, her title as Arthur's widow. Finally, in 1531, he banished her from court and shipped her off to a distant castle. The pope ordered him to return her to court, on pain of excommunication, the most severe penalty a Catholic could suffer. Henry not only ignored this threat, he insisted that his marriage to Catherine had been dissolved, and in 1533 he married Anne Boleyn.

Clement refused to recognize the marriage, but Henry did not care. He no longer recognized the pope's authority, and proceeded to break with the Roman Catholic Church, establishing the Church of England in its stead, with the king as the head of the new church. And so, not surprisingly, the newly formed Church of England proclaimed Anne Boleyn England's rightful queen.

The pope tried every threat in the book, but nothing worked. Henry simply ignored him. Clement fumed—no one had ever treated him so contemptuously. Henry had humiliated him and he had no power of recourse. Even excommunication (which he constantly threatened but never carried out) would no longer matter.

Catherine too felt the devastating sting of Henry's disdain. She tried to fight back, but in appealing to Henry her words fell on deaf ears, and soon they fell on no one's. Isolated from the court, ignored by the king, mad with anger and frustration, Catherine slowly deteriorated, and finally died in January of 1536, from a cancerous tumor of the heart.

Interpretation

When you pay attention to a person, the two of you become partners of sorts, each moving in step to the actions and reactions of the other. In the process you lose your initiative. It is a dynamic of all interactions: By acknowledging other people, even if only to fight with them, you open yourself to their influence. Had Henry locked horns with Catherine, he would have found himself mired in endless arguments that would have weakened his resolve and eventually worn him down. (Catherine was a strong, stubborn woman.) Had he set out to convince Clement to change his verdict on the marriage's validity, or tried to compromise and negotiate with him, he would have gotten bogged down in Clement's favorite tactic: playing for time, promising flexibility, but actually getting what popes always got—their way.

Henry would have none of this. He played a devastating power game—total disdain. By ignoring people you cancel them out. This unsettles and infuriates them—but since they have no dealings with you, there is nothing they can do.

And in this view it is advisable to let everyone of your acquaintance—whether man or woman—feel now and then that you could very well dispense with their company. This will consolidate friendship. Nay, with most people there will be no harm in occasionally mixing a grain of disdain with your treatment of them; that will make them value your friendship all the more. Chi non stima vien stimato, as a subtle Italian proverb has it—to disregard is to win regard. But if we really think very highly of a person, we should conceal it from him like a crime. This is not a very gratifying thing to do, but it is right. Why, a dog will not bear being treated too kindly, let alone a man!

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, 1788-1860

THE MONKEY AND THE PEAS

A monkey was carrying two handfuls of peas. One little pea dropped out. He tried to pick it up, and spilt twenty. He tried to pick up the twenty, and

spilt them all. Then he lost his temper, scattered the peas in all directions, and ran away.

FABLES, LEO TOLSTOY, 1828-1910

This is the offensive aspect of the law. Playing the card of contempt is immensely powerful, for it lets you determine the conditions of the conflict. The war is waged on your terms. This is the ultimate power pose: You are the king, and you ignore what offends you. Watch how this tactic infuriates people—half of what they do is to get your attention, and when you withhold it from them, they flounder in frustration.

MAN: Kick him—he'll forgive you. Flatter him—he may or may not see through you. But ignore him and he'll hate you.

Idries Shah, Caravan of Dreams, 1968

As some make gossip out of everything, so others make much ado about everything. They are always talking big, [and] take everything seriously, making a quarrel and a mystery of it. You should take very few grievances to heart, for to do so is to give yourself groundless worry. It is a topsyturvy way of behaving to take to heart cares which you ought to throw over your shoulder. Many things which seemed important [at the time] turn out to be of no account when they are ignored; and others, which seem trifling, appear formidable when you pay attention to them. Things can easily be settled at the outset, but not so later on. In many cases, the remedy itself is the cause of the disease: to let things be is not the least satisfactory of life's rules.

BALTASAR GRACIÁN, 1601-1658

KEYS TO POWER

Desire often creates paradoxical effects: The more you want something, the more you chase after it, the more it eludes you. The more interest you show, the more you repel the object of your desire. This is because your interest is too strong—it makes people awkward, even fearful. Uncontrollable desire makes you seem weak, unworthy, pathetic.

You need to turn your back on what you want, show your contempt and disdain. This is the kind of powerful response that will drive your targets crazy. They will respond with a desire of their own, which is simply to have an effect on you—perhaps to possess you, perhaps to hurt you. If they want to possess you, you have successfully completed the first step of seduction. If they want to hurt you, you have unsettled them and made them play by your rules (see Laws 8 and 39 on baiting people into action).

Contempt is the prerogative of the king. Where his eyes turn, what he decides to see, is what has reality; what he ignores and turns his back on is as good as dead. That was the weapon of King Louis XIV—if he did not like you, he acted as if you were not there, maintaining his superiority by cutting off the dynamic of interaction. This is the power you have when you play the card of contempt, periodically showing people that you can do without them.

If choosing to ignore enhances your power, it follows that the opposite approach—commitment and engagement—often weakens you. By paying undue attention to a puny enemy, you look puny, and the longer it takes you to crush such an enemy, the larger the enemy seems. When Athens set out to conquer the island of Sicily, in 415 B.C., a giant power was attacking a tiny one. Yet by entangling Athens in a long-drawn-out conflict, Syracuse, Sicily's most important city-state, was able to grow in stature and confidence. Finally defeating Athens, it made itself famous for centuries to come. In recent times, President John F. Kennedy made a similar mistake in his attitude to Fidel Castro of Cuba: His failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, in 1961, made Castro an international hero.

A second danger: If you succeed in crushing the irritant, or even if you merely wound it, you create sympathy for the weaker side. Critics of

Franklin D. Roosevelt complained bitterly about the money his administration spent on government projects, but their attacks had no resonance with the public, who saw the president as working to end the Great Depression. His opponents thought they had an example that would show just how wasteful he had become: his dog, Fala, which he lavished with favors and attention. Critics railed at his insensitivity—spending taxpayers’ money on a dog while so many Americans were still in poverty. But Roosevelt had a response: How *dare* his critics attack a defenseless little dog? His speech in defense of Fala was one of the most popular he ever gave. In this case, the weak party involved was the president’s dog and the attack backfired—in the long run, it only made the president more sympathetic, since many people will naturally side with the “underdog,” just as the American public came to sympathize with the wily but outnumbered Pancho Villa.

It is tempting to want to fix our mistakes, but the harder we try, the worse we often make them. It is sometimes more politic to leave them alone. In 1971, when the *New York Times* published the Pentagon Papers, a group of government documents about the history of U.S. involvement in Indochina, Henry Kissinger erupted into a volcanic rage. Furious about the Nixon administration’s vulnerability to this kind of damaging leak, he made recommendations that eventually led to the formation of a group called the Plumbers to plug the leaks. This was the unit that later broke into Democratic Party offices in the Watergate Hotel, setting off the chain of events that led to Nixon’s downfall. In reality the publication of the Pentagon Papers was not a serious threat to the administration, but Kissinger’s reaction made it a big deal. In trying to fix one problem, he created another: a paranoia for security that in the end was much more destructive to the government. Had he ignored the Pentagon Papers, the scandal they had created would eventually have blown over.

Instead of inadvertently focusing attention on a problem, making it seem worse by publicizing how much concern and anxiety it is causing you, it is often far wiser to play the contemptuous aristocrat, not deigning to acknowledge the problem’s existence. There are several ways to execute this strategy.

First there is the sour-grapes approach. If there is something you want but that you realize you cannot have, the worst thing you can do is draw attention to your disappointment by complaining about it. An infinitely

more powerful tactic is to act as if it never really interested you in the first place. When the writer George Sand's supporters nominated her to be the first female member of the Académie Française, in 1861, Sand quickly saw that the academy would never admit her. Instead of whining, though, she claimed she had no interest in belonging to this group of worn-out, overrated, out-of-touch windbags. Her disdain was the perfect response: Had she shown her anger at her exclusion, she would have revealed how much it meant to her. Instead she branded the academy a club of old men—and why should she be angry or disappointed at not having to spend her time with them? Crying “sour grapes” is sometimes seen as a reflection of the weak; it is actually the tactic of the powerful.

THE MAN AND HIS SHADOW

There was a certain original man who desired to catch his own shadow. He makes a step or two toward it, but it moves away from him. He quickens his pace; it does the same. At last he takes to running; but the quicker he goes, the quicker runs the shadow also, utterly refusing to give itself up, just as if it had been a treasure. But see! our eccentric friend suddenly turns round, and walks away from it. And presently he looks behind him; now the shadow runs after him. Ladies fair, I have often observed... that Fortune treats us in a similar way. One man tries with all his might to seize the goddess, and only loses his time and his trouble. Another seems, to all appearance, to be running out of her sight; but, no: she herself takes a pleasure in pursuing him.

FABLES, IVAN KRILLOFF, 1768-1844

Second, when you are attacked by an inferior, deflect people's attention by making it clear that the attack has not even registered. Look away, or answer sweetly, showing how little the attack concerns you. Similarly, when you yourself have committed a blunder, the best response is often to make less of your mistake by treating it lightly.

The Japanese emperor Go-Saiin, a great disciple of the tea ceremony, owned a priceless antique tea bowl that all the courtiers envied. One day a guest, Dainagon Tsunehiro, asked if he could carry the tea bowl into the light, to examine it more closely. The bowl rarely left the table, but the emperor was in good spirits and he consented. As Dainagon carried the bowl to the railing of the verandah, however, and held it up to the light, it

slipped from his hands and fell on a rock in the garden below, smashing into tiny fragments.

The emperor of course was furious. “It was indeed most clumsy of me to let it drop in this way,” said Dainagon, with a deep bow, “but really there is not much harm done. This Ido tea-bowl is a very old one and it is impossible to say how much longer it would have lasted, but anyhow it is not a thing of any public use, so I think it rather fortunate that it has broken thus.” This surprising response had an immediate effect: The emperor calmed down. Dainagon neither sniveled nor overapologized, but signaled his own worth and power by treating his mistake with a touch of disdain. The emperor had to respond with a similar aristocratic indifference; his anger had made him seem low and petty—an image Dainagon was able to manipulate.

Among equals this tactic might backfire: Your indifference could make you seem callous. But with a master, if you act quickly and without great fuss, it can work to great effect: You bypass his angry response, save him the time and energy he would waste by brooding over it, and allow him the opportunity to display his own lack of pettiness publicly.

If we make excuses and denials when we are caught in a mistake or a deception, we stir the waters and make the situation worse. It is often wiser to play things the opposite way. The Renaissance writer Pietro Aretino often boasted of his aristocratic lineage, which was, of course, a fiction, since he was actually the son of a shoemaker. When an enemy of his finally revealed the embarrassing truth, word quickly spread, and soon all of Venice (where he lived at the time) was aghast at Aretino’s lies. Had he tried to defend himself, he would have only dragged himself down. His response was masterful: He announced that he was indeed the son of a shoemaker, but this only proved his greatness, since he had risen from the lowest stratum of society to its very pinnacle. From then on he never mentioned his previous lie, trumpeting instead his new position on the matter of his ancestry.

Remember: The powerful responses to niggling, petty annoyances and irritations are contempt and disdain. Never show that something has affected you, or that you are offended—that only shows you have acknowledged a problem. Contempt is a dish that is best served cold and without affectation.

Image:
The Tiny

Wound.

It is small but painful and irritating. You try all sorts of medicaments, you complain, you scratch and pick at the scab. Doctors only make it worse, transforming the tiny wound into a grave matter. If only you had left the wound alone, letting time heal it and freeing yourself of worry.

Authority: Know how to play the card of contempt. It is the most politic kind of revenge. For there are many of whom we should have known nothing if their distinguished opponents had taken no notice of them. There is no revenge like oblivion, for it is the entombment of the unworthy in the dust of their own nothingness. (Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658)

REVERSAL

You must play the card of contempt with care and delicacy. Most small troubles will vanish on their own if you leave them be; but some will grow and fester unless you attend to them. Ignore a person of inferior stature and the next time you look he has become a serious rival, and your contempt has made him vengeful as well. The great princes of Renaissance Italy chose to ignore Cesare Borgia at the outset of his career as a young general in the army of his father, Pope Alexander VI. By the time they paid attention it was too late—the cub was now a lion, gobbling up chunks of Italy. Often, then, while you show contempt publicly you will also need to keep an eye on the problem privately, monitoring its status and making sure it goes away. Do not let it become a cancerous cell.

Develop the skill of sensing problems when they are still small and taking care of them before they become intractable. Learn to distinguish between the potentially disastrous and the mildly irritating, the nuisance that will quietly go away on its own. In either case, though, never completely take your eye off it. As long as it is alive it can smolder and spark into life.