

## LAW 42

STRIKE THE SHEPHERD AND THE SHEEP WILL SCATTER

### JUDGMENT

*Trouble can often be traced to a single strong individual —the stirrer, the arrogant underling, the poisoner of goodwill. If you allow such people room to operate, others will succumb to their influence. Do not wait for the troubles they cause to multiply, do not try to negotiate with them—they are irredeemable. Neutralize their influence by isolating or banishing them. Strike at the source of the trouble and the sheep will scatter.*

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW I

Near the end of the sixth century B.C., the city-state of Athens overthrew the series of petty tyrants who had dominated its politics for decades. It established instead a democracy that was to last over a century, a democracy that became the source of its power and its proudest achievement. But as the democracy evolved, so did a problem the Athenians had never faced: How to deal with those who did not concern themselves with the cohesion of a small city surrounded by enemies, who did not work for its greater glory, but thought of only themselves and their own ambitions and petty intrigues? The Athenians understood that these people, if left alone, would sow dissension, divide the city into factions, and stir up anxieties, all of which could lead to the ruin of their democracy.

Violent punishment no longer suited the new, civilized order that Athens had created. Instead the citizens found another, more satisfying, and less brutal way to deal with the chronically selfish: Every year they would gather in the marketplace and write on a piece of earthenware, an ostrakon, the name of an individual they wanted to see banished from the city for ten years. If a particular name appeared on six thousand ballots, that person would instantly be exiled. If no one received six thousand votes, the person with the most ostraka recording his name would suffer the ten-year “ostracism.” This ritual expulsion became a kind of festival—what a joy to be able to banish those irritating, anxiety-inducing individuals who wanted to rise above the group they should have served.

In 490 B.C., Aristides, one of the great generals of Athenian history, helped defeat the Persians at the battle of Marathon. Meanwhile, off the battlefield, his fairness as a judge had earned him the nickname “The Just.” But as the years went by the Athenians came to dislike him. He made such a show of his righteousness, and this, they believed, disguised his feelings of superiority and scorn for the common folk. His omnipresence in Athenian politics became obnoxious; the citizens grew tired of hearing him called “The Just.” They feared that this was just the type of man—judgmental, haughty—who would eventually stir up fierce divisions among them. In

482 B.C., despite Aristides' invaluable expertise in the continuing war with the Persians, they collected the *ostraka* and had him banished.

After Aristides' ostracism, the great general Themistocles emerged as the city's premier leader. But his many honors and victories went to his head, and he too became arrogant and overbearing, constantly reminding the Athenians of his triumphs in battle, the temples he had built, the dangers he had fended off. He seemed to be saying that without him the city would come to ruin. And so, in 472 B.C., Themistocles' name was filled in on the *ostraka* and the city was rid of his poisonous presence.

## THE CONQUEST OF PERU

*The struggle now became fiercer than ever around the royal litter [of Atahualpa, king of the Incan empire]. It reeled more and more, and at length, several of the nobles who supported it having been slain, it was overturned, and the Indian prince would have come with violence to the ground, had not his fall been broken by the efforts of Pizarro and some other of the cavaliers, who caught him in their arms. The imperial borla was instantly snatched from his temples by a soldier. and the unhappy monarch, strongly secured, was removed to a neighboring building where he was carefully guarded.*

*All attempt at resistance now ceased. The fate of the Inca [Atahualpa] soon spread over town and country. The charm that might have held the Peruvians together was dissolved. Every man thought only of his own safety. Even the [Incan] soldiery encamped on the adjacent fields took the alarm, and, learning the fatal tidings, were seen flying in every direction before their pursuers, who in the heat of triumph showed no touch of mercy. At length night, more pitiful than man, threw her friendly mantle over the fugitives, and the scattered troops of Pizarro rallied once more at the sound of the trumpet in the bloody square of Cajamarca.... [Atahualpa] was revered as more than a human. He was not merely the head of the state, but the point to which all its institutions converged as to a common center - the keystone of the political fabric which must fall to pieces by its own weight when that was withdrawn. So it fared on the [execution] of Atahualpa. His death not only left the throne vacant, without any certain successor, but the manner of it announced to the Peruvian people that a*

*hand stronger than that of their Incas had now seized the scepter, and that the dynasty of the Children of the Sun had passed away forever.*

THE CONQUEST OF PERU, WILLIAM H. PRESCOTT, 1847

The greatest political figure in fifth-century Athens was undoubtedly Pericles. Although several times threatened with ostracism, he avoided that fate by maintaining close ties with the people. Perhaps he had learned a lesson as a child from his favorite tutor, the incomparable Damon, who excelled above all other Athenians in his intelligence, his musical skills, and his rhetorical abilities. It was Damon who had trained Pericles in the arts of ruling. But he, too, suffered ostracism, for his superior airs and his insulting manner toward the commoners stirred up too much resentment.

Toward the end of the century there lived a man named Hyperbolus. Most writers of the time describe him as the city's most worthless citizen: He did not care what anyone thought of him, and slandered whomever he disliked. He amused some, but irritated many more. In 417 B.C., Hyperbolus saw an opportunity to stir up anger against the two leading politicians of the time, Alcibiades and Nicias. He hoped that one of the two would be ostracized and that he would rise in that man's place. His campaign seemed likely to succeed: The Athenians disliked Alcibiades' flamboyant and carefree lifestyle, and were wary of Nicias' wealth and aloofness. They seemed certain to ostracize one or the other. But Alcibiades and Nicias, although they were otherwise enemies, pooled their resources and managed to turn the ostracism on Hyperbolus instead. His obnoxiousness, they argued, could only be terminated by banishment.

Earlier sufferers of ostracism had been formidable, powerful men. Hyperbolus, however, was a low buffoon, and with his banishment the Athenians felt that ostracism had been degraded. And so they ended the practice that for nearly a hundred years had been one of the keys to keeping the peace within Athens.

## Interpretation

The ancient Athenians had social instincts unknown today—the passage of centuries has blunted them. Citizens in the true sense of the word, the Athenians sensed the dangers posed by asocial behavior, and saw how such behavior often disguises itself in other forms: the holier-than-thou attitude that silently seeks to impose its standards on others; overweening ambition at the expense of the common good; the flaunting of superiority; quiet scheming; terminal obnoxiousness. Some of these behaviors would eat away at the city's cohesion by creating factions and sowing dissension, others would ruin the democratic spirit by making the common citizen feel inferior and envious. The Athenians did not try to reeducate people who acted in these ways, or to absorb them somehow into the group, or to impose a violent punishment that would only create other problems. The solution was quick and effective: Get rid of them.

Within any group, trouble can most often be traced to a single source, the unhappy, chronically dissatisfied one who will always stir up dissension and infect the group with his or her ill ease. Before you know what hit you the dissatisfaction spreads. Act before it becomes impossible to disentangle one strand of misery from another, or to see how the whole thing started. First, recognize troublemakers by their overbearing presence, or by their complaining nature. Once you spot them do not try to reform them or appease them—that will only make things worse. Do not attack them, whether directly or indirectly, for they are poisonous in nature and will work underground to destroy you. Do as the Athenians did: Banish them before it is too late. Separate them from the group before they become the eye of a whirlpool. Do not give them time to stir up anxieties and sow discontent; do not give them room to move. Let one person suffer so that the rest can live in peace.

*When the tree falls, the monkeys scatter.  
Chinese saying*

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW II

In 1296 the cardinals of the Catholic Church met in Rome to select a new pope. They chose Cardinal Gaetani, for he was incomparably shrewd; such a man would make the Vatican a great power. Taking the name Boniface VIII, Gaetani soon proved he deserved the cardinals' high opinion of him: He plotted his moves carefully in advance, and stopped at nothing to get his way. Once in power, Boniface quickly crushed his rivals and unified the Papal States. The European powers began to fear him, and sent delegates to negotiate with him. The German King Albrecht of Austria even yielded some territory to Boniface. All was proceeding according to the pope's plan.

One piece did not fall into place, however, and that was Tuscany, the richest part of Italy. If Boniface could conquer Florence, Tuscany's most powerful city, the region would be his. But Florence was a proud republic, and would be hard to defeat. The pope had to play his cards skillfully.

Florence was divided by two rival factions, the Blacks and the Whites. The Whites were the merchant families that had recently and quickly risen to power and wealth; the Blacks were the older money. Because of their popularity with the people, the Whites retained control of the city, to the Blacks' increasing resentment. The feud between the two grew steadily more bitter.

## THE WOLVES AND THE SHEEP

*Once upon a time, the wolves sent an embassy to the sheep, desiring that there might be peace between them for the time to come. "Why," said they, "should we be for ever waging this deadly strife? Those wicked dogs are the cause of all; they are incessantly barking at us, and provoking us. Send them away, and there will be no longer any obstacle to our eternal friendship and peace." The silly sheep listened, the dogs were dismissed, and the flock, thus deprived of their best protectors, became an easy prey to their treacherous enemy.*

FABLES, AESOP, SIXTH CENTURY B.C.

Here Boniface saw his chance: He would plot to help the Blacks take over the city, and Florence would be in his pocket. And as he studied the situation he began to focus on one man, Dante Alighieri, the celebrated writer, poet, and ardent supporter of the Whites. Dante had always been interested in politics. He believed passionately in the republic, and often chastised his fellow citizens for their lack of spine. He also happened to be the city's most eloquent public speaker. In 1300, the year Boniface began plotting to take over Tuscany, Dante's fellow citizens had voted him in to Florence's highest elected position, making him one of the city's six priors. During his six-month term in the post, he had stood firmly against the Blacks and against all of the pope's attempts to sow disorder.

By 1301, however, Boniface had a new plan: He called in Charles de Valois, powerful brother of the king of France, to help bring order to Tuscany. As Charles marched through northern Italy, and Florence seethed with anxiety and fear, Dante quickly emerged as the man who could rally the people, arguing vehemently against appeasement and working desperately to arm the citizens and to organize resistance against the pope and his puppet French prince. By hook or by crook, Boniface had to neutralize Dante. And so, even as on the one hand he threatened Florence with Charles de Valois, on the other he held out the olive branch, the possibility of negotiations, hoping Dante would take the bait. And indeed the Florentines decided to send a delegation to Rome and try to negotiate a peace. To head the mission, predictably, they chose Dante.

Some warned the poet that the wily pope was setting up a trap to lure him away, but Dante went to Rome anyway, arriving as the French army stood before the gates of Florence. He felt sure that his eloquence and reason would win the pope over and save the city. Yet when the pope met the poet and the Florentine delegates, he instantly intimidated them, as he did so many. "Fall on your knees before me!" he bellowed at their first meeting. "Submit to me! I tell you that in all truth I have nothing in my heart but to promote your peace." Succumbing to his powerful presence, the Florentines listened as the pope promised to look after their interests. He then advised them to return home, leaving one of their members behind to continue the talks. Boniface signaled that the man to stay was to be Dante. He spoke with the utmost politeness, but in essence it was an order.

And so Dante remained in Rome. And while he and the pope continued their dialogue, Florence fell apart. With no one to rally the Whites, and with Charles de Valois using the pope's money to bribe and sow dissension, the Whites disintegrated, some arguing for negotiations, others switching sides. Facing an enemy now divided and unsure of itself, the Blacks easily destroyed them within weeks, exacting violent revenge on them. And once the Blacks stood firmly in power, the pope finally dismissed Dante from Rome.

The Blacks ordered Dante to return home to face accusations and stand trial. When the poet refused, the Blacks condemned him to be burned to death if he ever set foot in Florence again. And so Dante began a miserable life of exile, wandering through Italy, disgraced in the city that he loved, never to return to Florence, even after his death.

## THE LIFE OF THEMISTOCLES

*[Themistocles's] fellow citizens reached the point at which their jealousy made them listen to any slander at his expense, and so [he] was forced to remind the assembly of his achievements until they could bear this no longer. He once said to those who were complaining of him: "Why are you tired of receiving benefits so often from the same men?" Besides this he gave offense to the people when he built the temple of Artemis, for not only did he style the goddess Artemis Aristoboule, or Artemis wisest in counsel—with the hint that it was he who had given the best counsel to the Athenians and the Greeks—but he chose a site for it near his own house at Melite... So at last the Athenians banished him. They made use of the ostracism to humble his great reputation and his authority, as indeed was their habit with any whose power they regarded as oppressive, or who had risen to an eminence which they considered out of keeping with the equality of a democracy.*

THE LIFE OF THEMISTOCLES, PLUTARCH, C. A.D. 46-120



## Interpretation

Boniface knew that if he only had a pretext to lure Dante away, Florence would crumble. He played the oldest card in the book—threatening with one hand while holding out the olive branch with the other—and Dante fell for it. Once the poet was in Rome, the pope kept him there for as long as it took. For Boniface understood one of the principal precepts in the game of power: One resolute person, one disobedient spirit, can turn a flock of sheep into a den of lions. So he isolated the troublemaker. Without the backbone of the city to keep them together, the sheep quickly scattered.

Learn the lesson: Do not waste your time lashing out in all directions at what seems to be a many-headed enemy. Find the one head that matters—the person with willpower, or smarts, or, most important of all, charisma. Whatever it costs you, lure this person away, for once he is absent his powers will lose their effect. His isolation can be physical (banishment or absence from the court), political (narrowing his base of support), or psychological (alienating him from the group through slander and insinuation). Cancer begins with a single cell; excise it before it spreads beyond cure.

## KEYS TO POWER

In the past, an entire nation would be ruled by a king and his handful of ministers. Only the elite had any power to play with. Over the centuries, power has gradually become more and more diffused and democratized. This has created, however, a common misperception that groups no longer have centers of power—that power is spread out and scattered among many people. Actually, however, power has changed in its numbers but not in its essence. There may be fewer mighty tyrants commanding the power of life and death over millions, but there remain thousands of petty tyrants ruling smaller realms, and enforcing their will through indirect power games, charisma, and so on. In every group, power is concentrated in the hands of one or two people, for this is one area in which human nature will never change: People will congregate around a single strong personality like planets orbiting a sun.

To labor under the illusion that this kind of power center no longer exists is to make endless mistakes, waste energy and time, and never hit the target. Powerful people never waste time. Outwardly they may play along with the game—pretending that power is shared among many—but inwardly they keep their eyes on the inevitable few in the group who hold the cards. These are the ones they work on. When troubles arise, they look for the underlying cause, the single strong character who started the stirring and whose isolation or banishment will settle the waters again.

In his family-therapy practice, Dr. Milton H. Erickson found that if the family dynamic was unsettled and dysfunctional there was inevitably one person who was the stirrer, the troublemaker. In his sessions he would symbolically isolate this rotten apple by seating him or her apart from the others, if only by a few feet. Slowly the other family members would see the physically separate person as the source of their difficulty. Once you recognize who the stirrer is, pointing it out to other people will accomplish a great deal. Understanding who controls the group dynamic is a critical realization. Remember: Stirrers thrive by hiding in the group, disguising their actions among the reactions of others. Render their actions visible and they lose their power to upset.

A key element in games of strategy is isolating the enemy's power. In chess you try to corner the king. In the Chinese game of go you try to isolate the enemy's forces in small pockets, rendering them immobile and ineffectual. It is often better to isolate your enemies than to destroy them—you seem less brutal. The result, though, is the same, for in the game of power, isolation spells death.

The most effective form of isolation is somehow to separate your victims from their power base. When Mao Tse-tung wanted to eliminate an enemy in the ruling elite, he did not confront the person directly; he silently and stealthily worked to isolate the man, divide his allies and turn them away from him, shrink his support. Soon the man would vanish on his own.

Presence and appearance have great import in the game of power. To seduce, particularly in the beginning stages, you need to be constantly present, or create the feeling that you are; if you are often out of sight, the charm will wear off. Queen Elizabeth's prime minister, Robert Cecil, had two main rivals: the queen's favorite, the Earl of Essex, and her former favorite, Sir Walter Raleigh. He contrived to send them both on a mission against Spain; with them away from the court he managed to wrap his tentacles around the queen, secure his position as her top adviser and weaken her affection for Raleigh and the earl. The lesson here is twofold: First, your absence from the court spells danger for you, and you should never leave the scene in a time of turmoil, for your absence can both symbolize and induce a loss of power; second, and on the other hand, luring your enemies away from the court at critical moments is a great ploy.

Isolation has other strategic uses. When trying to seduce people, it is often wise to isolate them from their usual social context. Once isolated they are vulnerable to you, and your presence becomes magnified. Similarly, con artists often look for ways to isolate their marks from their normal social milieu, steering them into new environments in which they are no longer comfortable. Here they feel weak, and succumb to deception more easily. Isolation, then, can prove a powerful way of bringing people under your spell to seduce or swindle them.

You will often find powerful people who have alienated themselves from the group. Perhaps their power has gone to their heads, and they consider themselves superior; perhaps they have lost the knack of communicating with ordinary folk. Remember: This makes them vulnerable. Powerful though they be, people like this can be turned to use.

The monk Rasputin gained his power over Czar Nicholas and Czarina Alexandra of Russia through their tremendous isolation from the people. Alexandra in particular was a foreigner, and especially alienated from everyday Russians; Rasputin used his peasant origins to insinuate himself into her good graces, for she desperately wanted to communicate with her subjects. Once in the court's inner circle, Rasputin made himself indispensable and attained great power. Heading straight for the center, he aimed for the one figure in Russia who commanded power (the czarina dominated her husband), and found he had no need to isolate her for the work was already done. The Rasputin strategy can bring you great power: Always search out people who hold high positions yet who find themselves isolated on the board. They are like apples falling into your lap, easily seduced, and able to catapult you into power yourself.

Finally, the reason you strike at the shepherd is because such an action will dishearten the sheep beyond any rational measure. When Hernando Cortés and Francisco Pizarro led their tiny forces against the Aztec and Incan empires, they did not make the mistake of fighting on several fronts, nor were they intimidated by the numbers arrayed against them; they captured the kings, Moctezuma and Atahualpa. Vast empires fell into their hands. With the leader gone the center of gravity is gone; there is nothing to revolve around and everything falls apart. Aim at the leaders, bring them down, and look for the endless opportunities in the confusion that will ensue.

Image: A Flock of Fatted  
Sheep. Do not waste precious  
time trying to steal a sheep or two; do  
not risk life and limb by setting upon  
the dogs that guard the flock. Aim at the  
shepherd. Lure him away and the dogs  
will follow. Strike him down and the flock will  
scatter—you can pick them off one by one.

Authority: If you draw a bow, draw the strongest. If you use an arrow, use the longest. To shoot a rider, first shoot his horse. To catch a gang of bandits, first capture its leader. Just as a country has its border, so the killing of men has its limits. If the enemy's attack can be stopped [with a blow to the head], why have any more dead and wounded than necessary? (Chinese poet Tu Fu, Tang dynasty, eighth century)

## REVERSAL

“Any harm you do to a man should be done in such a way that you need not fear his revenge,” writes Machiavelli. If you act to isolate your enemy, make sure he lacks the means to repay the favor. If you apply this Law, in other words, apply it from a position of superiority, so that you have nothing to fear from his resentment.

Andrew Johnson, Abraham Lincoln’s successor as U.S. president, saw Ulysses S. Grant as a troublesome member of his government. So he isolated Grant, as a prelude to forcing him out. This only enraged the great general, however, who responded by forming a support base in the Republican party and going on to become the next president. It would have been far wiser to keep a man like Grant in the fold, where he could do less harm, than to make him revengeful. And so you may often find it better to keep people on your side, where you can watch them, than to risk creating an angry enemy. Keeping them close, you can secretly whittle away at their support base, so that when the time comes to cut them loose they will fall fast and hard without knowing what hit them.