

## LAW 47

DO NOT GO PAST THE MARK YOU AIMED FOR; IN  
VICTORY, LEARN WHEN TO STOP

### JUDGMENT

*The moment of victory is often the moment of greatest peril. In the heat of victory, arrogance and overconfidence can push you past the goal you had aimed for, and by going too far, you make more enemies than you defeat. Do not allow success to go to your head. There is no substitute for strategy and careful planning. Set a goal, and when you reach it, stop.*

## TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

In 559 B.C., a young man named Cyrus gathered an immense army from the scattered tribes of Persia and marched against his grandfather Astyages, king of the Medes. He defeated Astyages with ease, had himself crowned king of Medea and Persia, and began to forge the Persian Empire. Victory followed victory in quick succession. Cyrus defeated Croesus, ruler of Lydia, then conquered the Ionian islands and other smaller kingdoms; he marched on Babylon and crushed it. Now he was known as Cyrus the Great, King of the World.

After capturing the riches of Babylon, Cyrus set his sights on the east, on the half-barbaric tribes of the Massagetai, a vast realm on the Caspian Sea. A fierce warrior race led by Queen Tomyris, the Massagetai lacked the riches of Babylon, but Cyrus decided to attack them anyway, believing himself superhuman and incapable of defeat. The Massagetai would fall easily to his vast armies, making his empire immense.

In 529 B.C., then, Cyrus marched to the wide river Araxes, gateway to the kingdom of the Massagetai. As he set up camp on the western bank, he received a message from Queen Tomyris: "King of the Medes," she told him, "I advise you to abandon this enterprise, for you cannot know if in the end it will do you any good. Rule your own people, and try to bear the sight of me ruling mine. But of course you will refuse my advice, as the last thing you wish for is to live in peace." Tomyris, confident of her army's strength and not wishing to delay the inevitable battle, offered to withdraw the troops on her side of the river, allowing Cyrus to cross its waters safely and fight her army on the eastern side, if that was his desire.

Cyrus agreed, but instead of engaging the enemy directly he decided to play a trick. The Massagetai knew few luxuries. Once Cyrus had crossed the river and made his camp on the eastern side, he set the table for an elaborate banquet, full of meat, delicacies, and strong wine. Then he left his weakest troops in the camp and withdrew the rest of the army to the river. A large Massagetai detachment soon attacked the camp and killed all of the Persian soldiers in a fierce battle. Then, overwhelmed by the fabulous feast that had been left behind, they ate and drank to their hearts' content. Later,

inevitably, they fell asleep. The Persian army returned to the camp that night, killing many of the sleeping soldiers and capturing the rest. Among the prisoners was their general, a youth named Spargapises, son of Queen Tomyris.

When the queen learned what had happened, she sent a message to Cyrus, chiding him for using tricks to defeat her army. “Now listen to me,” she wrote, “and I will advise you for your own good: Give me back my son and leave my country with your forces intact, and be content with your triumph over a third part of the Massagetai. If you refuse, I swear by the sun our master to give you more blood than you can drink, for all your gluttony.” Cyrus scoffed at her: He would not release her son. He would crush these barbarians.

### THE VAINGLORIOUS COCKEREL

*Two cockerels fought on a dungheap. One cockerel was the stronger: he vanquished the other and drove him from the dungheap. All the hens gathered around the cockerel, and began to laud him. The cockerel wanted his strength and glory to be known in the next yard. He flew on top of the barn, flapped his wings, and crowed in a loud voice: “Look at me, all of you. I am a victorious cockerel. No other cockerel in the world has such strength as I. ” The cockerel had not finished, when an eagle killed him, seized him in his claws, and carried him to his nest.*

FABLES, LEO TOLSTOY, 1828-1910

The queen’s son, seeing he would not be released, could not stand the humiliation, and so he killed himself. The news of her son’s death overwhelmed Tomyris. She gathered all the forces that she could muster in her kingdom, and whipping them into a vengeful frenzy, engaged Cyrus’s troops in a violent and bloody battle. Finally, the Massagetai prevailed. In their anger they decimated the Persian army, killing Cyrus himself.

After the battle, Tomyris and her soldiers searched the battlefield for Cyrus’s corpse. When she found it she cut off his head and shoved it into a wineskin full of human blood, crying out, “Though I have conquered you and live, yet you have ruined me by treacherously taking my son. See now—I fulfill my threat: You have your fill of blood.” After Cyrus’s death, the

Persian Empire quickly unraveled. One act of arrogance undid all of Cyrus's good work.

## Interpretation

There is nothing more intoxicating than victory, and nothing more dangerous.

Cyrus had built his great empire on the ruins of a previous one. A hundred years earlier, the powerful Assyrian Empire had been totally destroyed, its once splendid capital of Nineveh but ruins in the sand. The Assyrians had suffered this fate because they had pushed too far, destroying one city-state after another until they lost sight of the purposes of their victories, and also of the costs. They overextended themselves and made many enemies who were finally able to band together and destroy them.

Cyrus ignored the lesson of Assyria. He paid no heed to the warnings of oracles and advisers. He did not worry about offending a queen. His many victories had gone to his head, clouding his reason. Instead of consolidating his already vast empire, he pushed forward. Instead of recognizing each situation as different, he thought each new war would bring the same result as the one before as long as he used the methods he knew: ruthless force and cunning.

Understand: In the realm of power, you must be guided by reason. To let a momentary thrill or an emotional victory influence or guide your moves will prove fatal. When you attain success, step back. Be cautious. When you gain victory, understand the part played by the particular circumstances of a situation, and never simply repeat the same actions again and again. History is littered with the ruins of victorious empires and the corpses of leaders who could not learn to stop and consolidate their gains.

## THE SEQUENCE OF CROSS-EXAMINATION

*In all your cross-examinations..., most important of all, let me repeat the injunction to be ever on the alert for a good place to stop. Nothing can be more important than to close your examination with a triumph. So many lawyers succeed in catching a witness in a serious contradiction; but, not satisfied with this, go on asking questions, and taper off their examination until the effect upon the jury of their former advantage is lost altogether.*

THE ART OF CROSS-EXAMINATION, FRANCIS L. WELLMAN, 1913

## THE OVERREACHING GENERAL

*We read of many instances of this kind; for the general who by his valor has conquered a state for his master, and won great glory for himself by his victory over the enemy, and has loaded his soldiers with rich booty, acquires necessarily with his own soldiers, as well as with those of the enemy and with the subjects of the prince, so high a reputation, that his very victory may become distasteful, and a cause for apprehension to his prince. For as the nature of men is ambitious as well as suspicious, and puts no limits to one's good fortune, it is not impossible that the suspicion that may suddenly be aroused in the mind of the prince by the victory of the general may have been aggravated by some haughty expressions or insolent acts on his part; so that the prince will naturally be made to think of securing himself against the ambition of his general.*

*And to do this, the means that suggest themselves to him are either to have the general killed, or to deprive him of that reputation which he has acquired with the prince's army and the people, by using every means to prove that the general's victory was not due to his skill and courage, but to chance and the cowardice of the enemy, or to the sagacity of the other captains who were with him in that action.*

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, 1469-1527

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

No single person in history has occupied a more delicate and precarious position than the king's mistress. She had no real or legitimate power base to fall back on in times of trouble; she was surrounded by packs of envious courtiers eagerly anticipating her fall from grace; and finally, since the source of her power was usually her physical beauty, for most royal mistresses that fall was inevitable and unpleasant.

King Louis XV of France began to keep official mistresses in the early days of his reign, each woman's good fortune rarely lasting more than a few years. But then came Madame de Pompadour, who, when she was a middle-class child of nine named Jeanne Poisson, had been told by a fortune-teller that she would someday be the king's favorite. This seemed an absurd dream, since the royal mistress almost always came from the aristocracy. Jeanne nevertheless believed herself destined to seduce the king, and doing so became her obsession. She applied herself to the talents the king's favorite had to have—music, dancing, acting, horseback riding—and she excelled in every one of them. As a young woman, she married a man of the lower nobility, which gave her an entrée to the best salons in Paris. Word quickly spread of her beauty, talent, charm, and intelligence.

Jeanne Poisson became close friends with Voltaire, Montesquieu, and other great minds of the time, but she never lost sight of the goal she had set herself as a girl: to capture the heart of the king. Her husband had a chateau in a forest where the king would often go hunting, and she began to spend a lot of time there. Studying his movements like a hawk, she would make sure he would “happen” to come upon her while she was out walking in her most alluring dress, or riding in her splendid coach. The king began to take note of her, making her gifts of the game he caught in the hunt.

In 1744 Louis's current mistress, the Duchesse de Chateauroux, died. Jeanne went on the offensive. She placed herself everywhere he would be: at masked balls at Versailles, at the opera, wherever their paths would cross, and wherever she could display her many talents: dancing, singing, riding, coquetry. The king finally succumbed to her charms, and in a ceremony at Versailles in September of 1745, this twenty-four-year-old daughter of a

middle-class banking agent was officially inaugurated as the king's mistress. She was given her own room in the palace, a room the king could enter at any time via a hidden stairway and back door. And because some of the courtiers were angry that he had chosen a woman of low origins, he made her a marquise. From now on she would be known as Madame de Pompadour.

The king was a man whom the slightest feeling of boredom would oppress out of proportion. Madame de Pompadour knew that keeping him under her spell meant keeping him amused. To that end she put on constant theatrical productions at Versailles, in which she starred. She organized elaborate hunting parties, masked balls, and whatever else it would take to keep him diverted outside the bedroom. She became a patroness of the arts, and the arbiter of taste and fashion for all of France. Her enemies at the court only grew in number with each new success, but Madame de Pompadour thwarted them in a totally novel way for a king's mistress: with extreme politeness. Snobs who resented her for her low birth she won over with charm and grace. Most unusual of all, she befriended the queen, and insisted that Louis XV pay more attention to his wife, and treat her more kindly. Even the royal family begrudgingly gave her their support. To crown her glory, the king made her a duchess. Her sway was felt even in politics: Indeed she became the untitled minister of foreign affairs.

In 1751, when Madame de Pompadour was at the height of her power, she experienced her worst crisis. Physically weakened by the responsibilities of her position, she found it increasingly difficult to meet the king's demands in bed. This was usually the point at which the mistress would meet her end, struggling to maintain her position as her beauty faded. But Madame de Pompadour had a strategy: She encouraged the king to set up a kind of brothel, *Pare aux Cerfs*, on the grounds of Versailles. There the middle-aged king could have liaisons with the most beautiful young girls in the realm.

Madame de Pompadour knew that her charm and her political acumen had made her indispensable to the king. What did she have to fear from a sixteen-year-old who had none of her power and presence? What did it matter if she lost her position in the bedroom, as long as she remained the most powerful woman in France? To secure that position she became still closer friends with the queen, with whom she started attending church.



Although her enemies at the court conspired to have her toppled from her official position as king's mistress, the king kept her on, for he needed her calming effect. It was only when her part in the disastrous Seven Years' War drew much criticism on her that she slowly withdrew from public affairs.

Madame de Pompadour's health had always been delicate, and she died at the age of forty-three, in 1764. Her reign as mistress had lasted an unprecedented twenty years. "She was regretted by all," wrote the Duc de Croy, "for she was kindly and helpful to everyone who approached her."

## Interpretation

Aware of the temporariness of her power, the king's mistress would often go into a kind of frenzy after capturing the king: She would try to accumulate as much money as possible to protect her after her inevitable fall. And to extend her reign as long as possible, she would be ruthless with her enemies in the court. Her situation, in other words, seemed to demand from her a greed and vindictiveness that would often be her undoing. Madame de Pompadour succeeded where all others had failed because she never pressed her good fortune. Instead of bullying the courtiers from her powerful position as the king's mistress, she tried to win their support. She never revealed the slightest hint of greed or arrogance. When she could no longer perform her physical duties as mistress, she did not fret at the thought of someone replacing her in bed. She simply applied some strategy—she encouraged the king to take young lovers, knowing that the younger and prettier they were, the less of a threat they posed, since they could not compare to her in charm and sophistication and would soon bore the monarch.

*A man who was famous as a tree climber was guiding someone in climbing a tall tree. He ordered the man to cut the top branches, and, during this time, when the man seemed to be in great danger, the expert said nothing. Only when the man was coming down and had reached the height of the eaves did the expert call out, "Be careful! Watch your step coming down!" I asked him, "Why did you say that? At that height he could jump the rest of the way if he chose." "That's the point," said the expert. "As long as the man was up at a dizzy height and the branches were threatening to break, he himself was so afraid I said nothing. Mistakes are always made when people get to the easy places." This man belonged to the lowest class, but his words were in perfect accord with the precepts of the sages. In football too, they say that after you have kicked out of a difficult place and you think the next one will be easier you are sure to miss the ball.*

ESSAYS IN IDLENESS, KENKO, JAPAN, FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Success plays strange tricks on the mind. It makes you feel invulnerable, while also making you more hostile and emotional when people challenge your power. It makes you less able to adapt to circumstance. You come to believe your character is more responsible for your success than your strategizing and planning. Like Madame de Pompadour, you need to realize that your moment of triumph is also a moment when you have to rely on cunning and strategy all the more, consolidating your power base, recognizing the role of luck and circumstance in your success, and remaining vigilant against changes in your good fortune. It is the moment of victory when you need to play the courtier's game and pay more attention than ever to the laws of power.

*The greatest danger occurs at the moment of victory.*  
*Napoleon Bonaparte, 1769-1821*

## KEYS TO POWER

Power has its own rhythms and patterns. Those who succeed at the game are the ones who control the patterns and vary them at will, keeping people off balance while they set the tempo. The essence of strategy is controlling what comes next, and the elation of victory can upset your ability to control what comes next in two ways. First, you owe your success to a pattern that you are apt to try to repeat. You will try to keep moving in the same direction without stopping to see whether this is still the direction that is best for you. Second, success tends to go to your head and make you emotional. Feeling invulnerable, you make aggressive moves that ultimately undo the victory you have gained.

The lesson is simple: The powerful vary their rhythms and patterns, change course, adapt to circumstance, and learn to improvise. Rather than letting their dancing feet impel them forward, they step back and look where they are going. It is as if their bloodstream bore a kind of antidote to the intoxication of victory, letting them control their emotions and come to a kind of mental halt when they have attained success. They steady themselves, give themselves the space to reflect on what has happened, examine the role of circumstance and luck in their success. As they say in riding school, you have to be able to control yourself before you can control the horse.

Luck and circumstance always play a role in power. This is inevitable, and actually makes the game more interesting. But despite what you may think, good luck is more dangerous than bad luck. Bad luck teaches valuable lessons about patience, timing, and the need to be prepared for the worst; good luck deludes you into the opposite lesson, making you think your brilliance will carry you through. Your fortune will inevitably turn, and when it does you will be completely unprepared.

According to Machiavelli, this is what undid Cesare Borgia. He had many triumphs, was actually a clever strategist, but had the bad luck to have good luck: He had a pope for a father. Then, when he had bad luck for real—his father's death—he was unprepared for it, and the many enemies he had made devoured him. The good luck that elevates you or seals your

success brings the moment for you to open your eyes: The wheel of fortune will hurtle you down as easily as up. If you prepare for the fall, it is less likely to ruin you when it happens.

People who have a run of success can catch a kind of fever, and even when they themselves try to stay calm, the people below them often pressure them to go past their mark and into dangerous waters. You have to have a strategy for dealing with these people. Simply preaching moderation will make you look weak and small-minded; seeming to fail to follow up on a victory can lessen your power.

When the Athenian general and statesman Pericles led a series of naval campaigns around the Black Sea in 436 B.C., his easy triumphs enflamed the Athenians' desire for more. They dreamed of conquering Egypt, overrunning Persia, sailing for Sicily. On the one hand Pericles reined in these dangerous emotions by warning of the perils of hubris. On the other hand he fed them by fighting small battles that he knew he could win, creating the appearance that he was preserving the momentum of success. The skill with which Pericles played this game is revealed by what happened when he died: The demagogues took over, pushed Athens into invading Sicily, and in one rash move destroyed an empire.

The rhythm of power often requires an alternation of force and cunning. Too much force creates a counterreaction; too much cunning, no matter how cunning it is, becomes predictable. Working on behalf of his master, the shogun Oda Nobunaga, the great sixteenth-century Japanese general (and future emperor) Hideyoshi once engineered a stunning victory over the army of the formidable General Yoshimoto. The shogun wanted to go further, to take on and crush yet another powerful enemy, but Hideyoshi reminded him of the old Japanese saying: "When you have won a victory, tighten the strings of your helmet." For Hideyoshi this was the moment for the shogun to switch from force to cunning and indirection, setting his enemies against one another through a series of deceptive alliances. In this way he would avoid stirring up needless opposition by appearing overly aggressive. When you are victorious, then, lie low, and lull the enemy into inaction. These changes of rhythm are immensely powerful.

People who go past the mark are often motivated by a desire to please a master by proving their dedication. But an excess of effort exposes you to the risk of making the master suspicious of you. On several occasions, generals under Philip of Macedon were disgraced and demoted immediately

after leading their troops to a great victory; one more such victory, Philip thought, and the man might become a rival instead of an underling. When you serve a master, it is often wise to measure your victories carefully, letting him get the glory and never making him uneasy. It is also wise to establish a pattern of strict obedience to earn his trust. In the fourth century B.C., a captain under the notoriously severe Chinese general Wu Ch'i charged ahead before a battle had begun and came back with several enemy heads. He thought he had shown his fiery enthusiasm, but Wu Ch'i was unimpressed. "A talented officer," the general said with a sigh as he ordered the man beheaded, "but a disobedient one."

Another moment when a small success can spoil the chances for a larger one may come if a master or superior grants you a favor: It is a dangerous mistake to ask for more. You will seem insecure—perhaps you feel you did not deserve this favor, and have to grab as much as you can when you have the chance, which may not come again. The proper response is to accept the favor graciously and withdraw. Any subsequent favors you should earn without having to ask for them.

Finally, the moment when you stop has great dramatic import. What comes last sticks in the mind as a kind of exclamation point. There is no better time to stop and walk away than after a victory. Keep going and you risk lessening the effect, even ending up defeated. As lawyers say of cross-examination, "Always stop with a victory."

Image: Icarus Falling  
from the Sky. His father  
Daedalus fashions wings  
of wax that allow the  
two men to fly out of  
the labyrinth and  
escape the Minotaur.  
Elated by the tri-  
umphant escape  
and the feeling of  
flight, Icarus soars  
higher and high-  
er, until the sun  
melts the wings

and he hurtles  
to his death.

*Authority:* Princes and republics should content themselves with victory, for when they aim at more, they generally lose. The use of insulting language toward an enemy arises from the insolence of victory, or from the false hope of victory, which latter misleads men as often in their actions as in their words; for when this false hope takes possession of the mind, it makes men go beyond the mark, and causes them to sacrifice a certain good for an uncertain better. (Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527)

## REVERSAL

As Machiavelli says, either destroy a man or leave him alone entirely. Inflicting half punishment or mild injury will only create an enemy whose bitterness will grow with time, and who will take revenge. When you beat an enemy, then, make your victory complete. Crush him into nonexistence. In the moment of victory, you do not restrain yourself from crushing the enemy you have defeated, but rather from needlessly advancing against others. Be merciless with your enemy, but do not create new enemies by overreaching.

There are some who become more cautious than ever after a victory, which they see as just giving them more possessions to worry about and protect. Your caution after victory should never make you hesitate, or lose momentum, but rather act as a safeguard against rash action. On the other hand, momentum as a phenomenon is greatly overrated. You create your own successes, and if they follow one upon the other, it is your own doing. Belief in momentum will only make you emotional, less prone to act strategically, and more apt to repeat the same methods. Leave momentum for those who have nothing better to rely upon.