

LAW 36: Disdain Things You Cannot Have: Ignoring Them Is The Best Revenge

Law 36 of *The 48 Laws of Power* emphasizes the importance of strategic neglect to maintain power and avoid elevating trivial matters or minor adversaries. When it comes to revenge, Robert Greene advises against reacting to minor provocations or irritations, as doing so often grants them undeserved significance and validity. Instead, demonstrating indifference or contempt communicates strength and superiority while preserving energy for battles that truly matter. This approach not only diminishes the influence of detractors but also reinforces one's position of authority and composure, proving that the best form of revenge is often no reaction at all.

The story of Pancho Villa illustrates how attention can inadvertently amplify an adversary's importance. Once a celebrated revolutionary, Villa's influence had waned after a series of defeats, and he resorted to banditry to reclaim his relevance. In 1916, he attacked Columbus, New Mexico, killing several Americans and provoking widespread outrage. President Woodrow Wilson, pressured to act, launched a massive military expedition to capture Villa. However, Villa evaded capture, and the publicity surrounding the US efforts restored his image as a folk hero in Mexico. This demonstrates how excessive reactions to a minor adversary can backfire, elevating their status and diminishing the responder's authority.

In contrast, King Henry VIII's strategy to disregard the Pope's authority over his annulment exemplifies the power of ignoring opposition to achieve one's goals. When denied permission to divorce Catherine of Aragon, Henry circumvented the Vatican entirely by establishing the Church of England, granting himself the power to annul his own marriage. This decisive move not only rendered the Pope irrelevant but also cemented Henry's control over religious and political matters in England. By refusing to engage directly with his opposition, Henry avoided prolonged conflict and demonstrated his sovereignty.

Greene underscores a key paradox in human behavior: the more one pursues or engages with a problem, the more elusive and formidable it becomes. Obsessing over small irritations or minor enemies signals insecurity and grants them more power than they deserve. By contrast, ignoring or showing disdain for these challenges robs them of their ability to provoke a meaningful response. Indifference conveys confidence, creating the perception of invulnerability and leaving adversaries powerless to disrupt one's focus or plans.

This law also advises caution in dealing with criticism or minor controversies. Addressing every critique or complaint not only consumes valuable energy but also risks validating detractors by acknowledging their arguments. The "Tiny Wound" analogy captures this idea: a minor wound, if constantly scratched, can fester and grow into a serious problem, whereas leaving it alone allows it to heal naturally. Likewise, minor provocations often dissipate when met with silence or indifference, while excessive attention magnifies their impact and prolongs their presence.

The chapter further explores the consequences of ignoring trivial conflicts versus engaging with them. When left unacknowledged, critics or minor adversaries are forced to escalate their actions in desperation, often exposing their weaknesses or self-destructing in the process. On the other hand, responding to every provocation diminishes one's status, making the adversary appear more significant and capable than they truly are. This principle holds true across various domains, from politics to personal relationships, where restraint often proves to be the most effective strategy.

Modern examples of this principle can be seen in public relations and leadership. Prominent figures who refuse to engage with minor controversies often project an image of composure and focus, whereas those who respond defensively risk appearing vulnerable or insecure. For instance, in the world of entertainment,

celebrities who ignore petty tabloid stories tend to maintain their mystique and credibility, while those who publicly refute rumors can inadvertently amplify them.

In conclusion, Law 36 teaches the value of restraint and the art of selective engagement. By refusing to react to trivial provocations or minor irritants, one preserves their energy, maintains their dignity, and ensures that their focus remains on meaningful objectives. This law serves as a reminder that sometimes, the most powerful response is no response, allowing adversaries or issues to fade into irrelevance. Mastering the ability to prioritize battles and ignore distractions is a hallmark of effective leadership and enduring influence.