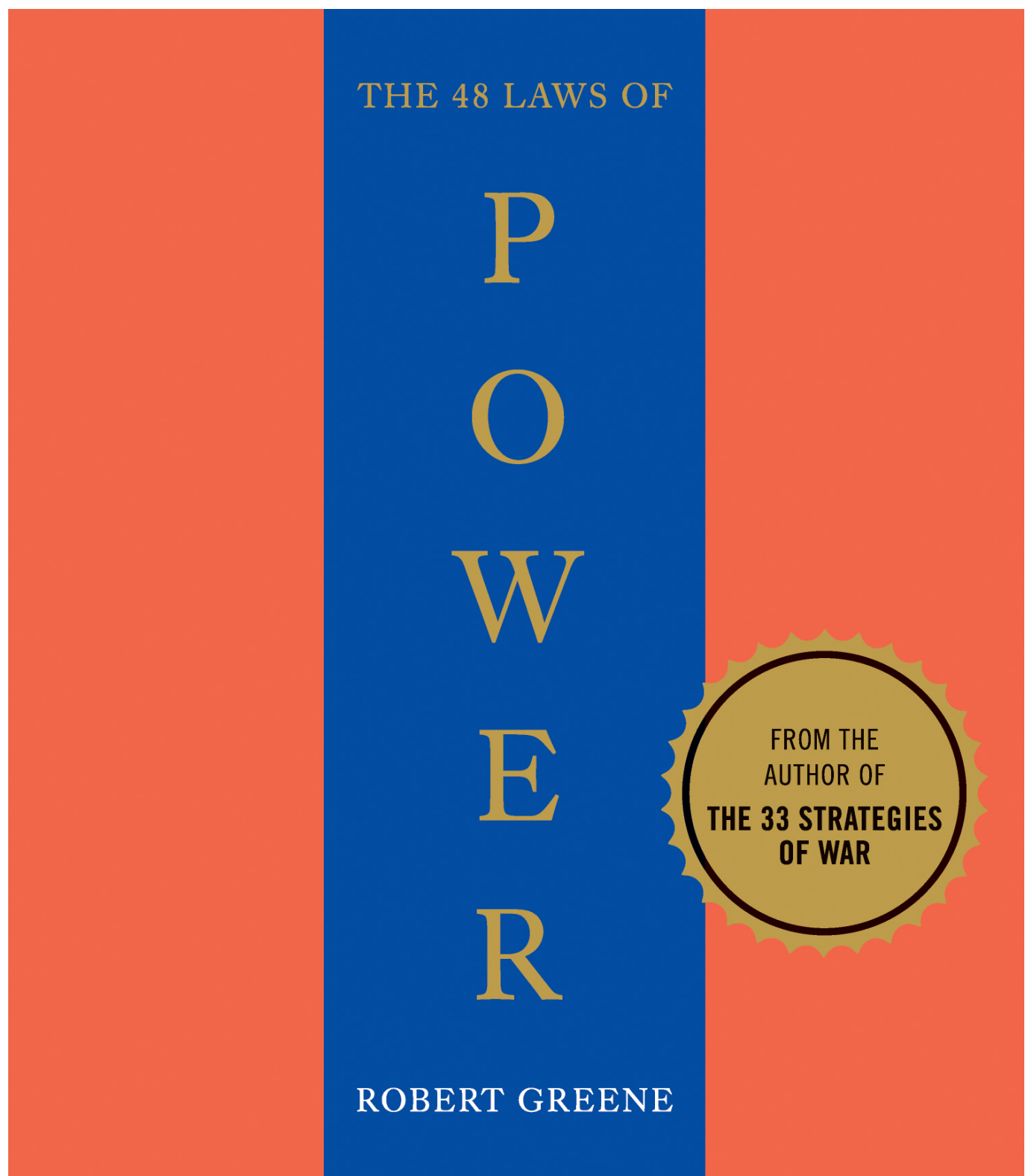


Understanding The 48 Laws of Power

Illimitable Men | 10 May, 2016 | by IM



“Do not leave your reputation to chance or gossip; it is your life’s artwork, and you must craft it, hone it, and display it with the care of an artist.” – Robert Greene

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1.) Introduction:

The 48 Laws of Power is the modern man's Machiavellian bible; based on the incisive strategic thought of prominent classical thinkers Niccolo Machiavelli and Baltasar Gracian, Robert Greene sets out to elucidate the reader on the nature of power. He explores power by dissecting its elements, explaining each element's uses, and exemplifying its manifestation through regaling historic tales of Europe's elite.

The 48 Laws of Power is so thoroughly potent in its capacity to teach cunning, that it is not only a bestseller, but likewise the most loaned book in U.S prison libraries. In some prisons the book is even banned, as such one is almost certain that if the text had been released in an earlier era, it would have ended up on the Vatican's list of forbidden texts in the same way Machiavelli's "The Prince" did.

2.) What The Book Lacks:

It's important for the aspiring Machiavellian to know what The 48 Laws of Power lacks in order to compensate for the gap in understanding they will be left with. Some of the things left unsaid in the text will be outlined within the confines of this essay, whilst others will require further reading.

The 48 Laws of Power is not a complete treatise on power. Although a detailed set of in-depth maxims, it focuses predominantly on the micro and omits near all mention of the macro. It focuses on the optimisation of personal affects to enhance social power, but does not offer strategic models or blueprints.

Realising The 48 Laws of Power was an incomplete treatise, Greene released The 33 Strategies of War. The 33 Strategies is The 48 Law's complementary sister text, because where the 48 Laws focuses on the micro, The 33 Strategies focuses on the macro. Only once an individual has studied both texts will they possess a complete understanding of the Machiavellian world that Greene elucidates, neither book is sufficient in and of itself.

To expound on what I mean by this, The 48 Laws of Power will make you shrewder with people, but it won't help you formulate effective business strategies. Whilst the 33 Strategies of War will arm a man with the understanding necessary to engage in corporate warfare, it will do little to assist him interpersonally. As such, neither is a comprehensive education in power, but together they form a complete and unassailable treatise. Combine these texts with Machiavelli's "The Prince", and one has both the psychological tools and philosophical understanding to develop a masterful competency in cunning.

The examples used to illustrate the book's laws take place among a social class most cannot relate to in an era alien to all who live today. As such, it is necessary to transfer the elements of power represented in a classical paradigm into a contemporary one. Whilst competent abstract thinkers will have no problem doing this, the average person will find it challenging to translate some of the laws into a modern context and will as such struggle to truly understand the precepts of the text.

Greene exposes the granular building blocks of power, but that's where he stops. The book does not provide methodological instruction to help the reader implement the laws. And likewise, it does not teach the reader which law takes precedence when two contradicting laws are relevant to one's situation. It is down to the reader to work these things out for themselves, and if they cannot, they will be unable to derive the entirety of what the book has to offer.

3.) The Spectral Nature of The Laws:

A common erroneous tendency I have noticed in those studying The 48 Laws is to treat the laws too rigidly, ironic, considering law 48 is "assume formlessness", the advocacy of adaptability as a

strategem. In so much as one should adapt their strategy based on the ever-changing nature of the battlefield, one should likewise tailor each stratagem to suit the situation they find themselves in.

Generally one should not **outshine the master**, but it is important to remember that “generally” does not equate to “never.” There will come a time when defying a law is necessary to maximise your options.

Say your boss takes the credit for all your hard work and does not properly respect or compensate you. This makes you want to leave, and you suspect your boss wants to fire you anyway. In a meeting with your boss and your bosses’ boss, it would pay to outshine your boss. By impressing your bosses’ boss, you gain the favour of somebody more important and become less disposable. Double this up with an anonymous smear campaign of your boss, and perhaps your boss will be fired by his boss and you will retain your job.

After all it was your boss that was the problem, not the job. If the gambit fails, your already anticipated exit will likely hasten, but with little to lose the gamble is worth it.

The laws are generalised aspects of power, moldable to the dynamics of the situation in hand. When applying a law, one should generally consider two things: is the timing right? (law 35) and is the current strategy working? (law 48). If the answer to the first question is yes and the second no, one should use a law reversal. If the answer to the first and second questions is no, continue as you are, mindful to execute a law reversal at an opportune moment.

“Assume formlessness” was specifically chosen as the final law because it is the single stratagem that encompasses and concludes all others. There is no one specific way of perceiving or using a law, and although not specifically and explicitly communicating this, Robert Greene demonstrates the dual nature of laws by exploring their reversals. In the same way that an organism must adapt to its environment for natural selection to favour it, the changing tides of power demand the same of the Machiavellian.

Do not see the laws as monolithic entities, but rather as stratagems that encompass a contradicting and varied nature. Each law falls on a spectrum between 0 and 100, the law in its default form is the law at 100, whilst the reversal is the law at 0. You may employ the law at different gradations and still effectively utilise the power of said law. Although a law at 0 will utilise the same element of power as a law at 100, it will be completely antithetical to it.

With the law “always say less than necessary” for example, 100 would be the default interpretation of the law, meaning one would say as little as necessary to communicate. The reversal would be the same law of power at 0 on the spectrum, meaning the individual would speak verbosely without revealing any substance. This bombards the victim with excess information, which is not merely concealment, but likewise distractive. That which is typically a defensive move gains a subtle attacking component when reversed.

The mid-point at 50 would be to reveal information, but keep your trump card hidden. Essentially, the individual would say less than necessary whilst appearing open. Each law thus falls on a spectrum and can be rotated and rendered in any way one’s imagination deems fit, to know when and how to apply a law is to know the art of finesse. I cannot teach you how to do this through essays, essay reading will only make you aware of the possibility. To teach the skill would require one-on-one tutelage and some practice.

4.) Perfecting The Learning Process:

If one simply reads The 48 Laws of Power as quickly as possible, they do themselves a disservice. It is a book that should be read at one’s pace and savoured. My recommendation for learning the text is as follows:

– Read a law and do your best to understand it. See if you can transfer the historical example into a

contemporary one, this will allow you to better relate to the aspect of power being discussed.

- Read the law again, this time taking notes on what you think are the key points which make up the crux of the law. Write down any hypothetical examples relevant to the law you can come up with.
- Listen to the law in question narrated on YouTube (or buy the audiobook) to promote further internalisation. If I've written an essay on the law in question, you can glean understanding from my insights. My essays on the laws will [appear on this page](#). Eventually I'll have a write-up on all the laws.
- Analyse present and past situations for examples of where the law took place (efficacy of this step is obviously limited by the strength of your memory) – this will compound your understanding of a law's applicability on top of any hypothetical examples you came up with.
- Practice exercising the laws defensively with your social groups.
- Join a disposable social group (a club of some sort you don't really care about) where you can practice a more aggressive use of the laws without any meaningful or lasting consequence.
- Utilise the laws aggressively with your main social groups should you deem it necessary.

5.) In Closing:

The 48 Laws of Power, The 33 Strategies of War and The Prince are the three principal books on which an aspiring Machiavellian should base their understanding of cunning. As a recommended reading order, I advise first reading The Prince in order to acquaint yourself with the holistic philosophical and ethical viewpoint of the Machiavellian. This should be followed up with a reading on The 48 Laws of Power, as the text will acquaint the reader with people's personal affects and teach them how to handle these.

The third and final book that makes up the core foundation of Machiavellian knowledge is The 33 Strategies of War. If you are an entrepreneur or businessman, you will find the strategies outlined in The 33 Strategies of War to be invaluable. Essentially the text teaches one how to wage warfare on a military scale, and being on the institutional scale, that which applies to the military is likewise transferable to the corporate.

Each foundational text will expand and change the way you think about people and power. Machiavelli's The Prince will encourage you to critically examine the Judeo-Christian view of morality and how it relates to political power – this is why the Vatican originally banned it. The 48 Laws of Power will teach you to behave in a way that elicits respect from your peers, whilst enhancing your perception of their manipulations. And The 33 Strategies of War will open your eyes to strategy on a larger scale, highlighting the relationship between human and institutional behaviour.

These three texts form the foundational fulcrum necessary to make a Machiavellian of a man. Additional texts on power are out there, but they are merely additive rather than necessitative for the power and strategy aficionado.

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Blog:

[How To Apply The 48 Laws of Power: Machiavellian Social Competencies](#)
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Book(s):

[The Prince](#)
[The 48 Laws of Power](#)
[The 33 Strategies of War](#)