It's Good to Be the King . . .
Until It Isn't

In the satirical film *History of the World, Part I*, King Louis XVI of France traverses his day without inhibitions, indulging his every whim. He uses his staff for chess pieces, and when skeet shooting he has peasants, instead of clay disks, thrown up into the air as targets. Whenever he needs to urinate, he calls over a "piss boy" (his term, not ours) who carries a bucket for him to relieve himself. Each time he engages in one of these indulgent actions, he turns to the camera and says, "It's good to be the king."

But the story didn't end well for King Louis XVI; the people revolted and he was murdered. It was good to be the king . . . until it wasn't.

Mark Hurd, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, understands what it feels like to ascend to power, only to fall from grace. After all, Mark started at the bottom. He began his career at NCR Corporation as a junior sales analyst and steadily moved up the ranks over the next 20 years until he was named the company's president and chief operating officer in 2001. A few years later, Hewlett-Packard stole Mark away and promoted him to chief executive officer. Under Mark's watch, HP became the top seller in desktop and laptop computers, its revenues rose, and its stock price doubled.

Mark enjoyed all the luxuries of being a CEO, and then some.
In the fiscal year of 2008, Mark earned $25.4 million in cash. He and his wife had access to the company jet, and when he asked for it, HP even gave him extra money to cover the taxes involved in using the jet. For Mark Hurd, it was good to be the CEO ... until he met Jodie Fisher.

When Mark first saw Jodie on the reality television show Age of Love, he was immediately drawn to her. As a CEO, he was a man who was used to getting what he wanted, and he acted on his desire for Jodie. Mark handpicked Jodie to host various HP events in order to be in close contact with her. Even though Jodie resisted these advances, Mark was undeterred. He insisted on taking Jodie out to fancy dinners that had no business relevance but were charged to HP. In an attempt to woo Jodie, Mark pointed out all the women who were clamoring to be with him, including Sheryl Crow. When celebrity lawyer Gloria Allred detailed Mark's solicitations in a letter to HP, it became clear to the company that Mark had made a habit of using company money to wine, dine, and fly women around the country. Because Mark failed to properly report these expenses, it cost him his job in 2010. It was good to be the CEO, until it wasn't.

What caused Mark to behave so recklessly? Why did he risk everything?

We propose that the answer lies in one word: power. As the great British philosopher Bertrand Russell once stated, "The fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics." In other words, how much power we have at any moment in time drives how we think and how we behave.

When people hear the word power, they immediately understand what it means. Formally, power is the amount of control that one person has over another. The powerful have greater access to scarce resources, and they can control the behavior of those with less power by offering or withholding resources, or meting out punishments.
The classic example is the difference between a boss and an employee. The boss can offer raises and promotions, or threaten demotions and termination. Yet power is not static and fixed; it is dynamic and subjective, and it changes across contexts. For example, an associate in a law firm has power over summer interns who are trying to get hired for full-time work. But this same associate has less power when dealing with partners in the firm. But you only have power over another person when that person values the resource you control. In our law firm example, the associate has power over the interns only to the extent that they want a full-time job or a reference letter, and the partners have power over the associate, especially when the associate covets partnership.

Power, in other words, is driven by the three factors that we detailed in the introduction: the fact that we are social beings vying for scarce resources that are unstable and dynamically fluctuate.

To understand the effects of power it is helpful to consider a story involving a magical lock of hair. Samson was a biblical figure whose hair gave him unparalleled strength; he could rip apart a lion with his bare hands and escape any bonds of chain or rope. He was invincible, that is, until his head was shaved. Without his mane, Samson lost his power, and he spent the rest of his life in servitude. It was good to be Samson ... until it wasn't.

In today's modern world, power is a lot like Samson's hair—it may not make us invincible, but it makes us feel invincible. It is an elixir of strength and confidence that gives the powerful a psychological leg up on their competitors. But it can also blind us to the consequences of our actions, producing egocentric, selfish, and uncooperative behavior, as we saw with Mark Hurd and King Louis.

The interesting thing about power is that it's often not how powerful we are, but how powerful we feel that determines how we think and how we act. In other words, your experience of
your own power can matter as much or even more than how much power you actually have. Indeed, our research shows that across a wide range of situations, from interviewing for a new job, to asking someone out on a date, to impressing our boss in a meeting, we can gain a competitive advantage by increasing our feelings of power.

By understanding how power affects everyone, we will show you how to harness the positive effects of power and mitigate its pitfalls. You will learn how to get power and how to keep it—how to remain the king even when others are vying to take your crown.

It’s All in Your Head

Let’s try a little experiment. Close your eyes and think about a time in which you had power—a time in which you controlled an important resource that others wanted or a time when you were in a position to reward another person. Really relive that experience and feel what it was like to have that power. Go ahead and take your time, we’ll wait.

How did that memory make you feel? If you are like the tens of thousands of people who have done this exercise, it probably gave you a psychological dose of power—a feeling, at least temporarily, that you could accomplish anything. It may have made you feel more confident and more willing to take a chance you wouldn’t have taken just moments earlier.

We stumbled upon this technique almost 15 years ago when we found that simply thinking about moments when someone had power actually made that person act as if they were more powerful. What we had done was to “prime” power in people’s minds. Once we realized that a key element of power was simply feeling powerful, it opened up the door for new ways of creating power.

It was with this insight in mind that Dana Carney of the Uni-
versity of California, Berkeley, came up with another way to instill a sense of power. Simply stand up and put your hands on your hips. Stay in this position for a moment and think about how it makes you feel. Or sit down on a couch and lean back and spread your arms across the back. These are called expansive postures—your body is expanding out and taking up space. Now let’s try a different posture. Sit on the edge of a chair, hunch your shoulders forward, and put your hands under your legs. How do you feel in this position? In this posture your body is constricted and confined. In which one did you feel more powerful?

Expansive postures are intimately tied to power. Indeed, dominant individuals across species often expand their postures and take up more space: Northern elephant seals rise up to ward off competitors for mating, the peacock expands its tail to signal its authority, the chimpanzee puffs out its chest by holding its breath to assert its power. Similarly, we’ve all witnessed how the executive sits back in their oversized chair or stands tall before the board to signal and assert who is in charge.

But these postures can be used to help people feel like they have more power. Dana found that simply putting people into one of these expansive postures (which she aptly named a power pose), like sitting back in a chair, standing up straight like Wonder Woman or Superman, or leaning forward on a desk like a boss barking orders, made people feel more powerful.

These are radically new ways of thinking about power. We intuitively know that how we feel influences our physical behavior—that when we feel proud, we stand up a little straighter, that when we feel strong, we grasp someone’s handshake a little tighter, etc. But what this research shows is that this relationship also works in reverse; our physical behavior also influences how we feel. In other words, just as we can start a manual transmission car by rolling it down the street, putting the car in gear, and releasing the clutch, we can “roll start” feeling powerful by directing our body in a high-power “gear.”
Some of our most recent research shows that even music can produce feelings of power. In a project led by Dennis Hsu of Northwestern University, we found that songs with strong, powerful beats and bass sounds—like “We Will Rock You” by Queen, “Get Ready for This” by 2 Unlimited, and “In Da Club” by 50 Cent—made people feel and act more powerfully. This may explain why so many athletes, from Colin Kaepernick in football to Serena Williams in tennis, walk into the stadium wearing headphones. Or why, the season after the Miami Heat lost in the NBA finals to the Dallas Mavericks, LeBron James prepared for a rematch by blasting Wu-Tang Clan’s “Bring the Pain” (with its lyrics of “Basically, can’t fuck with me”) through the locker room. That night, Miami routed Dallas.

Any of these methods—recalling an experience with power, taking on a powerful posture, listening to powerful music—can increase your sense of power. The key is finding the one that works for you. Personally, we favor the recall task. What is nice about recalling an experience when you had power is that everyone has had such an experience—anyone can relive those feelings and produce a long-lasting and authentic sense of power. The power of recall also has the most scientific evidence behind it, with hundreds of studies documenting its effects. But again, you can use whichever route—memories, poses, or music—that best helps you kick-start your sense of power.

So now we know what power is, and how to feel more of it. We next turn to how this feeling of power fundamentally alters how we interact with our friends and our foes.

Speeding Down the Highway with Samson’s Hair Blowing in the Wind

We first became interested in power when our collaborator Deb Gruenfeld, a professor at Stanford University, stepped on a plane
in the late 1990s. As she settled into her seat, a man in a suit sat down next to her. The overhead fan was blowing in his face, and he immediately took action to remedy the annoying situation. Rather than simply turn the fan off, however, he redirected it right into Deb's face. In response, Deb just sat there, doing nothing, shivering in frustration. This man had felt entitled to adjust the temperature conditions at will, but Deb felt paralyzed. For months after, Deb stewed: Why had this man acted so quickly and confidently while she dithered?

Now imagine that you walked into a room with five other participants. You all sit down around a table and write an essay. Half of you are asked to write about a time when you had power, while the other half are instructed to write about a time when someone had power over you. When you are done with the essay, you are placed in your private room to fill out some surveys. The door closes behind you, and as you settle into your chair, you realize that there is a fan blowing directly into your face. What do you do? Remember, it is unclear whether or not you are allowed to adjust this annoying fan; whether you can turn it off or redirect it.

In one experiment, we purposely created this situation to see who would tinker with the fan and who would sit there getting colder and colder. In other words, we wanted to re-create the psychological experience that Deb had experienced on the plane.

It turned out that those who had been randomly assigned to think about a time they had power were 65 percent more likely to turn off or redirect the fan than someone who had thought about having little power. Simply recalling an experience in which they had power in one room led these individuals to assert agency and power to make their world a more comfortable place to be in the next room.

Being primed with power even changes our voice. In a project led by Sei Jin Ko of San Diego State University, we had participants read a passage to measure the baseline acoustics of each
participant's voice. We then had participants recall an experience with power. Finally, we had participants read their opening statement in a negotiation, and measured whether power changed their acoustic properties. Here is what we found: Participants conveyed a steadier pitch and a greater shift between being loud and quiet—that is, they varied their pitch less and their volume more—after imagining they had power. Like our subjects, Margaret Thatcher, the former British prime minister, learned to speak with greater authority by varying her volume more but her pitch less. (Thatcher went through vocal training to express this authority in her voice.)

But were these effects noticeable to the naked ear? To find out, we later played the recordings of all of our speakers to listeners at a different university. Without knowing that power had been manipulated in the experiment, these listeners reported that those primed with power sounded more authoritative and more powerful.

As it turns out, there is a neurological explanation behind these effects of power. When Maarten Boksem and colleagues from Tilburg University used an EEG to measure brain activity in people who had been primed to think about power, they found that recalling an experience with power actually increased brain activity on the frontal left side of the brain.

This finding tells us something fundamental about why power produces all of the effects we just described, like feelings of authority and confidence. Much of human behavior is driven by the interplay between two brain systems. One is the inhibition system, which helps people avoid negative outcomes. The other system is the approach system, which directs our attention toward achieving positive outcomes. The approach system resides in that frontal left side of the brain, the side of the brain that gets activated in those who feel powerful. It is this left-hemisphere activation that causes us to behave like the man on the plane and take action to achieve the outcome we want.
Evidence of these effects of power can even be seen in our blood. Dana Carney has found that power leads individuals to experience decreased cortisol, a stress hormone that serves as a psychological inhibitor. Similarly, in our research with Jennifer Jordan of the University of Groningen, we have found that power reduces physiological stress as measured by heart rate and systolic blood pressure.

Neurologically, hormonally, and physiologically, it feels good to be the king. And when we feel like a king, we are more likely to act like one.

So, recalling an experience with power can temporarily change how we feel and act. But are there longer-term effects?

How to Nail a Job Interview and Become the Boss

In 2004, one of our former grad students, Gillian Ku, got a highly coveted interview for a professorship at London Business School (LBS). In general, academic interviews are long, arduous affairs that have tremendous amounts of stress built in. You typically have a series of 30-minute one-on-one interviews with each professor in the department throughout the day, culminating with the crucial job talk: a 90-minute presentation in which you present your research while being mercilessly grilled by a faculty that is searching for any flaw. When Gillian interviewed at LBS, she was given 30 minutes to prepare before her talk. She spent a full 10 minutes of that time completing our power prime—writing out an experience she had had with power. This simple task surged confidence into Gillian. As she gave her talk, she was in complete command of the room and situation. She handled every question with aplomb and captivated the audience with her persuasive responses. And better yet, she got the job.

This anecdote was so striking that we wanted to scientifically test whether activating that feeling of power can give some-
one a competitive advantage in landing a job. In a project led by Joris Lammers of the University of Cologne, we conducted an experiment that involved mock face-to-face interviews with a two-person committee for entrance into a prestigious French business school. During these selection interviews, applicants had to convince two expert interviewers (typically professors) that they had the motivation, skills, and experience to be successful. Unbeknownst to the interviewers, we randomly assigned these applicants to one of three conditions: a high-power recall prime, a low-power recall prime, and a baseline condition with no prime.

The result? Astoundingly, interviewers accepted 68 percent of the candidates in the high-power-prime condition but just a mere 26 percent in the low-power-prime condition. A later study replicated these effects with written job applications: Applicants who had been primed with power got higher ratings.

Why did these remarkable results occur? Because in both cases—the live interview and the application essay—those applicants primed with power displayed greater confidence, and were thus viewed as more capable and competent.

Now, you might think this effect is ephemeral, floating away after a few minutes. And you would be right if the power prime existed in isolation. Indeed, in a vacuum, the effects of priming only last for an hour or two. However, if the prime alters behavior in those couple of hours, it can have a lasting effect.

We demonstrated the enduring nature of power primes in a study we ran over a three-day period with Gavin Kilduff of New York University. We split participants into three-person, same-sex groups, and primed one person in each group with high power, one person with low power, and one with a neutral level of power. These three-person teams then worked together on a task and went home. Two days later each team came back to the lab and did some new tasks. Then came the interesting part: We asked each team member who they thought the leader of the
group was. We found that the participants primed with power on the first day of the study were perceived to be leaders two days later.

Why did effects that seem so ephemeral persist here? Well, when we analyzed videotape of the conversations on the first day, we found that the individuals primed with power initially acted as though they were the leader. They spoke earlier and with greater conviction at the beginning of the group’s meeting. Then two days later, they continued to be seen that way, even when their contributions were equal to those of others on the team. In other words, this power prime influenced short-term behavior, which then had enduring effects.

Thus, to be perceived as powerful, it helps to be not only in the right place at the right time, but also in the right frame of mind. A small change in our mindset—activated by something as quick and easy as thinking about a prior experience when we had power—can have a significant impact on our long-term success. Put simply, we can all achieve significantly higher status if we adjust our psychological states at the outset of a group interaction.

Now that we know that power helps us speed down the highway toward a brighter future, we need to be aware that power can also cause us to drive too fast. And when we speed down the highway, we become more likely to crash—sometimes literally.

Powerholics: Invincibility and Invisibility

On June 15, 2013, Ethan Couch was driving his truck at a speed of 70 miles an hour down a highway in Fort Worth, Texas. A mere 16 years of age, Ethan and a group of friends had stolen beer from a Walmart earlier in the evening. Severely drunk, with a blood alcohol content three times the legal limit, Ethan lost control of his vehicle and crashed into a group of pedestrians, killing four
and injuring five others. Compounding the tragedy, many of the pedestrians who were struck were good Samaritans, people who had stopped to help out a motorist with a flat tire.

What caused such a horrific accident? According to Ethan's defense lawyers, it was a disease, one that required treatment, not imprisonment. What was this mysterious disease? It was "Affluenza," and it is caused by having too much wealth and too much power. Individuals who suffer from Affluenza, according to Ethan's defense, lose the ability to see the link between their behavior and consequences. Ethan, his defense argued, had been so indulged by his parents that he lost his capacity to engage in moral thinking and responsible behavior!

The judge in the case was apparently swayed by this argument, sentencing Ethan to just 10 years of probation and ordering that his parents pay for him to attend an intensive therapy program.

Whether or not you agree with this ruling, the judge got one thing fundamentally right: Power and privilege are intoxicating. Left unchecked, they can turn individuals into optimistic risk-takers who don't heed the boundaries that normally constrain our behavior. Often, the powerful only see the rewards in their behavior and not the risks or even mortal consequences.

This may be why, as we found in a study with Cameron Anderson of Berkeley, power makes people less likely to want to use condoms during sexual intercourse. And not just men—we found the same effect for women when they had been primed with power.

Or why the powerful are more likely to cheat and break the rules, even rules they themselves have created and imposed on others. In research we conducted with Joris Lammers of the University of Cologne, we had participants roll a set of dice to determine the number of lottery tickets they would receive—for example, a roll of two would earn them two tickets—and to report the roll of their dice. Would the powerful be more likely to
overreport their outcomes? We found that indeed they were. So why do the powerful speed down the highway and end up hurting themselves and others? Part of the reason is because, like Mark Hurd and Ethan Couch, they assume they are the only ones on the road. Let’s look at why.

The Powerful Think They Are the Only Ones on the Highway

Are people in power really that oblivious to the plight of others, or is that just something the less powerful say to feel better about themselves? We designed an experiment to find out. Here is what we asked our participants to do: Hold up the index finger of your dominant hand and draw a capital “E” on your forehead. Do this as quickly as possible, without stopping to think.

What does your E look like? Does it look like a normal E, or is it backward? It turns out that to draw an E on your forehead correctly requires that you think about what the E looks like from the vantage point of others (see left photo). In contrast, a self-focused E looks like an E from your vantage point, but is backward for others (see right photo).
Here is why you should care about the direction of your E. Power, as it turns out, dramatically increases the tendency for people to draw the E backward, from a selfish perspective. In a study we conducted with Joe Magee of New York University, almost three times as many people drew the backward E when they had been primed with power compared to those primed with low power. (We even replicated these findings in our first meeting with our publisher, when we asked everyone in the room to draw an E on their forehead. Just as in our experiment, the senior editors drew backward E’s. The junior editors drew them correctly.) Again and again, we see that power makes people more focused on their own unique vantage point and oblivious to the perspectives of others.

So why do the powerful seem to forget that other people are in the room, like the man who redirected the annoying fan into Deb’s face? Our neuroscience research offers clues; in a project led by Keely Muscatell of UCLA, we found that individuals who feel a sense of power are less likely to activate the prefrontal cortex and cingulate cortex, which represent the neural circuitry that pays attention to others. Other research shows that the powerful display less neurological mirroring of other people, and thus less awareness of others around them.

Interestingly, even in nature, the more powerful species have a narrower field of vision. The distinction between predator and prey offers an illuminating example of this. The key feature that distinguishes predator species from prey species isn’t the presence of fangs or claws or any other feature related to biological weaponry. The key feature is the position of their eyes. Predators evolved with eyes facing forward—which allows for binocular vision that offers exquisite depth perception when pursuing prey. Prey, on the other hand, often have eyes facing outward, maximizing peripheral vision, which allows the hunted to detect danger that may be approaching from any angle. Consistent with our place at the top of the food chain, humans have
eyes that face forward. We have the ability to gauge depth and pursue our goals, but we can also miss important action on our periphery.

This focus on the self also explains why stinginess has been linked to power. Consider two famous Christmas tales. In Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, the character Scrooge is introduced as a man of extraordinary wealth who hoards his money for himself and scolds at the thought of spending it on others. In stark contrast, O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi,” tells the tale of an impoverished couple, Jim and Della, in which Jim sells his prized pocket watch to purchase combs for Della’s beautiful hair only to learn that she has cut and sold her hair to buy a gold chain for his watch. The characters of these stories vary on two dimensions. The first is their willingness to spend on themselves versus others. Scrooge hoards his money only for himself, whereas Jim and Della sacrifice their own prized possessions to buy gifts for each other. Second, they differ in terms of their power and wealth. Scrooge is a man of unlimited means whereas O. Henry’s characters have very little.

In research we conducted with Derek Rucker of Northwestern University, we found that these stories echo a scientific truth. In one study, we manipulated power by having people take on the role of a Boss or an Employee. Afterward, all participants were given an opportunity to buy Hershey's Kisses at a cost of five cents. Some were asked to buy the chocolates for someone else, while others were buying only for themselves. Here is what we found: The powerful bosses acted like Scrooge—they bought 32 chocolates when buying for themselves but only 11 chocolates when buying for others. In contrast, those in the less powerful role of an employee acted like Jim and Della—they bought 37 chocolates when buying for others but only 14 when buying for themselves!

Other researchers have found that wealthier individuals donate a smaller percentage of their income to charity. Even
though the powerful have more resources to share with others, power ironically makes people more Scrooge-like.

The key insight from all of this research is that power blinds us to the plight of others. And this "blindness" can have serious consequences: It can lead the powerful to lose their kingdom.

The King's Downfall

As we mentioned at the outset, there is a scene from the movie History of the World, Part I in which King Louis XVI shoots peasants instead of clay discs during his target practice. While shooting his subjects into the air, he is told that "the people are revolting . . . the peasants feel you have no regard for them." King Louis XVI responds with absolute shock, "I have no regard for the peasants?? They are my people . . . I love them." The very next moment, he yells "Pull!" and a peasant flies up in the air. King Louis XVI forgot to attend to the people and they ultimately beheaded him. He overestimated their loyalty and suffered as a result.

One modern-day version of King Louis XVI is James "Jimmy" Cayne, who resigned as CEO of Bear Stearns in January of 2008, just two months before the entire firm collapsed. Although he never fired rifles at peasants, he was similarly out of touch with his shareholders and employees. Rather than focusing on the welfare of the company, Cayne spent an inordinate amount of time playing bridge; in fact this is what he was doing the day when two of his firm's hedge funds collapsed and began bankruptcy proceedings. His departure was described as the "Cayne Mutiny" and characterized as "not a fond farewell." He was later named by CNBC as one of the "Worst American CEOs of All Time." But Cayne saw the emotions expressed during his departure differently. "When I left on January 4 . . . there wasn't a dry eye. Standing ovation. I was crying . . . Standing ovation, of the whole auditorium."
Whether in business, in government, or anywhere else, a lack of attention to others frequently contributes to powerful people's eventual downfall. But like Jimmy Cayne, the powerful never see it coming. Sebastien Brion of IESE Business School has documented this blindness scientifically. He found that the powerful are often overconfident in the support they have from others, and as a result they neglect to tend to those around them. Eventually, they lose the support of their subordinates and ultimately lose their power. Alexander Haig knows just how this can happen.

Alexander Haig liked being in charge. He slowly rose up the ranks of the Army, eventually becoming the vice chief of staff in the early 1970s. At the height of the Watergate scandal, Haig served as the White House chief of staff for the final year of President Richard Nixon’s term. Given the immense pressure that President Nixon was facing with the Watergate investigation, Haig essentially ran the government—he was seen as the “acting president,” and special prosecutor Leon Jaworski even called him the “37¼ President.”

A few years later, President Ronald Reagan appointed Haig as secretary of state. Just months into his presidency, on March 30, 1981, President Reagan was shot. On that fateful day, Haig rushed into the briefing room and seized the reins of the presidency. He famously stated, “Constitutionally, gentlemen, you have the president, the vice president, and the secretary of state in that order, and should the president decide he wants to transfer the helm to the vice president, he will do so. He has not done that. As of now, I am in control here, in the White House.”

There was a big problem with the statement: The 25th Amendment to the Constitution states that the line of succession goes from the vice president to the Speaker of the House to the president pro tempore of the Senate, before landing on the secretary of state. There was immense backlash to Haig’s seizing of control, and he lasted only another year as secretary of state be-
fore resigning. His colleagues, who had long bristled at Haig's exaggerated sense of power, turned on him: "The public beating Mr. Haig received at the hands of the White House was virtually unprecedented." He became defined by this one moment and most of his obituaries when he passed away in 2010 led with his infamous phrase, "I am in control here."

When the powerful act selfishly and ignore others, they often veer into hypocrisy. As a leader, this is the last place you want to be. Hypocrisy involves holding a double standard—espousing and demanding strict moral standards for others while violating those same standards in one's own behavior. Indeed, our research with Joris Lammers shows that power increases hypocrisy—power licenses people to break laws and act freely on their desires while creating strict laws for others.

Consider two U.S. governors who made news for their dramatic and tragic downfalls: Eliot Spitzer and Rod Blagojevich. As attorney general, Spitzer targeted any organization with links to prostitution, even travel agencies that he said promoted sex tourism. He also targeted the male customers of prostitutes and signed into law the "anti-human trafficking" bill that increased the penalty for patronizing prostitutes. But on March 10, 2008, Spitzer was famously discovered to be a frequent customer of prostitutes. Two days later, Spitzer resigned as governor of New York.

Similarly, Governor Blagojevich had positioned himself as a reformer and campaigned against what he called a "legacy of corruption, mismanagement and lost opportunities." It was later discovered that Blagojevich had tried to sell the rights to a vacant United States Senate seat to the highest bidder (this was the seat that Barack Obama vacated when he was elected president in 2008 and resigned from the Senate). In recorded comments, Blagojevich said, "I've got this thing, and it's fucking golden. I'm just not giving it up for fucking nothing."

Hypocrisy is Spitzer passing laws that targeted prostitution cli-
ents, while patronizing prostitutes himself. It is Blagojevich campaigning as a reformer, condemning corruption in others, while flagrantly violating these standards himself. And it ended badly for both of them.

Hypocrites are intolerable; they boil our blood and leave us salivating at the prospect of revenge. And, often, we get it. This is why hypocrites don't remain in power for very long. It's the combined curses of selfishness and hypocrisy that bring the king down.

Hubris and overconfidence can explain why many powerful people act with selfishness and harshness. But it turns out that powerful people also act badly when they feel threatened and disrespected. In fact, power and low status are a particularly toxic combination. Nearly all of us have suffered at the hands of an official who holds power over us in one domain, but would command little respect in the outside world. These individuals are prone to using their power to make life difficult for others. We call these people Little Tyrants.

A particularly notorious example of this toxic combination involved the American prison guards in the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib. In 2004, these guards were caught on film celebrating their power over inmates. On a smaller scale, consider the sometimes egregious bullying of security guards, DMV officials, reimbursement administrators, or bouncers at nightclubs. Like knowledge, a little power can be a dangerous thing.

Research we have done with Nathanael Fast of the University of Southern California has shown that when we put people in positions that are not well respected but command power over others, those people become prone to turning into Little Tyrants. In one study, for example, we gave everyone a chance to assign tasks to another person. When participants had power but felt disrespected, they were almost twice as likely to assign tasks that were particularly demeaning to others, like having someone repeat “I am filthy” five times or bark repeatedly like a dog.
These Little Tyrants demean others to compensate for their own wounded egos.

Power is precious but precarious. Whether it is hubris and hypocrisy or low status and threat, there are many paths people can take to abuse their power. When the powerful demonstrate little concern for those around them, they make themselves vulnerable to losing their power. So how can a king hold on to his crown? The key is finding a way to capture the benefits of having power without falling prey to the temptations that lead to the loss of power.

Finding the Right Balance: How to Speed Without Crashing

As we’ve seen, power acts almost like a wonder drug, giving you agency and confidence and optimism. But it’s important not to get too high on your own power. For these benefits to emerge, you need to know your place in the power hierarchy and act accordingly. Those who act as if they have more power than they do, like Alexander Haig did, get ostracized. And this is bad news for the powerful, for as we saw in our introduction, the greatest form of torture is social isolation.

So, how do we reconcile these two points—the fact that power can be primed and lead to power, and the finding that if you act too powerfully for your position you will be socially punished?

To resolve this seeming contradiction, we need to understand two truths about power and social behavior. First, for each person at any point, there is a range of acceptable power that you can display relative to the actual power that you have. If you exceed that range, you are likely to be punished, but within the range, you can express more power than you actually have . . . but only up to a point. That is, you have some latitude, but don’t get too cocky.
Second, we need to recognize that confidence and deference are not mutually exclusive, and it’s usually a lack of deference rather than excess of confidence that gets powerful people into trouble. Take the job interview—the most successful candidates are those who display confidence but also show appropriate deference to the interviewer. Thus, the key is to be confident but also deferential. You need to find the right balance.

We mentioned that power is a psychological accelerator that encourages people to speed down the highway; it makes us more confident and optimistic, and helps us reach our destination faster. But to accelerate without endangering ourselves and others, we also need some mechanism for keeping our egos in check and preventing us from careening off the road. We need a steering wheel.

Our steering wheel is something we call perspective-taking, which is simply the ability to see the world from the perspective of others. Indeed, as we will discuss later in this book, our research has shown that the ability to take another’s perspective is a critical ingredient for managing both our friends and our foes.

A crucial element to finding this balance is to know and consider the perspective of your audience. Take the power pose: Standing in front of your boss with a power pose may not go over so well; your boss may feel threatened and feel as though you are challenging their authority. This is why the power pose is best done before the interaction. It gives you a dose of confidence while still allowing you to appear deferential.

The ability to take the perspective of others helps the powerful see the others on the highway and fosters more cooperation from those with less power. Thus, the ability to see the world through the eyes of others can help the powerful stay in power—and be effective as well.

Research we have done with Joe Magee of NYU has established a number of benefits of combining power and perspective-taking. For one, it helps us solve problems more effectively. We
have found that when the powerful member of the team is primed with an exercise in perspective-taking, it increases the team's ability to share critical information. In one study, when we gave the powerful a dose of perspective-taking, these individuals led their group to make better decisions by increasing the amount of information the team discussed and shared.

Just as a car needs both acceleration and a steering wheel to reach its destination, people need power and perspective-taking to be successful ... and to hold on to their throne.

So how can we get the powerful to become more effective perspective-takers? One way is to direct their attention toward team objectives. Leigh Tost of the University of Michigan found that she could get the powerful to integrate and consider the perspective and advice of experts when she directed their attention toward the team goal of making the best decision. When powerful individuals focus on team goals rather than their own selfish goal of retaining power, they are more likely to realize that others have something unique to contribute.

Another method is to hold the powerful accountable for their decisions, to make the powerful explain their policies and articulate their rationale behind their actions. Indeed, our research has found that accountability steers the powerful to consider the perspectives of important stakeholders.

One final tip for harnessing power without its side effects of hubris and selfishness is to select leaders who already have a pretty good psychological steering wheel. An old piece of advice for those on first dates comes into play here: Watch how your date treats the waitstaff at dinner. They may be on their best behavior with you, but how they treat those with less power can portend their treatment of you when you are weak or vulnerable. Indeed, Roos Vonk of Radboud Universiteit found that people who kiss up but kick down are considered to be the slimiest of them all.

This kind of test is especially important when selecting lead-
ers because it helps to expose who is most prone to abusing power. Because the powerful are less dependent on and less con-
strained by others, how they choose to use their power reveals their true nature. A quote by Robert Green Ingersoll when de-
scribing Abraham Lincoln eloquently captures this point: “If you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” With power, the constraints that normally govern how we act and behave recede and we become the truest form of ourselves.

So yes, it is good to be the king. And it is good to remain the king. Our research suggests that when the powerful de-
velop the ability to see the world through the perspectives of others, they are more likely to retain their throne. Power paired with perspective-taking leads to stronger and more enduring kingdoms.

Here, we have considered how power influences our behavior at the individual level. Next, we turn to the question of power in groups and explore when having a steep hierarchy wins . . . and when it kills.