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OUT OF THE ARCHIVES NO. 20

There have been so many good original articles to publish lately that I had almost forgotten what a reprint was, the last being published in Hoosier Archives #31. However, ... with "The Grudge Game" getting ready to start as soon as the players can be rounded up, I thought this might be an appropriate time to reprint Larry Peery's "The Subtle Art of Backstabbing." Not that you needed any ideas, fellows! Anyway, this article is reprinted with Larry's permission. It was published in Kenogic I, 10.5 of 10 February 1968 and it really shows how to insert that ol' stabberoo.

THE SUBTLE ART OF BACKSTABBING
by Larry Peery

Backstabbing is, perhaps, the most misunderstood and misused term in Diplomacy. A survey of what theoretical literature there is on Diplomacy (and considering the volume of published material, there is an unexplicable paucity of useable material on the game itself) shows that there is less written about backstabbing than any one of a half-dozen "rules," or even the IDF. (IDA now?) Nowhere, to my knowledge, is there any real discussion of the "art of backstabbing"--if only because no one would be willing to write such a discussion for fear his reputation might suffer. Since mine cannot possibly suffer further, this does not deter me from such a discussion.

To call backstabbing an "art" may seem silly, even sacrilegious, yet it is not so. The superior player, even when the victim, can only admire a well-executed backstab, while a useless or boughed backstab incites only scorn and laughter. Backstabbing represents one of the few real unknowns in the game. The skillful use of the backstab identifies the superior player while an inept or worthless backstab is the mark of an amateur. The importance of the backstab in a game where success depends on cooperation and joint operation, at least in the early stages, is obvious. but, what is backstabbing?

We all have images of betrayal, greed, et. when backstabbing is mentioned, and no worse name can be applied to a player than to label him a "backstabber." Yet, in reality, we often confuse the label with the art, the player with the technique. The scorn heaped on the one is too often passed on to the other.

At this point, I would like to describe some types of backstabs, using mainly games I have been involved in, and by coincidence, backstabs I have either initiated or been the victim of. I have no fear that my discussion at this stage will endanger any of these games so I will be extremely candid.

The first type of backstab I want to refer to is what I have labeled the Grand Slam. This is the great "double-cross" at the critical moment which allows the enfeebled David to strike down the mighty Goliath. This is probably the most spectacular single moment in a Diplomacy game. It comes (or should) as a total surprise, costs the victim a number of supply centers, almost always comes on a Fall turn, and normally signals the rapid decline

and elimination of a player. An excellent illustration of such a stab is in 19660, coming in Fall 1903 and ending in Fall 1904. This game was carried in ADAG and moves printed appeared in issues 9-12.

By way of background: Through Spring 1903 Turkey and Austria had been jointly attacking Russia, who was at this point almost eliminated. Then in Fall 1903, Turkey and Italy put the ax to Austria.

FALL 1903

AUSTRIA (TZUDIKER): A Tri-Tyr, A Mos S A Gal-war, A Gal-war, A Ser-Tri, A Bud-Vie, F Gre S Turk F Aeg-Ion.

ITALY (VON NETZKE): A Tyr S A Ven-Tri, A Ven-Tri, F Ion S Turk F Aeg-gre.

TURKEY (PEERY): A Sev S Russian A Liv-Mos, A Ukr S Russian A Liv-Mos, A Rum S A Lul-Ser, A Lul-Ser, F Con-lul(s.o.), F Aeg-Gre.

RUSSIA (LONG): A Liv-Mos.

The net result was that the Austrian armies in Trieste and Serbia and her fleet in Greece had to retreat, with only Budapest and Albania open. The Austrian A in Moscow was annihilated. The Austrian A Serbia retreated to Budapest; she removed F Greece and A Trieste. Italy built a fleet in Rome; Turkey built a fleet in Smyrna and an army in Constantinople.

SPRING 1904

AUSTRIA (TZUDIKER): A Bud-Tri, A War-Sil, A Vie-Ioh.

ITALY (VON NETZKE): A Tyr-Vie, A Tri S A Tyr-Vie, F Ion-Tun, F Apu-Nap, F Rom-Tus.

RUSSIA (LONG): A Mos Holds.

TURKEY (PEERY): A Sev S Russian A Mos, A Ukr-War, A Rum-Bud, A Ser S A Rum-Bud, A Con-lul, F Bul(s.o.)-Gre, F Gre-Ion, F Smy-Aeg.

The Austrian A Budapest retreated to Galicia.

FALL 1904

AUSTRIA (TZUDIKER): A Gal S A Sil-war, A Sil-war, A Boh-Hun.

ITALY (VON NETZKE): A Vie S A Bud-Gal, A Tri S A Vie, F Ion S F Nap-Tyr, F Nap-Tyr, F Tus S F Nap-Tyr.

RUSSIA (LONG): A Mos Holds.

TURKEY (PEERY): A Sev S A War-Mos, A War-Mos, A Bud-Gal, F Gre-Aeg, F Ion S F Tun, A Ser-Bud, F Aeg-Gre, A Bul-Hun.

At this point Austria had no remaining supply centers. Turkey had gained two and Italy one.

This is an example of a blitzkrieg in the truest sense of the word. Significantly, there was nothing that the Austrian player could do to stop it, unless one of the attackers halted his attack.

Yet a backstab need not be spectacular. It can be as limited as the failure of one player to deliver a promised support, thus causing his ally's position to crumble. Indeed, this is probably the most common type of backstab. This type of stab I have labeled the Lapse Stilleto, for obvious reasons.

Another type of backstab involves the violation of a territory's neutrality or the occupation of a buffer area by one power as a prelude to an attack on another player and former ally, or at least noncombatant. This I have designated The Crawl Stab. In this type the player being attacked may not be directly attacked at all. Nor need it involve the occupation of any supply centers as normally occurs in the Grand Slam. Nor need it occur on a Fall turn.

An example of this comes in 1966AH (again in ADAG #24) in the Fall of 1906 when Italy violated the long-standing neutrality of the Western Med, without realizing any real gains at that moment. Even so, the possible future threat posed to France's position makes this an extremely dangerous attack.

FALL 1906 (partial moves)

FRANCE (PEERY): A Bel S A Bur, A War S A Bur, A Bur S A Bel, F Eng S A Bel. (Bel and Bur were attacked by Germany.)

ITALY (TURNER): F Eas-Ion, F Ion-Tyr, F Tyr-Iyo, A Fle-War.

Thus, although no supply centers changed hands and no major territory was lost, France's position becomes critical, particularly in view of the looming Austrian menace.

Yet another backstab, jokingly labeled the Stab Lough, is the stab that fails, at least initially, to achieve its goal. The most likely reason for this is the attacked player's expectation of the stab and his making suitable defensive moves or even countering with a double-cross of his own. Such a situation arose in 1966BB when Italy finally attacked Russia (again refer to ADAG #22).

SPRING 1906 (partial moves)

ITALY (WENDERGRASS): F Ion-Eas, A Gre-Smy, A Tri-Bud, F Alb-Gre, F Aeg C A Gre-Smy (dislodged, retreats to Ion), A Bar S A Tri-Bud, A Ven-Tri.

RUSSIA (PEERY): A Vie S A Gal-Joh, A Gal-Joh, A Hun S A Bud, A Bud S A Vie.

TURKEY (GRIFFIN): F Con-Aeg, F Smy S F Con-Aeg.

This is a case where a backstabber almost met disaster, although its ultimate success or failure rode on the outcome of my next example, drawn from the same game.

The fourth type of backstab, which I have labeled the Stab Finesse, is both the most subtle and the most tricky, as well as being the most risky. It is also the most desperate since it is used only by a player who is in danger of being eliminated, or to keep another player from winning. It is literally the great gamble--the sacrifice of one's immediate position on the possible hope of future gain, or recovery. If it is successful, it changes the course of the game. If it fails, it proves disastrous to the attacker.

One such stab occurred in 1966BB, in the Fall 1907 (AGAD # 25), although the essential moves came in Spring 1907. Until the Spring, it appeared that Germany and France would remain allied while Russia proceeded to annihilate Germany. Then, in the Spring, France suddenly entered Munich, the Helgoland Night, and made other threatening moves toward Germany. At this point, Germany offered to trade sides and aid Russia against France. This was Russia's fondest desire since her position, considering herself fighting the entire board, was such that she needed an ally somewhere. So, the stage was set for a masterful stab. Russia, for reasons that need not concern us here, agreed to Germany's proposal of an alliance and further agreed not only to halt her attack on Germany (she already held Berlin, Silesia, Denmark, etc.), which was sure of success, but to help Germany attack France. It should be noted that this would not normally have happened. First, no player in Russia's position would entrust her future to such a shaky proposition. Second, the Russian player had clear previous warning of Germany's motives and true plans although he did not act on them (this is also historically accurate, although as equally incomprehensible as Russia's failure to react to warning of Germany's 1900 attack). Last, nevertheless, the moves were:

FALL 1907 (partial moves)

FRANCE (PROSNITZ): F Nat-Hug, A Rus-Bar, F Ion-Nth, A Tyr S Italian A Tri-Vie, F Hol S German A Kis-Den.

GERMANY (LONG): A Kis-Den, F Bel S French F Lon-Nth, A Pru-War, A Hol-Ruh.

RUSSIA (PEERY): F Dan S F Nuy-Nth (dislodged), F Eng S F Nuy-Nth, F Nuy-Nth, F Ital C German A Pru-Kis, A Bar S A Pru-Kis, A Sil and A Boh S A Kis-Pan.

The next item will be the builds and removals: Germany has two builds, France one, and Russia has two removals. Depending on what Russia chooses to remove, the future winner of the game may well be determined. It should be noted that in this situation, as in most similar games, although the attacked power is deprived of the win, he still has the power to decide who will win. For the record, the moves Germany was supposed to make according to her alliance with Russia were: A Pru-Kis, F Bel S Nth-Nuy, A Kis-Pan, A Hol holds.

This is obviously a desperation tactic. Yet it worked, and worked well. Against a good player, such a maneuver would not have been successful and Germany would have lost Kiel and probably Munich. As it is, Russia has been stopped permanently and the initiative has gone over to the French-Italians-Germans.

This is not the only Stab Finesse I have seen. A very similar stab occurred in 19660 in its later stages when France (Charles Turner) and England (Red Walker) engaged in a mock war while they attempted to convince me that they were about to break their alliance. Their tactics were successful in that they helped delay the Turkish advance. That game ended in a draw.

Thus, we have seen at least four distinct types of stabs, the Grand Slam, the Lapsus Salletto, the Crawl and the Stab Finasse. Undoubtedly there are others, or variations of these four, but these examples should be sufficient to illustrate the wide possible uses of the stab as a weapon, both offensively and defensively.

Other vital questions remain. The question of who to stab? When to stab? Is it really necessary to win? These and other questions I leave to you since they are outside the scope of this discussion.

Yet, some comments must be made concerning two main points. First, the matter of surprise. A stab must be either done in such a way as to eliminate any possible defense of it, or against it (by having the over-whelming position to start from) or come as a surprise to the victim. In most cases, stabs are no surprise at all, least of all to the intended victim, although again he may not either desire or be able to take any action to prevent it. Such a situation may well exist in 1966AD in EREMION in the coming season, although it is clearly too soon to be sure. The nature of the winter build and spring moves will determine if this is indeed to be a stab. Until this point, Germany and France have maintained a care-ful non-aggression pact and France has devoted her entire force to an attack on Turkey. Meanwhile Germany has destroyed Russia and is in the process of destroying England and now appears to be forced to either attack Turkey or France to gain the supply centers she needs to win. Certainly the location and type of German units would suggest a stab of France, although Germany's future build may change this. Yet here we have a situation where a power must con't a stab to win. This often happens in the later stages of a game.

Thus, we see that in playing, stabs are divided into two parts, those coming early in the game and those coming late. Both may be fatal, those coming later being the more spectacular and heart-breaking.

The final point I wish to consider is that of reaction. This is the critical factor. How does the stabbed player react? Because, although in the Grand Slam a player has little choice in his scope of response to a stab, in the majority of stab situations the victim still has sufficient power to strike the attacker, and most importantly, in choosing where to make his removals, to circumvent the stab and throw the game to another player. Thus, as there are several types of stabs so there are several types of reactions.

One may simply give up, withdraw, resign, allow one's position to be over-run and not oppose the attacker. This is sometimes a path used, often with a devilish intent. For a player may realize that in surrendering to the attacker his supply centers, he makes the attacker larger, more vulnerable, and ultimately the victim of a stab himself. This is the most subtle sort of revenge.

The opposite is the player who fights tenaciously to hold what he can, gives up only what is absolutely necessary, although determined to hang on and save what he can in the hope that a shift in the course of the game will restore his power.

The third, and final, possibility, already referred to, is the ability to throw a game to some player who was not involved in the stab. This presents problems in that doing so often works to force the non-stabber into the position where he must face the stabbers as he grows larger. However, a skillful player may combine the skillful rearward action with this goal. Such a possibility may well occur in 1966BB. But then, that assumes Peery will do what is expected, and in light of his fall moves and removals, one never knows. But then, what Peery can never know.

This concludes my discussion of backstabs. I might note that in the illustrations I used (1966D, Australia by Turkey), it was Mr. Twitler who first expressed his appreciation of the stab committed to him, thus clearly demonstrating his own worth as a player. In 1966E (England and France of Turkey), there is no denying that I was taken in completely. In 1966AH, the situation remains unopposed, particularly in light of Austria's growing power. In 1966BB, it may well be that Mr. Pendragon's unsuccessful stab was the most successful of all, since he may win this game. And, of course, in the Stab Finasse in 1966KB (Germany of Russia), Mr. Long, as he himself said, "of the two years I have even connected with Diplomacy, this has got to be my high water mark." It surely is.

(It should be noted that all the games mentioned herein are long since over. Also, due to space limitations (we didn't have another 43 pages, Peery! C.A.)), Larry's concluding comments that this article wouldn't affect his future game policies were omitted. He also introduced future articles. Let's bug him about that, shall we?)