The Power Boys: Push Pays Off

Learn to ignore your altruistic instincts.
—Author Robert J. Ringer

My argument is with people who do not view the world cynically.
—Author Michael Korda

They are publishing's new odd couple. Columbus-born Robert Ringer, 37, is a brash college dropout and hard-boiled hustler who roars his Honda 750 through Los Angeles' swooping canyons. London-born Michael Korda, 42, is a sophisticated and well-connected editor, a graduate of Oxford who rides his horse each morning in Manhattan's Central Park. But no one doubts that both are working the same side of the street. Ringer's *Winning Through Intimidation* is No. 5 on the *Publisher's Weekly* best-seller's list, one rung above Korda's *Power! How to Get It, How to Use It.* Though drubbed by reviewers for their oversimplified and sometimes silly Machiavellian advice, the two books have already sold half a million copies, are currently being offered by six book clubs and are bringing their surprised authors renown as the twin Dale Carnegies of the cynical '70s.

Korda dispenses breezy bits of office one-upmanship (jam a visitor's chair into a small space to make him feel powerless, speak softly to an elderly rival —it may make him think he is going deaf). Ringer's book is a heady parable of the worm (himself) who turned predator and earned a spectacular $849,901 in a single year of real estate wheeling and dealing. Despite the differences in style, the message is the same: death will come soon; meanwhile, there is nothing left to believe in but success and power in a cruel world we never made.

Dashed Hopes. *Power!* appeals mostly to anxious paper-shufflers in major cities, including the stream of White House aides who have headed for Washington's Globe Book Shop to buy a copy. *Intimidation* draws salesmen and Ringer's fellow graduates of "Screw U.," his updated term for the School of Hard Knocks. Brentano's, a bookstore chain that promotes *Intimidation* heavily, says the book is moving fast in all its stores.

Both books are cashing in on the nation's current mood of disillusionment and individual helplessness, which social scientists see as the sour product of the recession and the dashed hopes of the 1960s. In insisting that hard work will get you nowhere, Korda and Ringer are preaching to a growing number of converts. Says Paula Landau, consultant for an "assertion" training group in North Hollywood, Calif.: "There is an unprecedented feeling of loss of control. The middle class is losing out, and they know it." According to U.C.L.A. Psychologist Manuel Smith, author of the self-assertion bestseller *When I Say No I Feel Guilty*, "There is the feeling that all the institutions we believed in are bullshit."

Like the more aggressive tracts of the women's movement and the burgeoning self-assertion programs, the Korda and Ringer books are psychic Charles Atlas courses. Appropriately, their time. Self-help books used to stress the individual's ability to change the world. Publishers distributed 40 million copies of Elbert Hubbard's *A Message to Garcia* (1899), a bracing sermon about an army lieutenant who overcame all obstacles on a secret mission during the Spanish-American War. Later, in Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), getting ahead meant getting along with others, a suitable note for an increasingly complex and bureaucratic nation. Yet in Carnegie and in self-help books of the 1950s like Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), the ideal

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ROBERT RINGER PRACTICING INTIMIDATION AT HIS BEVERLY HILLS OFFICE
"Every time I forget my principles, I lose money."

both authors present themselves as 98-lb. weaklings. "I am the person for whom my book was written," says Korda. "Every time I forget the lessons in my book, I lose money," says Ringer. Both are sure they have a way to handle bullies who would otherwise kick sand in their faces. "The books give permission to attack," says Business Psychologist Harry Levinson, a lecturer at Harvard. "They legitimize the underlying aggression in people."

Among the bookish, both Korda and Ringer are usually dismissed with a sneer. At the Harvard Business School Coop, both works are "regarded as light reading." Says a powerful New York book editor: "They are pathetic diagrams for people who no longer believe their own stuff will carry them through life. They feel if they could just memorize some rules, they could get over the abyss."

If so, Korda and Ringer may have hit on the how-to-succeed formula for of hard work recedes. Korda and Ringer are a final mutation in the tradition: the system is chaotically unjust, and only manipulation pays off.

Survival Guide. For some, *Power!* and *Intimidation* are practical guides. "Ringer's book helps take the Mr. Milquetoast out of some of our more timid salesmen," says Dick Jones, a Miami real estate broker who has made *Intimidation* required reading for his 17 salesmen. Leroy Machulda, an elementary school principal in Le Roy, Minn., says he will use Ringer methods in applying for a new job, including a version of Ringer's lavish $5 calling card. Maxene Andrews of the Andrews Sisters is another *Intimidation* enthusiast. "I wish I had read it before my Broadway show *Over There*," she says. "I was so intimidated by the producer to give him more credit than he deserved."

A female executive in Chicago says she uses Kordaesque gimmicks to protect her power. Example: she often ar-

bitrarily picks out something a male associate says at a meeting and contradicts it firmly to show her rank. "It works," she says with a smile. Miami Executive Conrad Omanski considers *Power!* a survival guide: "It has allowed me to recognize the little power plays in business, with some people currying favor with gifts and resorting to lefthanded forms of bribery."

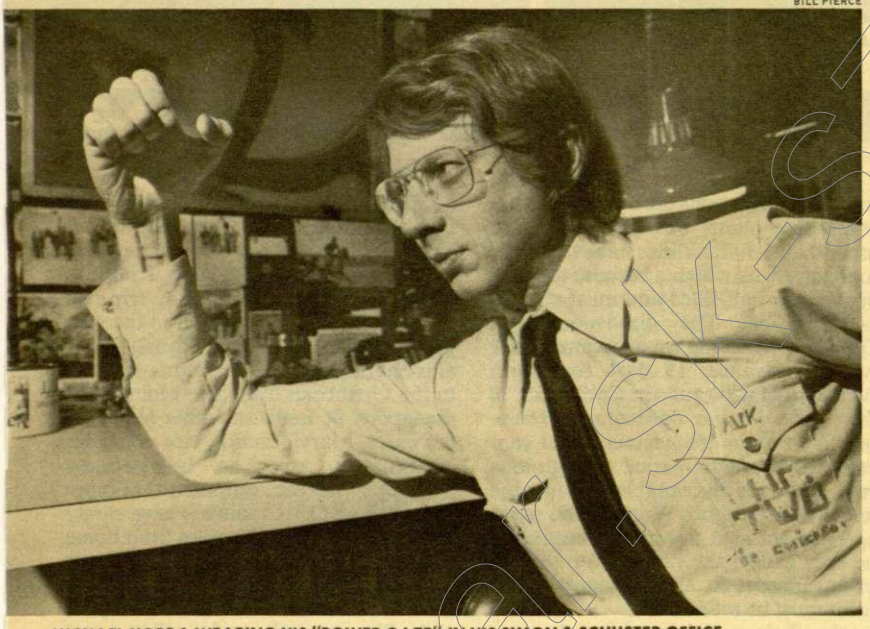
Much of Korda's book concentrates on dress and the trappings of power, including which briefcase and footwear to buy (Gucci loafers are "power shoes"). Some of his advice reads like a mad parody. Rising executives should practice a strong "power gaze" in front of a mirror. If they can't maintain it without twitching, Xylocaine, an anesthetic ointment, should be applied to the face before important meetings. It is all reminiscent of former Adman Shepherd Mead's 1952 book, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Mead, now living in Switzerland, says, "I wonder if they'll make a musical out of Michael's book too."

Some friends see no connection between Korda's book and Korda's life. Says one: "Michael didn't get ahead by standing in power circles and wearing power shoes." But Korda does follow some of his own advice. He practices the power gaze, learned to pick out the power seat at meetings and cultivates an appropriate air of mystery about himself by hinting to visitors about his role in some still-secret cold war mission. Korda also made sure to grab a power position when his predecessor as Simon & Schuster editor in chief, Robert Gottlieb, moved on to Random House. Says Korda, who threatened to quit if he was not allowed to take over Gottlieb's vacant office: "If I hadn't moved into that office and in effect seized the territory as fast as possible, things could have gone wrong."

Colleagues say Korda is fond of role playing. After the opening of the movie *The Man Who Would Be King*, friends found him playing the sergeant major. Once he strode into a sales convention in full fox-hunting gear, blowing a hunting horn and proceeding to present a book on the Maryland hunting set. Says one associate: "It was not humor. It was Korda's chance to display his sense of costume and class."

Screaming Ads. The theatricality may be understandable. Korda is the nephew of the famed Hungarian-born film producer Sir Alexander Korda and spent much of his youth crisscrossing Europe with his powerful and elite show-biz family. But there is another view of all the role playing. "To know Michael well is to know he doesn't have much of a center," says a colleague, "so he collects roles. He goes from being a cowboy to a pilot to a daddy."

BILL PIERCE



MICHAEL KORDA WEARING HIS "POWER GAZE" IN HIS SIMON & SCHUSTER OFFICE
"I am the person for whom my book was written."

As a New York publishing insider, Korda had little trouble launching his book and getting it reviewed. Ringer had a harder time. When ten publishers turned down *Intimidation*, Ringer published it himself and sold it by mail, with screaming ads in the *Wall Street Journal* and other newspapers. Ringer spent well over $100,000 on the ads and intimidated some bookstores into placing their own ads by proposing to give rivals exclusive sales rights in their territories. When *Intimidation* caught on, Ringer had Funk & Wagnalls take over the distribution of his book. This was O.K. with Ringer's agent Henry Rearden, who turned out to be Ringer himself, hiding behind the name of a character in *Atlas Shrugged*, the ponderous novel by his right-wing idol, Ayn Rand.

Says Ringer: "Ambitious people should see the world as it is—overpopulated, polluted, headed for the worst depression of all time—and get to the well before it dries up forever." For Ringer it was a slow trip to the well. By his own account, he was a failure and "total *shlep*" for most of his life, dropping out of Ohio State dental school and blundering at an odd succession of jobs, from designing men's shirts to selling strawberries out of the back of a truck.

In the late '60s Ringer wandered into real estate as an independent broker, matching buyers and sellers of apartment houses. As his book tells it, he was fleeced out of his fee in "routine commissiondectomies" by high-powered sharpies, until he discovered intimidation. His main breakthrough was to create a kind of Korda "power image" by erecting a massive false front. He set up lavish quarters in Columbus, sent out the $5 calling card and learned to sweep into a client's office with a retinue of aides and secretaries. His most outlandish ploy was to buy his own $800,000 Learjet for dramatic arrivals and departures.

Aborted Attempt. Ringer's greatest triumph was earning a commission of $426,901.39 on a single deal, the sale of eight apartment properties in Kansas and Missouri. Says the seller of the properties, Al Moore, president of the Viking Investment Corp.: "Ringer did his homework well. He was very, very arrogant, but I don't think he ever intimidated a soul." Says another principal in a Ringer deal: "He was just a good peddler."

Within 18 months of the Viking deal Ringer had lost everything (including the jet, demolished in a crash landing) and was reduced to borrowing $5,000 from a former associate. Ringer says only that "I forgot my principles and started to trust people."

One deal was an aborted attempt to set up a real estate fund, much like a mutual fund, to sell shares in properties. In another setback, Ringer was indicted for violating state security laws in Cincinnati in 1971. He was acquitted two years later, and says he spent $600,000 paying off claims in the case. In 1971 the SEC blocked Ringer's attempt to build a small conglomerate out of a small company, Crescent General of L.A., which dealt in blood plasma and Utah land. Ringer hit on the idea of writing a book "because I was looking for something the Government doesn't consider illegal."

Says Ringer, who was $200,000 to $400,000 in debt when he wrote *Winning Through Intimidation:* "I am a tortoise of no special ability." It is a confession echoed by Korda's slogan: "No one is indispensable." If so, only hustle and trickery will get you ahead of the pack—and thousands of Americans who feel the same way are willing to pay for the advice.