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The Prince



by Nicolo
Machiavelli

The first great political philosopher of the Renaissance was **Nicolo Machiavelli** (1469-1527). His famous treatise, *The Prince*, stands apart from all other political writings of the period insofar as it focuses on the practical problems a monarch faces in staying in power, rather than more speculative issues explaining the foundation of political authority. As such, it is an expression of *realpolitik*, that is, governmental policy based on retaining power rather than pursuing ideals.

Machiavelli was born in Florence, Italy at a time when the country was in political upheaval. Italy was divided between four dominant city-states, and each of these was continually at the mercy of the stronger foreign governments of Europe. Since 1434 Florence was ruled by the wealthy Medici family. Their rule was temporarily interrupted by a reform movement, begun in 1494, in which the young Machiavelli became an important diplomat. When the Medici family regained power in 1512 with the help of Spanish troops, Machiavelli was tortured and removed from public life. For the next 10 years he devoted himself to writing history, political philosophy, and even plays. He ultimately gained favor with the Medici family and was called back to public duty for the last two years of his life. Machiavelli's greatest work is *The Prince*, written in 1513 and published after his death in 1532. The work immediately provoked controversy and was soon condemned by Pope Clement VIII. Its main theme is that princes should retain absolute control of their territories, and they should use any means of expediency to accomplish this end, including deceit. Scholars struggle over interpreting Machiavelli's precise point. In several sections Machiavelli praises Caesar Borgia, a Spanish aristocrat who became a notorious and much despised tyrant of the Romagna region of northern Italy. During Machiavelli's early years as a diplomat, he was in contact with Borgia and witnessed Borgia's rule first hand. Does Machiavelli hold up Borgia as the model prince? Some readers initially saw *The Prince* as a satire on absolute rulers such as Borgia, which showed the repugnance of arbitrary power (thereby implying the importance of liberty). However, this theory fell apart when, in 1810, a letter by Machiavelli was discovered in which he reveals that he wrote *The Prince* to endear himself to the ruling Medici family in Florence. To liberate Italy from the influence of foreign governments, Machiavelli explains that strong indigenous governments are important, even if they are absolutist.

Giovanni to arrange that he should be received honourably by the citizens of Fermo. all of which would be not only to his honour, but also to that of Giovanni himself, who had brought him up.

Giovanni, therefore, did not fail in any attentions due to his nephew, and he caused him to be honourably received by the Fermans, and he lodged him in his own house, where, having passed some days, and having arranged what was necessary for his wicked designs, Oliverotto gave a solemn banquet to which he invited Giovanni Fogliani and the chiefs of Fermo. When the viands and all the other entertainments that are usual in such banquets were finished, Oliverotto artfully began certain grave discourses, speaking of the greatness of Pope Alexander and his son Cesare, and of their enterprises, to which discourse Giovanni and others answered; but he rose at once, saying that such matters ought to be discussed in a more private place, and he betook himself to a chamber, whither Giovanni and the rest of the citizens went in after him. No sooner were they seated than soldiers issued from secret places and slaughtered Giovanni and the rest. After these murders Oliverotto, mounted on horseback, rode up and down the town and besieged the chief magistrate in the palace, so that in fear the people were forced to obey him, and to form a government, of which he made himself the prince. He killed all the malcontents who were able to injure him, and strengthened himself with new civil and military ordinances, in such a way that, in the year during which he held the principality, not only was he secure in the city of Fermo, but he had become formidable to all his neighbours. And his destruction would have been as difficult as that of Agathocles if he had not allowed himself to be overreached by Cesare Borgia, who took him with the Orsini and Vitelli at Sinigaglia, as was stated above. Thus one year after he had committed this parricide, he was strangled, together with Vitellozzo, whom he had made his leader in valour and wickedness.

Some may wonder how it can happen that Agathocles, and his like, after infinite treacheries and cruelties, should

live for long secure in his country, and defend himself from external enemies, and never be conspired against by his own citizens; seeing that many others, by means of cruelty, have never been able even in peaceful times to hold the state, still less in the doubtful times of war. I believe that this follows from severities being badly or properly used. Those may be called properly used, if of evil it is lawful to speak well, that are applied at one blow and are necessary to one's security, and that are not persisted in afterwards unless they can be turned to the advantage of the subjects. The badly employed are those which, notwithstanding they may be few in the commencement, multiply with time rather than decrease. Those who practise the first system are able, by aid of God or man, to mitigate in some degree their rule, as Agathocles did. It is impossible for those who follow the other to maintain themselves.

Hence it is to be remarked that, in seizing a state, the usurper ought to examine closely into all those injuries which it is necessary for him to inflict, and to do them all at one stroke so as not to have to repeat them daily; and thus by not unsettling men he will be able to reassure them, and win them to himself by benefits. He who does otherwise, either from timidity or evil advice, is always compelled to keep the knife in his hand; neither can he rely on his subjects, nor can they attach themselves to him, owing to their continued and repeated wrongs. For injuries ought to be done all at one time, so that, being tasted less, they offend less; benefits ought to be given little by little, so that the flavour of them may last longer.

And above all things, a prince ought to live amongst his people in such a way that no unexpected circumstances, whether of good or evil, shall make him change; because if the necessity for this comes in troubled times, you are too late for harsh measures; and mild ones will not help you, for they will be considered as forced from you, and no one will be under any obligation to you for them.

CHAPTER XV

Concerning Things For Which Men, And Especially Princes, Are Praised Or Blamed

Summary: A man who strives solely for good will be pursuing his own downfall, for so many men are not good. The prudent prince will temper his goods and bads to achieve a powerful balance.

It remains now to see what ought to be the rules of conduct for a prince towards subject and friends. And as I know that many have written on this point, I expect I shall be considered presumptuous in mentioning it again, especially as in discussing it I shall depart from the methods of other people. But, it being my intention to

write a thing which shall be useful to him who apprehends it, it appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of a matter than the imagination of it; for many have pictured republics and principalities which in fact have never been known or seen, because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to

positions by having been liberal, and by being considered so, I answer: Either you are a prince in fact, or in a way to become one. In the first case this liberality is dangerous, in the second it is very necessary to be considered liberal; and Caesar was one of those who wished to become pre-eminent in Rome; but if he had survived after becoming so, and had not moderated his expenses, he would have destroyed his government. And if any one should reply: Many have been princes, and have done great things with armies, who have been considered very liberal, I reply: Either a prince spends that which is his own or his subjects' or else that of others. In the first case he ought to be sparing, in the second he ought not to neglect any opportunity for liberality. And to the prince who goes forth with his army, supporting it by pillage, sack, and extortion, handling that which belongs to others, this liberality is necessary, otherwise he would not be followed by

soldiers. And of that which is neither yours nor your subjects' you can be a ready giver, as were Cyrus, Caesar, and Alexander; because it does not take away your reputation if you squander that of others, but adds to it; it is only squandering your own that injures you.

And there is nothing wastes so rapidly as liberality, for even whilst you exercise it you lose the power to do so, and so become either poor or despised, or else, in avoiding poverty, rapacious and hated. And a prince should guard himself, above all things, against being despised and hated; and liberality leads you to both. Therefore it is wiser to have a reputation for meanness which brings reproach without hatred, than to be compelled through seeking a reputation for liberality to incur a name for rapacity which begets reproach with hatred.

CHAPTER XXI

How A Prince Should Conduct Himself As To Gain Renown

Summary: To promote goodwill among the people, a good prince should always support new businesses, promising artisans, and the like. He should also celebrate at festivals with his people in honor of days and events that they hold special. Both rewards and punishments should be quick and creative. If two neighboring countries go to war you must take sides, for to remain neutral will be your downfall. The victor will seek to oppress you because you did not aid him and the loser will refuse you aid for the same reason. If possible, do not join forces with someone already stronger than you as this puts you at their mercy. If you join the weaker power you have the most favorable results. If you win, you strengthen your own country, destroy a powerful enemy, and form a useful alliance with another principality. If your side loses, your companion-in-arms will help support you through the rough times, and this will join your fortunes for future successes. To gain the most esteem from both your people and on the world stage, one must embark on great enterprises and give rare proofs of one's ability.

Nothing makes a prince so much esteemed as great enterprises and setting a fine example. We have in our time Ferdinand of Aragon, the present King of Spain. He can almost be called a new prince, because he has risen, by fame and glory, from being an insignificant king to be the foremost king in Christendom; and if you will consider his deeds you will find them all great and some of them extraordinary. In the beginning of his reign he attacked Granada, and this enterprise was the foundation of his dominions. He did this quietly at first and without any fear of hindrance, for he held the minds of the barons of Castile occupied in thinking of the war and not anticipating any innovations; thus they did not perceive that by these means he was acquiring power and authority over them. He was able with the money of the Church and of the people to sustain his armies, and by that long war to lay the foundation for the military skill which has since distinguished him. Further, always using religion as a plea, so as to undertake greater schemes, he devoted himself with a pious cruelty to driving out and clearing his kingdom of the Moors; nor could there be a more admirable example, nor one more rare. Under this same cloak he assailed Africa, he came down on Italy, he

has finally attacked France; and thus his achievements and designs have always been great, and have kept the minds of his people in suspense and admiration and occupied with the issue of them. And his actions have arisen in such a way, one out of the other, that men have never been given time to work steadily against him.

Again, it much assists a prince to set unusual examples in internal affairs, similar to those which are related of Messer Bernabo da Milano, who, when he had the opportunity, by any one in civil life doing some extraordinary thing, either good or bad, would take some method of rewarding or punishing him, which would be much spoken about. And a prince ought, above all things, always to endeavour in every action to gain for himself the reputation of being a great and remarkable man.

A prince is also respected when he is either a true friend or a downright enemy, that to say, when, without any reservation, he declares himself in favour of one party against the other; which course will always be more advantageous than standing neutral; because if two of