



A Prince for All Seasons

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In his monumental treatise, *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli delineates the methods and means by which a ruler can acquire and consolidate political power. Within its pages are found principles that, while being a paradigm of political expedience, generally have been considered, over the years, to be the apotheosis of despotism and tyranny. Yet, many of Machiavelli's less nefarious views set forth in *The Prince* are relevant still and have significant practical application for current heads of state, even in today's increasingly democratic world. Much of what he writes, however, centers on what he considers the most important characteristics and qualities to be espoused by a prince attempting to gain or maintain political hegemony, and in this respect he is not at all reluctant to advocate treachery and deceit.

An “Ideal” Prince Is Perspicacious

An important criterion necessary for the development of political acumen, discussed by Machiavelli in a number of chapters, is the ability to utilize the talents and experience of others. There is much to be learned by a prince from the exploits of not only the great men of antiquity but also those of his own contemporaries. Throughout *The Prince*, Machiavelli provides myriad examples of the application of this concept, especially as it relates to the military. A successful prince must also be decisive and be able to differentiate between foolish and wise advice and assimilate the latter into his desired course of action.

An “Ideal” Prince Is Frugal

In the chapter sixteen analysis of the princely merits of frugality over generosity, Machiavelli draws an interesting and logical parallel in that he considers the former to be synonymous with the latter when applied to the inequity of heavy taxation of the populace to subsidize lavish government expenditure. “For in that way [the prince] practices generosity towards all from whom he refrains from taking money, who are many, and stinginess only toward those from whom he withholds gifts, who are few.” In this manner, the prince would best serve his own reputation and popularity by catering to the self-interest of his subjects, allowing them to determine how a greater portion of their income should be spent. Machiavelli also contends, however, that an astute prince may find occasion to appear magnanimous by distributing external wealth, not out of any sense of altruistic propriety, but rather as a means to further facilitate and consolidate his personal power and influence. This principal is particularly relevant, he believes, with regard to nurturing the loyalties of the military by disbursing the spoils of war.

An “Ideal” Prince Is Merciful But Feared

Again, as with frugality and generosity, Machiavelli indicates that a prince, being best served by a reputation for one specific quality, may better maintain his circumstances by judicious use of its exact opposite. A prince will obtain less of a reputation for cruelty when, by executing a few leaders of opposing factions likely to initiate violent disunity, he keeps the peace and tranquility within the populace. If he were to concern himself with the well-being of the dissident or iconoclast, his inaction would result in anarchy, and violence will “offend an entire community, while the few executions ordered by the prince affect only a few individuals.” Along with a controlled use of cruelty, Machiavelli considers fear, which “the prince has it in his own hands to create,” rather than love, to be the essence of the respect accorded his authority. The specter of inevitable punishment is a potent deterrent to the disobedience that may be encouraged by motives of excessive self-interest.

An “Ideal” Prince Need Not Keep His Word

It is to a prince’s credit to appear virtuous to the public but often considerably more advantageous not to be so in actuality. The benefit of any semblance of truth notwithstanding, a prince’s word is most effective in obtaining his desires when it is devoid of any moral or ethical standards whatsoever. According to Machiavelli, it need be upheld only when the prince or his subjects benefit; otherwise, it should be a calculated study in deception. Although “everyone sees what you seem to be, few experience what you really are and these few do not dare to set themselves up against the opinion of the majority supported by the majesty of the state.” The character of a shrewd prince is likened by Machiavelli to the cunning of the fox and the ferocity of the lion; he must be able to outmaneuver and deceive his enemies intellectually and also crush them militarily. In order to prevail in such an endeavor, a prince need not concern himself with the humaneness of his methods, but only with their efficacy.

An “Ideal” Prince Avoids Being Hated

Whereas Machiavelli indicates that, of love and fear, the latter is the more propitious quality for a prince to cultivate in his subjects, he also renders an important distinction between fear and hatred. A wise prince, he states, can keep the positive sentiments of his subjects by adhering to a few basic principles. A public reputation for high moral character, whether or not it coincides with the values practiced by the prince in private life, sets goals to which the populace can aspire. “A prince acquiring such a reputation is highly thought of, and against one enjoying such respect conspiracy is difficult.” Concern for the well-being of the people, both the common man and the aristocracy, also helps mitigate dissatisfaction from within. In addition, Machiavelli states that a prince must take care to see that those closest to him, his inner circle, are treated well and remain loyal.