

Life

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.

The Prince

In this selection from Chapter XVII of *The Prince*, Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli continues his central theme of how a prince can gain and maintain power. As this passage illustrates, Machiavelli leaves behind the idealism of the medieval Christian king and looks instead to what he views as the realities of human nature. As he does throughout the book, Machiavelli uses examples from classical Rome to support his points. In this case he refers to the great Carthaginian general Hannibal and his noted Roman opponent, Scipio Africanus.

From *The Prince*

By Niccolò Machiavelli

Here the question arises: is it better to be loved than feared, or vice versa? I don't doubt that every prince would like to be both; but since it is hard to accommodate these qualities, if you have to make a choice, to be feared is much safer than to be loved. For it is a good general rule about men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain. While you serve their welfare, they are all yours, offering their blood, their belongings, their lives, and their children's lives, as we noted above—so long as the danger is remote. But when the danger is close at hand, they turn against you. Then, any prince who has relied on their words and has made no other preparations will come to grief; because friendships that are bought at a price, and not with greatness and nobility of soul, may be paid for but they are not acquired, and they cannot be used in time of need. People are less concerned with offending a man who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared: the reason is that love is a link of obligation which men, because they are rotten, will break any time they think doing so serves their advantage; but fear involves dread of punishment, from which they can never escape.

Still, a prince should make himself feared in such a way that, even if he gets no love, he gets no hate either; because it is perfectly possible to be feared and not hated, and this will be the result if only the prince will keep his hands off the property of his subjects or citizens, and off their women. When he does have to shed blood, he should be sure to have a strong justification and manifest cause; but above all, he should not confiscate people's property, because men are quicker to forget the death of a father than the loss of a patrimony. Besides, pretexts for confiscation are always plentiful; it never fails that a prince who starts to live by plunder can find reasons to rob someone else. Excuses for proceeding against someone's life are much rarer and more quickly exhausted.

But a prince at the head of his armies and commanding a multitude of soldiers should not care a bit if he is considered cruel; without such a reputation, he could never hold his army together and ready for action. Among the marvelous deeds of Hannibal, this was prime: that, having an immense army, which included men of many different races and nations, and which he led to battle in distant countries, he never allowed them to fight among themselves or to rise against him, whether his fortune was good or bad. The reason for this could only be his inhuman cruelty, which, along with his countless other talents [virtù], made him an object of awe and terror to his soldiers; and without the cruelty, his other qualities [le altre sua virtù] would never have sufficed. The historians who pass snap judgments on these matters admire his accomplishments and at the same time condemn the cruelty which was their main cause.

When I say, "His other qualities would never have sufficed," we can see that this is true from the example of Scipio, an outstanding man not only among those of his own time, but in all recorded history; yet his armies revolted in Spain, for no other reason than his excessive leniency in allowing his soldiers more freedom than military discipline permits. Fabius Maximus rebuked him in the senate for this failing, calling him the corrupter of the Roman armies. When a lieutenant of Scipio's plundered the Locrians, he took no

action in behalf of the people, and did nothing to discipline that insolent lieutenant; again, this was the result of his easygoing nature. Indeed, when someone in the senate wanted to excuse him on this occasion, he said there are many men who know better how to avoid error themselves than how to correct error in others. Such a soft temper would in time have tarnished the fame and glory of Scipio, had he brought it to the office of emperor; but as he lived under the control of the senate, this harmful quality of his not only remained hidden but was considered creditable.

Returning to the question of being feared or loved, I conclude that since men love at their own inclination but can be made to fear at the inclination of the prince, a shrewd prince will lay his foundations on what is under his own control, not on what is controlled by others. He should simply take pains not to be hated, as I said.