Excerpts from The Prince by Niccolò Machiavelli

***“Men must be either pampered or annihilated. They avenge light offenses; they cannot avenge severe ones; hence, the harm one does to a man must be such as to obviate [eliminate] any fear of revenge.”***

EXPLANATION

A prince has two options: benevolence and destruction. Because kindness will cause resentment among the people, he should choose it only if he is absolutely sure there will be no ill consequences. The destruction he brings must eliminate any parties that might seek to revenge against him. Feelings of pity or compassion are meaningless. Self-interest and self-protection are the motivating factors and are to be pursued ruthlessly.

***“A prince must have no other objective, or thought, nor take up any profession but the art of war, its methods and its discipline, for that is the only art expected of a ruler. And it is of such great value that it not only keeps hereditary princes in power, but often raises men of lowly condition to that rank.”***

EXPLANATION

For Machiavelli, all affairs of government are viewed through a military lens, because the ultimate goal of a government is self-preservation; military defense, strategy, diplomacy, and geography—is the means by which governments preserve themselves.

***“A question arises: whether it is better to be loved or feared. The answer is, of course, that it would be best to be both loved and feared. But since the two rarely come together, anyone compelled to choose will find greater security in being feared than in being loved. . . . Love endures by a bond which men, being scoundrels, may break whenever it serves their advantage to do so; but fear is supported by the dread of pain, which is ever present.”***

EXPLANATION

This passage contains the most famous of Machiavelli’s statements. Often, his argument that it is better to be feared than loved is taken to suggest that The Prince is a handbook for dictators and tyrants. But a closer reading reveals that Machiavelli believes people will become disloyal under some circumstances. He also believes the prince’s ultimate goal is to maintain the state, which requires the obedience of the people.

Between benevolence and cruelty, It is cruelty that is more reliable. Machiavelli never advocates the use of cruelty for its own sake, only in the interests of the ultimate end of statecraft.

***“Everybody knows how honorable it is for a prince to be an honest man and not a trickster. Nevertheless, the experience of our times shows that the princes who have done great things are the ones who have taken little account of their promises and who have known how to addle [confuse] the brains of men with craft. In the end they have conquered those who have put their reliance on good faith…”***

***“You must realize, then, that there are two ways to fight. In one kind the laws are used, in the other, force. The first is suitable to man, the second to animals. But because the first often falls short, one has to turn to the second. Hence a prince must know perfectly how to act like a beast and like a man…”***

***“It is necessary for a prince to understand how to make good use of the conduct of the animals, he should select among them the fox and the lion, because the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot protect himself from the wolves. So the prince needs to be a fox that he may know how to deal with traps, and a lion that he may frighten the wolves. Those who act like the lion alone do not understand their business. A prudent ruler, therefore, cannot and should not be faithful when it is to his disadvantage and the causes that made him give his promise have vanished...”***

EXPLANATION