Dr. Jennie Ward

English 111, Section 024-A

2 October 2012

The Machiavellian principle “It is better to be feared than to be loved” is not an immoral edict but a carefully chosen last resort.

Machiavelli’s book The Prince though simply phrased and concisely written was a letter to a prince and should be read as such. The simplicity of his composition lulls a casual reader into forgetting that Machiavelli was prescribing the actions related to the affairs of the state. Modern rhetoric, political or otherwise, which use quotations from Machiavelli out of context suffers from oversimplification, and should not discount Machiavelli’s depth of insight. As if proactively trying to prevent his reader --Lorenzo De Medici-- from taking these instructions out of context, Machiavelli points to other parts of his own writing, in the same document, multiple times. The Machiavellian principle “It is better to be feared than to be loved” is not an immoral edict but a carefully chosen last resort. He unequivocally clarified this position when he wrote: “one would like to be both, but as it is difficult to combine love and fear, if one **has** [emphasis mine] to choose between them it is far safer to be feared than loved” (Machiavelli 78). The genius of his work is that he relates the complex events of his time to their roots via a careful study of history providing context and perspective. Machiavelli’s condensed analysis as a whole is far superior to the common place elements he used to form it. What he submitted is a quiver of techniques, and wise is the one that grabs the bag rather than a single arrow.

This point is further highlighted by professor Jeffrey B. Abramson in his book Minerva’s Owl: “Bad persons do not need Machiavelli’s prompting to commit atrocities … But benevolent leaders need to learn that the common good is not always the same as the moral good, and that we count on them to serve the former even if it means violating the latter” (Abramson). The validity of this point is easily observed in our daily lives too. Mothers resort to the fear of bogyman as a last resort to prevent their children from wandering into danger. A mother probably rather lovingly reason with her child, but she recognizes that fear of scary bogyman is a more effective mechanism to protect her child, so she uses it. She puts the overall goal of keeping her child safe above the discomfort caucused by fear of scary bogyman.

Going deeper, we are faced with the question of relevance. In a great example Machiavelli points to the value of a prince’s own army and belittles an army of mercenaries in chapter twelve. He points out that an army that shares cultural, geographical, and ancestral traits with the prince will fight far more effectively than an army fighting for a prize. A soldier’s love of his homeland, honor, freedom, or family could transcend love of money. The power of this exceeding love remains true even if the said soldier happens to be indifferent to the prince. Furthermore the soldier’s fear of what could happen if he laid down his arms is very palpable and strong. Fear of being dishonored, fear of failing to protect his family, and fear of letting his comrades down can certainly provoke a soldier fighting for his homeland more than the love of money or loot could motivate a soldier of fortune.

As a contemporary demonstration of relevance we can look at U.S. military actions in Japan that ushered in the end of World War II as opposed to terrorist actions on September 11th 2001 that yielded no conclusive benefits to the Muslim extremist. In the case of bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the fear that was generated in Japan, or even the world, was overwhelming. The image of a mushroom cloud is still synonymous with destruction and ruin. Never before had the world seen such devastation. The Japanese emporia, army, and people could not formulate a response other than surrender. Otherwise the entire nation would have faced elimination.

On the other hand, the terrorists’ acts of September 11th in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania though horrific were fruitless. Perhaps al-Qaeda leaders never imagined that any one of their plans for that day would come to fruition. They certainly were not able to carry them out again since that infamous day. The scale of the terror they caused pales in comparison to the power and commitment of their opponent, be it the U.S. government or the American people. But it was enough to make the U.S. government the direct enemy of al-Qaeda. So proving yet another Machiavellian observation the world united with the strong one to cause al-Qaeda’s marginalization. If al-Qaeda was a country or government and not a fragmented group it could have conceivably been eliminated.

So neither fear by itself nor love alone is the winner in this contest. A fear mongering Hitler proves to be less effective than a peaceful Martin Luther King. But Martin Luther King, the peaceful preacher, surely had to invoke fear at least on some occasion to persuade his congregation away from the wrath of God when nudging them towards the loving God was not effective enough. These are in fact the complexities that Machiavelli pondered. The overarching truth he observed lies in having the foresight to plan which in turn allows for the flexibility to strike that perfect balance. If the simplicity of Machiavelli’s writing points out the black and white islands of truth in our lives, so he must have assumed us smart enough to notice the ocean of gray in between.

Works Cited

Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince :* New York: Modern Library a division of The Random

House Publishing Group, 2007.

Abramson, Jeffrey B. *Minerva's Owl : The Tradition Of Western Political Thought*. n.p.: Harvard University Press, 2009. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 5 Sept. 2012.