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 not meant for modest situations. The simplicity of his composition lulls a casual reader into forgetting that he was prescribing the actions of a prince. Modern rhetoric, political or otherwise, which use quotations from Machiavelli out of context suffer from oversimplification, and should not discount Machiavelli’s depth of insight. As if trying to prevent his reader –Lorenzo De Medici– from reading these sentences out of context Machiavelli points to other parts of his writing multiple times. The genius of his work is that he relates the complex events of his time to their roots via a careful study of history. It is evident that he was conscious of variables and employed a graceful breakdown model 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). It is my assertion that Machiavelli submitted a holistic idea far superior to the sum of commonplace ingredients he used to form it and should be taken in its entirety rather than analyzed individually.

Going beyond the fact that Machiavelli’s writing is multifaceted is the obvious point that in the aforementioned quote he only elected fear over love as a last resort. This point is further highlighted by professor Abramson “Think of it this way. Bad persons do not need Machiavelli’s prompting to commit atrocities; they know all too well how to commit evil on their own. 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) in his book Minerva’s Owl. The validity of this point is easily observed in our daily lives. A mother that invokes the fear of bogeyman has probably tried very hard to lovingly reason with her child, but desperate to keep him/her from wandering into danger resorts to fear.

Moving deeper we are faced with the question of relevance. Trying to imagine how much people are motivated by fear and how much by love Machiavelli too saw a need to establish applicability. A great example is where he points to value of a prince’s own army and belittles an army of mercenaries. He points out that an army that shares cultural, geographical and ancestral traits with the price will fight far more effectively than an army that is fighting for money. A soldier’s love of his homeland, honor, freedom or family could transcend love of money. Power of this exceeding love remains true if the said soldier happen to be indifferent to the prince. The fear of what could happen if the soldier laid down his arms is also very palpable and strong. Fear of being dishonored, fear of failing to protect one’s family, and fear of letting one’s comrades down can certainly weigh heavier than the love of money or loot.

As a contemporary demonstration of relevance we can look at U.S. military actions in Japan that ushered the end of World War II opposed to terrorist actions on September 11th 2001 that yielded no tangible benefits to the perpetrators. In the case of bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the fear was overwhelming. Image of a mushroom cloud is still synonymous with destruction and ruin. Never before had the world seen such devastation. The opposing side simply could not formulate an answer. The Japanese emporia, army, and people, honorable and devoted maybe, had to surrender. Otherwise the entire nation would face elimination.

On the other hand terrorist’s 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 come to fruition. They certainly were not able to carry them out again. The scale of the terror they caused pales in comparison to the power of their opponent. They made the U.S. their direct enemy, and in keeping with Machiavelli’s observations the world united with the strong one causing their elimination.

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. Even God or those who presume to speak on behalf of God were never able to use one idea singularly. Proponents of religions had all the motivation to formulate these edicts in the most calculated manner. They certainly had enough time and chances; yet people are simultaneously made to fear the almighty smiter and lured to the open arms of the companionate and the merciful.

The simplicity and directness of Machiavelli’s writing point out the black and white islands of truth in our lives so he must have assumed us smart enough to unavoidably notice the ocean of gray in between where we spend most of time.