

CHAPTER
17

Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from The Prince*
by Niccolò Machiavelli

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) was an Italian political philosopher, historian, poet, and playwright from Florence. Serving in public office for 14 years, he went on almost 30 diplomatic missions for the Florentine city-state. During his diplomatic career, he traveled around Italy and to the courts of France and Germany, gaining insight into the world of Renaissance politics. In 1513 Machiavelli wrote The Prince, a book of advice to rulers on how to found a state and how to stay in power. The following excerpt shows Machiavelli's views on how a ruler should build his reputation.

How a Prince Should Conduct Himself so as to Gain Renown

Nothing makes a prince so much esteemed as great enterprises and setting a fine example. We have in our time Ferdinand of Aragon, the present King of Spain. He can almost be called a new prince, because he has risen, by fame and glory, from being an insignificant king to be the foremost king in Christendom; and if you will consider his deeds you will find them all great and some of them extraordinary. In the beginning of his reign he attacked Granada, and this enterprise was the foundation of his dominions. He did this quietly at first and without any fear of hindrance, for he held the minds of the barons of Castile occupied in thinking of the war and not anticipating any innovations; thus they did not perceive that by these means he was acquiring power and authority over them. He was able with the money of the Church and of the people to sustain his armies, and by that long war to lay the foundation for the military skill which has since distinguished him. Further, always using religion as a plea, so as to undertake greater schemes, he devoted himself with a pious cruelty to driving out and clearing his kingdom of the Moors; nor could there be a more admirable example, nor one more rare. Under this same cloak he assailed Africa, he came down on Italy, he has finally attacked France; and thus his achievements and designs have always been great, and have kept the minds of his people in suspense and admiration and occupied with the issue of them. And his actions have arisen in such a way, one out of the other, that men have never been given time to work steadily against him. . . .

Never let any Government imagine that it can choose perfectly safe courses; rather let it expect to have to take very doubtful ones, because it is found

in ordinary affairs that one never seeks to avoid one trouble without running into another; but prudence consists in knowing how to distinguish the character of troubles, and for choice to take the lesser evil.

A prince ought also to show himself a patron of ability, and to honour the proficient in every art. At the same time he should encourage his citizens to practise their callings peaceably, both in commerce and agriculture, and in every other following, so that the one should not be deterred from improving his possessions for fear lest they be taken away from him or another from opening up trade for fear of taxes; but the prince ought to offer rewards to whoever wishes to do these things and designs in any way to honour his city or state.

Further, he ought to entertain the people with festivals and spectacles at convenient seasons of the year; and as every city is divided into guilds or into societies, he ought to hold such bodies in esteem, and associate with them sometimes, and show himself an example of courtesy and liberality; nevertheless, always maintaining the majesty of his rank, for this he must never consent to abate in anything.

from Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince. Reprinted in Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., Great Books of the Western World (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 31–33.

Activity Options

- Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** Make a cause-and-effect diagram illustrating how a prince gains renown according to Machiavelli. Then share your diagram with your classmates.
- Determining Main Ideas** Write a numbered list of tips for princes who want to gain fame and public approval. Share your list with a group of classmates and discuss which tips political leaders today might use.