

## FREDERICK II, THE GREAT

### FROM *Antimachiavell*

*Frederick II, the Great (1712–1786), king of Prussia, was the third son of Frederick William II of Prussia and Sophia Dorothea of Hanover, sister of George II of England. As a boy, Frederick showed little interest in the military matters that fascinated his father and, led by his tutor, the French Calvinist refugee Jacob E. Duhan de Jandun, discovered a world of art and literature instead. He mastered the flute, for which he composed a number of pieces, and adopted a free-thinking philosophy. His father's efforts at discipline had little effect on the young Frederick, who tried to evade his duties by escaping to England in 1730. The plan was discovered, Frederick imprisoned, and his best friend executed. This brutal encounter had its desired effect: Frederick threw himself on his father's mercy and dedicated himself to the arts of kingship. After a period of military service, in 1735 Frederick withdrew to the castle of Rheinsberg, where he undertook a systematic program of reading. He corresponded with Voltaire and, through French literature, read widely in the philosophical works of the Enlightenment. His ideal of government became enlightened but absolute, serving the people but limited only by the ruler's sensibilities. In this period Frederick wrote a number of treatises on politics, among which was the *Antimachiavell* (1740), published by Voltaire at The Hague. In it, he developed his ideal of the enlightened, absolute monarch in contrast to those of the Florentine statesman. The work was widely read in France and praised as a formula for enlightened rule. In the same year, Frederick succeeded his father and began a long and illustrious reign as king of Prussia. He distinguished himself as the greatest military genius of his day. In peacetime, he transformed Prussia into the model of an enlightened despotism. His policies expanded education, promoted industry, and reformed justice, all in the interest of state power.*

From *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, edited and translated by Jay Luvaas (New York: Free Press, 1966).

### The Duty of Sovereigns

Since Machiavelli wrote his political *Prince*, the face of Europe has changed so much that it can no longer be recognized. If some great general in the age of Louis XII were to come back into the world he would find himself much at a loss. He would see war now carried on by bodies of men so numerous that they can hardly be subsisted in the field, yet are kept up in peace as well as war,

whereas in his age, to execute great enterprises and strike decisive blows a handful of men sufficed, and these were disbanded as soon as the war was over. Instead of coats of mail, lances, and harquebusses with matches, he would find the army furnished with uniforms, firelocks, and bayonets. He would see new methods of encamping, besieging, and giving battle, and find the art of subsisting the troops as necessary now as that of conquering was before.

But what would Machiavelli himself say upon seeing this new political face of Europe, and so many princes who were scarcely known in his day now being ranked with the greatest monarchs? What would he say upon seeing the power and authority of sovereigns firmly established, the present manner of negotiating, and that balance settled in Europe by the alliance of many princes and states against the over-powerful and ambitious, a balance solely designed for securing the peace and tranquility of mankind?

All of these things have produced such universal change that Machiavelli's maxims cannot be applied to modern politics. . . . He assumes that a prince who has a large territory, a numerous army, and a full treasury may defend himself against his enemies without foreign supplies. I venture to contradict. . . . Let a sovereign be ever so formidable, he cannot defend himself against powerful enemies without the assistance of allies. If the most formidable prince in Europe, Louis XIV, was reduced to the greatest distress and was nearly ruined by the war of the Spanish Succession, if for want of foreign assistance he was unable to defend himself against the alliance of so many kings and princes, how should a sovereign who is less powerful be able to resist the joint attacks of his neighbors, to which he may often be exposed, without allies?

It is often said—and often repeated without much reflection—that treaties are useless because they are never observed in all points, and that the present age is no more scrupulous in keeping faith than any other. I answer that although many examples may be produced, ancient, modern, and some very recent of princes who have not fulfilled all their engagements, yet it is always prudent and necessary to make alliances. For your allies otherwise will be so many enemies; and if they refuse to send you supplies when you need them, you may at least expect them to observe an exact neutrality.

It is a known truth in politics that the most natural and consequently the best allies are those who have common interests and who are not such close neighbors as to be involved in any dispute

over frontiers. Sometimes it happens that strange accidents give birth to extraordinary alliances. In our own time we have seen nations that had always been rivals and even enemies united under the same banners. But these are events that rarely occur and that never can serve as examples, for such connections can only be momentary, whereas the other kind, which are contracted from a unity of interests, alone are capable of execution. In the present situation in Europe, when all her princes are armed and preponderating powers rise up capable of crushing the feeble, prudence requires that alliances should be formed with other powers, as much to secure aid in case of attack as to repress the dangerous plans of enemies, and to sustain all just pretensions by the help of such allies. . . .

Nor is this sufficient. We must have eyes and ears among our neighbors, especially among our enemies, which shall be open to receive and faithfully report what they have seen and heard. Men are wicked. Care must be taken especially not to suffer surprise, because surprises intimidate and terrify. This never happens when preparations are made, however vexatious the event anticipated. European politics are so fallacious that the wisest men may become dupes if they are not always alert and on their guard.

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The military system ought . . . to rest on good principles that experience has shown to be valid. The genius of the nation ought to be understood—what it is capable of, and how far its safety may be risked by leading it against the enemy. . . .

There are states which, from their situation and constitution, must be maritime powers: such are England, Holland, France, Spain, and Denmark. They are surrounded by the sea, and their distant colonies force them to keep a navy and to maintain communication and trade between the mother country and these detached members. There are other states such as Austria, Poland, Prussia, and even Russia, some of which may well do without shipping and others that would commit an unpardonable error in politics if they were

to . . . employ a part of their troops at sea when they stand indispensably in need of their services on land.

The number of troops maintained by a state ought to be in proportion to the troops maintained by its enemies. Their forces should be equal, or the weakest is in danger of being oppressed. Perhaps it may be argued that a king ought to depend on the aid of his allies. This reasoning would be good if allies were what they ought to be, but their zeal is only lukewarm, and he who shall depend upon another as upon himself will most certainly be deceived. If frontiers can be defended by fortresses, there must be no neglect in building nor any expense spared in bringing them to perfection. France has provided an example of this, and she has realized its advantages on different occasions.

But neither politics nor the army can prosper if the finances are not kept in the greatest order and if the prince himself be not a prudent economist. Money is like the magician's wand, for by its aid miracles are performed. Great political views, the maintenance of the military, and the best conceived plans for the well-being of the people will all remain lethargic if not animated by money. The economy of the sovereign is useful to the public good because, if he does not have sufficient funds in reserve either to supply the expenses of war without burdening his people with extraordinary taxes or to give relief to citizens in times of public calamity, all these burdens will fall on the subject, who will be without the means he needs most in such unhappy times.

All branches of the state administration are intimately tied together in one bundle: finances, politics, and military affairs are inseparable. Not one, but all of these departments must be uniformly well administered. They must be steered in a straight line, head to head, as the team of horses in the Olympic contest which, pulling with equal weight and speed, covered the course and brought victory to their driver. A prince who rules independently and has fashioned his political system

himself will not find himself in difficulty when he must make a quick decision, for he directs everything toward his established goal.

Above all, he must have acquired the greatest knowledge conceivable in the details of military affairs. One produces poor campaign plans at the round table, and where do the best plans lead if they are wrecked through the ignorance of those entrusted with their execution? A King may be the most able man, the best economist, the most subtle statesman—he will still fail as commander in chief if he neither knows the needs of an army nor cares about the countless details of its maintenance, if he is unaware how an army is mobilized, remains ignorant of the rules of war, or understands nothing of training troops in the garrison and leading them in the field. . . .

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So in Prussia the ruler must do that which is most useful for the good of the state and therefore he must place himself at the head of the army. In this way he gives esteem to the military profession and preserves our excellent discipline and the order introduced among the troops. . . . If he possesses no expert knowledge, how will the king judge order and discipline among the different regiments and units? How can he improve what he himself does not understand? How can he blame the colonels for their mistakes and indicate to them at once the way in which they have been wrong and instruct them how to put their regiments in good order? If the king himself understands nothing of regimental and company economy, of troop leading and the art of maneuver, will he be so imprudent as to interfere? In this event he would expose himself to ridicule just as much as he would through ordering false troop movements. All this knowledge demands constant exercise, which one can only acquire if he is a soldier and applies himself to military service with unbroken diligence.

Finally, I venture the assertion that only the ruler can introduce and maintain this admirable discipline in the army. For often he must summon his authority, strongly censure the individual with-

out regard for person and rank, reward others generously, have the troops mustered whenever possible, and not overlook the slightest negligence. The king of Prussia therefore must of necessity be a soldier and commander in chief. This office, which is courted in all republics and monarchies with diligence and ambition, nevertheless is held in low regard by the kings of Europe, who believe that they lose some of their dignity if they lead their armies themselves. But the throne turns out to be a disgrace if effeminate and lazy princes abandon the leadership of their troops to generals, and thus implicitly avow their own cowardice or incapacity.

In Prussia it is certainly honorable to work with the flower of the nobility and the elite of the nation in strengthening discipline. For it is discipline that preserves the fame of the fatherland, gives it respect in peace, and produces victory in war. One would have to be a completely pitiful human being, bogged down in inertia and unnerved by high living, if he wished to shrink from the trouble and work that the maintenance of discipline in the army demands. But in exchange for his efforts, the king certainly would find his reward in victories and fame, which is even more valuable than the highest peak of grandeur or the pinnacle of power.

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As for the manner in which a prince ought to make war, I agree entirely with Machiavelli. Indeed, a great king ought always to assume command of his troops and to regard the camp as his place of residence. This is what his interest, duty, and glory require. As he is the chief magistrate in distributing justice to his people in times of peace, so he ought to be their chief protector and defender in war. When a prince is his own general and present in the field, his orders are more easily suited to all sudden emergencies and are executed

with greater dispatch. His presence prevents that misunderstanding among the generals which is so often prejudicial to the interests of the sovereign and fatal to the army. More care is taken of the magazines, ammunition, and provisions, without which Caesar himself at the head of 100,000 men would never be able to accomplish anything. As it is the prince himself who gives orders for the battle, it seems to be his province to direct the execution of these orders, and by his presence and example to inspire his troops with valor and confidence.

But it may be objected that every man is not born to be a soldier and that many princes have not the talents, experience, or courage necessary for commanding an army. This objection may be easily removed: a prince will always find generals skilful enough to advise him, and it is sufficient for him in this case to be directed by their advice. Besides, no war can be carried on with great success if the general is under the direction of a ministry which is not present in the camp and consequently is unable to judge of sudden occurrences and to give orders accordingly.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. According to Frederick, why does a state need allies?
2. What has the state become according to Frederick?
3. How does a ruler choose allies?
4. What is their relation to the state?
5. How do they reflect the state? Why does the state need a military?
6. What is the purpose of the military?
7. How is Frederick's idea different from Machiavelli's?