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“That to Use Fraud in Managing War Is a Glorious Thing,”

“That the Fatherland Ought to Be Defended, Whether with Ignominy or with Glory,”

And

“That Promises Made through Force Ought Not to Be Observed”

Discourses on Livy, Book III, Chapters 40–42

By Niccolo Machiavelli

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40. That to Use Fraud in Managing War Is a Glorious Thing

Although the use of fraud in every action is detestable, nonetheless in managing war it is a praiseworthy and glorious thing, and he who overcomes the enemy with fraud is praised as much as the one who overcomes it with force. One sees this by the judgment those make of it who write the lives of great men, who praise Hannibal and others who were very notable in such modes of proceeding. Of the very many examples of that to be read I shall not repeat any. I shall say only this: that I do not understand that fraud to be glorious which makes you break faith given and pacts made; for although this may at some time acquire state and kingdom for you, as is discoursed of above,[\[1\]](#) it will never acquire glory for you. But I speak of the fraud that is used with the enemy who does not trust in you and that properly consists in managing war, as was that of Hannibal when at the lake of Perugia[\[2\]](#) he simulated flight so as to enclose the consul and the Roman army, and when he lit up the horns of his herd to escape the hands of Fabius Maximus.[\[3\]](#)

Like such frauds was the one that Pontius, captain of the Samnites, used to enclose the Roman army within the Caudine Forks.[\[4\]](#) Having put his army close to the mountains, he sent more of his soldiers in shepherds' clothing with a very large herd to the plain. When they were taken by the Romans and asked where the Samnites' army was, they all agreed, according to the order given by Pontius, to say that it was at the siege of Nocera.[\[5\]](#) That thing, believed by the consuls, made them trap themselves within the Caudine cliffs, where, after they entered, they were at once besieged by the Samnites. This victory,

had through fraud, would have been very glorious for Pontius if he had followed the counsels of his father, who wished the Romans either to save themselves freely or all be killed, and not to take the middle way, “which neither provides friends nor removes enemies.”^[6] That way was always pernicious in things of state, as was discoursed of above in another place.^[7]

41. That the Fatherland Ought to Be Defended, Whether with Ignominy or with Glory; and It Is Well Defended in Any Mode Whatever

As was said above,^[8] the consul and the Roman army were besieged by the Samnites, who had set very ignominious conditions on the Romans (which were: wishing to put them under the yoke and sending them back to Rome disarmed), and because of this the consuls were as though dazed, and all the army in despair. Lucius Lentulus, the Roman legate, said that it did not appear to him that any policy whatever for saving the fatherland was to be avoided; for since the life of Rome consisted in the life of that army, it appeared to him it was to be saved in every mode, and that the fatherland is well defended in whatever mode one defends it, whether with ignominy or with glory. For if that army saved itself, Rome would have time to cancel the ignominy; if it did not save itself, even though it died gloriously, Rome and its freedom were lost. And so his counsel was followed.^[9] That advice deserves to be noted and observed by any citizen who finds himself counseling his fatherland, for where one deliberates entirely on the safety of his fatherland, there ought not to enter any consideration of either just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious; indeed every other concern^[10] put aside, one ought to follow entirely the policy that saves its life and maintains its liberty. That is imitated by the sayings and deeds of the French so as to defend the majesty of their king and the power of their kingdom, for they hear no voice more impatiently than that which would say: such a policy is ignominious for the king. For they say that their king cannot suffer shame in any decision whatever of his, whether in good or in adverse fortune, because whether he loses or wins, all—they say—are the king’s affairs.

42. That Promises Made through Force Ought Not to Be Observed

When the consuls returned to Rome with the army disarmed and the ignominy they received, the first to say in the Senate that the peace made at Caudium ought not to be observed was the consul Spurius Postumius. He said that the Roman people was not obligated, but that he and the others who had promised the peace were indeed obligated; and so if the people wished to free itself from every obligation, it had to give him and all the others who had promised it into the hands of the Samnites as prisoners. He held to this conclusion with so much obstinacy that the Senate was content with it, and sending him and the others to Samnium as prisoners, they protested to the Samnites that the peace was not valid. So favorable was fortune in this case to Postumius that the Samnites did not detain him, and when he returned to Rome, Postumius was more glorious with the Romans for having lost than was Pontius with the Samnites for having won.^[11] Here two things are to be noted: one, that glory can be acquired in any action whatever, because in victory it is acquired ordinarily; in loss, it is acquired either by showing that such a loss did not come by your fault or through doing at once some virtuous action that cancels it. The other is that it is not shameful not to observe the promises that you have been made to promise by force; and when the force is lacking, forced promises that regard the public will always be broken and it will be without shame for whoever breaks them. Various examples of this are read in all the histories; and every day in present times they are seen. Not only are forced promises not observed among princes, when the force is lacking, but all other promises are also not observed when the causes that made them promise are lacking. Whether this is a praiseworthy thing or not, or whether like modes ought to be observed by a prince or not, is disputed by us at length in our treatise *Of the Prince*,^[12] so for the present we shall be silent about it.

[1] I. See N. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, II.13; N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 18.

[2] Lake Trasumennus.

[3] Livy, *The History of Rome*, XXII.4,16–17. See also Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus*, 6; Polybius, *Histories*, III.83–84, 93. Hannibal did not simulate flight according to Livy or Polybius.

[4] Livy, *History of Rome*, IX.2–3.

[5] Actually Lucera.

[6] Quoted in Latin from Livy, IX.3. The consuls were Titus Veturius Calvinus and Spurius Postumius.

[7] See *Discourses*, II.23.4.

[8] In the preceding chapter.

[9] Livy, *History of Rome*, IX.4.

[10] Lit.: “respect.”

[11] Livy, *History of Rome*, IX.8–12.

[12] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 18; the title is given in Latin.

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