

Niccolò Machiavelli

To the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Instrumentality of the U.S. Department of Defense

Greetings:

As you are a practical group, yet with a philosophical turn of mind, you have sought my opinion on basic questions of government. I answer that leaders have but two duties: internally, to promulgate just laws and maintain order; externally, to provide for the security of the state in defending it from strangers. Of these two, I turn my attention in this testimony to the problem of maintaining the security of the state, for without this all other questions of government are moot. The first question, therefore, is how best to maintain the security of the state, whether through arms or by some other means.

To answer this one must look to the very nature of men. The history of all nations has been conflict and warfare. Therefore at all times and in all places men have found it necessary to arm themselves for defense against the attacks of their enemies. If men were naturally good, this would not be so, but how we live is different from how we ought to live. He who studies what *ought* to be done rather than what *is* done will learn the way to his downfall rather than to his preservation. It would be good if all men could live under common sets of laws and in common agreement, with no strife nor ambition between them. Because this is not likely to be so, the wise leader assumes that in order for the state to live securely he must maintain a state strong in arms. You are fortunate to be leaders in a republic rich in people and resources, one that can supply its own arms. Since your resources are great, you must consider a second question: How strongly armed should a nation be?

It has ever been thus, that it is better to be loved than

feared, but it is more efficient in the exercise of power to be feared. A leader who keeps his arms modest will surely be loved by his people for the small cost they bear in supporting his army. He would be loved by his enemy as well for giving away all the advantage, should a dispute arise. Therefore the prudent leader should never be less strongly armed than he counts his enemy to be. For when it comes to a choice between offending one who is loved and one who is feared, men will always offend those whom they love because the consequences are less. A leader who relies on the love of his friends to help defend him against his enemies relies on the wind. Therefore be strong enough to be feared by others, but not so strong that they are compelled to conspire against you. Your strength should be such that others will leave you in peace rather than suffer the injury you could do them by your arms. Further, you have it in your power to create fear in others; but to create love depends on their good natures. A leader must always exercise the power he can control rather than that which is uncertain.

To be strongly armed, is it better to have many small arms or few large ones? The type of arms a nation needs depends on its situation, whether its enemies are close by or at some distance. If they are close by, there is need for many small arms, since conflict will be constant and must be kept within bounds. If the enemy is distant, a few large arms are more capable of acting at great distance and of being needed less frequently. Indeed, the leader who can depend on machines of war rather than soldiers is fortunate, for men are ever unreliable, but machines cannot think and never question orders. In the situation of your republic you should have a small number of advanced weapons, sufficient to annihilate your enemy but not so numerous as to drain your treasury. For it is certain that men must either be conciliated or annihilated: They take vengeance for slight injuries, but for grave ones they cannot. Therefore design your weapons to do your enemy such damage as to make vengeance impossible. The risk of this, of course, is that your enemy may do the same to you.

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Because fortune is always doubtful, and time brings all things bad as well as good, you must consider the risk of war with your current weapons and calculate whether it is better to develop ever more powerful weapons or to restrict the development of such arms. Clearly it would be better to have no further weapons developed than currently exist. Yet the short-sightedness of man is ever pleased with innovations that bring immediate advantage, overlooking the slow-working poison underneath, and in the natural course of events new weapons will be made. If it were possible to restrict them, how could it be done?

Strong nations may agree between themselves to do those things that are to their mutual advantage and may bear honor for a time to such agreements. But the only nation that could propose an agreement with regard to arms is the one already most advanced. Why should the armed man listen to the unarmed? Only the man not yet fully armed may listen to one who is willing to lay down some of the arms he has. Yet a prudent leader must always be ready for deceit. And when difficulties arise, he must be prepared for war, else he fails his subjects and his allies.

If leaders of strongly armed nations make agreements about arms, they must be careful to watch weaker nations, that they do not develop their own arms. The game of power must be played only by the strong, and they should not be more than two or three. If small nations come to have powerful weapons, this would be more dangerous than anything. Although men can rarely agree, even for their mutual advantage, it is more likely that the leaders of two strong nations will agree and live by their agreement than that strong and weak mixed together will agree or that many will keep faith with one agreement. Therefore, a strong nation should extend the protection of its arms to friends and allies so that they do not need to develop their own. A powerful leader will maintain his position by affording safety and protection to his friends who, being numerous and weak and fearful, are bound to stay by him. While it is not desirable for the leader of a nation to be dependent on another, weak nations have no choice, since they lack the resources to develop their own arms. A leader of a strong nation should seek to have allies who depend on him for protection, for such increases his power. It may be necessary and even wise for a leader to send weapons and soldiers to be stationed on the territory of his allies, especially if his enemy is their neighbor. But this matter of allowing arms to fall into the control of others is dangerous and must be managed very carefully.

Arms should be shared only with old allies who have no reason to go over to the enemy. There can be nothing more foolish than giving arms to false friends or future enemies. The sale of arms should be strictly limited. For the profit of a moment a man may barter away his children's future by imprudent sale of arms. It is sometimes argued that arms may be sold to both sides by a nation that is neutral in a conflict between other nations. Consider carefully whether there can be such a thing as neutrality in a dispute: A leader is esteemed for showing himself a true friend or a true enemy but is thought weak and indecisive if he tries to take both sides in a

dispute. He loses his friend and gives aid to his enemy by trying to show favor to both sides, and he deceives himself that his former enemy will feel indebted to him. Whoever thinks that present favors erase the memory of past injuries is mistaken and his nation is in peril.

If you consider all I have said, you will put your nation in little danger of being taken over by strangers. But there are no safe courses; rather you must understand that all choices involve risks. The order of things is such that leaders never escape one danger without incurring another. Prudence lies in weighing the disadvantages of each choice and taking the least bad as good. Your choices, ladies and gentlemen, are extraordinarily difficult, for the stakes are very high, and all may be lost with a single turn of fortune. I counsel you to stay strongly armed for fear of falling to your enemy. But be careful of your arms, that your arms become not so powerful that they overmatch your own power to control them and lead to your destruction.

In a world in which no man can ever control fortune long, the power of your weapons is truly frightening, even to one such as myself. For I see clearly that in the world as it is now, one man—and not necessarily the leader of a state—may do great damage to many people, even destroy whole cities with a single weapon, and this not out of policy but only out of personal hatred or fear. This is the greatest danger, which you must guard against. Therefore, I counsel you above all: Because men will never cease to make more powerful weapons, you must keep your weapons in your own control and in the control of your friends. Who loses control loses all.

