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Machiavelli and Warfare

Niccolo Machiavelli focuses on how to successfully organize a militia in the fourteenth chapter of his political treatise, *The Prince*. One of the justifications why is because “it is unreasonable to expect that” a man with strong defenses will obey “[someone] who is unarmed” (Machiavelli 61). Consequently, efficiency in warfare is “all that is expected of a ruler” (Machiavelli 61). Carl Von Clausewitz, a Machiavellian strategist, states that war, by its very nature, is an “alternative political instrument” used for the “continuation of political activity” (Clausewitz 87). War serves a great and important purpose because it is a phase in dominion relationships, both on the domestic and transnational levels, which dictates the destiny of a state and its leaders, tests the military power of the ruler and his government in preserving national interests, and measures the limits of human morality for the sake of victory.

Machiavelli is not the only political commentator who thinks warfare should be the foremost priority of a ruler: Sun Tzu, a military strategist, shares the same view in his treatise, the *Art of War*. Sun Tzu asserts in his treatise that “the art of war”, because it holds the fate of the territory, “is a matter of vital importance to the state” (Sun Tzu 91). Clausewitz expounds on this and defines war as “an act of force that [compels] our enemy to do our will” (Clausewitz 75). Warfare is important because it is a political blueprint that predicts safety, ruin, life, and death. Wars manipulate the flow of history and the destiny of a state. The December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii heavily influenced the entry of the United States into World War II. The participation of the United States effectively shaped the outcome of the war:

the Allied forces, backed by the United States, eventually emerged as victors. If the Japanese government weighed their decisions before applying them, then massive losses would not have been inflicted against them. The return of investment in declaring war is worthless if the waging nation does not take into account the strength and power of the other country. After the Japanese defeat three years later, Hideki Tojo, the Prime Minister of Japan, was ousted from his position in disgrace and was executed for war crimes a year later. This example substantially demonstrates that war dictates the fate of states and its leaders.

When leaders feel that their interests are being threatened, they wage battles against the adverse sovereign. This is because the military strength of a leader and his government is necessary to protect the stability of the nation, and this is why “to be skilled in the art of war” is important in maintaining the state (Machiavelli 61). An example of this is when Napoleon Bonaparte felt that French interests were being threatened by foreigners. From humble beginnings, he rose up the ranks of the French military and cultivated the militia to its finest. His tactics were so carefully planned that he succeeded in establishing a formidable French empire that rattled the balance of power in Europe. He also seized advantage of the nationalist passions of post-revolutionary France. It only took one miscalculation—a winter-season invasion against Russia—to topple-off Napoleon and assure his defeat in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Undermining the enemy, complacency and overconfidence eventually cost Napoleon his government and empire. Consistency and meticulous attention to details are essential at preserving a state. When leaders start to “neglect the art of war”, it is “the first way to lose [the] state” (Machiavelli 61). Furthermore, timing is of the essence simply because when one knows when to fight and when to not, one will be victorious (Sun Tzu 123). The Napoleonic era in

Europe illustrates how wars test the military durability of a prince and his government when securing and preserving national interests.

Machiavelli and his realist approach to politics places warfare at the pinnacle of the treatise although he is morally aware of what is right or wrong. His basic goal in *The Prince* is “to write something practical” (Glasberg 40). Machiavelli mentions that it is “better to be feared than loved” if being both is not feasible (Machiavelli 71). This statement displays Machiavellian pragmatism and realism. Clausewitz, likewise, points out that “mistakes that come from kindness”, in times of battle, “are the very worst” (Clausewitz 75). Pragmatic, competent leaders use warfare for self-preservation and the securing of their interests regardless of the moral repercussions. During the Vietnam War, the United States forces organized a mass killing of about five-hundred South Vietnamese civilians on March 1968, two months after the Tet Offensive. This event, known as the My Lai Massacre, was conducted to annihilate possible Viet Cong strongholds around the vicinity. Federal legislators declared treason against the people who attempted to stop the massacre. International anger sparked when estimates of the total breadth of its damage was uncovered a year later. The North Vietnamese forces retaliated by utilizing attrition warfare, continuing guerilla tactics, attacking other Vietnamese civilians within the perimeter of battle, and torturing prisoners of war. The notion of ethics and moral sentiments is finite during the Vietnam War for both belligerents. This conflict exhibits the Machiavellian principle of practicality over morality in order to achieve survival and victory in times of socio-political discord.

Machiavelli instructs the readers how to organize a militia in the fourteenth chapter because war is crucial and important: it dictates history, measures the hardness of a stable state and exposes the limits of social morality. Machiavelli views warfare as a “responsive instrument

of power to radical social changes” (Glasberg 37) that convulse the foundations of societal balance. Using warfare as a device, leaders fortify their power, protect their resources and appraise the limits of their moral code. Ethical questions about its practice may be around to counter its concept, but warfare remains as the dominant instrument of conflict resolution until human relationships finally gain and uphold a more harmonious society.

Works Cited

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