



Name: _____

Date: _____

Political Testament

by Frederick the Great

Frederick II (1712–1786) ruled Prussia, present-day Germany and Poland, from 1740 until his death in 1786. He was acquainted with Voltaire, the French philosopher, and the two men regularly discussed the role of government. Frederick became known as ‘Enlightened monarch’ because he adapted some of the ideas of the Enlightenment during his reign. For instance, he allowed religious toleration and offered freedom of the press to his citizens. While he did maintain absolute rule over Prussia he is commonly quoted as referring to himself as the “first servant of the state.”

Primary Source:

Politics is the science of always using the most convenient means in accord with one’s own interests. In order to act in conformity with one’s interests, one must know what these interests are, and in order to gain this knowledge, one must study their history and application. ... One must attempt ... to know the ... people which one wants to govern in order to know if one must treat them **leniently** or severely. ...

[The Prussian nobility] has sacrificed its life and goods for the service of the state; its loyalty and merit have earned it the protection of all its rulers, and it is one of the duties [of the ruler] to aid those noble families which have become impoverished in order to keep them in possession of their lands. ...

A well-conducted government must have an underlying concept ... that it could be likened to a system of philosophy. All actions taken must be well-reasoned, and all financial, political, and military matters must flow towards one goal, which is the strengthening of the state and the furthering of its power. . . . A **sovereign** is not elevated to his high position; supreme power has not been confined to him in order that he may live in lazy luxury, enriching himself by the labor of the people, being happy while everyone else suffers. The sovereign is the first servant of the state. He is well-paid ... but one demands that he work efficiently for the good of the state, and that he ... pay personal attention to the most important problems. ...

Glossary:

leniently: mercifully

sovereign: a king or monarch

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Political Testament *continued*

You can see, without doubt, how important it is that the King of Prussia govern personally. . . . All parts of the government are . . . linked with each other. Finance, politics, and military affairs are inseparable; . . . a Prince who governs personally, who has formed his [own] political system, will not be handicapped when occasions arise where he has to act swiftly. . . . Catholics, Lutherans, . . . Jews, and other Christian sects live in this state, and live together in peace. If the sovereign . . . declares himself for one religion or another . . . heated disputes ensue and, in the end, the religion persecuted will leave the fatherland, and millions of subjects will enrich our neighbors.

It is of no concern in politics whether the ruler has a religion or whether he has none. All religions. . . are founded on superstitious systems. . . . It is impossible for a man of good sense . . . not to see their error; but these prejudices . . . were made for men, and one must know enough to respect the public and not to outrage its faith, whatever religion be involved.

Glossary: