

Political Testament of Frederick William (“the Great Elector”) (May 19, 1667)

Abstract

This extraordinary document displays Frederick William’s psychology and statecraft with unvarnished frankness. His deep religiosity is evident, but the ways in which his Calvinist faith differed from Lutheranism are not so easy to detect. Though he sometimes employs a patrimonial idiom in speaking of his rule (e.g., “the house of Brandenburg”), more often the accent falls on the “absolutist” military-bureaucratic state that he so mightily labored to erect. He writes with Machiavellian realism about domestic and international rivals for power within and over Brandenburg-Prussia, about his territorial ambitions, and the military and economic resources at his and his successor’s disposal.

Source

The fatherly love that I, as a father, bear for my son and future successor has compelled me to leave for him some useful lessons born of long experience, and to put these briefly into writing. [I do this] in consideration that it will be beneficial and necessary for him to know how he should lead his entire government, and how he should act, first and foremost regarding God, also regarding his peers, as well as his subjects, granted and entrusted to him by God, in religious and secular matters; [he should know] what kind of councilors he needs, how he should let councils vote, and also when and how he should make decisions; with whom he is in alliance, and with whom he still has to make such [alliances], and how he can improve the finances [*Cammerstadt*]; what is concerned in the maintenance of the fortresses, the naming of the fortresses that are there now, and what kinds of places could be established as convenient for the security and communication of the territories, what kind of garrisons are necessary therein during peacetime and wartime, as well as what is involved in the maintenance of the magazines and the expansion thereof. So I have no doubt that in this writing enough is explained about how the entire state must be led; I also hope that my son will observe such dutifully, so that he can accomplish this: that his reign should not be difficult but rather very easy, also that he will learn such not from his officials, but rather can have the knowledge himself. Therefore, I have written as briefly as possible here, so that reading too much and too long will not be irksome to my son.

Now, the first proper virtue of a righteous ruler is that he properly and sincerely fear, love, and keep God in mind, God who created him and made him lord and ruler of so many lands and people. Let His word, which alone leads to salvation [*Sein allein Seligmachendes wohrdt*], be the only true guideline of your entire reign and life, because therein lies the proper God-pleasing art of ruling and high politics. At the same time, diligently call to God daily — morning, noon, and night — with an ardent prayer, first for wisdom and understanding, also for gracious support with the heavy burden of reigning in His almighty name’s honor and for the best of the entrusted land and people, and act so that you may answer to God, temporally in this world and eternally in the next. At the same time, remember also the many great kindnesses that God has shown to you before others, that out of sheer grace He has made you a prince over so many lands and people, and therefore you have great cause to thank Him daily with diligent prayer, and to be diligent in using your entire life and reign to serve Him. Contemplate, too, often and always, that you do not offend in the very least, or do anything for which you will have to account before the Almighty, not even the least little thing. This Christian contemplation of the future judgment, which God demands more from rulers than from others, and the knowledge that all subjects are watching you, and following your example, will mean that you will be diligent throughout your life not to sin against God knowingly, but rather always to do good, as much as human weakness allows. If you observe this

well, then the benefit from it will be that piety will grow and increase in you more and more, from day to day. So then you will be blessed and God will abundantly grant you everything temporal that you desire and pray for. Be diligent to lead a proper, moderate, and sober life, and go before your subjects and officials as a good example. [...]

To be generous to the poor is Christ's command, and thereby you will collect an immortal treasure in heaven, where neither moths nor vermin destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.^[1]

Now regarding religion and the building of churches in your lands, and in what form you could best lead, it is primarily to be seen, and to be considered, that the Reformed [Calvinist] religion, which is founded solely on the true word of God and on the works of the Apostles without any human additions, should be spread further in your lands. This should happen in such a way so that it is not with force, or prohibition of the Lutheran churches, or withdrawal of their incomes or revenues, but rather from your own means that you promote the building of Reformed churches in your lands. [...]

To promote this work, primarily you have to see that when there are subjects of the Reformed religion in your lands who are qualified and talented, that they are accepted and appointed before others as your officials and officers, at court and in the country. Yes, because in Brandenburg there are none available, accept foreigners and favor them over the Lutherans. Give the Reformed children the ordinary benefices and stipends, so that they learn something and thereby can serve you better. At the same time, appoint preachers in Stettin and in the countryside who are not argumentative, and who do not brand your religion heretical or damn it, but rather who are peaceful people. So, then seek to promote religious peace, and bring back to life my edicts. In any case fill the schools and academies with teachers and professors who are moderate, and not argumentative. Those who do not want this, order them to leave the country.

Of the different religions, in your lands there are three: the Reformed, the Lutheran, and the Roman Catholic. In Brandenburg, [East] Prussia, Magdeburg, Pomerania, Halberstadt, Minden, the County of Mark and Ravensberg, most are Lutheran, and the fewest are Reformed, and praise God that Brandenburg and Pomerania are entirely free of outrageous papist abominations and idolatry, except for the ceremonies that the Lutherans have retained from the papistry in their churches. If handled well, they could be abolished, and you should reasonably strive to do so. You should also take care that the Roman Catholics do not secretly sneak in again, above all because there are none in Brandenburg and Pomerania, and for the few who live in the countryside the [religious] practice is not to be allowed, either publicly or secretly, just as it has not been allowed here in the aforementioned territories since the Reformation, except when imperial or royal ambassadors were in Berlin. I hope that the Almighty will let it be so until the Last Day, so that our descendants will never see such idolatry and abomination. In [East] Prussia the Roman Catholics may publicly practice, also in churches and chapels, and one must allow them that, but one is not to allow them more than what the pact grants them. In the lands that are given as equivalents of Pomerania, there are many Roman Catholics, and they have their public practice; however, they are not allowed more than what they were entitled to and practiced in the year 1624, and one must protect them insofar, but in no case are they to be allowed more. Now, regarding the Roman Catholics in Cleves and the associated territories, the reversionary contracts that were given to the estates by Electors Johann Sigismund and Georg Wilhelm were also confirmed by me. You are to hold such reversionary contracts in the highest esteem, because in the same the estates recognized and accepted my relatives and me as their hereditary lords. Therefore, the estates are to be protected from everything, and the same reversionary contracts are to be in no way violated, and it would be better for your education if you read the words regarding the Roman Catholics in the same, or have them read to you. It is based on this that their religion is allowed in the associated territories, and there is no closing of the eyes [*keine conivens*], but rather a granting of free toleration of their superstitious faith.

[...]

At the universities in your lands you must order and must provide all things so that prominent scholarly people are accepted and appointed as professors. [...]

However, you should see to it that the professors are diligent in their functions and that they loyally instruct the youth and keep them from trouble.

You must love the subjects entrusted to you by God as a proper father of the country, without regard for their religion. You must always reasonably seek to promote their interest and their best, to promote commerce, and to think of increasing the population, especially in Brandenburg. Let the prelates, lords, and nobles come to you often, and speak with them. Show yourself to be gracious and animated towards each of them, because such befits a great lord, and contributes to his special renown among various others. In this way, you will awaken the love and affection of the subjects more and more. However, exercise moderation in all things so that your status is not diminished and you maintain respect. Regarding your peers, however, you are not to yield the very least thing regarding precedence and rank. Give up nothing that is owed to you, but rather hold fast to the electoral preeminence, because too much courtesy and vivacity can cause one to lose the rights one has, and there are plenty of such examples at hand.

Let the dear justice be highly ordered [*hochlichen befallen*] in all of your lands, and see to it that the poor as well as the rich are given their right without regard to their person, and that trials go quickly, and are not held up, because that secures the throne of the ruler. And because you will seldom be able to hear matters of justice because of all the other business of governing, give diligent attention to the councilors who are appointed. When you learn that they let themselves be corrupted and do not deal with justice correctly, then punish them to such an extent that all the others will reflect on it. However, if someone wants to complain about the councilors out of malice, then he is also to be punished reasonably, so that justice retains the appropriate respect. Most of all, make sure that in matters of justice you issue no verdict until the other side has first been informed of the charges.

Now, regarding the councilors and officials that you will need in the future and how they should be qualified, because a lord's reputation is dependent on the kind of councilors he selects, so you need to consider such choices well and not be hurried. I know of none better to suggest than those whom Jethrow described to Moses,^[2] namely, they should be people who are first pious, inimical to greed, and discrete; they should live a respectable life, have an honest disposition, know something about the state, and be of the Reformed (Calvinist) religion. Look for such people with great diligence inside and outside the territory. When you select such and they accept, then it will go well for you, you will sense God's blessing in the government, and then your burden will not seem so heavy. However, you must maintain and compensate them so that they can live to honor you and have no cause to think of other means and let themselves be corrupted, so that they simply and totally depend on you, and serve (have their eye on) no one else in the world. Only make sure that you do not make one official alone too great and give him all the authority. Instead, show the same trust to all who serve you in good faith, and treat them the same. Have no favorite at your court, because such people take the glory from the lord, to whom it alone belongs, and make him contemptible, and ultimately they rise above the lord himself. I hope that you will not tolerate or put up with such people around you, because it will only bring you contempt, diminution, trouble and great disadvantage. However, because you will not be able to live without such people, despite all hopes, you had better keep many of them, and allow them no great authority. [...]

Also do not permit your officials to form factions or their own followings. Keep all of your councilors and officials dependent on you and none other, and you will be good and happy in your reign. [...]

In the council listen diligently, note all of the councilors' opinions well and also have a protocol diligently kept. Decide nothing important in the presence of the councilors, out of the necessity of discretion. Instead, take such to consider privately, have one or another privy councilor come to you, ponder all the opinions that were presented and resolved, and be like the bee who sucks the best nectar from the

flowers. If it is a difficult matter, then pray to God that He tells you in your heart what you should do or have done, first of all for the honor of His name, for the best and prosperity of the territory, people, and subjects, and also for you and your house. Then promptly carry out the work that you have planned. So that it will go well and felicitously. Have all the letters that come in the mail or otherwise brought to you yourself. Open and read them, and then divide the work among the councilors, or have someone else do the division. When you have the councilors vote, then see to it that you start from the bottom, and not from the top, since the great authority of the senior councilors may prevent the junior ones from expressing their ideas or speaking freely, because they are often put through the wringer [*durch die hehell gezogen*] or interrupted by the more senior ones.

The Almighty has amply blessed the House of Brandenburg, more than other houses in the [Holy] Roman Empire, with many and impressive territories. Hence, the house has many enemies who begrudge such blessings. Sooner or later they will have some opportunity or be able to activate their sinister plans to diminish the house, and they will not refrain from removing it from all consideration. So you must always live, as much as possible, in good trust, friendship, and correspondence with all electors, princes, and estates of the empire, and give them no reason for any hostility, and maintain the good peace. And because God has blessed our house with many lands, you only have to think of their conservation, and make sure that by hungering for more lands you do not bring great envy and hostility upon yourself and thereby endanger that which you already have. However, you should in no way allow yourself to be deprived or allow anything to be taken from your lands, borders, or conventional rights. Because some conflict could therefore arise, first it should be attempted to resolve it amicably. When, despite all hopes for such an amicable settlement, nothing will work then one must strive to protect one's legal position as best as possible. Also, when war arises between two others, attempt to resolve the conflict through your interposition, but always position yourself well, so that you have force behind you. I have always done such and through God's grace avoided much misfortune. When, however, war must be necessary, then let there be good order in your lands, and do not allow that your subjects are oppressed and violated, because your means will be derived from their means.

You have to make good alliances inside as well as outside the [Holy] Roman Empire, and these cannot be held against you, because such power was granted to members of the empire by the Peace of Münster and Osnabrück. Those alliances that I have made with foreigners must be renewed before the end of the year. However, you can stand in good alliance very well primarily with those who have no pretensions regarding your lands, also with those who are close neighbors, with the emperor as superior and regarding the lands closely adjacent to Silesia. Normally, however, diligently pay attention primarily to the empire, the Protestants, and your well-being, and do not allow the emperor anything that is contrary and would lead to the empire or Protestantism's downfall and the violation of German freedom. Follow thereby the glorious example of your predecessors, whose council in the empire is still praised today by friend and enemy, and who were considered the most congenial in the empire. If the emperor should be attacked by the crown of Sweden because of the Polish and Danish war, contrary to the clear letter of the Peace of Oliva, or otherwise unreasonably, then you have to assist reasonably loyally and you must not sit still. Instead, immediately take up arms and put yourself in a good position, and then get good conditions for yourself and your state, because it is completely certain that if you were to sit still, and think that the fire is still far from your borders: then your lands are going to be the theater [of war] on which one will play out the tragedy. Not to mention the many marches and counter-marches, which completely ruin the land, and will ultimately strike the fortresses when the land is devastated. Yes, ultimately you will be robbed of your land and people. Always maintain a good friendship with the King in Poland and the Republic, as the closest neighbors, first with the Electorate of Brandenburg, and also regarding [East] Prussia. Try to maintain the good affection of the Republic [of Poland]. Spare no costs thereby, because if you are assured of the Republic's friendship, then your newly attained sovereignty in Prussia will be more secure, and you will be able to enjoy it in greater peace. The unbearable status that I and my predecessors had vis-à-vis the crown of Poland while we were vassals, and how everything had

to be offset with money, cannot be described in full, but the archive and the receipts will show something of it. Since the Almighty God showed me the great grace to let me fight for and retain sovereignty after such difficult and expensive wars, for which He is to be eternally thanked, you must now take care of such as a precious treasure of your house, because Poland, on the one side, and [East] Prussia itself, on the other, endeavor that it may return to its previous status, may God protect you from that. [...]

Though I hope it will not happen, if the emperor, Spain, and the House of Austria go too far and violate the peace treaty concluded at Münster and Osnabrück, or if they would like to try to introduce new religious or worldly things in the empire that run contrary to German freedom and lead to the oppression of the ancient customs and structure, then normally you have to use the foreign crowns against them. At the same time, if Sweden or France want to go too far, then you have to hold to the emperor and the House of Austria, so that you can maintain the proper balance between them. The Italian princes handle this in such a way. When they see that one or the other is gaining and becoming great and powerful and that the one side is superior to the other, then they hold to the weaker and set themselves opposite the other. [...]

The changing of the times will provide opportunities to make alliances with others. One must always orient oneself, and aim, and do that which is useful and beneficial to one's state: alliances are good, indeed, but one's own force is still better. One can rely more surely on it [one's own force], and a lord is of no consideration if he does not have his own means and soldiers. For that is what made me considerable once I followed this principle, and I always deplore that at the beginning of my reign, to my great disadvantage, I let myself be distracted from that and against my will followed other advice.

After the diocese of Magdeburg also falls to the House of Brandenburg, after the death of the current administrator, then not only it, but rather none of the other lands should ever be separated from the electoral territories. They should neither through partition nor through whatever it may be called at any time be separated from the electorate, except what I have said in my testament out of special consideration and good intention regarding Halberstadt, and that Lauenburg and Buttauw [Bötzwow?] should be granted to my youngest son, Ludwig. Of the other electoral lands, principalities, and counties, it is in no way advised to give the least bit more to your brother or brothers, should God grant more, because through the partition of the lands the power and respect of the house are reduced. I do not even mention the great expenses that the electoral dignity demand of the government, which then could not be carried out as respect demands. Thereby the respect which one now has for the House of Brandenburg would decline entirely, as one sees in such examples as the Houses of Saxony and Anhalt and others. You could benefit your brothers before others with dowries and benefices in religious foundations, which you have to grant, and the same with governorships, if you find it necessary to appoint governors with the dignity and command, because your brothers are closer to you than others. You can thereby ensure that they better maintain their princely status, and not live as a degeneration of the House of Brandenburg. Additionally, I admonish you earnestly, also entirely fatherly, to love each other brotherly, and to always live in good, proper brotherly unity and trust. So I also do not doubt that your brothers will not fail to show you all the proper respect which is due to you as the head of the house. [...]

Now, regarding the fortresses in your lands, not only the well-being of your lands is dependent on them, but also your entire state. I therefore order you to keep them most secure, to improve them, to build more, and to provide them with everything necessary, as best you can, whatever it may cost. Because I will not live to experience the finished construction of the newly fortified places and fortresses, so diligently think to bring them to complete perfection. In no way have I fortified and built as I fancied, but much more for the best interest and security of myself, and that of you and your lands and subjects in the future. Pray to God sincerely that He will grant to you a long continuous and peaceful reign, because peace nourishes, and war devours. You must therefore diligently pray to the Almighty [for peace],

because you will have better opportunities and time during peacetime to complete such buildings and to acquire all kinds of supplies of guns, powder, fuses, lead, cannon, saltpeter, sulphur, earthworks, and all kinds of materials, as well as provisions. These will bring me and you greater glory and honor: for me in that you will complete what I have begun and will follow my plans; for you, however, in that you follow in my footsteps and comply with my fatherly reminders, because these will certainly increase your and your land's security. [...]

Still more provisions and carting houses must be built, because having too many supplies will not harm you, and one can never have enough of them. Have the supplies of the magazines and their inventory diligently sent to you every month or quarter by the appointed officials, so that you can see what is really present, what has been consumed, what has been distributed, and what remains. However, every year a proper accounting must be rendered, and inspectors be sent to see whether everything is present, before the provisions administrators realize it. You also must not permit that the governors or commandants loan anything out without your knowledge. [...]

In electoral Brandenburg there are loyal subjects who willingly and happily will support you, you can certainly rely on their loyalty. Regarding the Duchy of [East] Prussia, it is such a distinguished duchy in power and strength such as none in the [Holy] Roman Empire. Therefore it is a valuable treasure to be esteemed and to take good care of. It is primarily to be seen that the currently desolate finances may be brought to right. During my reign this has been impossible because of the continuous wars and the totally devastating times. I nevertheless made a start, and if God lets me live longer, then I will continue further. Such a thing could happen, that the leased parcels could be redeemed again, and then that no peasants or empty farms would be given away, because your wealth in [East] Prussia primarily consists of the retention of the many farms. Therefore you do not want to give them up, because when one gives up the laying hens, then they have difficulty laying eggs. To direct the finances requires few people, because the cliché is certainly that "the more officials the more thieves." Not to mention the great upkeep, which goes on top, and through which the finances are heavily burdened:

I must admit that there are many officials in office now, but there are also many old people at the end of their lives, to whom one must reasonably give bread as long as they live, as it happens with old horses and dogs. I won't mention that one should not do this to old officials, God bless them amply again, but officials who are just unnecessary can mostly be released, with the consolation that when positions are vacant again, then they will be promoted ahead of others, as I have made a start doing thus in analyzing the finances and the court. [...]

Your own proper subjects in the districts must buy the salt and the herring from those you have assigned, and not from merchants or officials, as happens now. One will want to object that this is something new, but the previous Dukes of Prussia also did it, and the old receipts prove such adequately, and what was right for one's predecessors must be right for you. Let yourself in no way be distracted from this, because this can bring in many thousands annually for you. You must, however, arrange for loyal people who understand this work and perform it loyally. The officials themselves now use one who was already drawn in, and they will try to hinder this necessary work through their clients, and thereby spare no effort and toil.

Take good care that you do not keep a much too extensive court, but instead reduce it on occasion. Always regulate the expenditures according to the revenues, and have officials diligently render receipts every year. When the finances are in a good state again, then you will have enough means, and you will not have to request money from the estates or address them. Then it is also not necessary to hold the many and expensive parliaments [*Landtage*], because the more parliaments you hold, the more authority is taken from you, because the estates always try something that is detrimental to the majesty of the ruler.

[...]

This is briefly what occurred to me. Follow my devoted warnings, admonitions, and advice, and live up to all of it. I would have found myself fortunate if my lord father had been inclined to want to leave behind for me as much information as I have left for you about your state, because it would have made my reign less difficult at the beginning. Therefore I remind and admonish you again, to fear, love, and honor God with your entire heart, because he who honors Him will be honored by Him, and he who disdains Him will be disdained by Him. Serve him with a righteous heart and live true to His ways, and He will never abandon you in your difficult reign, but instead will always stand by you with His grace and fatherly help. It will all go fortuitously and proceed well, your enemies will be forced to fear you, while your friends will be delighted with you. All the world will look to you, and you will have no one but God to fear. You will have blessings and constant peace in the land, you will be blessed in your reign, blessed in your house, and you will see with great joy the blessings in the children God will give you. Yes, you will finally bring everything to an end felicitously and well, and with blessings and peace, and honor and glory in the world, but the greatest thing will be that you have a gracious God and Father. Ultimately after you have done much work and toil, when you have become weary of life, and you rest, and you blessedly depart from this world, which is only transitory, then you will pass on to a better and immortal glorious kingdom, which out of grace God has promised to His own, who live in his way. You will have complete joy and satisfaction and an eternal life for always and forever. In His time the Almighty will help you with joy, which I wish you from the heart, and hereby conclude.

I have had this copied from my own handwritten draft, which I immediately burned, in the year 1667.

The 19th of May in Cölln on the Spree.

Frederick William, Elector.

NOTES

[1] Matthew 6:19-20.

[2] Moses 18:21.

Source: Politisches Testament des Großen Kurfürsten, (May 19, 1667), Geheimes Staatarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin: BPH, Urk. III.1, No. 18; reprinted in Richard Dietrich, ed., *Die politischen Testamente der Hohenzollern*. Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1986, pp. 179–204.

Translation: Ben Marschke

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