Why Machiavelli Still Matters

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FIVE hundred years ago, on Dec. 10, 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli sent a letter to his friend Francesco Vettori, describing his day spent haggling with local farmers and setting bird traps for his evening meal. A typical day for the atypical letter writer, who had changed from his mud-splattered clothes to the robes he once wore as a high official in the Florentine republic.



Toward the end of the letter Machiavelli mentions for the first time a “little work” he was writing on politics. This little work was, of course, “The Prince.”

One of the remarkable things about “The Prince” is not just what Machiavelli wrote, but that he was able to write at all. Just 10 months earlier, he endured the “strappado”: Hands tied behind his back, he was strung to a prison ceiling and repeatedly plunged to the floor.

Having at the time just been given the task of overseeing the foreign policy and defense of his native city, he was thrown out of his office when the Medici family returned to power. The new rulers suspected him of plotting against them and wanted to hear what he had to say. Machiavelli prided himself on not uttering a word.

He may well have saved his words for “The Prince,” dedicated to a member of the family who ordered his torture: Lorenzo de Medici. With the book, Machiavelli sought to persuade Lorenzo that he was a friend whose experience in politics and knowledge of the ancients made him an invaluable adviser.

History does not tell us if Lorenzo bothered to read the book. But if he did, he would have learned from his would-be friend that there are, in fact, no friends in politics.

“The Prince” is a manual for those who wish to win and keep power. The Renaissance was awash in such how-to guides, but Machiavelli’s was different. To be sure, he counsels a prince on how to act toward his enemies, using force and fraud in war. But his true novelty resides in how we should think about our friends. It is at the book’s heart, in the chapter devoted to this issue, that Machiavelli proclaims his originality.

Set aside what you would like to imagine about politics, Machiavelli writes, and instead go straight to the truth of how things really work, or what he calls the “effectual truth.” You will see that allies in politics, whether at home or abroad, are not friends.

Perhaps others had been deluded about the distinction because the same word in Italian — “amici” — is used for both concepts. Whoever imagines allies are friends, Machiavelli warns, ensures his ruin rather than his preservation.

There may be no students more in need of this insight, yet less likely to accept it, than contemporary Americans, both in and outside the government. Like the political moralizers Machiavelli aims to subvert, we still believe a leader should be virtuous: generous and merciful, honest and faithful.

Yet Machiavelli teaches that in a world where so many are not good, you must learn to be able to not be good. The virtues taught in our secular and religious schools are incompatible with the virtues one must practice to safeguard those same institutions. The power of the lion and the cleverness of the fox: These are the qualities a leader must harness to preserve the republic.

For such a leader, allies are friends when it is in their interest to be. (We can, with difficulty, accept this lesson when embodied by a Charles de Gaulle; we have even greater difficulty when it is taught by, say, Hamid Karzai.) What’s more, Machiavelli says, leaders must at times inspire fear not only in their foes but even in their allies — and even in their own ministers.

What would Machiavelli have thought when President Obama apologized for the fiasco of his health care rollout? Far from earning respect, he would say, all he received was contempt. As one of Machiavelli’s favorite exemplars, Cesare Borgia, grasped, heads must sometimes roll. (Though in Borgia’s case, he meant it quite literally, though he preferred slicing bodies in half and leaving them in a public square.)

Machiavelli has long been called a teacher of evil. But the author of “The Prince” never urged evil for evil’s sake. The proper aim of a leader is to maintain his state (and, not incidentally, his job). Politics is an arena where following virtue often leads to the ruin of a state, whereas pursuing what appears to be vice results in security and well-being. In short, there are never easy choices, and prudence consists of knowing how to recognize the qualities of the hard decisions you face and choosing the less bad as what is the most good.

Those of us who see the world, if not in Manichaean, at least in Hollywoodian terms, will recoil at such claims. Perhaps we are right to do so, but we would be wrong to dismiss them out of hand. If Machiavelli’s teaching concerning friends and allies in politics is deeply disconcerting, it is because it goes to the bone of our religious convictions and moral conventions. This explains why he remains as reviled, but also as revered, today as he was in his own age.

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# The Modern Machiavelli

**By**[**Donald L. Gilmore and David Reif**](http://www.americanthinker.com/donald_l_gilmore_and_david_reif)

Few are likely to have a solid understanding of political affairs today without a thorough understanding of our debt to the prominent, fifteenth-century Italian political thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527). The revelations unveiled by this brilliant Florentine diplomat in his disquisitions on realpolitik in his book The Prince (Il Principe) caused a furor in his day because of his honest, accurate, and comprehensive treatment of the subject of politics and propaganda and his analysis of political intrigue during the centuries preceding him.

The term realpolitik, "the pursuit of national interests by leaders without regard for ethical or philosophical considerations" probably originated in Machiavelli's analysis of the use of political power, but is German and of later origin. After the advent of Christianity, morality had a strong influence on political thinking, and this continued for the next fifteen hundred years. This caused politics to be considered a moral as well as a worldly practice. However, with the rise of various institutions, society underwent changes. Political authority became increasingly secularized both within and outside of religious practice. Old catechisms gave way as church and state drifted towards their ultimate rendezvous with our modern world.

Machiavelli's contribution in this arena was to demonstrate, through an analysis of history, that behind a veneer of pretended morality, honesty, integrity, and Christian practices and virtues there dwelt another sphere of action, a dark world, dominated by greed, ruthlessness, hypocrisy, lies, intrigue, deception, and even murder. This vicious, manipulative world described by Machiavelli still exists, as it did in his day, hidden behind a curtain of disguise and pretense. This ugly world, a product of the past but ongoing and virtually universal, still functions but is screened from view by naïve delusions and beliefs shared by most people about life and politics and continues to affect worldly outcomes.

Machiavelli wrote The Prince at a time when the competition for power in Italy by a number of kingdoms was so intense that this adviser of "princes" wrote his book to clarify what it would take to bring peace and national unity to the area of what is today modern Italy. To achieve this goal, Machiavelli found it imperative to describe how powerful "princes" in Italy and elsewhere, those contemporary to him and in the past, had gained power and created stability in their kingdoms. In addition, he incorporated into his work the lessons he had learned during a lifetime of observing historic events close at hand, through advising leaders on courses of action, and witnessing the successes and failures in the use of power in Europe.

His book did not provide a pretty picture -- he is blunt -- but it was largely a correct one. Machiavelli, ultimately, was unseated from his diplomatic position through a reversal in fortune, and he wrote The Prince to ingratiate himself with those currently in power in order to obtain a new office. He failed in this endeavor, but his book, nonetheless, has cast a spell on powerful men ever since.

The following are some of Machiavelli's important tenets to be practiced by "the Prince" or national leader today, to further his interests. They are as much in force today as ever, and the average citizen needs to know them so that he can peek behind the mask of state to see the truth behind the power:

**Tenet One.**The leader should always wear a mask.No leader should show his true self to his people. He must assume a persona, or mask, that hides his true self and his real intentions, the motives behind his actions, and his true goals. Showing his true colors will often work against his popular support and foil his efforts to achieve his objectives, which are often not those of the people.

**Tenet Two:** The prince must be prepared to act against charity, humanity, and religion. In order to maintain the state, Machiavelli said: [the leader] "is often obliged to act against his promises, against charity, against humanity, and against religion. And therefore, it is necessary that he [the leader] have a mind ready to turn itself according to the way the winds of Fortune and the changeability of affairs require him. As long as possible, he should not stray from the good, but he should know how to enter into evil when necessity commands . . . it is essential to understand this: that a prince [leader] cannot observe all those things by which men are considered good, for in order to maintain the state, he is often obliged to act against his promises, against charity, against humanity, and against religion."

**Tenet Three:** The prince should always mask his acts and intentions concerning his basic morality.Machiavelli said: "A prince must be very careful never to let anything slip from his lips that is not full of the five qualities mentioned above: he should appear, upon seeing and hearing him, to be all mercy, all faithfulness, all integrity, all kindness, all religion. And there is nothing more necessary than to seem to possess this last quality . . . for everyone sees what you seem to be, few perceive what you are, and those few do not dare to contradict the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the state to defend them."

**Tenet Four:**The prince should avoid being despised or hated. "What makes him [a prince] despised is being considered changeable, frivolous, effeminate, cowardly, irresolute, from these qualities a prince must guard himself as if from a reef, and he must strive to make everyone recognize in his actions greatness, spirit, dignity, and strength."

**Tenet Five**: The prince should acquire esteem through the accomplishment of great undertakings and examples of his great talents . . . he should strive in all his deeds to give the impression of a great man of superior intelligence.

**Tenet Six:**The prince should avoid inconsistency.Machiavelli said: "For anyone who has appeared to be good for a time and intends, for his own purposes, to become bad must do so in appropriate stages and in such a way as to be governed by circumstances, so that before your altered nature deprives you of old supporters, it will have provided you with so many new ones that your authority will not be diminished; otherwise, finding yourself unmasked and without friends, you will be ruined." "It is necessary, [however,] to be a great hypocrite and liar: and men are so simple-minded . . . that someone who deceives will always find another who will allow himself to be deceived."

In today's terms this is all about shaping the image of the politician. It has become a big business in our society to create an image or "mask" for a person. George Bush II was shaped to look like a Texan by his handlers. Photographed on the ranch cutting brush with a chainsaw, he looked the part. The Bush family, however, are from New England, and George II was an Ivy League blue blood. There are many examples of powerful American presidents who constructed masks in order to conceal their true identity. Harry Truman was portrayed as an honest hard-working, small businessman who was a haberdasher. While the truth was that he had been involved in an endless string of unsuccessful ventures until he landed himself in the political machine of boss Tom Pendergast where he prospered. Yet his image of a simple man-of-the-people persists, and his role as agitator for causes like socialized medicine are downplayed.

 These days much of the work of the medieval prince is done by the political parties and those who control them. In the modern republic, the prince is often a composite. A group of forces using the platform of a political party as an instrument of power have become the embodiment of the Prince, but without the responsibilities an actual monarch once faced.

Thus hidden, the principles of Machiavelli can be exercised with a minimum of scrutiny. A cut-out can be constructed by the strong men and their handlers behind the scenes and manipulated. What ensues is a shadow puppet theater. A figure, the president, moves across the screen, bobbing and weaving about while the audience fills in the shadowy picture with their imagination and through cues by his manipulators.

The librettofor the performance is the observed public relations artifact provided by the shapers and marionette makers. These special technicians provide the public with an entertaining substitute for democracy. Well-meaning but naïve, the public does not know what the powerful are doing and why they are doing it, which makes them vulnerable to propaganda.

Unfortunately, the Machiavellian method is not limited to politics. It has become a cultural icon infecting other powerful institutions from business to religion -- an engine of modernism. Meanwhile, driven by the dream of earthly power and a personal utopia, leaders become poseurs, willing marionettes skewered on the mandrel of fame.

When all goes well, the American government is a functioning, democratic federal republic. However in the hands of the composite Prince, who is a construction created by powerful interest groups, foundations, global corporations, One World Marxists, and just plain old fashioned plutocrats, the originally created American system is threatened.

Our cherished notions regarding public institutions have succumbed to the fiction writer and the invisible puppeteer, and the modern world has become a parade of political shadows replacing principles. While the Machiavellian ethos prevails, the will of the people is subverted while a cast of powerful manipulators struggle for control.

\*The above quotations from Machiavelli were taken from: The Portable Machiavelli, trans & ed., Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), pp.130, 134-46, 150-51.

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