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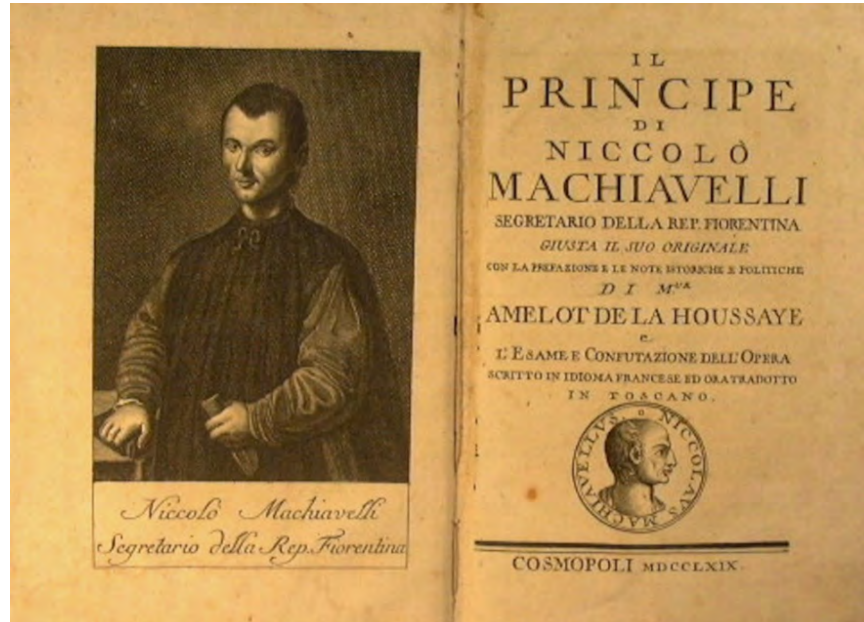


Niccolò Machiavelli
Segretario della Rep. Fiorentina

IL
PRINCIPE
DI
NICCOLÒ
MACHIAVELLI
SEGRETARIO DELLA REP. FIORENTINA
GIUSTA IL SUO ORIGINALE
CON LA PREFAZIONE E LE NOTE ISTORICHE E POLITICHE
DI
AMELOT DE LA HOUSSAYE
E
L'ESAME E CONFUTAZIONE DELL'OPERA
SCRITTO IN IDIOMA FRANCESE ED ORA TRADOTTO
IN TOSCANO.

NICCOLAVS MACHIAVELLVS

COSMOPOLI MDCCLXIX

THE PRINCE BY NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

Guide to Seventh Reading

Mortimer J. Adler and **Peter Wolff**

This little book is the first and greatest in a long line of works which deal with how men gain and hold political power. It was written in the sixteenth century by an out-of-office administrator and diplomat of the city-state of Florence. Behind its astute analysis lie years of firsthand experience of contemporary political life and a careful study of ancient political history.

This potent pamphlet is in the form of a how-to-do-it book for a ruler or would-be ruler. It tells how to become a successful, not a good or wise, ruler. The successful politician should be concerned with having a good reputation, not with being virtuous. If he has to choose between being feared or loved, he will find it better to be feared. He must be like a lion and a fox, employing force and deceit. If successful, he will win popular approval, and his villainies

will be forgotten. Nothing succeeds like success.

This is an astonishing break with classical political thought, which links politics and ethics. Aristotle was an objective student of politics, but he saw political rule as having ethical ends. The modern departure, fathered by Machiavelli, regards ethical judgments as irrelevant in the scientific approach to politics, which should inquire into the "how" of things as they are. We cannot help being fascinated by this masterful analysis of the facts of political life, whatever our moral qualms or reservations. We who have lived in an era of astute "princes," from Lenin to Franco, naturally read Machiavelli as if he were a commentator on the contemporary scene. An age which has known Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, and experienced bluff, terror, propaganda, and "cold war" has therefore experienced all the political realities with which Machiavelli deals; but it can still learn to understand them better and, perhaps, to question how far sheer power politics can ever succeed.

GUIDE TO

Seventh Reading

I

Niccolo Machiavelli was born in Florence in 1469 and died there in 1527. Thus he was located, both with respect to time and place, at the heart of the Renaissance. It is not altogether easy to say just what the Renaissance was, nor when it began and when it ended. But we may safely say that it was a period of transition from the middle ages to modern times, that it included a revival of learning, and that it was accompanied by political and religious turmoil. In Italy, where the Renaissance achieved its greatest flowering, it began sometime after 1350 and was definitely over by 1550.

It may help us to visualize this period if we recall some of the great names of the Italian Renaissance. There were such artists as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael; such political leaders as Lorenzo de' Medici and Cesare Borgia; such churchmen as Pope Alexander VI and the Florentine friar Savonarola; adventurers and explorers like Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci; philosophers like Pico della Mirandola, Pomponazzi, and Giordano Bruno.

At the center of the Renaissance in Italy stood Florence. Jacob Burckhardt describes the city thus:

> The most elevated political thought and the most varied forms of human development are found united in the history of Florence, which in this sense deserves the name of the first modem State in the world. Here the whole people are busied with what in the despotic cities is the affair of a single family. That wondrous Florentine spirit, at once keenly critical and artistically creative, was incessantly transforming the social and political condition of the State, and as incessantly describing and judging the change. Florence thus became the home of political doctrines and theories, of experiments and sudden changes . . . (The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, New York, 1945, p. 48)

In the midst of this hotbed of political thought and action, Machiavelli lived and wrote. For the details of his life we refer the reader to the Biographical Note (pp. ix-x), but here is Burckhardt's evaluation of him:

> But of all who thought it possible to construct a State, the greatest beyond all comparison was Machiavelli. He treats existing forces as living and active, takes a large and an accurate view of alternative possibilities, and seeks to mislead neither himself nor others. No man could be freer from vanity or ostentation; indeed, he does not write for the public, but either for princes and administrators or for personal friends. The danger for him does not lie in an affectation of genius or in a false order of ideas, but rather in a powerful imagination which he evidently controls with difficulty. The objectivity of his political judgment is sometimes appalling in its Sincerity; but it is the sign of a time of no ordinary need and peril, when it was a hard matter to believe in right, or to credit others with just dealing. (Ibid., pp. 54-55)

I I

In spite of such high praise, the adjective "Machiavellian" as it is commonly used has derogatory connotations. Generally a man is considered to be "Machiavellian" if he is crafty, cunning, and unscrupulous. A man of such character is supposed to be Machiavelli's ideal.

Let us examine Machiavelli's aims and the means he proposes to reach that end. At the very outset it is clear that Machiavelli is not drawing a picture of an ideal man. His book is not addressed to all of mankind; it is rather meant only for a prince or king. In fact, *The Prince* is dedicated to a prince of the Medici family (see the dedication on p. 1).

Again, *The Prince* is not a theoretical exposition of its subject, as, for example, the *Treatise on Law* is. Rather, it is a practical political treatise; that is to say, it is directed toward action. How does

Machiavelli's work compare with other practical political writing that we have read, such as Aristotle's *Politics*? The guiding principle of Machiavelli's writing is the following statement, taken not from *The Prince*, but from another book:

> Whoever desires to found a state and give it laws, must start with assuming that all men are bad and ever ready to display their vicious nature, whenever they may find occasion for it. (Discourses, Book I, Ch. 3)

This statement is not, of course, very Battering to man. Nevertheless, it may well be correct that practical political action takes its beginning from it. Certainly there is much evidence that states deal with one another in a fashion that is based precisely on some such assumption. Power politics, Realpolitik, "brink-of-war-policies" are all based on the hypothesis that sovereign states (and presumably the people composing them) are concerned solely with survival and domination and respect nothing but force or the threat of force.

Machiavelli can find support in other writers for his position. He himself attributes the above statement to "all those who have written upon civil institutions" and adds that "history is full of examples to support them."

Thus, Aristotle's *Politics* contains support for Machiavelli. "Man," says Aristotle in Chapter 2,

> when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all; since armed injustice is the more dangerous, and he is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by intelligence and virtue, which he may use for the worst ends. Wherefore, if he have not virtue, he is the most unholy and the most savage of animals, and the most fun of lust and gluttony. (Vol. 9, p. 446d)

But if this is a correct description of man, then Machiavelli might be justified in looking for any means that will preserve law and order, if not justice, in the state.

The same low opinion of man is reflected in the *Republic*, although the position is not espoused by Socrates, but by Glaucon, who tells the story of the ring of Gyges. He concludes the fable thus:

> For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine anyone obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot ... (Vol. 7, p. 312a-b)

Machiavelli, therefore, is simply dealing with men as they are, not as they should be. He is under no illusion that the methods which he advocates are noble. For in discussing Agathocles, a tyrant of Sicily, who successfully obtained his position through bloodshed and violence, he adds:

> Yet it cannot be called talent to slay fellow-citizens, to deceive friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; such methods may gain empire, but not glory. (p. I3b)

In spite of this, he thinks that the skill and cleverness of Agathocles are to be highly esteemed:

> Nevertheless, his barbarous cruelty and inhumanity with infinite wickednesses do not permit him to be celebrated among the most excellent men. (p. I3c)

Both Plato and Aristotle want to check man's bestiality. Plato proposed to do it through education; Aristotle through the state and law. Both of these, of course, are long-range projects. Machiavelli, concerned with man's present brutality, suggests to the prince that he combat his subjects' bestiality by becoming a stronger and more clever beast himself. In a famous passage he says:

> ... there are two ways of contesting, the one by the law, the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts; but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second . . . A prince, therefore, being compelled knowingly to adopt the beast, ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves. (p. 25a-b)

I I I

Is Machiavelli's advice sound? Will a prince be likely to stay in power by following it?

For most of us the soundness (or lack of soundness) of Machiavelli's advice will, of course, remain a matter of conjecture. We are not likely to be princes and so will not be able to put his advice into practice. However, if we wish to test Machiavelli's suggestions, we may imagine what we would say to a prince if we were placed in an advisory capacity.

In Chapter X, Machiavelli advises the prince to fortify his cities. This, in Machiavelli's opinion, will deter potential invaders and he

tells us why:

> Men are always adverse to enterprises where difficulties can be seen, and it will be seen not to be an easy thing to attack one who has his town well fortified, and is not hated by his people. (p. 16b)

Machiavelli's advice is, of course, tailored to the conditions of the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, the policy which the United States is following in the twentieth century seems to be not too different. Like Machiavelli's prince, the United States is fortifying itself; i.e., building up its defenses so that a potential aggressor will be deterred. At the same time, the United States is trying to keep the good will of allies all over the world.

Consider another, more extreme, piece of advice. This is taken from the beginning of Chapter XIV:

> A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules, and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise from a private station to that rank. (p. 21b)

Is this cynicism on Machiavelli's part? Or is this sound practical advice? Should the sole concern of princes, rulers, or governments be war? Are there any arts of peace that should also be learned by rulers? Is it as important to "wage peace" as it is to wage war?

Is The Prince an immoral book?

If the book is immoral it must be because it advocates immoral actions. Does it do that? While its premise, that political thinking must be guided by the fact that men are bad, is not shared by such writers as Aristotle and Plato, there are many passages in their works that take a realistic view of politics. Aristotle, for example, in Book V of the *Politics*, gives advice to tyrants on how they should act in order to preserve their tyrannies. All of Book V is concerned with revolutions in various types of states and the ways of avoiding them. In Chapter 11, Aristotle turns to monarchies and tyrannies. He evidently considered it perfectly proper for a political treatise to consider how a tyrant should act to maintain himself in power. The advice which he gives is interesting, too. In general, Aristotle advocates two sorts of action. The first sort is what he calls "the old traditional method in which most tyrants administer their government." This calls for the tyrant to "put to death men of spirit," to "employ spies," "to sow quarrels among the citizens," to "impoverish his subjects," "to distrust his friends," and other simi-

lar actions. The second sort of action that Aristotle advocates is different. Here he advises the tyrant to practice virtue or at least a quasi-virtue, so that the citizens will love and not hate him. The first sort of action advocated by Aristotle is certainly "Machiavellian," and even the second sort is not altogether contrary to the spirit of *The Prince*, since Machiavelli emphasizes that it is good for the prince to be loved, if that can be accomplished without jeopardizing his power which rests mainly on fear. (See Chapter XVII.)

Even in Plato we find much that sounds like Machiavelli's thought. For instance, compare the following two passages. The first is from *The Prince*, Chapter XVIII, entitled "Concerning the Way in Which Princes Should Keep Faith."

> Therefore it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them. And I shall dare to say this also, that to have them and always to observe them is injurious, and that to appear to have them is useful. (p. 25c)

The next passage is from the *Republic*, Book II. Glaucon, after having told the story of the ring of Gyges, maintains that the eulogists of injustice will speak as follows:

> They will tell you that the just man who is thought unjust will be scourged, racked, bound-will have his eyes burnt out; and, at last, after suffering every kind of evil, he will be impaled: Then he will understand that he ought to seem only, and not to be, just. (Vol. 7, p. 312d)

This, to be sure, is not Plato's or Socrates' position. But Plato himself is not above using questionable means to attain his political ends. He is willing to recommend the so-called "royal lie," which we discussed in the guide to the first assignment of this Reading Plan. Plato, it will be remembered, saw nothing wrong with telling a lie to the citizens of his ideal state, so that each one would be satisfied with his station and his duties. (See Vol. 7, pp. 340b-341b.)

Is there any difference, then, between *The Prince*, the *Republic*, and the *Politics*, or are all three alike immoral books concerned merely with political expediency? The question almost answers itself. Though all three books are alike in being political and practical and in dealing with the means needed to accomplish political ends, there is a great difference in the ends which they advocate. Plato's purpose was the discovery of justice and the establishment of a perfectly just state. That purpose certainly is highly moral and laudable, whatever we may think of some of the means involved. Aristotle's *Politics* is a direct continuation of his moral treatise, the

Ethics. Far from considering the state and its laws as things that concern only the rulers, he considers the state necessary for human happiness and thinks that the constitution is man's salvation. All of his remarks, therefore, must be understood as being governed by the essential moral role which he feels the state plays in man's life.

But *The Prince* is altogether different in its purpose. We can discover no moral end that Machiavelli's remarks are to serve. There seems to be, in fact, no end that he has in mind except that of success. Machiavelli's maxim seems to be that everything is permissible as long as it succeeds. There is no concern with why men should live in states, why rulers should govern in one way or another, why certain means should be employed and others not. Consequently, though some of Machiavelli's advice may be useful to the best of rulers, some or all of it can also be used by the worst tyrants and dictators. *The Prince* would seem to be, then, at best an amoral book, and at worst, actually *immoral*.

Does the last chapter of The Prince state a moral end that can justify it?

It is sometimes maintained that the moral end for which we were just now looking is supplied in the last chapter of the book "Can Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians"). Perhaps a case can be made for Machiavelli here. For the first time in the book, he here sets forth a worthy and patriotic goal which his treatise on political means can serve.

Some doubts remain, however, since this twenty-sixth chapter seems like an appendage to the book and since, also, it is addressed to the house of Medici. An interesting sentence occurs in the middle of the chapter. Machiavelli tells us that "that war is just which is necessary" (p. 36d). Is this the sentiment of justice or of expediency? How does it compare with the very opposite view—that war is necessary which is just?
The reader will have to judge Machiavelli's morality or immorality for himself.

Is Machiavelli's advice suitable not only for princes, but also for statesmen in republics?

Is it good advice for the elected heads of republics that "the chief foundation of all states ... are good laws and good arms; and as there cannot be good laws where the state is not well armed, it follows that where they are well armed they have good laws" (p. 18a).

Is it correct to say that such a statesman "ought to have no other aim or thought ... than war"? (p. 21b).

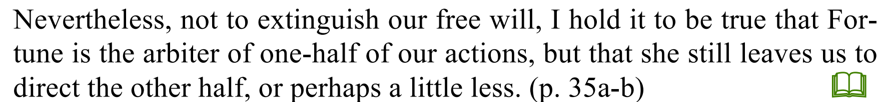
Could we substitute the word "statesman" in the following assertion and accept it: "It is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong"? (p. 22b).

What is Machiavelli's view of the role of fortune in human life?

This is a question that must be answered by any historian or writer on political subjects who draws heavily (as Machiavelli does) on historical example and precedent. The study of history will often give rise to the suspicion that the actions of men (at least the large and important actions) are not really under their control but that men are buffeted about by fortune, though they may have the illusion that they direct their own lives.

If all, or at least all large-scale, human events are matters of fortune, then, of course, it is useless to write books such as *The Prince*. Machiavelli's fundamental assumption certainly is that the prince can do something about the events that take place.

Does there seem to be any plausibility in the way in which he apportions the roles of fortune and free will?



> Nevertheless, not to extinguish our free will, I hold it to be true that Fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less. (p. 35a-b)

SELF-TESTING QUESTIONS

The following questions are designed to help you test the thoroughness of your reading. Each question is to be answered by giving a page or pages of the reading assignment. Answers will be found on page 220 of this Reading Plan.

1 Does Machiavelli consider mercenaries to be trustworthy soldiers?

2 In a war between neighboring states, should a prince or state take sides or be neutral?

3 How should a prince commit those cruelties that are necessary if he is usurping power?

4 What should a prince do to exercise his intellect?

5 How did Hannibal avoid mutiny in his army?

6 How must a conqueror deal with cities that had republican government?

7 Should a prince keep his word?

8 What does Machiavelli think of Hattery?

Should a prince wish to be loved or feared?

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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