

A CRITIC AT LARGE

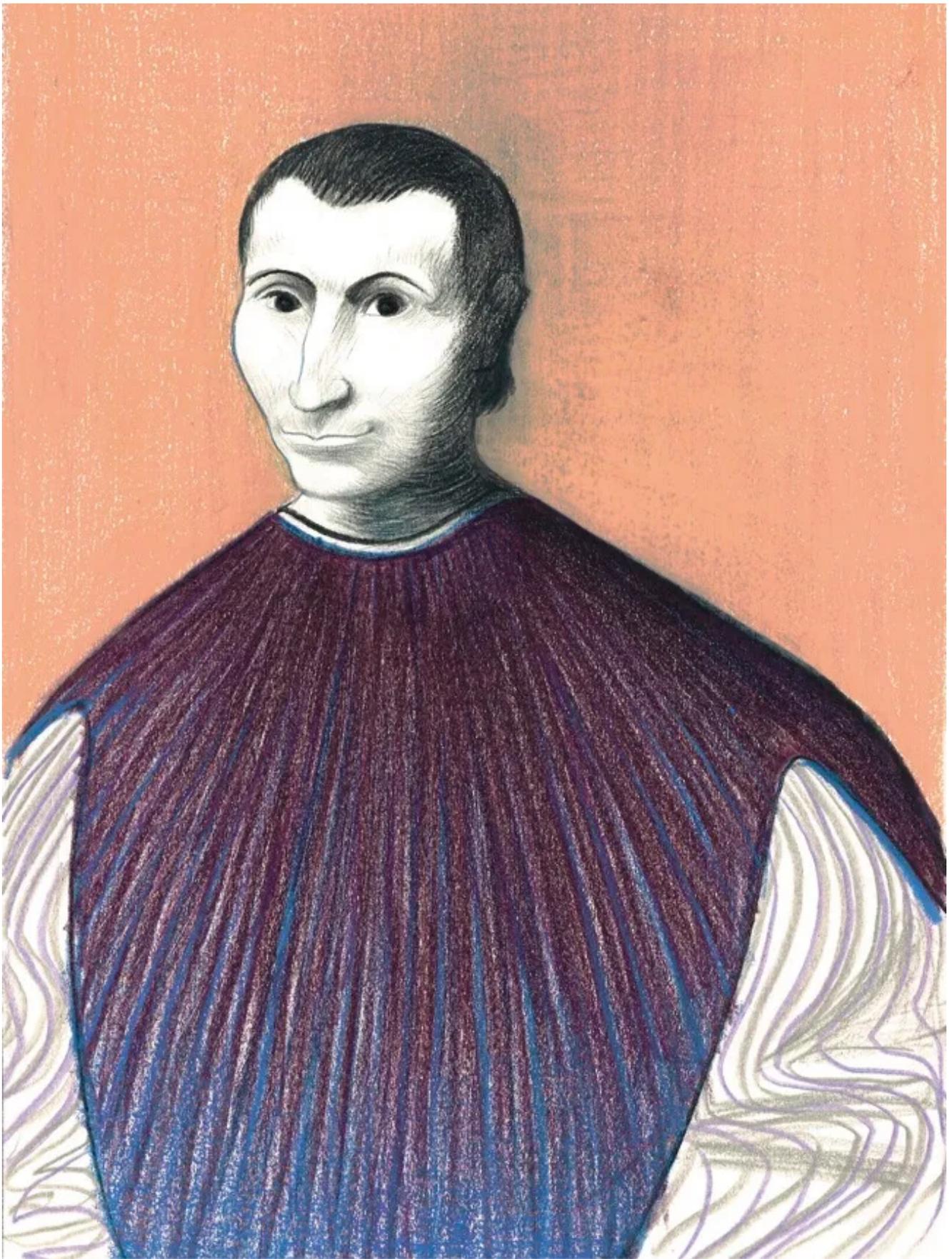
THE FLORENTINE

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Machiavelli believed that to succeed in life a man must be adaptable. Illustration by Lorenzo Mattotti

One method of torture used in Florentine jails during the glorious days of the Renaissance was the *strappado*: a prisoner was hoisted into the air by a rope attached to his wrists, which had been tied behind his back, and then suddenly

dropped toward the floor as many times as it took to get him to confess. Since the procedure usually dislocated the shoulders, tore the muscles, and rendered one or both arms useless, it is remarkable that Niccolò Machiavelli, after reportedly undergoing six such “drops,” asked for pen and paper and began to write. Machiavelli had nothing to confess. Although his name had been found on an incriminating list, he had played no part in a failed conspiracy to murder the city’s newly restored Medici rulers. (Some said that it was Giuliano de’ Medici who had been targeted, others that it was his brother Cardinal Giovanni.) He had been imprisoned for almost two weeks when, in February, 1513, in a desperate bid for pardon, he wrote a pair of sonnets addressed to the “Magnificent Giuliano,” mixing pathos with audacity and apparently inextinguishable wit. “I have on my legs, Giuliano, a pair of shackles,” he began, and went on to report that the lice on the walls of his cell were as big as butterflies, and that the noise of keys and padlocks boomed around him like Jove’s thunderbolts. Perhaps worried that the poems would not impress, he announced that the muse he had summoned had hit him in the face rather than render her services to a man who was chained up like a lunatic. To the heir of a family that prided itself on its artistic patronage, he submitted the outraged complaint “This is the way poets are treated!”

Machiavelli was not especially known for his poetry, and few would have called him a man with a claim to Medici support. His family was distinguished but far from rich, and had definite republican associations. Two of his father’s cousins had been beheaded for their opposition to the dynasty’s founder, Cosimo de’ Medici, who had effectively brought the historic republic to an end, in 1434, the better to protect the family bank’s enormous fortune. During Machiavelli’s youth, his father seems to have gained him entrée to the scholarly circles around the widely beloved Lorenzo de’ Medici, who had managed to rule Florence for decades without the Florentines’ feeling the brunt or shame of being ruled. But Lorenzo had died in 1492, and, two years later, the Medici were thrown out of the city. Machiavelli was twenty-five; Giuliano de’ Medici, Lorenzo’s youngest son, was fifteen. While Machiavelli had nothing to do with the religious regime of the Dominican preacher Savonarola, who replaced the Medici—he disdained the preacher’s pious “lies” even while admiring his republican reforms—he came into his own once the city turned against its savior and Savonarola (after suffering fourteen drops of the *strappado*) was hanged. In 1498, when both God and Savonarola’s supporters lost

their government posts, Machiavelli found himself with a job. For the next fourteen years, he proudly served an independent city-state that had returned to its republican form, but was now carefully buttressed to withstand Medici forces lurking at its borders, or the threat that other wealthy families might pose. The chief safeguard of the city's liberty was the Great Council: an administrative body with a membership of more than three thousand citizens, which gave Florence, with a population of some fifty thousand, the most broadly representative government of its time.

At the age of twenty-nine, Machiavelli was appointed Second Chancellor, with responsibilities for the city's correspondence and domestic reports. His immense physical and intellectual energy (he casually boasted of making "Greek, Latin, Hebraic, and Chaldean" references) seems to account for his additional appointment, within a month, as Secretary of the so-called Ten of War, which sent him on remote diplomatic missions, usually in the face of impending crisis. War was never far off. These were years when France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire, battling over rival claims, sent their formidable armies marching across the weak and continually sparring Italian states; Milan, Genoa, Florence, Venice, Naples, and any number of smaller duchies, marquisates, and republics found it hard to defend themselves, for lack of a united front.

To make matters worse, the varied Italian powers relied on mercenary troops that traded sides more easily than today's big-league ballplayers, signing a new contract as soon as a better offer came along. Machiavelli thrived on the urgency and the uproar, filling his saddlebags with books and galloping off to argue the Florentine case, then report back on what he had found. In one report, he described his duties as weighing what the ruler's "intentions are, what he really wants, which way his mind is turning, and what might make him move ahead or draw back"; he wrote of the need "to conjecture the future through negotiations and incidents." All in all, it seems that he was expected to bring the gifts of a psychologist to the task of a prophet.

He did it very well. Although his lack of wealth kept him from achieving the rank of ambassador—officially a mere envoy, he styled himself, rather grandly, the Florentine Secretary—his unblinking judgments made him the right-hand man of

the republic's chief official, Piero Soderini. He was set to work at the courts of King Louis XII of France, Pope Julius II, and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian, all the while studying the differing forms of government and temperament offered to his view. Like most psychologists, Machiavelli was insatiably curious about the human mind. And no one he met impressed him more than Cesare Borgia, the son of the Spanish Pope Alexander VI, who was at the height of his power when, in 1502, he received Machiavelli in the ducal palace of Urbino—by candlelight, as legend has it, dressed all in black, already a figure of self-consciously theatrical menace. Borgia had recently conquered Urbino, along with a large swath of central Italy, by means of daring, speed, and treachery. (Machiavelli especially admired a maneuver in which Borgia had asked the Duke of Urbino to lend him his artillery to help take a nearby town, then turned on the undefended duchy and took it instead.) Machiavelli could not help but contrast Borgia's stunning effectiveness with the frustratingly slow and prudent Florentine republic, which displayed the deficiencies as well as the virtues of the need for popular consensus, and he wrote excitedly to his bosses in the Palazzo della Signoria of the lessons offered by this majestic enemy. In the ruthless young warrior he saw a potential hero: a leader strong enough to expel the foreign armies and transform Italy from a poetic entity into a real one.

The most practical lesson that the dazzled envoy took from Borgia was the deployment of a citizen army. At one point in his campaigns, after his hired mercenaries had conspired against him, Borgia had been forced to draft peasants from his conquered territories. Machiavelli recognized the advantages of such a system, which were made particularly clear when Florence's mercenary army, warring against Pisa, ignominiously turned and fled once the fighting got too rough. Who, after all, was willing to die for a handful of florins (particularly the meagre handful paid by the republic)? On the other hand, who was not willing to die for one's country? In 1505, Machiavelli argued the case for a Florentine citizen militia, and on a brisk February day in 1506 several hundred Tuscan farmers paraded through the Piazza della Signoria, snappily dressed in red-and-white trousers and white caps. Despite the *commedia-dell'arte* air, just three years later Machiavelli led a thousand citizen troops in the latest of fifteen years of attacks on Pisa, and—to general astonishment—the Florentines won.

Machiavelli's military reputation remained sterling until 1512, when the militia, defending the neighboring town of Prato from Spanish troops, broke ranks and ran as shamelessly as the most craven mercenaries. Worse, the defeat left Florence on the losing side of a wider battle between France and the allied forces of Spain and Pope Julius II. With Florence vulnerable, a long-resentful pro-Medici faction seized its chance, and the republican government was overthrown. And so it happened that in September, 1512, after an absence of eighteen years, the Medici rode back into the city. Within days, Machiavelli's militia and the Great Council were dismissed.

Although Machiavelli soon lost his position as Secretary, he seems to have believed that he maintained some authority, writing a formal plea on behalf of Piero Soderini, whom he had helped to escape on the eve of the Medici return. This exceptional document—published for the first time in English, as “A Caution to the Medici,” in “The Essential Writings of Machiavelli” (edited and translated by Peter Constantine; Modern Library; \$17.95)—presents an argument against the Medici faction's continued blackening of Soderini's name. Machiavelli offers a political rationale (“The Medici government would only weaken itself by attacking a man who is in exile and cannot harm it”) for what seems an attempt to defend a friend and, in his name, the Florentine people. Of course, any illusions of influence were dispelled a few months later, in February, 1513, by jail and the *strappado*. Whether Giuliano de' Medici ever read the sonnets that Machiavelli dedicated to him is a matter of dispute, but his intervention was not ultimately required. After a month behind bars, Machiavelli was released, thanks to an amnesty granted upon Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici's election to the papacy as Leo X, the first Medici pope. (“God has granted us the papacy,” he reportedly told Giuliano. “Let us enjoy it.”) For four days, Florence was alight with pride and the heady prospect of favors from the overflowing papal coffers: fireworks, bonfires, pealing bells, and cannonades all greeted the weary former Secretary as he made his way home.

Even now, Machiavelli hoped that “these new masters of ours” would find his services of use. He was experienced, he was (at forty-three) extremely vigorous, and during his many years of civil service he had shown himself a trustworthy man. “My poverty is evidence of my fidelity and virtue,” he confided to a friend.

And he desperately needed a job. That spring, still unemployed, he retreated from the city to live with his wife and children on the family farm, near San Casciano, in taunting view of the tower of the Palazzo della Signoria. It was a sprawling and ramshackle place, and he was sadly out of his element, catching birds and playing cards; his worldly friends sent mocking regards to the chickens. But in the evening, approaching his study, he stripped off his muddy clothes and put on his ambassadorial attire. “Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients,” he wrote, in one of the most famous letters of the Renaissance, “where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me.” Livy, Cicero, Virgil, Tacitus: he wrote their answers down and, adding observations from the history he had witnessed, toward the end of 1513 he completed a little book about statecraft—a book of strictly practical matters, dealing with armies and fortresses, with ways of holding on to power—that he resolved would demonstrate his usefulness once and for all to Giuliano, since it discussed people and their actions “as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined.” Never before or since has a writer so clearly proved that the truth is a dangerous thing.

“**T**he Prince,” Machiavelli’s how-to guide for sovereigns, turned out to be “a scandal that Western political thought and practice has been gazing at in horror and in fascination since its first publication,” to quote from Albert Russell Ascoli’s introduction to Peter Constantine’s new translation (Modern Library; \$8; also included in “The Essential Writings of Machiavelli”). Circulated in manuscript for years, the book was not published until 1532—nearly five years after Machiavelli’s death—and received its first significant critique within the decade, from an English cardinal who pronounced the author “an enemy of the human race.” Machiavelli stood accused of having inspired Henry VIII to defy papal authority and seize ecclesiastical power for the crown. Some thirty years later, in France, the book was blamed for inciting Queen Catherine de’ Medici to order the massacre of two thousand rebel Protestants. (There seems to have been little besides her family connection to warrant the Machiavellian association.) His notoriety grew, less through knowledge of the offending book than through the many lurid and often skewed attacks it prompted, with titles on the order of “Stratagems of Satan.” Wherever a sovereign usurped power from the church or

the nobility, whenever ostentatious deceit or murderous force was used, Machiavelli was spied in the shadows, scribbling at his desk amid the olive groves, his quill dipped in a poison so potent that it threatened the power structures of Europe.

What caused the furor? Here, out of context and placed end to end (a method not unfamiliar to his attackers), are some of Machiavelli's most salient and satanic points: "A prince, particularly a new prince, cannot afford to cultivate attributes for which men are considered good. In order to maintain the state, a prince will often be compelled to work against what is merciful, loyal, humane, upright, and scrupulous"; "A wise ruler cannot and should not keep his word when it would be to his disadvantage"; "Men must be either flattered or eliminated, because a man will readily avenge a slight grievance, but not one that is truly severe"; "A man is quicker to forget the death of his father than the loss of his patrimony." And, the distilled spirit of this dark brew: "How one lives and how one ought to live are so far apart that he who spurns what is actually done for what ought to be done will achieve ruin rather than his own preservation." To underscore how shocking such notions were, they should be compared with other examples from the genre in which Machiavelli was consciously working: the "Mirrors of Princes," a type of professional primer offered by advisers to young or recently elevated monarchs, meant to shape their judgment and, with it, the future of the state. A philosopher could not hope for a more direct influence on the fate of mankind than by writing such a book; or, practically speaking, for a better advertisement for a royal job. Erasmus, whose "Education of a Christian Prince" was written two years after Machiavelli's work—he presented his treatise first to Charles of Aragon and, after it failed to elicit the desired financial result, to Henry VIII—spun his pious counsel around the central thesis "What must be implanted deeply and before all else in the mind of the prince is the best possible understanding of Christ." Machiavelli, on the other hand, proposed the best possible understanding of the methods of Cesare Borgia.

There is a context, however, that, if not ameliorating, is richly complicating and easily overlooked in the light of Machiavelli's aphoristic skill. One doesn't wish to fall back on the excuse that this is the way that rulers (or other people) often behave, although it is true that Machiavelli no more invented political evil by

describing it than Kinsey invented sex. Like all the celebrated artists of his time and place—and statecraft was one of the Renaissance arts—Machiavelli was in thrall to ancient pagan models. But there is a crucial difference: a painter could situate a Madonna within a classical portico without disturbing the figure's Christian meaning. Works that delve beneath the surface of classical forms to get at classical thinking—works of literature, philosophy, politics—require a recognition, at least, of the conflict between pagan and Christian ideals: strength versus humility, earthly life versus the hereafter, the hero versus the saint. For Machiavelli, the choice was not difficult. The Roman republic was for him the undisputed golden age; even before writing "The Prince," he had begun a commentary on Livy's "History of Rome," closely analyzing the Roman system of liberty and leaving no doubt that he was a republican at heart. ("It is not the particular good but the common good that makes cities great. And without doubt this common good is observed nowhere but in a republic.") But Christian piety had sapped the strength needed to bring this heroic form of government back to life. The great republic of his own era had failed because the men entrusted with its liberties did not know how to fight for them. He had seen his friend Soderini forfeit Florence by refusing to limit the freedoms ultimately employed against him by his enemies; that is, by trusting that goodness and decency could triumph over the implacable vices and envious designs of men.

This was not Borgia's defect. Yet he was not a monster, if one considered the question of morals honestly, in terms of the good actually accomplished rather than the reputation created for oneself. Unafraid of being known for cruelty, Borgia had deposed a number of petty rulers who were so weak that robbery and murder had been rampant in their lands, until—"with a few exemplary executions"—he established peace and order. Machiavelli asserts that Borgia had thus proved more genuinely merciful than the Florentines, who, guarding their reputation, had allowed the town of Pistoia to be destroyed by factional fighting rather than intervene with their own arms. "A prince, therefore, must not fear being reproached for cruelty," he concludes, issuing one of the memorably black-hearted maxims that do not mean exactly what they say. (On the question of murdering a few to save a greater number, Thomas More took a similar position in "Utopia," which followed "The Prince" by just three years and, giving its name to the very notion of political idealism, has stood in moral counterpoint ever

since.) For Machiavelli, cruel and unusual measures were to be used only out of necessity, to be ended quickly, and to be converted into benefits (safety, security, wealth) for the prince's subjects. Rulers who perpetrated needless or excessive cruelties—such as King Ferdinand of Spain, who had robbed his country's Christianized Jews and Moors, and then expelled them—are rebuked, no matter what their achievements may have been. "These means can lead to power," Machiavelli confirms, and then departs from his famous counsel of Realpolitik to add, "but not glory."

So is he in fact a moralist? Or, heaven forbid, a saint? Machiavelli was a very precise writer, continually reworking his manuscripts to achieve a style that is as clear as daylight. Writing in his native Tuscan-inflected Italian (rather than in the scholarly Latin commonly used for significant works), he relied on simple words and expressions, proud of his freedom from the "unnecessary artifice with which so many writers gild their work." One of the conundrums that Machiavelli poses for his readers is that this verbal clarity lends itself to such uncertain meaning. Peter Constantine, who has won many awards for his staggeringly multilingual work in translating Chekhov, Thomas Mann, Voltaire, and Sophocles (among others), has translated "The Prince" with the stated intention of winning its author the status of "a major stylist, a writer of beautiful prose." True, "major stylist" is rarely one's first thought when Machiavelli comes up in conversation. And when a book has been translated as often as "The Prince"—there are more than half a dozen English translations currently in print—some new claim is expected. Yet, on careful comparison, the most stylistically elegant version of "The Prince" remains George Bull's nearly fifty-year-old translation, a taut and almost Hemingwayesque account of Machiavelli's strong republican prose. (Sample evidence: Constantine renders one of Machiavelli's famous sentences, "Since a prince must know how to use the nature of the beast to his advantage, he must emulate both the fox and the lion, because a lion cannot defy a snare, while a fox cannot defy a pack of wolves." Defy a snare? Bull's less wordy version is smoother English and also better mimics the punch of Machiavelli's Italian: "So, as a prince is forced to know how to act like a beast, he must learn from the fox and the lion; because the lion is defenceless against traps and a fox is defenceless against wolves.")

A translator's work is meant to be transparent, providing access to a text without agenda or interpretation. But the choice even of a word can amplify a thought in a significant way. Constantine may not provide the most nimbly literary Machiavelli, but he pushes us in the right political direction when, early in "The Prince," he offers: "Even with the most powerful army, if you want to invade a state, you need the support of the people." No other version of this line is quite as democratically ringing, not even Machiavelli's, which states that the success of an invasion depends on the *favore de' provinciali*, a phrase rendered by Bull as "the goodwill of the inhabitants" and by other translators in more or less the same comparatively pedestrian way. The support of the people: this idea or a near variant—"el popolo amico," "la benivolenzia popolare"—occurs throughout Machiavelli's little book and slowly gathers weight as the one possession that the prince cannot afford to be without. Constantine is right to underscore it. The following observations—which could never pass as "Machiavellian"—should be viewed against the author's more famously glittering advice: "A prince must have the people on his side, otherwise he will not have support in adverse times"; "A prince need not worry unduly about conspiracies when the people are well disposed toward him. But if they are his enemies and hate him, he must fear everything and everybody." And the forthright climax of this theme: "The best fortress for the prince is to be loved by his people." Presented as no more than another component of the book's message of self-serving Realpolitik, Machiavelli's steady drumming of the lesson that the prince must treat his subjects well has an almost subliminal force. Whether the prince turns out to be a lion or a fox, "The Prince" sets a trap to render him, in relation to his people, a lamb.

Machiavelli is often credited with the phrase "The end justifies the means." Although he never used exactly these words, and the notion appears to date from Greek tragedy, the implied moral relativism is essential to his work. Insofar as "The Prince" was intended as a means to an end, however, it was a failure: there is no evidence that Giuliano de' Medici ever read it, and the Florentine successor to whom Machiavelli eventually dedicated the book, Giuliano's despotic nephew Lorenzo, was said to have preferred the gift of a pair of hounds. In any case, neither prince saw fit to offer the author a job. Within the plan of the book itself, the final chapter envisions an end so important—the unification of the Italian states—that it justifies not only whatever means must be used to attain it but

whatever language must be used to describe it. The prose suddenly becomes effusive, lyrical, and determinedly rousing: the verbal equivalent of pennants flying, trumpets sounding. For Machiavelli is no longer justifying or advising but actively urging the prince toward a goal, and it is a goal much larger than personal power. “Italy, after so many years, must welcome its liberator,” he declares. “The love with which these lands that have suffered a flood of foreign armies will receive him will be boundless, as will be their thirst for vengeance, iron loyalty, their devotion and tears. All doors will be flung open. What populace would not embrace such a leader?” Judged as a means to this end, too, “The Prince” was a failure: it was three hundred and fifty years before Machiavelli’s nationalist hopes prevailed. Still, he understood that many of his ideas, being so radically new, would meet resistance. Living in the age of great explorers—his assistant in the Florentine Chancery was Agostino Vespucci, cousin of Amerigo—Machiavelli saw himself as one of their company, with a mission “no less dangerous” than seeking “unknown seas and continents.”

To the culture at large, the danger was real. “The Prince” offered the first major secular shock to the Christianized state in which we still live. Long before Darwin, Machiavelli showed us a credible world without Heaven or Hell, a world of “is” rather than “should be,” in which men were coolly viewed as related to beasts and earthly government was the only hope of bettering our natural plight. Although his ideas have drawn sporadic support throughout history—among seventeenth-century English anti-monarchists, among nineteenth-century German nationalists—it was not until the present age that scholars began to separate the man from his cursed reputation. Roberto Ridolfi’s landmark biography, of 1954, made a passionate case for its subject’s Italian warmth of spirit. Leo Strauss, a few years later, claimed that Machiavelli intended his most outrageous statements merely to startle and amuse. And, in full redemption, Sebastian de Grazia’s Pulitzer Prize-winning “Machiavelli in Hell,” of 1989, argued for the quondam devil’s stature as a profoundly Christian thinker. There is today an entire school of political philosophers who see Machiavelli as an intellectual freedom fighter, a transmitter of models of liberty from the ancient to the modern world. Yet what is most astonishing about our age is not the experts’ desire to correct our view of a maligned historical figure but what we have made of that figure in his most titillatingly debased form. “The Mafia Manager: A Guide

to the Corporate Machiavelli”; “The Princessa: Machiavelli for Women”; and the deliciously titled “What Would Machiavelli Do? The Ends Justify the Meanness” represent just a fraction of a contemporary, best-selling literary genre. Machiavelli may not have been, in fact, a Machiavellian. But in American business and social circles he has come to stand for the principle that winning—no matter how—is all. And for this alone, for the first time in history, he is a cultural hero.

“**A**fter everything was lost” is the way that Machiavelli referred to the years after he emerged from prison, failed to regain his job, and languished outside the halls of power. But even while he lamented his fate, and continued to angle for Medici favor, he went on writing, almost feverishly, and in a variety of forms. He completed his “Discourses on the First Decade of Livy,” a scholarly ode to the republican ideal—John Adams loved this book—which he seems to have read aloud to friends in the increasingly anti-Medici circle that gathered in the gardens of the Rucellai palace. He devoted himself to poetry, working on classical themes in Dantesque terza rima, and he discovered a gift for the theatre. Most striking, in the midst of these dark years, he turned to comedy. There was the one about the devil who was afraid of his wife; the one he adapted from the Roman playwright Terence; and then there was “The Mandrake,” a satiric, bawdy, often scatological farce involving the timeless trio of aspiring lover, stupid husband, and venal priest, all conspiring to get a Renaissance Sophia Loren into bed. It was the greatest hit of Machiavelli’s career. Although the date of composition is uncertain—the observation that “here in Florence, if you’re not in with the ruling party . . . you can’t even get a dog to bark at you” describes a long-term quandary—we know that the play was first put on in 1520, in a production so successful that Pope Leo X ordered a command performance at the papal court later that year. And so, seven years after everything was lost, and thanks to the Pope’s delight in a show that happily trafficked in adultery and the shifty morals of the clergy—this in the same year that Leo X excommunicated Martin Luther—Machiavelli at last came into Medici favor, and everything was more or less regained.

To succeed in life a man must be adaptable. This is a prime lesson of “The Prince,” and Machiavelli appears to have been determined to live by it. A republican during the republic, a royal servant when princes rule: “He who conforms his course of action to the quality of the times will fare well.” From Leo

X and his cousin Giulio de' Medici—the Archbishop of Florence and its de-facto ruler since the death of the despised Lorenzo—Machiavelli now received a commission to write an official “History of Florence,” an assignment that placed him in distinguished literary company, and carried the suggestion of other plum tasks to come. But a corollary, if contradictory, lesson of “The Prince” is that, try as he might, “man cannot deviate from that to which nature inclines him.” In composing his Medici-commissioned history, Machiavelli agonized over how to present the Medici, and the result is anything but the work of a courtier. Recounting how the family’s desire to “wield exclusive power” had led it to crush all political opposition, leaving other parties with no alternative except plots and murderous conspiracies, he concluded bluntly that under the Medici regime “liberty was unknown in Florence.”

In the matter of conspiracies, in 1522 a plot to murder Giulio de' Medici was found to have originated among the learned circle of the Rucellai palace gardens. The circle was disbanded; Machiavelli’s closest friends were exiled or beheaded. He, however—in circumstances very different from the Medici conspiracy a decade earlier—was neither arrested nor implicated. Scholars have agreed with the Florentine authorities that Machiavelli knew nothing of the plot; he was too historically suspect a figure for his friends to risk including. But Ross King, in his brief biography “Machiavelli: Philosopher of Power,” points out how curiously often Machiavelli writes about political conspiracy, and the overt sympathy with which he handles the conspirators; in the portion of the “History” that Machiavelli was composing in 1522, he treats the fifteenth-century ringleader of a plot against the Sforza tyrant of Milan with the respect due to a Roman republican hero. It is difficult not to wonder, at least, about Machiavelli’s innocence in these events. Of course, in 1522 there was not a scrap of evidence against him. But then it may have been the incriminating scrap of 1513 that made him think so hard about the rules by which conspirators must proceed: confide in absolutely no one except when absolutely necessary, try to leave no one alive who might be able to take revenge, and, above all, never put anything in writing.

Even military opportunities returned, when, in 1523, Giulio de' Medici succeeded to the papacy as Clement VII. During a time when the pressure of foreign claims was mounting, Machiavelli was entrusted with maintaining Florence’s

fortifications. He did his job enthusiastically—even ecstatically—and well. When, in the spring of 1527, the Emperor’s armies thundered south through Italy, they bypassed the terrified city, judging the walls and forts too difficult to breach. Instead, the angry, starving, part-Spanish, part-Lutheran, barely controllable army marched directly on to Rome, where soldiers poured through the walls and viciously sacked the city—robbing, raping, murdering, and destroying for days on end. Machiavelli himself helped Clement to escape. But he had done even more for his beloved Florence than he knew, and less for himself. In the ensuing chaos, the Medici regime in Florence was overthrown; the republic was restored; the Great Council was reinstated. This was everything that Machiavelli had hoped for even when he appeared to be on the other side. He was seen not as brilliantly adaptable, however, but simply as on the other side. As a Medici supporter, he found himself once again unemployed, subject to the same sort of political suspicions as when the Medici had first returned. But, at fifty-eight, he no longer had the resources to start over. He developed mysterious stomach ailments and took to his bed, and within weeks of the republic’s restoration Machiavelli died, attended by his loving children, his loyal friends, and a priest.

Odd, that an expert at winning should have lost so much, and then lost it all again. In however perverse a way, Machiavelli was no less a martyr to his convictions than Thomas More, who was beheaded—and eventually canonized—for his refusal to condone the royal power grab that Henry VIII purportedly learned from “The Prince.” Of course, More had the courage to stand in opposition to the moral direction of his times. Machiavelli *was* his times: he gave permanent form and force to its political habits and unspoken principles. Although it is often said that modern politics begins with Machiavelli, most politicians still run and hide at the mention of his name. In 1972, Henry Kissinger, the most arguably “Machiavellian” counsellor of princes this country has ever seen, recoiled at the insinuation that he had learned anything from the Florentine Secretary, stating, “There is very little of Machiavelli’s one can use in the contemporary world.” (Kissinger’s only competitor in this area, Karl Rove, is the subject of a new biography titled “Machiavelli’s Shadow.”) Yet we continue to flounder in the break between politics and ethics that Machiavelli made impossible to ignore: private life and public life; personal morality and Realpolitik. We insist that our leaders convince us that they are exemplary and (increasingly)

God-fearing human beings, who are nevertheless able to protect us from enemies not so constrained. How is this to be done? Do we really want to know?

Most important, as we emerge from the century that gave Utopia a bad name—in which Hitler and Stalin and other genocidal princes believed they were building superior worlds, in which the means was annihilation and the end an illusion—we are still arguing bitterly over the question of whether the end justifies the means. Are there any acts that one's sense of honor (or conscience, or ability to sleep at night) forbid one to commit—as an individual, as a nation—no matter what the promised end? Machiavelli did not question the use of torture for political purposes, even after he had been its victim. “When the very safety of the country depends upon the resolution to be taken,” he wrote in the “Discourses,” “no considerations of justice or injustice, humanity or cruelty, not of glory or of infamy, should be allowed to prevail.” This has doubtless been the tacit position of many governments throughout history; it is openly the position of a large segment of our government now, with Vice-President Cheney warning of the need for going to “the dark side” in dealing with terrorist suspects, and Attorney General Mukasey undecided about which methods of “enhanced” interrogation constitute torture. There is no question, however, about the method used on Machiavelli, the *strappado*—also known today as “Palestinian hanging”—which was responsible for the death of an Iraqi detainee in C.I.A. custody at Abu Ghraib in 2003: the prisoner was suspended by his arms, which had been shackled behind his back, and died of asphyxiation. Private morality may be presumed to prevail again when the country is strong and secure, although Machiavelli, unlike those who offer such consolation, admitted that the nature of mankind makes it unlikely that there ever will be such a time. “I love my country more than my own soul,” Machiavelli wrote, yet a full assessment of his work makes that decision far from clear. Then, as now, it is a terrible choice. ♦

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