

Machiavelli and *The Prince*

At the peak of the Italian Renaissance, Niccolo Machiavelli wrote a brutally frank handbook for leaders, advising them how to take and hold political power.

Around 1500, the Italian Renaissance flourished. New styles of art, architecture, and literature emerged. At the same time, political conspiracies, warring mercenary armies, and foreign invasions stalked the land.

Several regional city-states dominated Italy. These states were suspicious, hostile, and often at war with one another. But they had reached a balance of power until European kings decided to make Italy a battleground for their ambitions.

In 1434, the Medici family established its rule over Florence, a city-state in the center of Italy. The Medici made Florence an economic powerhouse of banking and commerce. When Lorenzo de Medici “The Magnificent” came to power in 1469, his family had gained a reputation for supporting new artists like Michelangelo. But many also accused Lorenzo of being a tyrant who set the tone in Florence for corruption and immorality.

A Christian monk named Savonarola preached against the Medici and Catholic Church priests for their greed and vices. When Lorenzo died in 1492, Savonarola called for Florence to become a Christian republic. Two years later, King Charles VIII of France invaded Italy. With French support, the people of Florence rebelled against the Medici and drove them out of the city.

In December 1494, Florence established a Great Council, composed of several thousand men from noble families. The Great Council elected a small group and appointed others to run the city. The Florence Republic was born.

Savonarola resumed his blistering attacks against corrupt priests. But the church eventually branded him a heretic, and city officials hanged him and burned his body in the town square in May 1498.

A young man named Niccolo Machiavelli witnessed all these dramatic events in Florence. Soon, his own life would radically change when he entered into the service of his beloved city.

The Rise and Fall of a Diplomat

Machiavelli, the son of a lawyer, was born in 1469. Machiavelli's family was not wealthy, but managed to educate him with tutors and books on ancient history that his father collected.

Despite Machiavelli's lack of any government experience, the new republican government of Florence appointed him in 1498 to a position concerned with foreign affairs and war. Thus the obscure 29-year-old Machiavelli began his career as a diplomat.

At first, he carried out the policies that others decided. Machiavelli's initial assignment was to work for the recovery of Pisa, a former seaport possession of Florence. It had asserted its independence during the French invasion. Florence had hired foreign mercenary troops to retake Pisa. The troops, however, refused to fight their way into the town. From this experience, Machiavelli concluded that Florence needed a citizen militia, which would be loyal to Florence.

Machiavelli traveled a great deal. He represented Florence on missions to other Italian city-states, the pope in Rome, and the major European powers. Once while he was visiting the new French king, Louis XII, one of the king's advisors remarked, "The Italians know nothing of war." Machiavelli replied, "The French know nothing of politics," the art of taking and holding power. Soon, Machiavelli gained a reputation for his sharp observations and witty comments in his diplomatic reports and letters.

In 1501, Machiavelli married and eventually had five children. But because he traveled a lot, he was not at home often. He soon gained another reputation—for having numerous love affairs and enjoying wild parties.

In 1502, the Great Council of Florence elected a new leader, Piero Soderini. He quickly recognized Machiavelli's keen diplomatic skills and sent him on many important missions.

With Pisa still remaining independent, Machiavelli argued that Florence needed to abandon its mercenaries and establish a citizen militia. Soderini agreed and authorized Machiavelli to personally recruit soldiers and oversee their training.

In 1509, Machiavelli led Florence's citizen militia in successfully besieging Pisa until it surrendered. It was the greatest moment in Machiavelli's career.

A few years later, France again invaded Italy. Pope Julius II assembled a "Holy League" of allies against the French. Soderini refused to join with Pope Julius since France was Florence's traditional foreign ally. Julius personally led his troops into battle and defeated the French invaders. He then turned his wrath against Florence.

Pope Julius enlisted the aid of Spanish troops and the Medici to attack Florence. When Machiavelli's inexperienced militia failed to hold a fortified outpost, Florence's citizens panicked and turned against Soderini, who fled. The Florentines surrendered, agreeing to allow the Medici to return to the city.

In September 1512, the Medici family quickly restored its rule of Florence. It abolished the republic and its militia. Shortly afterward, the Medici fired Machiavelli from his diplomatic post.

A year later, the Medici unjustly accused Machiavelli of participating in a conspiracy to overthrow them. He was imprisoned and brutally tortured. He won his freedom several months later in an amnesty that celebrated the election of a Medici family member as Pope Leo X.

The Prince

Machiavelli was depressed more by the loss of his job as a diplomat than the torture he had endured. "I am rotting away," he wrote. Then in a bold move to regain his position, he wrote a short handbook of advice to princes, kings, and popes. He dedicated it to the Medici ruler of Florence.

Machiavelli's book of advice to leaders, *The Prince*, differed from others of the time. It did not dwell on such Christian ideals as always keeping one's word. Machiavelli began with the idea that to take and hold power, a prince must "learn how not to be good" because most other men are not good. He based his advice on his diplomatic experience, but also on the enduring lessons he found in Greek and Roman history.

Machiavelli believed that the most important lesson from history was for a prince to be a "man of virtue." He described such men as those who "stand up all by themselves," relying on their own armies rather than mercenaries

or fortune. Machiavelli never pointed to anyone in his time who was a “man of virtue.” But one came close: Cesare Borgia, whom Machiavelli had observed on several diplomatic missions.

Borgia was the son of Pope Alexander VI. When Borgia decided to carve out a principality for himself in central Italy, the pope provided Borgia with troops.

Borgia did whatever was necessary to win. When leaders of allied families rebelled against him, he tricked them into attending a meeting where he had them strangled. In another instance, Borgia appointed a governor to restore order in a city he had conquered. Following Borgia’s orders, the governor ruthlessly cracked down on the populace and restored order. To gain popularity with the people, Borgia then ordered the hated governor beheaded in the town square.

Borgia thought he had made plans for every possible contingency. But at the height of his success, misfortune struck when his father, the pope, suddenly died. Borgia himself became ill, preventing him from going to Rome to influence the election of the new pope.

Borgia agreed to the election of Pope Julius II after the new pope promised that he could keep his principality. But the pope had no intention of honoring his promise. He imprisoned Borgia and expelled him from Italy.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli admired Borgia’s bold and self-assured actions. But Machiavelli concluded that Borgia had depended too much on fortune. Good fortune made Borgia, and bad fortune destroyed him.

Machiavelli continued in *The Prince* to argue his long-held view that a leader must rely on his own armies and not mercenaries. The only thing that holds these soldiers, he said, is “a little pay,” which is never enough “to make them want to die for you.”

Machiavelli’s most famous advice in *The Prince* concerned how to act to hold on to power:

- “A prudent lord, therefore, cannot and must not keep faith [keep his word] when this is to his disadvantage,” he wrote.

- He declared, “in all actions of all men, and especially of princes where there is no court of appeal, the end justifies the means.” Most people care only if the prince wins, he argued, not what methods he uses to win, even if these include such things as lying, cruelty, and violence.
- He said, “it is much more secure to be feared than to be loved.” Nevertheless, he also warned that a prince must never be hated since the people will then conspire against him.
- He cautioned that a prince must avoid “flatterers” and instead surround himself with those who speak the truth to him. A prince must question everything, listen carefully, but always decide what is best for him and his state. He pointed out that a prince “who is not wise himself cannot be well counseled.”

In the concluding chapters of *The Prince*, Machiavelli focused on his main concern: the tragic condition of Italy, which had become overrun by foreign “barbarians.” He challenged the princes of Italy (specifically the Medici) to be more aggressive in picking up the banner of Italian liberation. He said they should not wait for good fortune to come their way, “because fortune is a woman, and it is necessary to beat her and hit her in order to subdue her.”

Machiavelli ended *The Prince* by quoting the great Italian Renaissance scholar Petrarch:

When virtue takes up arms
It tears its foes apart,
And shows that ancient valor
Still beats in Italy’s heart.

Even though Machiavelli presented a handwritten copy of *The Prince* to the Medici ruler of Florence, the ruler probably never read it. But many others did.

The Influence of Machiavelli

Resigned to his forced retirement, Machiavelli spent the next few years writing his most extensive work, usually called *Discourses*. In this work, Machiavelli argued that the influence of even a virtuous prince could only last so long. Therefore, a republic, where people are “born free,” was the superior form of government. The best republics, he wrote, were those with good laws, a strong religion, severe criminal punishments, and a citizen army.

In 1526, Italy was invaded again, this time led by the German Holy Roman Emperor. Once again, the Medici were evicted from Florence, and the republic was restored. Machiavelli, age 57, hoped he would finally get his old position as a diplomat back, but the new government appointed someone else.

The following year, Machiavelli became seriously ill. On his deathbed, he told friends that he would prefer to go to hell, discussing politics with the wise men of history, than to go to heaven with boring saintly souls.

The Prince was never published in Machiavelli’s lifetime. When printed copies became widely available after 1532, the Catholic Church banned it as an evil work. Others criticized it as a “handbook for tyrants.” By the early 1600s, Shakespeare was using “Machiavel” to refer to an unscrupulous and scheming person. Today, “Machiavellian” means acting in an evil, underhanded way.

Many others, however, have applauded Machiavelli’s realism. They believe he described how the world of politics really operates. The French philosopher Rousseau thought *The Prince* was a service to the people, putting them on guard against the secrets of tyrants. Some believe that modern political science began with *The Prince*, which made the security and interest of a nation the highest priority of its leader.

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* not just to get his old job back, but also to spark the liberation of Italy from foreign occupation. Above all, Machiavelli was a patriot. Toward the end of his life, he wrote, “I love my country more than my soul.”

For Discussion and Writing (Individual)

1. Play the role of Machiavelli and write a letter to Cesare Borgia, telling him where he went wrong.
2. Do you believe Machiavelli was basically evil or good? Why?
3. Do you think American leaders should follow Machiavelli's advice in *The Prince*? Why?

ACTIVITY (Group)

The Prince and the President

Form small discussion groups to evaluate the hypothetical presidential decisions listed below. The groups should discuss and answer the following questions for each presidential decision:

1. Would Machiavelli agree or disagree? Why?
2. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Presidential Decisions

- A. The president promises never to lie to the American people.
- B. The president recommends unilaterally canceling a foreign trade agreement because it is costing American jobs.
- C. The president wants Congress to restore the military draft.
- D. The president orders the CIA to use torture to get information from suspected terrorists.