

## Machiavelli Was Right

THE SHOCKING LESSON OF *THE PRINCE* ISN'T THAT POLITICS DEMANDS DIRTY HANDS, BUT THAT POLITICIANS SHOULDN'T CARE.

By Michael Ignatieff

You remember the photograph: President Obama hunched in a corner of the Situation Room with his national-security staff, including Hillary Clinton with a hand over her mouth, watching the live feed from the compound in Pakistan where the killing of Osama bin Laden is under way. This is a Machiavellian moment: a political leader taking the ultimate risks that go with the exercise of power, now awaiting the judgment of fate. He knows that if the mission fails, his presidency is over, while if it succeeds, no one should ever again question his willingness to risk all.

It's a Machiavellian moment in a second sense: an instance when public necessity requires actions that private ethics and religious values might condemn as unjust and immoral. We call these moments Machiavellian because it was Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, written in 1513, that first laid bare the moral world of politics and the gulf between private conscience and the demands of public action.

*The Prince's* blunt candor has been a scandal for 500 years. The book was placed on the Papal Index of banned books in 1559, and its author was denounced on the Elizabethan stages of London as the "Evil Machiavel." The outrage has not dimmed with time. The greatest modern conservative political theorist, Leo Strauss, taught his students at the University of Chicago in the 1950s to regard Machiavelli as "a teacher of evil." Machiavelli's enduring provocation is to baldly maintain that in politics, evil deeds cease to be evil if urgent public interest makes them necessary.

Strenuous efforts are being renewed in this 500th-anniversary year to draw the sting of this stark message. Four new books argue that to understand Machiavelli's brutal candor, we need to grasp the times that made him: the tangled and violent politics of Italy between 1498, when he took office as a senior official in Florence, and 1527, when he died. Alan Ryan returns Machiavelli to his blood-soaked context, the decline and fall of the Florentine republic. Philip Bobbitt positions Machiavelli as the great theorist of the early modern state, the first thinker to understand that if power was no longer personal, no longer exercised by a medieval lord, it had to be moralized, in a new public ethic based on *ragion di stato*—reason of state.

Maurizio Viroli wants us to grasp that *The Prince* was not the cynically devious tract it seems, but rather a patriotic appeal for a redeemer politician to arise and save Italy from foreign invaders and its own shortsighted rulers. Corrado Vivanti's learned intellectual biography reinforces Viroli's image of

Machiavelli as a misunderstood forerunner of the Italian Risorgimento, calling for the redemption of Italian republicanism four centuries before the final reunification of the Italian states.

All of these authors are at pains to stress that the “evil Machiavel” was in fact a brilliant writer, a good companion, and a passionate patriot. All stress that his ultimate ethical commitment was to the preservation of the *vivere libero*, the free life of the Florentine city-state and the other republics of Italy. The man himself certainly comes alive in his wonderful letter to his friend Francesco Vettori, written in 1513 after he had been thrown out of office, tossed into prison, and tortured. (Machiavelli was wrongly accused of conspiring against the Medicis, who had defeated the Florentine army and ousted the republican government the year before.) In the letter, he describes lonely days after his release from prison, hunting for birds on his small estate, drinking in the local tavern, and then coming back home at night to his study, to don the “garments of court and palace” and commune with “the venerable courts of the ancients.”

These fascinating new studies put Machiavelli back in his time but lose sight of the question of why his “amoral verve and flair” (Alan Ryan’s phrase) remain so enduringly provocative in our own time. Machiavelli was hardly the first theorist to maintain that politics is a ruthless business, requiring leaders to do things their private conscience might abhor. Everyone, it is safe to say, knows that politics is one of those realms of life where you put your soul at risk.

What’s distinctively shocking about Machiavelli is that he didn’t care. He believed not only that politicians must do evil in the name of the public good, but also that they shouldn’t worry about it. He was unconcerned, in other words, with what modern thinkers call the problem of dirty hands.

The great Princeton philosopher Michael Walzer, borrowing from Jean-Paul Sartre, describes the feeling of having dirty hands in politics as the guilty conscience that political actors must live with when they authorize acts that public necessity requires but private morality rejects. “Here is the moral politician,” Walzer says: “it is by his dirty hands that we know him.” Walzer thinks that we want our politicians to be suffering servants, lying awake at night, wrestling with the conflict between private morality and the public good.

Machiavelli simply didn’t believe that politicians should be bothered about their dirty hands. He didn’t believe they deserve praise for moral scruple or the pangs of conscience. He would have agreed with *The Sopranos*: sometimes you do what you have to do. But *The Prince* would hardly have survived this long if it was nothing more than an apologia for gangsters. With gangsters, gratuitous cruelty is often efficient, while in politics, Machiavelli clearly understood, it is worse than a crime. It is a mistake. *Ragion di stato* ought to discipline each politician’s descent into morally questionable realms. A leader guided by public necessity is less likely to be cruel and vicious than one guided by religious moralizing. Machiavelli’s ethics, it should be said, were scathingly indifferent to Christian principle, and for good reason. After all, someone who believes he has God on his side is capable of anything.

Machiavelli also understood that a politician, unlike a gangster, could not play fast and loose with the law. The law mattered because in republics, the opinion of citizens mattered, and if a prince put himself above the law too often, the people would drive him from office. Machiavelli was no democrat,

but he understood that popular anger in the lanes and alleys of his city could bring a prince's rule to a bloody end. If Machiavelli advised politicians to dissimulate, to pretend to virtues they did not practice in private life, it was because he believed that the people in the lanes and alleys cared more about whether the prince delivered peace and security than whether he was an authentic or even an honest person.

All of this looks like cynicism only if we fail to see its deep realism. In his book, Alan Ryan captures Machiavelli's hold on the modern moral imagination when he says, "The staying power of *The Prince* comes from ... its insistence on the need for a clear-sighted appreciation of how men really *are* as distinct from the moralizing claptrap about how they *ought* to be."

This moral clarity remains bracing in an era like our own, when politicians hide the necessary ruthlessness of political life behind the rhetoric of family values and Christian principles and call on citizens to feel their pain when they make difficult decisions. We are still drawn to Machiavelli because we sense how impatient he was with the equivalent flummery in his own day, and how determined he was to confront a problem that preoccupies us too: when and how much ruthlessness is necessary in the world of politics.

He insisted that when tough or risky political decisions have to be made, Christian charity or private empathy simply will not serve. In politics, the polestar must be the health of the republic alone. Following the querulous inner voice or tacking to and fro when moralizers on the sidelines object is just weakness, and if your hesitations put the republic at risk, it is contemptible weakness. Machiavelli's ethics valued judicious decisiveness in politics over the anguished search for rectitude.

So if we return to the Situation Room and to the decisions presidents make there, Machiavelli's *The Prince* tells us the question is not whether one human being should have the right to make such terrifying determinations. The essence of power, even in a democracy, is to use violence to protect the republic. It matters to the very soul of a republic, however, that the violence used in its defense never be gratuitous. His is not an ethic that values action for its own sake. Machiavelli praises restraint when it serves the republic. It may even be advisable, for example, for the president to stay the order to dispatch cruise missiles to Syria if he cannot discern a clear target or a defensible strategic objective.

What he refuses to praise is people who value their conscience and their soul more than the interests of the state. What he will not pardon is public displays of indecision. We should not choose leaders who agonize, worrying about the moral hazards of the power they exercise in the people's name. We should choose leaders who sleep soundly after taking ultimate risks with their own virtue. They are doing what must be done. *The Prince's* question about the current president would be: Is he Machiavellian enough?

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