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The Modern Machiavelli

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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 libretto for 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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