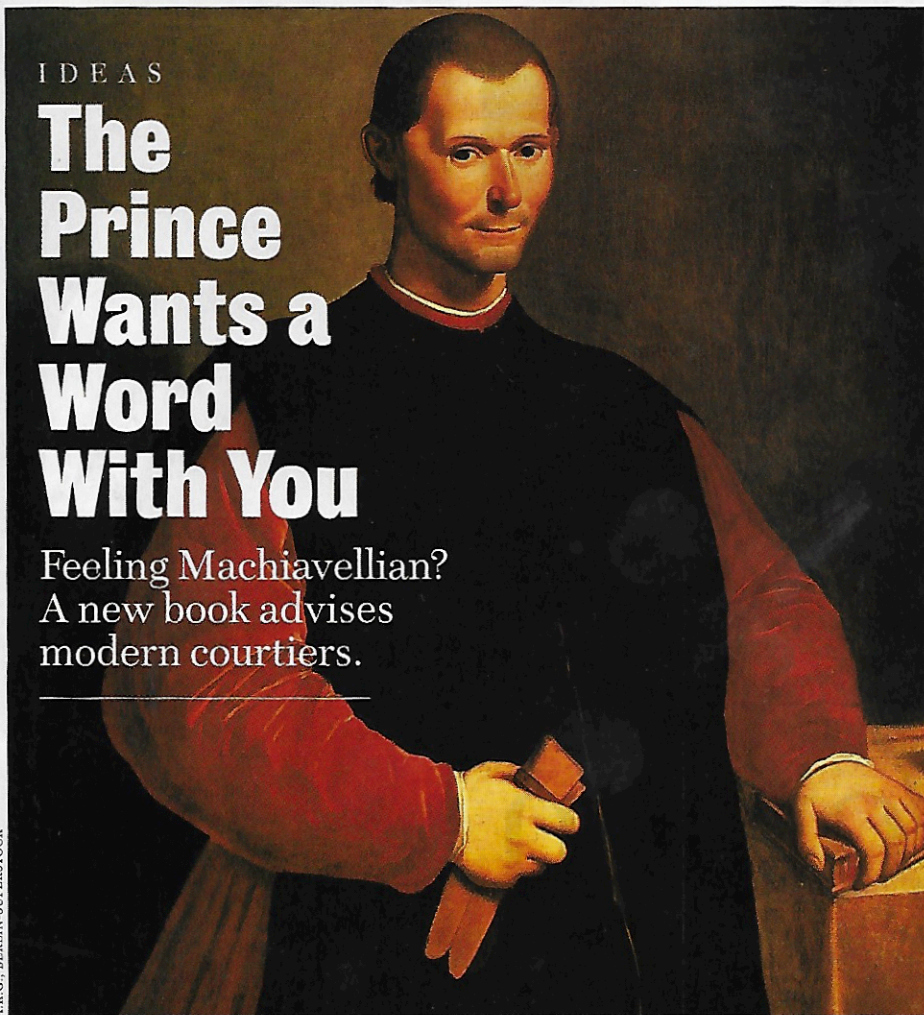


IDEAS

The Prince Wants a Word With You

Feeling Machiavellian? A new book advises modern courtiers.



Big Mach: For 500 years, the last word in career advancement and political intrigue

BY JERRY ADLER

TYPICALLY, AMONG THE FIRST AND most deserving casualties of a recession are books exalting the world's great businessmen. So there's probably a leading economic indicator in the success of **The 48 Laws of Power** (452 pages, Viking, \$24.95), this season's most talked-about all-purpose personal-strategy guide and philosophical compendium. When a book makes The Wall Street Journal's list of business best sellers without a single mention of Bill Gates or Warren Buffett—but references to Metternich, Brutus and the late Bourbon monarchs—it can only be a sign that the pie is going to start contracting again.

Luckily, the author, Robert Greene, doesn't pretend to know anything about economics. Instead, he set out to codify "the timeless

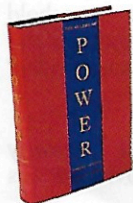
essence of power," much as the great Florentine thinker Machiavelli did half a millennium ago in "The Prince." Machiavelli never stooped to dispense mere get-rich-quick advice, and neither does Greene. His rules are couched as grand abstractions about human nature ("always say less than necessary"; "assume formlessness"; "pose as a friend, work as a spy"). His examples are drawn not from the mundane world of Chrysler or Sony but the epic struggles of the noble Romans, Renaissance princes and an immense cast of ancient Chinese emperors, generals and courtiers. (He also displays a fondness for 19th-century American con men and the notoriously devious art dealer Joseph Duveen.) But the lesson the reader is likely to take away is not how alluring and easy it is to achieve power and riches. It's *screw up and someone is going to pour molten lead in your ear.*

Intending the opposite, Greene has actually produced one of the best arguments since the New Testament for humility and obscurity. The English dandy Beau Brummell, a confidant of the Prince of Wales, upset the prince with a single thoughtless remark, was banished from the court and "died in the most pitiable poverty, alone and deranged." Kind of makes getting close to power seem hardly worth it, doesn't it? Or imagine yourself in the position of the keeper of the crown for the Han Emperor Chao, seeing your master fall drunkenly asleep in the garden. Attempting to follow Law 24 ("play the perfect courtier"), you might give the ruler your own coat to keep him warm. Bad mistake!—on awakening, Chao decreed that the crown-keeper, whose purview was headwear, had overstepped his authority, and had him executed.

Greene's point, needless to say, was not the emperor's cruelty—the cruelty, vanity and greed of superiors is a given here—but the courtier's mistake in trying too hard to win approval. (The possibility that he was motivated by simple compassion is not admitted.) But with 48 laws to remember, almost all with their own exceptions and qualifications, who could blame him? Perhaps he was attempting to implement Law 6 ("court attention at all costs") or Law 11 ("learn to keep people dependent on you"). The situation is remote from the dilemmas you might face in the business world. But should the modern corporate courtier follow the advice on page 180 ("be frugal with flattery"), or that which comes six pages later ("in matters of taste you can never be too obsequious with your master")?

You won't, unfortunately, find much guidance in Greene's own life and career. In conformity to Law 25 ("recreate yourself"), the book's jacket copy says the 39-year-old author "has been an editor at Esquire," although the actual position he held there, it turns out, was editorial assistant. "Also a playwright," he has worked in Hollywood since 1987 without getting a single script produced. He did, however, get inspiration from some of the great Hollywood power players of our time, like Madonna. ("She can be very charming but you never want to mess with her.") He has written an occasionally amusing and—for its genre—surprisingly erudite book. But if businessmen are buying it as a guide to how to operate in the real world, only one word of advice comes to mind.

Sell. ■



“Law 15: Crush your enemy totally. More is lost through stopping halfway than through total annihilation. Crush him, not only in body but in spirit.” —THE 48 LAWS OF POWER