

## Machiavelli by Leo Rosten

<sup>1</sup>FROM HIS SURNAME comes a synonym for treachery, ruthlessness, the cold-blooded use of power. From his Christian name, Niccolò, comes an epithet for the devil: "Old Nick." Not since Judas Iscariot was one man so hatefully honored, yet few minds cast so fresh, so harsh and so illuminating a light on politics, or made so decisive a break with the mythology that surrounded it.

<sup>2</sup>From antiquity down, men had invested their rulers, with supernatural attributes. Kings, queens, princes, dukes were believed to reign by divine and charismatic authority. Every sovereign bathed himself in a holy aura. The very language of politics was embroidered with grandiloquence: "by the grace of God," "royal blood," "our sacred prerogative." Power was not considered sufficient unless sanctified; every political adventurer enlisted the mystique of "legitimacy."

<sup>3</sup>Then, in 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli, an obscure and discredited diplomatist, wrote an analysis of politics called *The Prince*. It was an electrifying, horrifying work. It treated men as greedy, cruel, pugnacious, corrupt. It set forth the diabolic stratagems (deceit, assassination, betrayal, wholesale murder) by which power can be seized, enforced and extended. It ignored the sanctimonious precepts of tradition. Incisive, epigrammatic, icy in his detachment, Machiavelli reduced politics to problems of "force and fraud." He replaced morality with self-interest.

<sup>4</sup>*The Prince* generated a furore that has continued down the centuries. Placed on the Roman Catholic Index, it was condemned by theologians, attacked by

philosophers, but many a ruler and rebel and scoundrel made it his primer. *The Prince* was found at the deathbed of Henry IV; Charles V studied it; Catherine de' Medici brought it with her to France; Richelieu pored over its pages; William of Orange kept it under his pillow; Frederick the Great wrote an answer, not to challenge but to improve it. "Our thanks are due to Machiavelli..." said Francis Bacon, "who [has]...shown us what men are accustomed to do, not what they ought to do." The philosopher Hegel said, "*The Prince* has often been cast aside with horror as containing maxims of the most revolting tyranny; yet Machiavelli [laid]...down the principles on which alone States could be formed [under the circumstances]."

<sup>5</sup>Who was this "unholy necromancer"? Machiavelli was born in 1460, into the glory of Florence and the Renaissance. He showed little interest in his contemporaries — Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, a legion more. He was absorbed only in politics. Italy was a hodgepodge of warring principalities, prey to the French, Spaniards, Germans and Swiss who invaded and despoiled it. The infamous Borgias ruled Romagna; the papal states feuded bitterly. After Florence drove out the Medici and set up a republic, Machiavelli, aged 29, became secretary to the Council of Ten for War, advised them on defense, performed diplomatic missions. In 1502, he met Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI and perhaps the most sinister figure in a time ridden by experts in evil. A brilliant soldier of fortune, Cesare had deposed a dozen tyrants and subjugated their city-states. He was unencumbered by either scruples or conscience; he mixed

audacity with cunning and propitiation with murder. He became Machiavelli's superman.

<sup>6</sup>In 1512, the Medici were restored to power, and Machiavelli lost his job. He was tortured on the rack because he was believed to be conspiring with the republicans. He took his wife and children to San Casciano, where he spent most of his remaining years.

<sup>7</sup>After he wrote *The Prince*, which has become one of the most widely printed books in the world's literature, he produced a satirical novella about marriage and a wicked comedy of Renaissance morals that so pleased Pope Leo X, with its seductions, adultery and lust, that the Pontiff commended him to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, who gave Machiavelli 300 ducats to write a history of Florence. This *Storie Fiorentine*, the first major history to be written in Italian, was as original in its genre as was *The Prince* in its. It ignored the usual catalogue of dates and events and analyzed instead the conflicts of families, classes, vested interests.

<sup>8</sup>Machiavelli was a brilliant writer, an original thinker, but far from admirable as a man. Pale, thin, hollow-cheeked, he was an utter opportunist. He apotheosized Cesare Borgia until his overthrow, then called him a "rebel against Christ," then fawned on the Medici when they regained power. He wrote letters so coarse that biographers do not reprint them. He dryly admitted his own hypocrisy: "The author has no respect for anyone in Italy, but he bows and scrapes to anyone better dressed than himself." He criticized Christianity because it glorified humility and made men weak.

<sup>9</sup>Scholars still argue about his purpose in writing *The Prince*. Some say its cynicism was designed as a mask for a deeper truth: Machiavelli was a patriot

who loved freedom, hoped to make Florence independent, dreamed of an Italy liberated from foreign despotism.

<sup>10</sup>Each generation may appraise anew his startling, surgical prescriptions: "It is laudable in a prince to keep his faith and be an honest man, not a trickster. But the experience of our time shows that the princes who have done great things are the ones who have taken little account of their promises and who have known how to addle the brains of men with craft . . . Since men are wicked and do not keep their promises to you, you likewise do not have to keep yours to them. . . hold [it better] to be feared than to be loved. . . Men hesitate less to injure a man who makes himself loved than to injure one who makes himself feared . . . [The prince] must refrain from taking property, for men forget the death of a father more quickly than the loss of their patrimony . . . Men ought either to be well treated or crushed, because they can adjust to lighter injuries [but] not to more serious ones. He who becomes master of a city accustomed to freedom and does not destroy it, may expect to be destroyed by it."

<sup>11</sup>But he also wrote: "It cannot be called talent to slay fellow citizens, to deceive others, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; such methods may gain empires, but not glory. . . One cannot by fair dealing satisfy the nobles, but one can satisfy the people. . . The rule of a people is better than that of a prince."

<sup>12</sup>Of one thing we can be sure: He dared to introduce that detached, nonmoralizing way of looking at political forces and political conflicts that was to become modern political science. —LEO ROSTEN

FROM *LOOK* MAGAZINE, "THEY MADE OUR WORLD," 19 NOVEMBER 1963.