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## **Machiavelli and U.S. Politics**

### **Part 1: Pattern and Perception**

**by Lawrence M. Ludlow**

During a much-quoted radio broadcast in October 1939, Winston Churchill commented on the surprise Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland — an invasion that closely followed the German attack from the west, which triggered World War II. In his radio broadcast, Churchill said of Russia that it was “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Of course, it was only a mystery to Churchill because, until the invasion, he did not understand why the Soviets and Nazis had signed a pact that made partners of Stalin and Hitler. Using Churchill’s own words as a springboard, however, we can devise a parallel aphorism by blending in the advice given by Niccolò Machiavelli in his political treatise, *The Prince*. In our new Machiavellian aphorism, we may say that “the practice of politics in the United States is a lie wrapped in hypocrisy inside a half-truth.” As we shall see, this neatly characterizes the behavior of most U.S. politicians for the past century.

Before further exploration of *The Prince* and its relevance to contemporary politics, it is necessary to understand a thing or two about Renaissance Florence, the city where Machiavelli lived most of his life. Chief among the ironies of that city was the stark contrast between its artistic triumphs and its political achievements. In contrast to its brilliant legacy in literature, painting, sculpture, and architecture, the political story of this Italian city-state was one of constant devolution — from spirited republicanism into one-man rule, or despotism. For nearly the last 60 years of the 15th century, the city was controlled by the Medici family — first by Cosimo the Elder and finally by Lorenzo the Magnificent, who transformed Florence into the cultural capital of Europe while simultaneously devastating his family’s fortune by the time he passed from the scene in 1492.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence in 1469, and he held a number of legal-diplomatic posts in the Florentine chancery before his death in 1527. He wrote *The Prince* in 1513, dedicating it to Lorenzo di Piero de’ Medici, grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent. It is not surprising that *The Prince* both reflects and reinforces the Florentine trend toward despotism. It is

an essay on how to maintain political power at all costs. It is considered infamous because in it Machiavelli argued that politics writes its own rules and must not be limited by other standards of behavior or morality.

The infamous reputation of *The Prince* is puzzling, however, because it appears to be a source of perpetual inspiration in Washington, D.C. It defines the actions, if not the rhetoric, of that city's politicians and their army of supporters, dependents, and fawning sycophants. To illustrate the widespread influence of *The Prince*, we shall explore a few of the topics that Machiavelli addressed in his treatise. In each case, we shall also observe the following three-part pattern. In the very core, nestling at the root of our current policies, we shall find an unsavory lie. In turn, this will be shrouded by embarrassing hypocrisy as politicians shamelessly evade the implications of their lies so that they can achieve their goals. Finally, acting as an outer hard-candy shell that never seems to melt away under the heat of close scrutiny, the hypocrisy itself will be cloaked in a plausible half-truth. This last element is trotted out for public consumption and promptly absorbed in preparation for the next series of lies, hypocrisies, and half-truths. Together we shall discover that — much more than God, country, and apple pie — the unsavory trinity of lie, hypocrisy, and half-truth has become synonymous with the American Way, at least as far as politics is concerned.

### **People as Animals**

One cannot read *The Prince* without coming to the following realization: Machiavelli believed that most people are craven and invariably behave like animals in an almost Pavlovian sense. In chapter 12, for example, he sums up human nature:

It is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two. For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain. While you do them good, they are yours, offering you their blood, property, lives, and children ... when the need for them is far away; but, when it is close to you, they revolt.

As a man who spent his life surrounded by the leading politicians of his day, we should not be surprised by Machiavelli's dismal assessment. Similarly, it should not surprise us that his subsequent advice reflects this overall perception — regardless of the topic under discussion. This holds true for advice about when and how to deceive people, how to take advantage of religious beliefs, how to betray a trust, how to play off one group against another, how to determine when one should spend money liberally and when the purse strings should be pulled tight, when to instill fear, and when to be merciful. Consequently, Machiavelli is hailed as an early practitioner of modern political science — or at least someone who openly stated how politics really worked. In other words, he caused the scales to fall from our eyes. He showed us the world as it really is

instead of telling us what it should be or what we would like it to be. For this, readers sometimes consider Machiavelli to be a beneficent spirit — one who made it more difficult for dishonest politicians to ply their trade. On the other hand, in writing *The Prince* Machiavelli did not wring his hands too much about their bad habits, so the jury is still out on whether he was a prophet or a political panderer.

Modern politicians adopt Machiavelli's assessment of humanity when they remove decision-making power from the hands of individuals and place it in the hands of government. This applies equally to laws governing personal behavior and those governing economic activity. As a result, in nearly every facet of our lives, we are told what to do and when to do it by local, state, and federal officials. Of course, this is for our own good, since, as brute animals, we are unable to fathom what is best for ourselves. Political leaders — whether elected democratically or holding office as the result of a less participatory form of coercion, such as a coup — assume that they are made of better stuff than we. Consequently, they not only claim the right to decide for themselves what is best, but they go further — telling us what to do in order to deliver us from the consequences of our profound ignorance.

It is easy to see — at this most fundamental level of politics — the workings of the lie, hypocrisy, and half-truth. The lie is that politicians have our interests at heart. Their real intention is the monopolization of power. The hypocrisy is that they — most undeniably human — give themselves permission to do precisely what is forbidden to the rest of us as they act on their own behalf and ours. Finally, the half-truth is that people do indeed make mistakes — some more than others. This is something about which politicians remind us incessantly when we try to act on our own account. They ignore it, however, when they are the actors. Consequently, our own self-awareness of personal imperfections gives politicians the leverage they need to impose their will.

### **Great men versus the people**

Politicians, however, do not overplay their knowledge of our ignorance and tendency to err. Describing our vast limitations too frequently or too loudly would be impolitic. After all, who elected them if not these same dunces? Instead, they claim that they are assisting us, that without their help the great mass of people would become victims of wealthy, powerful people who are ruthless in their greed. Machiavelli provides inspiration for this rationalization. In chapter 9, he identifies two sorts of people — “great” men and “the people” — and he informs us of their respective vices and virtues:

I say that one ascends to this principality either with the support of the people or with the support of the great. For in every city these two diverse humors are found, which arises from this: that the [little]

people desire neither to be commanded nor oppressed by the great, and the great [men] desire to command and oppress the people.

Perhaps this is one source of modern demagoguery. By exploiting envy and fear, politicians can portray themselves as the saviors and protectors of the public — doing and saying whatever is necessary to gain the support needed to remain in power. If it so happens that a leader seizes the reins of authority with the assistance of other great and powerful people, Machiavelli recommends that he immediately sever those ties to win the support of the general populace — bolstering the illusion that he is on the side of the little people:

One who becomes prince against the people with the support of the great must before everything else seek to gain the people to himself, which should be easy for him when he takes up their protection. And since men who receive good from someone from whom they believed they would receive evil are more obligated to their benefactor, the people immediately wish him well more than if he had been brought to the principality with their support.

Once again, we can observe the use of the lie, hypocrisy, and half-truth. The lie is that powerful people are more likely than the average person to seek control over others. The hypocrisy is that although political leaders are, by definition, “great” men and thus — according to Machiavelli’s theory — something to be feared, somehow they seem to escape the evil predilections of other great men. Finally, the half-truth is that yes, great people often do seek power, but are holders of political office somehow different from other great men and thus immune from temptation?

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