



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Machiavelli and U.S. Politics

Part 3: Lies and Appearances

by Lawrence M. Ludlow

In words that are echoed in the mendacity of today's political class, Machiavelli enthusiastically endorsed lying. In chapter 18 he summed up his reasons:

How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his faith, and to live with honesty and not by astuteness, everyone understands. Nonetheless one sees by experience in our times that the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith and have known how to get around men's brains with their astuteness; and in the end they have overcome those who have founded themselves on loyalty.

... A prudent lord, therefore, cannot observe faith, nor should he, when such observance turns against him, and the causes that made him promise have been eliminated.... Nor does a prince ever lack legitimate causes to color his failure to observe faith.... But it is necessary to know well how to ... be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple and so obedient to present necessities that he who deceives will always find someone who will let himself be deceived.

These paragraphs are rich with information and misinformation. As to the latter, Machiavelli is incorrect in assuming a conflict between "astuteness" and "keeping faith." Every voluntary transaction between men requires both. As to the former, it is important to note that only the goals of dictators are important for Machiavelli. Consequently, "princes who have done great things" must be interpreted carefully. Great things do not include the widespread attainment of freedom or prosperity. These are too mundane for Machiavelli and his prince. Instead, great things are limited to highly visible instances of projected power: combat, conquest, and control. Nobody can accuse Machiavelli of being subtle.

There is more truth, however, in Machiavelli's appraisal of the "true believers" and sycophants who surround every power-hungry politician. Judging by the performance, not the

promise, of today's welfare-warfare state and its failed social programs and costly military ventures, the category of "simple" must include the following groups: citizens who believe governments can keep them safe from terrorists by stirring up hatred with interventionist foreign policies; parents who rely on public schools to educate children and on the insane war on drugs to keep them sober; citizens who believe that dependency on government handouts is a steppingstone to self-reliance; churchgoers who confuse political poses and outward shows of piety with genuine religious devotion; and, of course, soldiers who believe they are "fighting for freedom" as they destroy cities, dismiss innocent victims as "collateral damage," and bankrupt their own country for a disgraceful bunch of politicians playing a bloody game of global hegemony with other people's lives and treasure.

Unfortunately, Machiavelli's advice about lying creates a sticky problem that he is unable to escape. For example, the following statement falls between the two paragraphs cited above:

Thus, you must know that there are two kinds of combat: one with laws, the other with force. The first is proper to man, the second to beasts; but because the first is often not enough, one must have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for a prince to know well how to use the beast and the man....

Without truth-telling, how can there be a law-abiding society? Are citizens expected to faithfully obey laws or ignore them? Good laws are a kind of standard against which we measure behavior. Surely citizens will be able to measure their leaders by the laws they promulgate and the degree to which they abide by them. But if lies are the common currency of politicians, how can laws *not* expose to public view the empty chasm beneath these leaders' feet? We must conclude, then, that Machiavelli's advice about lying virtually guarantees that the "combat" of laws, which is proper to humans, must give way to the "combat" of force, which he has judged proper to beasts. Consequently, Machiavelli's is a universe fit only for beasts. *Animal Farm*, anyone?

With these observations in mind, we can move on to the topic of virtues that Machiavelli finds inconvenient — even objectionable — for successful rulers (chapter 18):

... It is not necessary for a prince to have all the above-mentioned qualities [being merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious] in fact, but it is indeed necessary to appear to have them. Nay, I dare say this, that by having them and always observing them, they are harmful; and by appearing to have them, they are useful, and it is [useful] to appear merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, and to be so; but to remain with the spirit built so that, if you need not to be those things, you are able and know how to change to the contrary.... And nothing is more necessary to appear to have than this last quality [religious devotion]. Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because

seeing is given to everyone, touching to few. Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are; and these few dare not oppose the opinion of many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them.

Having endorsed lies and violence while condemning virtues, Machiavelli at last states the guiding principle of his political program: the end justifies the means:

So let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone. For the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar.... A certain prince of present times, whom it is not well to name, never preaches anything but peace and faith, and is very hostile to both....

Today's politicians speak from both sides of their mouths — one side cutting deals with their peers in Congress and the other creating a public fiction for constituents. Business owners, however, are held to a different standard. The recent conviction of Martha Stewart illustrates this. Ms. Stewart was convicted of lying to a federal official — even though she was not under oath at the time. Meanwhile, federal officials are free to tell as many whoppers as they wish without fear of prosecution — whether they are politicians, prosecutors, or FBI agents.

Understanding as we do that lies are the chief language of federal officials — one forbidden to the rest of us — let us trace the three-fold pattern of lie, hypocrisy, and half-truth for the last four presidents. Didn't President Reagan tell his supporters that overgrown government was itself the problem, not the solution? Didn't he vow to eliminate draft registration, the Department of Education, and the Department of Energy? Didn't President George H.W. Bush say, "Read my lips" as he campaigned against raising taxes? Didn't President Clinton once promise that his would be the most moral presidency in history and say that the era of big government was over? Didn't candidate George W. Bush specifically condemn nation-building and government overspending while promising a more humble foreign policy?

The previous citations represent only a tiny fraction of the lies uttered by these men, and the hypocrisy surrounding each statement requires no further mention. But what are the half-truths that were used to cover them up and serve as red herrings to distract the public from the real legacies of these men? Let us examine them, one by one.

Reagan is remembered for opening the curtains on "morning in America" despite saddling taxpayers with massive debt and profligate spending, trade protectionism, expanding bureaucracies, and an extension of criminal law that has stuffed our prisons with nonviolent offenders. Even his tiny cut in marginal tax rates in 1981 was offset by tax hikes later that year — not to mention bracket creep from inflation. His words — not his actions — are remembered by the faithful — just as Machiavelli suggested. The half-truth may be that he believed his own words, but his actions belied them.

George H.W. Bush was not held accountable — at least not by Americans — for the deadly consequences of his interventionist foreign policy. He was not held accountable for meddling in the 1991 dispute between Iraq and Kuwait over the Kuwaiti practice of slant-drilling to siphon off Iraqi oil. He was not held accountable for backing the sanctions that caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children in the 1990s. This, in addition to his continued support for Israel and placement of American armed forces in Islamic holy places led to the attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 and its destruction in 2001. Americans still do not connect these incidents with his presidency. Instead, his supporters chided him only for “failing to complete” the war with Iraq — a half-truth that ignores the results of that war. Meanwhile, his enemies in the Democratic Party quibbled only about details in this assessment, knowing that they participated in and continued the same policies themselves.

Clinton is remembered primarily for lying about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky — a comparatively innocent foible that his supporters happily contrast with the devastating lies of George W. Bush. This is the “true” aspect of the half-truth that hides the reality. Clinton’s supporters, however, say nothing about the Waco conflagration and subsequent whitewash investigation. They also fail to mention the deadly results of intervening in the Serbian-Albanian dispute. Similarly, they do not mention the vast increase in surveillance against American citizens that he authorized or his continuation of Middle East interventions that contributed to the terrorist attacks of 2001.

Meanwhile, the excuse mongers are busy portraying George W. Bush as a verbally stumbling but nonetheless sincere president who fought valiantly to rein in domestic spending. Both Democrats and Republicans find it useful to galvanize their respective constituencies by pretending that Bush is fiscally tough. The Democrats do it to goose the party faithful with scary talk of horrendous cuts in much-beloved but ineffective boondoggles. Likewise, Republicans have found they can hypnotize their not-too-observant poodles by claiming that the Democrats would be spending us into the 30th century if not for the true-blue budget-cutting derring-do of Bush and company. Of course, the opposite is true. The president has a bad habit of approving bailouts for failed airlines, throwing money into the bottomless pit of medical-benefit entitlements, signing lard-filled highway bills, and stuffing the coffers of public schools that regularly churn out bumper crops of criminals and nitwits in roughly equal proportion. At the same time, his military expenditures have set new standards in Pentagon waste. The Democrats are waiting only for their chance to do the same.

*Lawrence Ludlow (LLSD55@yahoo.com) is a freelance writer living in San Diego. Harvey C. Mansfield’s translation of *The Prince* is the source for quotations unless otherwise noted.*