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

### **Part 5: War Crimes and Atrocities**

**by Lawrence M. Ludlow**

For Machiavelli, there is no deed too ruthless for rulers on the fast track to dictatorship. A prince who wishes to remain in power must not blink at opportunities for cruelty when they can advance his position. Consequently, in chapter 5, Machiavelli advises would-be princes to follow the example set by the ancient Romans in dealing with the Greek cities conquered by Rome as it gobbled up the Mediterranean world:

[The Romans] were compelled to destroy many cities in that province so as to hold it. For in truth there is no secure mode to possess them other than to ruin them. And whoever becomes patron of a city accustomed to living free and does not destroy it, should expect to be destroyed by it; for it always has a refuge in rebellion in the name of liberty....

These same sentiments seemed to govern U.S. policy during the wars waged against Vietnam and Iraq. In Vietnam, the United States dropped more than 7 million tons of bombs — three and one half times as much as were dropped in World War II. It is not surprising that in both North and South Vietnam, 2 million innocent civilians were killed in addition to 1 million Vietnamese soldiers.

In Iraq, the sanctions following Operation Desert Storm — backed by the United States and UN — led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children during the 1990s. This horrifying total continued to grow until Operation Iraqi Freedom [sic] and its aftermath finished off tens of thousands of additional noncombatants. Cities such as Fallujah have been leveled and turned into ghost towns.

Since the Middle Ages, efforts have been made to protect noncombatants from the ravages of war. The United States appears to be turning the clock back on that effort. In both wars of aggression just cited, U.S. soldiers were following the orders of politicians. Neither politicians nor soldiers were acting on the conviction that liberty and free enterprise ultimately triumph over

communism and tyranny. Instead, they acted on the shameful presumption that freedom requires the mass murder of people who pose absolutely no threat and are located on the other side of the world.

### **Aggressive war as a crime**

During the proceedings of the War Crimes Tribunal held in Nuremberg after World War II, it was established that wars of aggression are in themselves war crimes. Wars of aggression were defined as invasions launched by nations that have not been attacked — even if the aggressors call the invasions “pre-emptive attacks” or “wars of liberation.” Consequently, both the Vietnam War and the invasion of Iraq were war crimes. As such, they betrayed the founding principles of our nation. Furthermore, the politicians who launched these wars were never brought up on charges — even when the events that triggered them were shown to be fabrications. In Vietnam, it was the Gulf of Tonkin incident; in Iraq, it has been the nonexistent WMDs.

But Machiavelli has soothing words for leaders who are fearful of bad reputations. In chapter 8, he described how the king of Syracuse, Agathocles (ca. 300 B.C.), once assembled the senate of that city. He then proceeded to have its members murdered along with the richest people in the city. Once they were dead, said Machiavelli, “he [Agathocles] seized and held the principate of that city without any civil controversy.” The lack of outrage among American citizens about the U.S. war of aggression in Iraq may be an indicator of a similar absence of ethical standards in America. Even during the Vietnam War, anti-war sentiments were more often triggered by the deaths of U.S. soldiers than by outrage directed against the immorality of creating so many civilian Vietnamese casualties or awareness that wars of aggression are intrinsically war crimes.

In another example, Machiavelli described how the dictator Oliverotto took control of the city of Fermo in A.D. 1501. Oliverotto asked his uncle, Giovanni, to hold a banquet in his behalf, during which Oliverotto’s soldiers slaughtered Giovanni and all the other guests — enabling Oliverotto to take control of the city. Machiavelli’s assessment of this crime and the slaughter committed by Agathocles was matter-of-fact. He drew a distinction only between the ineffective versus effective use of atrocities — labeling them respectively as badly used and well used:

Someone could question how it happened that Agathocles and anyone like him, after infinite betrayals and cruelties, could live for a long time secure in his fatherland, defend himself against external enemies, and never be conspired against by his citizens, inasmuch as many other have not been able to maintain their states through cruelty even in peaceful times, not to mention uncertain times of war. I believe that this comes from cruelties badly used or well used. Those can be called well used (if it is permissible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of the necessity to secure

oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can.

Those cruelties are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time.... Hence it should be noted that in taking hold of a state, he who seizes it should review all the offenses necessary for him to commit, and do them all at a stroke.... For injuries must be done all together, so that, being tasted less, they offend less; and benefits should be done little by little so that they may be tasted better [by the people].

Knowing this, should we assume that the shock-and-awe tactics pursued in March 2003 in Iraq were intended as an “evil deed well used” (to use a Machiavellian expression) because they ended swiftly? If so, what about the indefinite “detention” and torture of suspects at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo — not to mention the deportation of prisoners to countries where torture is practiced? Unfortunately for those who wish to adhere to the advice of Machiavelli, these abuses are taking place over an extended period of time. They are not being “done at a stroke” as Machiavelli recommended. Consequently, the Renaissance master would categorize these abuses as “cruelties badly used.”

### **Just following orders**

Amid the fog of lies and emotions whipped-up by politicians interested in transforming our free republic into a despotic empire, have atrocities and cruelty become acceptable to once-civilized Americans? Aren't we being just a wee bit precious in guarding the airwaves from dirty words here at home while our soldiers force defenseless captives to strip naked and simulate sexual acts before beating them to death during interrogation, attacking them with dogs, shaving their beards and leering at them in degrading postures, smearing them with fake menstrual blood, and kicking their genitals in the name of freedom?

If so, it is not the first time it has happened. Before World War II, Germany had been considered one of the most civilized nations in Europe. Nonetheless, in the politically orchestrated frenzy of fear and empire building, some of the worst atrocities of the 20th century — a century virtually awash in atrocities — were committed within its borders and conquered territories. Furthermore, these atrocities were committed with the cooperation of the churchgoing citizens and soldiers who, after all, were just following orders.

Returning to the War Crimes Tribunal held in Nuremberg after World War II, the excuse that “I was just following orders” was not deemed acceptable when offered by Nazi soldiers accused of war crimes. That excuse is now known as the infamous “Nuremberg Defense.” We've been hearing the same justification for events taking place at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and at prisons located in countries where torture is allowed — as in the case of Maher Arar, who was deported to Syria, where he was tortured at the behest of the CIA. The new attorney general,

Alberto Gonzalez, has proven to be just as unethical as John Ashcroft on the subject of torture. Gonzalez said the provisions of the Geneva Convention were outdated and ill-suited for dealing with captured al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters. He added that laws prohibiting torture do “not apply to the president’s detention and interrogation of enemy combatants.” He also complained that the pain caused by interrogation must include “injury such as death, organ failure, or serious impairment of body functions in order to constitute torture.” He even characterized the small acts of human kindness recommended in provisions of the Geneva Convention as “quaint.”

As in previous examples cited in this essay, the pattern of lie, hypocrisy, and half-truth applies to the way U.S. politicians have framed the discussion of war crimes perpetrated by the military forces of the U.S. against both civilian populations and detainees. The lie used to justify these atrocities was that they were intended to bring down evil leaders. Americans have had plenty of time to become accustomed to this rationalization. President Truman’s bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a prime example. Those nuclear explosions yielded approximately 200,000 innocent civilian victims. Their real purpose was to “send a message” to America’s World War II ally, the Soviet Union, informing its leaders that the United States indeed possessed a formidable weapon. President Truman, however, misled Americans by claiming that the nuclear weapons were used to prompt a faster surrender and save the lives of 500,000 American soldiers (the correct figure, supplied by the military, was actually 46,000 soldiers). Americans were not told that the Japanese leadership already had sued for peace before the bombings — seeking virtually the same terms that were obtained after the bombings. Using Truman’s falsehood as its touchstone, U.S. politicians claimed that the napalm and Agent Orange used in Vietnam, the sanctions against Iraq, and Operation Iraqi Freedom itself were designed to topple the leaders of evil regimes. These tactics, however, have failed. Nothing was gained, and only the bodies are left to count.

When accused of encouraging these crimes and other acts of torture, politicians resort to “damage control.” To avoid the charge of hypocrisy, they create a plausible half-truth as a cover story. They tell us the crimes were “isolated acts” and were confined to a few “bad apples.” Then they sponsor sham investigations that — it is not surprising — discover wrongdoing only among the lowest ranks of soldiers. This protects the reputations of high military and administrative officials from being blemished. While it is indeed true that soldiers of low rank carried out the atrocities, the question that must be asked is whether they were really acting without the implicit assent of their commanding officers as well as such political higher-ups as former Attorney General John Ashcroft, his successor Alberto Gonzalez, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, former CIA Director George Tenet, and President Bush himself.

Administration officials, however, should not worry too much about their reputations. America seems to be developing a thick callus around its conscience. Each new revelation of cruelty or deception — such as the lies and many-layered cover-up surrounding Pat Tillman’s

death — is quickly absorbed by the public and forgotten. This indicates a woeful decline in the kind of behavior deemed “acceptable” in the United States. The hearts of some Americans have grown so hard that callers to one nationwide talk-radio show have proudly described barbeque parties celebrating the atrocities of Abu Ghraib. These on-air descriptions were accompanied by laughter and encouragement from the talk-show host.

As in the case of Machiavelli’s prince, in today’s political arena, deeds are neither intrinsically evil nor good — merely ineffective or effective. They require only the proper calculation to determine their advisability. The end justifies the means — or as the French proverb goes (much quoted by tyrants): “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.”

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