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# NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI



Niccolò Machiavelli (A.D. 1469–1527) is one of the best known, most widely quoted, and most frequently followed political theorists of all time. Born in Florence in 1469, he lived amid the chaotic artistic vitality and political unrest of Renaissance Italy—with Spanish against French, Popes against Emperors, and the cities of Florence, Venice, Milan, Naples, and Rome each against each other. Among his illustrious contacts were Cesare Borgia, Julius II, Emperor Maximilian, and the Medici princes.

The Prince—his best known work—was written in 1513 during a forced retirement from public life after Machiavelli fell out of political favor. But it was not published until 1532, five years after his death. It became an instant best-seller, making its author both famous and infamous. Many critics see *The Prince* as the foundation of modern political science for three reasons: its stress on centralized government and bureaucracy; its cynicism about character—as opposed to the affirmative classical view of the Hebrew Scriptures and Plato; and its focus on success and efficiency as the supreme goals of government.

The term “Machiavellian” connotes cunning and deceit, and today is often spoken in a tone of admiration. But Machiavelli’s Florentine contemporaries were shocked by his views. Was he serious? Was he analyzing how rulers do behave or suggesting how they should behave? Was he a realist, an opportunist, a satirist, or a prophet describing the new realpolitik that was on its way? Whatever the answer, Machiavelli made his position clear: leaders are essentially selfish, self-interested, and self-protective. They view and treat other people simply as objects to be manipulated. Within such a view, virtuous character is worse than irrelevant. It is obstructive and foolish.

### Trustworthy Because True

“‘I know only one method of operation,’ he wrote in his diary: ‘To be as honest with others as I am with myself.’

“When President Franklin Roosevelt pressured him to get tough with the local French, Eisenhower refused, explaining, ‘My whole strength in dealing with the French has been based upon my refusal to quibble or to stoop to any kind of subterfuge or double dealing.’

“The French responded. One official told him, ‘As long as you say that, I believe it!’ Another said, “I have found that you will not lie or evade in any dealings with us, even when it appears you could easily do so.”

... “Indeed, whenever associates described Eisenhower, there was one word that almost all of them, superiors or subordinates, used. It was trust. People trusted him for the most obvious reason—he was trustworthy.”

—Stephen Ambrose, biographer

*Machiavelli’s concept of politics as an exercise in power relations was the birthchild of renaissance humanism. And it fits comfortably with modern secular realism. His maxim that “Men do not rule states with paternosters [The Lord’s Prayer] in their*

hands” reveals a philosophy of public life that has little or no place for character—or faith—in effective leadership. As philosopher Isaiah Berlin commented, by divorcing politics from virtue in the name of realism, “Machiavelli inflicted the wound that has never healed.”

#### An evening’s conversation


“When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; on the threshold I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace. Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable court of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me. And for four hours at a time I feel no boredom, I forget all my troubles, I do not dread poverty, and I am not terrified by death. I absorb myself into them completely. And because Dante says that no one understands anything unless he retains what he has understood, I have jotted down what I have profited from in their conversation and composed a short study, *De principatibus*, in which I delve as deeply as I can into the ideas concerning this topic, discussing the definition of a principedom, the categories of principedoms, how they are acquired, how they are retained, and why they are lost.”

—Niccolò Machiavelli, letter to his patron Francesco Vettori, 1513


## On Things for Which Men, and Particularly Princes, Are Praised or Blamed

We now have left to consider what should be the manners and attitudes of a prince toward his subjects and his friends. As I know that many have written on this subject I feel that I may be held presumptuous in what I have to say, if in my comments I do not follow the lines laid down by others. Since, however, it has been my intention to write something which may be of use to the understanding reader it has seemed wiser for me to follow the real truth of the matter rather than what we imagine it to be. For imagination has created many principalities and republics that have never been seen or known to have any real existence, for how we live is so different from how we ought to live that he who studies what ought to be rather than what is done will learn the way to his downfall rather than to his preservation. A man striving in every way to be good will meet his ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence it is necessary for a prince, if he wishes to remain in power, to learn how not to be good and to use his knowledge or refrain from using it as he may need.

Putting aside then the things imagined as pertaining to a prince and considering those that really do, I will say that all men, and particularly princes because of their prominence, when comment is made of them, are noted as having some characteristics deserving either praise or blame. One is accounted liberal, another stingy, to use a Tuscan term—for in our speech avaricious (*avaro*) is applied to such as are desirous of acquiring by rapine whereas stingy (*misero*) is the term used for those who are reluctant to part with their own—one is considered bountiful, another rapacious; one cruel, another tenderhearted; one false to his word, another trustworthy; one effeminate and pusillanimous, another wild and spirited; one humane, another haughty; one lascivious, another chaste; one a man of integrity and another sly; one tough and another pliant; one serious and another frivolous; one religious and another skeptical, and so on.



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"What is necessary for the prince is to be prudent enough to escape infamy of such vices as would result in the loss of his state . . . Further, he should have no concern about incurring the infamy of such vices without which the preservation of his state would be difficult."

Everyone will agree, I know, that it would be a most praiseworthy thing if all the qualities accounted as good in the above enumeration were found in a Prince. But since they cannot be so possessed nor observed because of human conditions which do not allow of it, what is necessary for the prince is to be prudent enough to escape infamy of such vices as would result in the loss of his state; as for the others which would not have that effect, he must guard himself from them as far as possible but if he cannot, he may overlook them as being of less importance. Further, he should have no concern about incurring the infamy of such vices without which the preservation of his state would be difficult. For, if the matter be well considered, it will be seen that some habits which appear virtuous, if adopted would signify ruin, and others that seem vices lead to security and the well-being of the prince.


### In What Manner Princes Should Keep Their Word

How laudable it is for a prince to keep his word and govern his actions by integrity rather than trickery will be understood by all. Nonetheless we have in our times seen great things accomplished by many princes who have thought little of keeping their promises and have known the art of mystifying the minds of men. Such princes have won out over those whose actions were based on fidelity to their word.

It must be understood that there are two ways of fighting, one with laws and the other with arms. The first is the way of men, the second is the style of beasts, but since very often the first does not suffice it is necessary to turn to the second. Therefore a prince must know how to play the beast as well as the man. This lesson was taught allegorically by the ancient writers who related that Achilles and many other princes were brought up by Chiron the Centaur, who took them under his discipline. The clear significance of this half-man and half-beast preceptorship is that a prince must know how to use either of these two natures and that one without the other has no enduring strength.

Now since the prince must make use of the characteristics of beasts he should choose those of the fox and the lion, though the lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox is helpless against wolves. One must be a fox in avoiding traps and a lion in frightening wolves. Such as choose simply the role of a lion do not rightly understand the matter. Hence a wise leader cannot and should not keep his word when keeping it is not to his advantage or when the reasons that made him give it are no longer valid. If men were good, this would not be a good precept, but since they are wicked and will not keep faith with you, you are not bound to keep faith with them.

A prince has never lacked legitimate reasons to justify his breach of faith. We could give countless recent examples and show how any number of peace treaties or promises have been broken and rendered meaningless by the faithlessness of princes, and how success has fallen to the one who best knows how to counterfeit the fox. But it is necessary to know how to disguise this nature well and how to pretend and dissemble. Men are so simple and so ready to follow the needs of the moment that the deceiver will always find some one to deceive. Of recent examples I shall mention one. Alexander VI did nothing but deceive and never thought of anything else and always found some occasion for it. Never was there a man more convincing in his asseverations nor more willing to offer the most solemn oaths nor less likely to observe them. Yet his deceptions were always successful for he was an expert in this field.



"Hence a wise leader cannot and should not keep his word when keeping it is not to his advantage or when the reasons that made him give it are no longer valid."

So a prince need not have all the aforementioned good qualities, but it is most essential that he appear to have them. Indeed, I should go so far as to say that having them and always practicing them is harmful, while seeming to have them is useful. It is good to appear clement, trustworthy, humane, religious, and honest, and also to be so, but always with the mind so disposed that, when the occasion arises not to be so, you can become the opposite. It must be understood that a prince and particularly a new prince cannot practice all the virtues for which men are accounted good, for the necessity of preserving the state often compels him to take actions which are opposed to loyalty, charity, humanity, and religion. Hence he must have a spirit ready to adapt itself as the varying winds of fortune command him. As I have said, so far as he is able, a prince should stick to the path of good but, if the necessity arises, he should know how to follow evil.

A prince must take great care that no word ever passes his lips that is not full of the above mentioned five good qualities, and he must seem to all who see and hear him a model of piety, loyalty, integrity, humanity, and religion. Nothing is more necessary than to seem to possess this last quality, for men in general judge more by the eye than the hand, as all can see but few can feel. Everyone sees what you seem to be, few experience what you really are and these few do not dare set themselves up against the opinion of the majority supported by the majesty of the state. In the actions of all men and especially princes, where there is no court of appeal, the end is all that counts. Let a prince then concern himself with the acquisition or the maintenance of the state; the means employed will always be considered honorable and praised by all, for the mass of mankind is always swayed by appearances and by the outcome of an enterprise. And in the world there is only the mass, for the few find their place only when the majority has no base of support. A certain prince of our own times, whom it would not be well to name, preaches nothing but peace and faith and yet is the enemy of both, and if he had observed either he would already on numerous occasions have lost both his state and his renown.

From *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli, translated and edited by Thomas G. Bergin, pp. 44, 45, 50, 51, 52. Crofts Classics Series. Copyright © 1947 by Harlan Davidson, Inc. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION.

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### The Strangest Fact of All

“None of the theories explain the strangest fact of all: Machiavelli’s practical advice was not at all practical. Even amid the murderous rivalries of the Italian boot, princes behaving so wickedly and selfishly would win only short-run victories. Nor could interstate relations long be conducted on many of his principles. The Florentine had dramatized a profound half-truth—that men are essentially selfish, self-regarding, self-protective. But selfishness could take many forms, some of them benign. Machiavelli had projected some notions that were only locally applicable at best into an ideology of ruthlessness and selfishness.

“More than mere selfishness; at the core of Machiavellianism lay the most pernicious and inhuman concept of all: the treatment of other persons, other leaders, as *things*. With Machiavelli, Richard Christie and Florence Geis wrote, it seemed ‘that success in getting others to do what one wishes them to do would be enhanced by viewing them as objects to be manipulated rather than as individuals with whom one has empathy. The greater the emotional involvement with others, the greater the likelihood of identifying with their point of view.’ But it is precisely that—identifying with the point of view of followers—that makes the transforming leader, in the long run, far more effective than manipulators.”

—James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership*

### Questions

1. Though Machiavelli's times were no more difficult than Plato's, he spends the first paragraph indirectly attacking Plato for his idealism. What is the tone of this attack? What specific aspects of Plato's writings does he mock? What does Machiavelli say will happen to the prince who strives "to do good"? Do you agree?
2. For Machiavelli, the bottom line is a prince's survival. What is the equivalent in today's political world?
3. What justification does Machiavelli give for a prince violating his word? What do you think of this reasoning? Can you think of instances in which you have heard similar justifications for not keeping a promise?
4. There are two prongs to success for a prince, according to Machiavelli: first, achieving political goals (using any means necessary) and second, maintaining an appearance of virtue. In what spheres do we see Machiavellianism today? How does the modern world respond?
5. In the second to last paragraph, the writer argues that a prince must be willing to adapt personal principles as "the varying winds of fortune command him." Is there a parallel to the widespread use of polling by politicians in our own day? How so?
6. Machiavelli's *realpolitik* works well for a prince when most people (subjects and other leaders) are honest and straightforward. But what happens when *everyone* is Machiavellian? Does Machiavelli's realism, at a certain point, become unrealistic?
7. Whether you are involved in the most fundamental levels of leadership—family, work, church, civic groups, or the local school PTA—or at the level of global business or state and national politics, you have likely encountered those who practice Machiavellian principles. How successful are these leaders? What does their success depend on? How successful are those who practice what Machiavelli himself calls "integrity" and "faith"? Which form of leadership do you practice?

#### Your View of the World and Your Way with People

"All my knowledge of human nature is owing to [my debts]: it is in managing my affairs that I have sounded the depths of the human heart . . . What expedient in negotiation is unknown to me? . . . Yes, among my creditors, I have disciplined that diplomatic ability, that shall someday confound and control cabinets."

—Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli

"Mistrust was his worldview."

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn on Josef Stalin

"I don't trouble them with political arguments. I just study human nature and act accordin'."

—Tammany boss George Washington Plunkitt

"Do principles change with dates?"

—Winston Churchill

"If a government has no moral scruples it often seems to gain great advantages and liberties of action, but 'all comes out even at the end of the day, and all will come out yet more even when all the days are ended.'"

—Winston Churchill

"You really felt as if a St. Bernard had licked your face for an hour, had pawed you all over . . . He never shook hands with you. One hand was shaking your hand; the other was always someplace else, exploring you, examining you. And of course he was a great actor, bar f—— none the greatest. . . . It was just a miraculous performance."

—Benjamin Bradley of the *Washington Post*  
on Lyndon B. Johnson's famous "Treatment"

"My father was a good man in a world in which goodness had no meaning. I will never make that mistake."

—Secretary of State Henry Kissinger

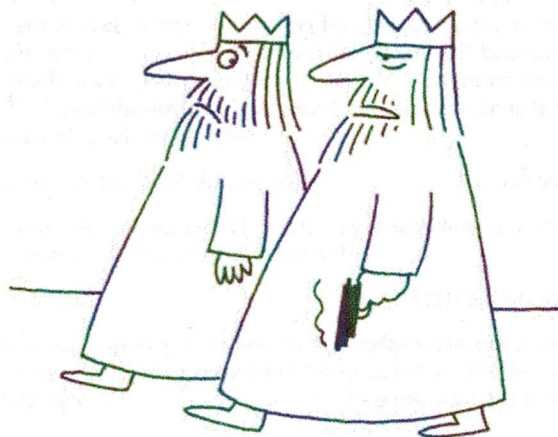
"To appeal solely to 'lower' or artificially sustained and intensified needs is to subject followers to manipulation. It has equally serious consequences for *leaders*. Essentially they manipulate themselves in manipulating others. In concentrating on a particular 'lower' need of the follower they concentrate as well on their own particular motivations that prompt them to arouse that need in a follower (student, customer, voter). The more the follower's need is aroused and satisfied, the more the manipulator's motive to satisfy that need is sustained and perpetuated. Leader and led come to be locked into a symbiotic maintenance of each other's lower needs."

—James MacGregor Burns

"As President, Carter's disdain for artifice served him well as long as things were going his way, but when things weren't going his way it created problems for him, because it essentially deprived him of the full use of one of the basic tools of statecraft. He didn't like to perform—in the sense of giving a performance. He hated to pretend to be feeling emotions he wasn't actually feeling at that moment. And of course that kind of pretending is essential to making an effective political speech, which is a kind of theatrical performance. . . .

"Sometimes his dislike of artifice reached comic lengths. One day he was scheduled to announce the elimination of several thousand pages of federal regulations. We got a big stack of paper for him, and the idea was that he would sweep it off the table or dump it in the wastepaper basket to illustrate how many regulations he was getting rid of. We thought that this would be very dramatic—excellent footage for the evening news. The only problem was, the President didn't follow the script. Instead he pointed to the stack and said something like, 'This is a prop prepared by my staff. It's supposed to represent the thousands of pages of regulations. Actually, it's just a pile of blank sheets of paper.' He then ignored it for the remainder of his statement. The evening news found something else to lead with that night."

—Hendrik Hertzberg, speechwriter to Jimmy Carter



C. Burratti

"What good is power if you don't use it?"