

Michael Ignatieff
Machiavellian Moments
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You remember the photograph: President Obama hunched in a corner in the Situation Room with his national security staff, including Hillary Clinton with a hand over her mouth, watching the live feed from the compound in Pakistan where the killing of Osama bin Laden is underway.

This is a Machiavellian moment: a political leader taking the ultimate risks that go with the exercise of power, now awaiting the judgment of fate. He knows that if the mission fails, his Presidency is over, while if it succeeds, no one should question his ruthlessness again.

It's a Machiavellian moment in a second sense, one of those instances in which public necessity appears to require a leader to order an act that private ethics and religious values might condemn as unjust and immoral.

We call these moments Machiavellian because Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* first laid bare the moral world of that Situation Room and the gulf between private conscience and the demands of public action.

The Prince's blunt candor has been a scandal for 500 years. It was placed on the Papal Index of banned books in 1559 and its author was denounced on the Elizabethan stages of London as the 'Evil Machiavel.' The outrage has not dimmed with time. The greatest modern conservative political theorist, Leo Strauss taught his students at the University of Chicago in the 1950's to regard Machiavelli as 'a teacher of evil.' Machiavelli's central provocation is to baldly maintain that in politics evil deeds cease to be evil if urgent public interest makes them necessary.

Strenuous efforts are being renewed in this five hundredth anniversary year to draw the sting of this stark message. Four new books argue that in order to understand his brutal candor, we need to grasp the times that made him: the tangled and violent politics of Italy between 1498 when he took office as a senior official in Florence and 1527 when he died. Philip Bobbitt has positioned Machiavelli as the great theorist of the early modern state, just then coming into being, the first thinker to understand that if power was no longer personal, no longer exercised by a medieval lord, it had to be moralized in a new public ethics of power based on reason of state.

Maurizio Viroli wants us to grasp that *The Prince* was not the cynically devious tract it seems, but rather a patriotic appeal designed to inspire a redeemer politician to arise and save Italy from foreign invaders and the catastrophic short-sightedness of its own rulers. Corrado Vivanti's learned intellectual biography reinforces Viroli's image of Machiavelli as a misunderstood forerunner of the Italian Risorgimento,

calling for the redemption of Italian republicanism four centuries before the final reunification of the Italian states.

All of these authors are at pains to stress that the 'evil Machiavel' was in fact a brilliant writer, a good companion and a passionate patriot. The man himself certainly comes alive in his wonderful letter to his friend Vettori, written in 1513, in which he describes lonely days of political exile, chopping wood on his farm outside Florence, hunting for game, drinking in the local tavern, and then coming back home at night to his study, to don the 'garments of court and palace' and commune with 'the venerable ancients.'

These new studies put him back in his time but lose sight of the question of why his "amoral verve and flair" (Alan Ryan's phrase) remain so enduringly provocative in our own time.

He was hardly the first theorist to maintain that politics is a ruthless, even bloody business, requiring politicians to do things their private conscience might abhor. Everyone, it is safe to say, knows that politics is one of those realms of life where you put your soul at risk.

What's distinctively shocking about Machiavelli is that he doesn't care. He not only believes that politicians must do evil in the name of the public good, he also maintains they shouldn't worry about it. He is unconcerned, in other words, with what modern thinkers call the problem of dirty hands.

The great Princeton philosopher, Michael Walzer, borrowing from Jean Paul Sartre, described the feeling of having 'dirty hands' in politics as the guilty conscience that political actors must necessarily live with when they authorize acts which public necessity requires but private morality rejects. Walzer says "here is the moral politician: it is by his dirty hands that we know him." It is by his guilt, even his remorse, that we know that a politician *has* a conscience. Walzer thinks that we want our politicians to be suffering servants, lying awake at night, wrestling with the conflict between private morality and the public good.

Machiavelli simply doesn't believe that politicians should be bothered about their dirty hands. He didn't care whether they should be inwardly troubled by acts like killing, lying or betrayal that go with the territory of public action. He would have agreed with *the Sopranos*: sometimes you do what you have to do.

But *The Prince* would hardly have survived this long if it was nothing more than an apologia for gangsters. With gangsters, gratuitous cruelty is often efficient, while in politics the infliction of gratuitous cruelty, Machiavelli clearly understood, was worse than a crime. It was a mistake. He wanted '*ragione de stato*' --reason of state-- to guide each politician's descent into morally questionable realms. A leader guided by public necessity was less likely to be cruel and vicious than one guided by

religious moralizing, for someone who believes they have God on their side is capable of anything.

Machiavelli also understood that a politician, unlike a gangster, could not play fast and loose with the law. The law mattered because in republics, public opinion mattered, and if a prince put himself above the law too often, the people would drive him from office. Machiavelli was not a modern democrat, but a classical republican, someone who took for granted that popular anger in the lanes and alleys of his city could bring a prince's rule to a bloody end. If Machiavelli advised politicians to dissimulate, to pretend to virtues they did not practice in private life, it was because he believed that the people in the lanes and alleys cared more about whether the prince delivered peace and security than whether he was an authentic or even honest person.

All of this looks like cynicism only if we fail to see its deep realism. Alan Ryan's little book on Machiavelli captures his hold on the modern moral imagination when he says, "the staying power of *The Prince* comes from. . .its insistence on the need for a clear-sighted appreciation of how men really are as distinct from moralizing claptrap about how they ought to be."

We read him to this day because the shock of his moral clarity is bracing in our time of hypocritical political correctness, when politicians hide the necessary ruthlessness of political life behind the rhetoric of family values and Christian principles and when they call on citizens to feel their pain when taking difficult decisions.

We are still drawn to Machiavelli because we sense how impatient he was with the equivalent flummery in his own day, and how determined he was to confront a problem that preoccupies us too: when and how far ruthlessness becomes necessary in the world of politics.

He insisted that when tough or risky political decisions have to be made, Christian charity or private empathy simply will not serve. In politics, your pole star must be the health of the republic alone. Following the querulous inner voice or tacking to and fro when moralizers on the sidelines object is just weakness and if your hesitations put the republic at risk, it is contemptible weakness at that.

Machiavelli's ethics starkly value judicious decisiveness in politics over the anguished search for rectitude. But he is not a cold-blooded utilitarian. We need to understand just how passionately devoted he was to the '*vivere libero*', the free life of the Florentine city-state and the other republics of Italy. He was, after all, the man who wrote a friend, when he had been thrown out of public office in the Florentine republic in 1512, arrested, tortured, exiled to his estate and denied any role in public life thereafter, that he still loved the republic more than his own life.

So if we return to the Machiavellian moment in the Situation Room, and ask how we should evaluate the decisions made there in our name, *The Prince* has a lot to teach us. As the President decides which of the republic's enemies should be hunted down, Machiavelli tells us the question is not whether one human being should have the right to make such terrifying determinations. It is the essence of power, even in a democracy, to use violence to protect the republic. It matters deeply that the violence be used as sparingly as possible, on persons who actually are bent on harming us and not on innocent and not so innocent bystanders. It matters to the very soul of a republic, Machiavelli says, that the violence used in its defense never be gratuitous. But violence *will* be used, he says, and we should not choose leaders who agonize about this fact, who lie awake at night, worrying about the moral hazards of the power they exercise in the people's name. We should choose leaders who sleep soundly after taking ultimate risks with their own virtue. They are doing what must be done. *The Prince's* question about our prince, the current President, would be: is he Machiavellian enough?

This is Machiavelli's message and this is why *The Prince* will continue to provoke and perplex as long as there are readers who turn to this slim volume written five hundreds years ago in order to know what politics truly is.

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