
TRAPPING
THE PRINCE:
MACHIAVELLI AND
THE POLITICS
OF DECEPTION

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Machiavelli's most famous political work, *The Prince*, was a masterful act of political deception. I argue that Machiavelli's intention was a republican one: to undo Lorenzo de Medici by giving him advice that would jeopardize his power, hasten his overthrow, and allow for the resurgence of the Florentine republic. This interpretation returns *The Prince* to its specific historical context. It considers Machiavelli's advice to Lorenzo on where to reside, how to behave, and whom to arm in light of the political reality of sixteenth-century Florence. Evidence external to *The Prince*, including Machiavelli's other writings and his own political biography, confirms his anti-Medicean sentiments, his republican convictions, and his proclivity for deception. Understanding *The Prince* as an act of political deception continues a tradition of reading Machiavelli as a radical republican. Moreover, it overcomes the difficulties of previous republican interpretations, and provides new insight into the strategic perspective and Renaissance artistry Machiavelli employed as a theoretician.

[F]or some time I have never said what I believed and never believed what I said, and if I do sometimes happen to say what I think, I always hide it among so many lies that it is hard to recover.

—Machiavelli

Realism is generally considered a necessary first move in the effort to make the study of politics scientific, and when political scientists turn to the history of ideas, they tend to acknowledge Machiavelli as the champion of realism, and *The Prince*, in particular, as the first treatise in political thought to infuse the contemplation of political affairs with a spirit of empiricism, *realpolitik*, and *raison d'état*. By

now it has become commonplace for political scientists in fields as diverse as international relations, comparative politics, organization theory, and political psychology to construct explanations about political life and political conduct that rely in part on the "axioms" that evolved from Machiavelli's little treatise. These include the necessities of "naked self-interest," the maintenance of rulership at all costs, the utility of unethical and manipulative behavior, and the centrality of power as an end in and of itself.¹ Accordingly, in many areas of political inquiry Machiavelli has come to be regarded as the theorist of "Machiavellianism," and Machiavellianism itself en-

tails understanding politics primarily in terms of who dominates whom and how successfully.

As far as it goes, this understanding of politics as power is true to Machiavelli's purposes in *The Prince*, but, in the end, I think it does not go far enough. What is missing from the political scientists' rendition of Machiavelli is another vision of politics, a republican one rooted in love of liberty and respect for self-governance, which political theorists have long considered as vital to Machiavelli's thought as power and *realpolitik*.² This second vision of politics as participation is one theorists tend to associate with Machiavelli's later works, particularly *The Discourses* and *The History of Florence*. Thus, like political scientists, they too often read *The Prince* in terms of the politics of power and domination.

I suggest that neither political scientists nor political theorists have realized the full force of the Florentine's intentions in *The Prince*. By offering a different perspective on the treatise I hope to show that both groups have underestimated Machiavelli, and in ironic ways—the theorists by not seeing the republican goals that guide the treatise, the political scientists by not recognizing the full force of the "Machiavellian" intentions that inform it. My purpose, then, is not only to present a new interpretation of this most famous of Machiavelli's works, but also to encourage a reconsideration of the adjective that bears his name and the vision of politics it represents.

Republicans and *The Prince*

No political thinker was more aware of how crafty assault by deceit could serve as a substitute for brute assault by violence than Niccolò Machiavelli. The theme of deception weaves through all of his work—his drama, his military writings, his history, his political theory. *Mandragola* is a tale of crafty assault

practiced by the wily Ligurio, who helps a young rake bed the beautiful wife of a pompous old doctor. *The Art of War* argues that a commander who vanquishes an enemy by stratagem is as praiseworthy as one who gains victory by force. *The History of Florence* tells the story of a city where deceit and guile secure power, while honesty and blind trust ruin it. Nowhere, of course, is Machiavelli's love for the art of deception more vividly unmasked than in *The Prince*. There the subject of crafty assault takes its notorious form in his advice to a ruler on how to play the fox, "confuse men's brains," and employ cunning in the political world. In short, whether the subject is love, war, or politics, Machiavelli recognizes the advantages of crafty assault in any form, be it trickery, stratagem, or artifice.

For those who believe that Machiavelli was a republican and a Florentine patriot, this view of him as the master theorist of deceit poses difficulties. As Hanna Pitkin (1984) reminds us, foxes make poor citizens—their deceit undermines civic *virtù*—and *The Prince* abounds with foxes and advice on deception. Furthermore, in Machiavelli's infamous tract to Lorenzo de Medici we find no defense of the Florentine republic, no call for popular liberty, no praises of republican Rome. Far from denouncing tyranny, as would any bold republican, Machiavelli appears to content himself with forging the absolute and ruthless power of an autocrat. How, then, is it possible to hail him as a defender of liberty, self-government, and civic *virtù*, when these appear to be the very values he teaches his Medici protégé to subvert?

Proponents of the thesis that Machiavelli was a republican, despite his authorship of *The Prince*, fall into two camps. According to the "weak republican" thesis, *The Prince* is an aberration. Despairing of the future of Florence, much less its republican government, Machiavelli saw the Medici as the only

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alternative to total chaos, and so wrote his advice book in reaction to an impending crisis (Baron, 1961; Hale, 1961; Pocock, 1975). This thesis maintains that after 1513 Machiavelli simply abandoned the idea of the prince as a "political innovator"; he renewed his commitment to republicanism, developed an admiration for antiquity, and refueled his antipathy for the Medici. The result of this renewal was *The Discourses*, complete with its dedication to republican sympathizers and its repudiation of the entire genre of princely advice books. Thus, these scholars view *The Prince* as a tract that reflects both Machiavelli's acceptance (reluctant though it might have been at the time) of Medicean domination and his clear-sighted, if opportunistic, attempt to ingratiate himself with the new rulers of Florence.

Among other things, the weak republican thesis strains credulity. To read *The Prince* as a sudden capitulation to Medici rule, or as a tool to curry favor is, arguably, to underestimate Machiavelli as a citizen and a theorist. Though I find Garrett Mattingly's (1958) ultimate assessment of *The Prince* unconvincing (for reasons I will explain shortly), I think he poses in dramatic terms the correct riposte to the weak republican thesis:

I suppose it is possible to imagine that a man who has seen his country enslaved, his life's work wrecked and his own career with it, and has, for good measure, been tortured within an inch of his life, should thereupon go home and write a book intended to teach his enemies the proper way to maintain themselves. . . . But it is a little difficult for the ordinary mind to encompass. (1958, p. 485)

The other camp advances a "strong republican" thesis, arguing that even as Machiavelli writes *The Prince*, he remains a defender of republican liberty and an opponent of the Medici (Gentili, 1924; Mattingly, 1958; Rousseau, 1978; Spinoza, 1945; Wolin, 1960). However, if this is indeed the case, and if republican

sympathies abound in *The Prince*, then something else must be moving beneath the surface of the text; some drama that the protagonist-prince does not see must be taking shape. This is precisely what the strong republican camp wants to argue, but as is so often the case with Machiavelli, there are differences of opinion on the matter of the subtext of *The Prince*. Three main views emerge.

The first is Rousseau's (1978, p. 88) claim that *The Prince* is a book for republicans. Rousseau argues that the advice book was not intended for the Medici at all, but rather to expose to the people the brutal ruthlessness of princes and lay bare their methods and madness. There is a paradoxical quality to this interpretation of the sort we have come to expect from Rousseau, namely, that even as Machiavelli is fashioning masks for a prince, he is unmasking him. By exposing the prince's stock-in-trade, Machiavelli is arming republicans with all the knowledge they need to avoid being deceived. A simple and telling criticism can, however, be lodged against this Rousseauian opinion: Machiavelli could not be writing a book for republicans, because he never intended that they read it. Interpretative accuracy often hangs on matters of practical political action, not to mention the intention of where to publish and for whom, and in this case we find no evidence that Machiavelli did or attempted to do anything with his treatise but send it to Francesco Vettori, his contact in the Medici Palace.

A second version of Machiavelli as a strong republican hardly takes *The Prince* seriously, for it assumes that the treatise was not intended seriously. Garrett Mattingly (1958) holds that Machiavelli's advice book is nothing more than a joke, a "diabolical burlesque" of the mirror-of-princes literature prevalent in the Renaissance. Nominally agreeing with Rousseau, Mattingly argues that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as an alarm, a "tocsin"

to the people of Florence. However, this agreement is surely more literary than political, for, unlike Rousseau, Mattingly does not read the treatise as revealing certain truths about princely power that republicans should know. He sees *The Prince* primarily as a fine example of Machiavelli's dramatic temperament, a reflection of his ability simultaneously to shock and amuse his audience. Machiavelli surely intended to shock and perhaps to amuse, and *Mandragola* fully displays his dramatic skills, but this does not suffice to make *The Prince* a burlesque, even if a diabolical one. The most obvious problem with Mattingly's reading is that it fails to take seriously Machiavelli's desire to reconstitute the political world. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (*P*, p. 56) declares his intention "to write something of use to those who understand."³ He wishes to reveal reality, not ridicule it, and his repeated instruction concerning princely *virtù* sounds less like a satire on the corruption of power than an attempt to determine how those in power might use guile and deceit to mitigate the corruption of the state.

The third strong republican perspective reads *The Prince* literally, as an advice book for a founder. Machiavelli's prince is to be the restorer of order, the man of *virtù* who will lay the foundations from which the republic will emerge. Thus, *The Prince* is "phase one" of a series of events that will lead to liberty and republican government in "phase two." On this account, *The Discourses* takes its point of departure from the (hoped-for) realization of the prince's plans. Put another way, *The Prince* has to do with "heroic" politics, *The Discourses* with mass politics of a republican sort, made possible by the heroism of the virtuoso leader. Thus Sheldon Wolin (1960, p. 231) contends that the prince will "render himself superfluous" and therefore "give way" to the rise of mass politics and the republic. Exactly how the founder renders himself

superfluous or how he gives way to the republic, Wolin does not say; the implication, roughly, is that he creates institutions that will subsume and outlive him. Hence the major issue, for Wolin (1960, p. 231), is whether or not the state will be capable of "generating its own momentum" after the founder is dead.⁴

Two problems beset Wolin's attempt to solve the puzzle of the transition from *The Prince* to *The Discourses*, and so to shore up the third version of the strong republican thesis. The first problem is textual: in *The Prince*, Machiavelli gives no specific advice concerning the foundation of republican institutions. Indeed, he does not deal with republics at all. On this score, we should compare *The Prince* with a later work, Machiavelli's advice to Pope Leo X, "On Reforming the State of Florence" (Pansini, 1969, pp. 633-34). There he does offer lengthy and detailed directives on the organization of a republic, and advises, among other things, the reopening of the hall of the Council of the Thousand, the redistribution of offices to the general public, and the return of a gonfalonier. Nothing even remotely similar to this appears in *The Prince*, where Machiavelli seems content to develop Lorenzo's knowledge of historical examples and his appreciation of deceit and violence, rather than his familiarity with republican *ordini*.

The second problem with Wolin's thesis is more political in nature: Would a theorist as cognizant of the vicissitudes of *fortuna* as Machiavelli content himself with the notion that "heroic politics" will somehow "give way" to mass politics, that the death of the prince will lead to the rise of the republic? Moreover, would a Florentine who knew well the personalities of the Medici princes—Giuliano (a man of little ambition, with a lack of aptitude for dealing with Florentine affairs) and Lorenzo (an unapproachable autocrat with Spanish pretensions) (Gilbert, 1984, p. 135; Hale, 1977, p.

99)—truly imagine them fit subjects for heroic politics, much less men great-hearted enough to relinquish their power after creating the conditions for a new republic?

Surely these rhetorical questions answer themselves. The history of the government of Florence, with its unpredictable oscillations between various forms of princely and republican rule, taught Machiavelli at least one lesson: that to wait (as was the Florentine habit) and expect to benefit from circumstances brings disaster. What is necessary is to act and to act boldly to change circumstances. This, in fact, is the very lesson Machiavelli teaches his prince, so it seems odd, to say the least, to assume that Machiavelli himself is willing to wait for the prince's retirement or death and expect that circumstances will, in due course, eventuate in a republic.

These last observations give us the needed purchase, I believe, to understand Machiavelli's strong republican intentions and to solve the puzzle of *The Prince*. Given the Florentine's commitment to boldness and his conviction that successful political action requires the mastery of circumstances, does it not seem plausible that *The Prince* could be read as a political act in itself, a bold attempt to change existing conditions? Despite its main fault, the Rousseauian interpretation is compelling precisely because of this—it approaches *The Prince* as praxis and renders Machiavelli a political actor as well as a political theorist. Again, however, it must be remembered that Machiavelli sent his tract to the prince and not to Piero Soderini, the deposed gonfalonier, or to his republican friends in the castle at Volterra. So the puzzle remains. If we are to be committed to a reading of Machiavelli as a strong republican and of *The Prince* as praxis—as I propose we should—then in what sense is this little book a bold attempt to alter circumstances? How is the author of *The*

Prince to be reconciled with the author of *The Discourses*?

These questions can be answered only if we remember Machiavelli's awareness of the advantages of crafty assault, and consider another, arguably more plausible, interpretative possibility: that *The Prince* is not simply about deception, but is itself an act of deception, and that this theorist of deceit is at the same time a practitioner of that very art. In other words, *The Prince* is a tract that in fact aims to restore a republic, though in appearance it dedicates itself to maintaining a principdom. Machiavelli indeed intends this book for the Medici. Thus, his deception resides not in exposing princely tricks to republicans, but in something far more crafty: he intends for a gullible and vain-glorious prince to heed the duplicitous advice of *The Prince*, and thereby take actions that will jeopardize his power and bring about his demise. Thus, even as Machiavelli (*P*, p. 65) tells Lorenzo that "one who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived," he is deceiving Lorenzo. Even as he presses upon the prince the need to establish a relationship to others that is unknown to them, Machiavelli places Lorenzo in exactly this relation to himself. Even as he offers his Medici a "humble testimony of devotion," Machiavelli devises a plot, a series of moves that, if followed, will lead Lorenzo to disaster.

This reasoning presumes, of course, that Machiavelli was a decided enemy of the Medici, and that he intended his advice to be followed to its damning letter. We will turn to that shortly. First we need to consider how, in the course of *The Prince*, this master of political deception sets his trap, disguises his own true aims, and makes Lorenzo his *mannerino*.

Trapping the Prince

Machiavelli's conception of politics in *The Prince* is quite clearly drawn from his

understanding of and experience in the art of war. Politics, like warfare, is a vicious struggle to gain control, to dominate and conquer opposing forces, to battle one's way to victory over the enemy. Machiavelli (*P*, p. 53) thus advises his prince to "have no other aim or thought . . . but war and its organization and discipline." That art alone is necessary for glory in politics. The organizer of the Florentine civilian militia also knows that though there is "no comparison" between the armed and the disarmed man, success in war depends upon more than brute assault by sheer force of arms (*P*, p. 54). Machiavelli (1965) recommends another sort of assault in *The Art of War*:

Where the nature of the terrain is such that you cannot draw the enemy into an ambush easily, you may, however, dig ditches and pitfalls in the plains, cover them over lightly with brushwood and clods and leave areas of solid ground through which you may retire in the heat of battle; if the enemy pursues, he is undone. (1965, p. 118)

Thus, for the general and the prince, the art of war and the art of politics require a knowledge of crafty assault as well as of armed combat. The political actor must be as skilled at setting traps as he is at bold, ferocious attack, for when one is foiled by "terrain" and unable to ambush easily, it may be necessary to deceive.

The political terrain of Florence in 1512 was not advantageous for Machiavelli. No "easy ambush" of the Medici lords was possible, and therefore we might remember Machiavelli's advice to generals in such situations: employ strategy and deception and your enemy will be undone. *The Prince* is Machiavelli's stratagem, an act of assault in the form of deception. As has been recognized for centuries, the text itself provides areas of "solid ground," or firm advice a new prince in a new territory can rely upon to gain and maintain his power. What has been missed, however, is Machiavelli's deceit. Amidst this solid advice he prepares "ditches and pitfalls" in

the form of subversive directives for his Medici lord, which he then covers over with promises of power, glory, and popular support. This deceptive advice to Lorenzo concerns three decisive matters for a prince: where to live, how to behave, and whom to arm. If we read Machiavelli's counsel to the prince with historical information at hand, its subversive character begins to appear. If we read it with a complete understanding of Lorenzo de Medici's circumstances in Florence, the conclusion seems obvious: Machiavelli is out to undo this enemy of the republic. Let us consider what he says.

Where to Live

Machiavelli begins *The Prince* by stating that his subject matter concerns monarchies, not republics (*P*, p. 5). This is surely disingenuous, for although his discussion of kinds of principalities and how they are acquired and kept (*P*, pp. 5-41) focuses primarily on princely power and not popular governance, one of his main categories of principality is the former republic. Machiavelli says that of all the new princes, the one who becomes ruler of a once-free city faces the most overwhelming difficulties, and he devotes a short chapter (*P*, pp. 18-19) to explaining princely options in such a situation. We, like Machiavelli, might expect that Lorenzo, a new prince in a former republic, would be particularly interested in this chapter, so we should note what Machiavelli prescribes when he addresses "the way to govern cities or dominions that, previous to being occupied, lived under their own laws" (*P*, p. 18). Machiavelli offers the prince in a formerly free state three choices: he may either despoil, live within, or restore the freedoms of the occupied city. He then discounts the third alternative by appealing to history: The Romans unsuccessfully tried to hold Greece and, at the same time, allow her freedom; hence, their only recourse was

to lay waste and despoil the country as they had done in Capua, Carthage, and Numantia. The paradox is not lost on Machiavelli—in order to maintain power in a former republic, one must destroy it. What renders such extreme measures necessary is the character of the citizenry of a subjugated republic: “They do not and cannot cast aside the memory of their ancient liberty,” Machiavelli warns, but then he concludes his chapter by offering the second option as another resort. If the prince can neither “lay waste” to the city nor restore its freedoms, then he must reside in it (*P*, p. 19).

Upon first reading, Machiavelli’s advice in chapter 5 seems solid. Indeed, he does not even bother to defend it. In chapter 3, on “mixed monarchies,” he argues that a prince’s residence within his conquered territory renders possession “more secure and durable” (*P*, p. 8) and allows for the immediate remedy of disorder, and in chapter 6, he reiterates that the maintenance of power is facilitated by a prince “being obliged to reside personally in his own territory” (*P*, p. 21). Yet there is something curious, even contradictory, about his advice in chapter 5. Before he counsels residence, Machiavelli unequivocally states that “whoever becomes the ruler of a free city and does not destroy it, can be expected to be destroyed by it.” A motive for rebellion against the prince, he argues, can always be found in “the name of liberty,” which republican citizens cannot cast aside (*P*, p. 18).

If this is the case, then what should we make of his advice? It seems that a prince who lives within a conquered republic would stand to lose rather than benefit, particularly if the people have not forgotten “the name of liberty.” A prince within a city is easier to find and destroy than one who lives in a country villa, as had been the habit of the Medici family; they maintained a palace within Florence but spent much of their time in their villas—Careggi, Cafaggiolo, Castello, Fiesole,

Poggio a Caiano—outside the city (Burkhardt, 1958, p. 399; Wackernagel, 1981). Machiavelli’s advice seems designed to change the residential practice of the family by strategically placing the prince inside the city’s walls. Yet at the same time it seems to run counter to his warning about the vengeful nature of former republicans—why should a prince live in their midst?

Perhaps our perspective is not yet complete. Machiavelli may be determined to assure Lorenzo’s power by offering further advice on how to neutralize the “desire for vengeance” and the love of liberty that inflame republican hearts, so that even though the prince resides within the city, he will be secure. Machiavelli does give advice on this score, but what he says is curious indeed.

How to Behave

If any one piece of advice occurs repeatedly in *The Prince*, it is Machiavelli’s dictum that the ruler should always strive to gain the favor of the people. In chapter 9, “Of the civic principality,” Machiavelli tells Lorenzo to reject the “trite proverb” that, “He who builds on the people builds on mud,” for the prince who animates the masses will find “he has laid his foundations well” (*P*, p. 38). Machiavelli reiterates this point in various ways throughout the treatise (*P*, pp. 60, 61, 63, 67, 71, 75, 76, 80). Because the friendship of the people is the prince’s “main resource” in times of adversity, he must avoid incurring their hatred in order to insure against conspiracy or ruin; this is “one of the most important matters a prince has to confront” (*P*, p. 67). Machiavelli acknowledges that princes cannot always avoid being hated by someone, but it is best if those who hate him not be the people (*P*, p. 67). In a new age, then, all princes (except the Turk and the Sultan) ought to aim at satisfying the *popolani*. Implicit is a corollary Machia-

velli makes explicit in his chapter on civic principalities: be wary of the nobility. The nobles are portrayed as untrustworthy, dishonest, greedy, and dangerous. Machiavelli writes:

[F]rom hostile nobles [the prince] has to fear not only desertion but their active opposition, and as they are always more far-seeing and more cunning, they are always in time to save themselves and take sides with one who they expect to conquer. (*P*, pp. 36-37)

Hence the wise prince will, when possible, esteem his nobles, but more often he will be suspicious of them. The people provide a far firmer foundation for power.

Before we accept the astuteness of Machiavelli's advice to Lorenzo, we should recall this Medici's situation. As we shall see, the Florentine people were not well inclined toward the new Medici. The mood of the city had changed markedly since the days of *il Magnifico*. The Florentines had become accustomed to a republic; what opposition there was to it came primarily from the aristocracy. It seems, then, that an astute advisor would have told Lorenzo to turn for support to the very class Machiavelli tells him to suspect—the *ottimati*. All the more curious is Machiavelli's own acknowledgement of this elsewhere (though not to Lorenzo in *The Prince*). In his document to Pope Leo X, "On Reforming the State of Florence," Machiavelli tells the Pope what would have to be done if a prince wished to turn the city into a monarchy:

[I]n Florence where there is a great sense of equality, one would first have to introduce inequality and create nobles with castles and villas, who would join the prince in suppressing the city and the whole province with their armies and factions. A prince alone, without the nobles, cannot bear the weight of a monarchy. (Pansini, 1969, p. 20)

Despite the fact that *The Prince* is (ostensibly) dedicated to a prince who wishes to maintain his power, nowhere in the treatise does Machiavelli offer Lorenzo the advice he gives Pope Leo. In

fact, he says exactly the opposite and issues warnings about trusting nobles and alienating the people. Of course, it may be that between 1512 and 1521 Machiavelli simply changed his mind on the subject of whose favor the prince should seek, but before we draw this conclusion we might look at another aspect of his advice on how to behave.

Machiavelli takes up the subject "Of liberality and niggardliness" in chapter 16. In advising the prince on how to behave, he again reminds him of the importance of not being hated by the people, observing that

one who wishes to obtain the reputation of liberality among men, must not omit every kind of sumptuous display, and to such an extent that a prince of this character will consume by such means all his resources and will be at last compelled, if he wishes to maintain his name for liberality, to impose heavy taxes on his people, become extortionate, and do everything possible to obtain money. This will make his subjects begin to hate him. (*P*, p. 58)

To underscore his warning against liberality (*liberalita*), Machiavelli concludes the chapter by saying, "of all things that a prince must guard against, the most important are being despicable or hated, and liberality will lead you to one or other of these conditions" (*P*, p. 60). Thus, the prince (who has already noted the danger of alienating the people) will agree to practice "niggardliness" (*parsimonia*)—it is one of the vices that secures his power. However, we have evidence to suggest that Machiavelli's warning against liberality in *The Prince* is more a matter of republican sympathies than helpful advice, for in *The History of Florence* he reveals how the Medici benefitted from liberality.

Book 8 of Machiavelli's *History* relates, among other things, the famous tale of the Pazzi conspiracy against *il Magnifico*, Lorenzo de Medici, in 1478. The details of the attempted but unsuccessful plot against Lorenzo's life need not concern us,

but what Machiavelli says about the outcome of the conspiracy is instructive. One of the elements of the plan called for Francesco Pazzi to ride to the gates of the city in the aftermath of Lorenzo's assassination, calling the people to liberty and to arms. However, events took a different turn. Francesco was wounded in the attempt to kill the prince, and it fell to his uncle, Iacopo, to sound the alarm. Machiavelli explains and analyzes the failure of this final effort by the Pazzi in the following way:

Iacopo rode out with perhaps a hundred men who had been prepared for this job, to make this last trial of their fortune, and he went to the Palace square calling the people and liberty to his aid. *But the first had been deafened by fortune and the liberality of the Medici* and the second was unknown in Florence, so there was no response. (1970, p. 273, emphasis added)

It is impossible to miss Machiavelli's conclusion—the liberality of the Medici had garnered the people's support. Indeed, the family's practiced munificence and heavy public spending had deafened the Florentines to the *cri de coeur* of the republic—that is, to liberty.

Armed with Machiavelli's analysis of this event, we can now read his advice in chapter 16 of *The Prince* in a different light. His injunction against liberality is intended to deprive Lorenzo of a tactic that had worked exceedingly well for the Medici in the past. As Machiavelli sees it, a liberal prince can spend, then depend on the people's goodwill, a miserly one cannot. It seems, then, that even as he assures Lorenzo that miserliness will win him public support and keep him from being hated, Machiavelli takes steps to guarantee that the name of liberty is not forgotten in Florence—and it is in liberty that citizens of a former republic "can always find a motive for rebellion" (P, p. 19). Yet, as Machiavelli knows, rebellion may come to naught unless there are good arms to strengthen it. We must now consider his advice on arms.

Whom to Arm

In chapter 20 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli takes up the matter of "whether fortresses and other things which princes often contrive are useful or injurious." Allan Gilbert (1938, p. 162) has noted this chapter's "un-Machiavellian" advice to the ruler about how to gain the support of the people, but let us take another look. The chapter begins with a review of what princes who want "to hold their possessions securely" have done, and Machiavelli notes that no "definitive judgment" is possible on these matters (P, p. 77). Conditions and circumstances vary and require different responses. But, then he issues a most definitive statement:

A new prince has never been known to disarm his subjects, on the contrary, when he has found them disarmed he has always armed them, for by arming them these arms become your own, those that you suspected become faithful and those that were faithful remain so, and from being merely subjects become your partisans. (P, p. 77)⁵

As if to leave no further doubt on the matter, Machiavelli goes on to argue that the new prince who disarms his subjects offends them and generates hatred toward himself. As we have seen, he has taken care to prepare the solid ground for this advice by telling the prince that the hatred of the people is precisely what he must avoid; one of his most potent remedies against conspiracy is not being hated by the masses. Therefore, Machiavelli concludes, "a new prince in a new dominion always has his subjects armed. History is full of such examples" (P, p. 78). His advice on this score follows from chapter 14, where the prince has been warned of the evils of being disarmed, and from chapter 12, where the prince has been told of the disastrous consequences of hiring mercenary and auxiliary troops.

On the surface, perhaps, Machiavelli's advice on arms seems sound, even "un-Machiavellian," but that impression begins to blur if we consider a seemingly

obvious point. Machiavelli's suggestion that the granting of arms inspires loyalty and makes partisans out of subjects, if taken to be sincere, fails to account for the possibility, indeed the probability, that arms may also facilitate plots, incite insurrection, and inspire rebels. The new prince who arms his subjects may just as easily make himself a mark for overthrow by creating the very instrument of his own destruction, namely, a civilian militia. Moreover, earlier in the treatise, when Machiavelli discusses such virtuous new princes as Francesco Sforza in Milan or Cesare Borgia in the Romagna, he makes no mention of their having armed their subjects, doubtless because they did not. His bold claim that "history is full of such examples" is followed by no examples at all, an odd omission for a thinker who is otherwise so willing to present specific historical examples for the prince to emulate.

Most curious of all, however, is Machiavelli's omission of a historical example that would have meant much to Lorenzo. In a letter written to Piero Soderini at the same time he was composing *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1961) makes mention of some causal histories that have led various princes to greatness, and notes that

Lorenzo de Medici disarmed the people to hold Florence; Messer Giovanni Bentivogli in order to hold Bologna armed them; the Vitelli in Castello and the present Duke of Urbino in his territory destroyed the fortresses in order to retain their states; Count Francesco and many others built them in their territories to make themselves sure of them. (1961, p. 98)

Machiavelli cites the Bentivogli, the Vitelli, and Francesco Sforza in his discussion of the things princes contrive in chapter 20, but he never acknowledges the example of Lorenzo de Medici, a new prince who disarmed his subjects in order to hold them. Surely this is odd, for of all the historical examples for the younger

Lorenzo to emulate, his grandfather would have been the best. Not only was *il Magnifico* the most artful *principe* of the Medicean line, he was also the most brilliant secular figure of the age, both loved and feared by the Florentines. But quite clearly, the example of Lorenzo the Magnificent directly contradicts Machiavelli's advice on arming subjects, and Machiavelli appears content to omit this piece of information in his "definitive" advice to the new prince.

The issue here, however, is not simply whether new princes have in the past routinely armed their subjects and, in essence, created civilian militias. At issue is another, more immediately historical matter: is Machiavelli's advice wise counsel for a Medici in Florence? From what we know of the history of the city, the answer to this question can only be no.

In Florence, the idea of liberty was deeply rooted in political tradition. The city's sense of freedom persisted through periods of oligarchical rule, rigged elections, and partisan foreign policies. A proclamation of July 1329, passed by the *pratica* (a citizen assembly), declared that the city would never submit to the autocratic rule of one man, "since liberty is a celestial good which surpasses all the wealth of this world" (Rubinstein, 1968, p. 450). That "celestial good" was what the Florentines believed contributed to their greatness. Coupled with this tradition of republican liberty, the Florentines had a history of strong opposition to the Medici, which grew particularly virulent in the mid-fifteenth century. In an oath sworn in May of 1466, 400 citizens over the age of 14 declared a political program of opposition to Medici rule that demanded, in part, that citizens "be free to debate and judge public and popular government" (Rubinstein, 1968, p. 458). Nor were the Florentines without individual voices raised in defiance of the Medici usurpation of liberty. In his

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Laudatio Florentinae Urbis, Leonardo Bruni declared, "nothing can be achieved by the covetousness of single citizens against the will of so many men," and suggested safeguards against autocratic power (Rubinstein, 1968, p. 446). Alamanno Rinuccini published *De libertate*, a powerful attack on Medici tyranny (Rubinstein, 1968, pp. 461-62), and Girolamo Machiavelli, Niccolo's great-granduncle, was tortured and executed for his part in leading the opposition to Medicean measures instituted under the rule of Cosimo (Machiavelli, 1970, p. 218; Ridolfi, 1963, p. 2).

There is no reason to suspect that this opposition to the Medici or the spirit of Florentine republicanism itself had softened or disappeared by 1512, or that Machiavelli was unaware of it. Without question, the republic was anything but stable and secure; internal struggles between the middle class and the aristocracy were unending, making institutional reform immensely difficult and external affairs precarious. By 1510, Piero Soderini, the gonfalonier, was out of favor; the aristocracy was pressing for his removal from office and for a return to *governo stretto*, though not for an end to the republic. There is, in fact, little evidence to suggest that there was any popular sentiment favoring the return of the Medici, nor is there any indication that the Medici's assumption of power was generated in any major way by forces within the city.⁶ No doubt the family had allies among a small number of wealthy families and some younger aristocrats who stood to gain commercially and politically from the decline of the republic (Brucker, 1969), but in the end, the Medici resumed their power with the aid of Spanish bayonets, not the Florentine citizenry (Gilbert, 1984; Hale, 1977; Schevill, 1936). The fact that, once installed in power, the princes kept foreign troops in the city and guards at the palace indicates that they felt some uncertainty

about their popularity. Perhaps this is why the younger Lorenzo, unlike his grandfather, *il Magnifico*, rarely ventured into public places to mingle and meet with the citizens. When he did, he was accompanied by armed guards (Gilbert, 1984, p. 108).

With respect to the matter of arms and Florence, let us further consider Machiavelli's advice to Lorenzo on fortresses, for it is as curious as his advice on arming the citizenry. In fact, his injunction against a fortress, when read in light of Florentine republicanism, also seems far more in keeping with the interests of the republic than with those of the Medici.

In chapter 20, Machiavelli tells Lorenzo that "a prince who fears his own people more than foreigners ought to build fortresses, but he who has greater fear of foreigners than of his people ought to do without them" (*P*, pp. 80-81). This is clever strategy, considering that Machiavelli has previously condemned the prince who fears his own people, and has stressed the danger of placing too much trust in foreign powers. Hence, the prince who can read at all cannot help but decide, as Machiavelli would have it, not to build a fortress. More metaphorically, the best fortress is to be found in the "love of the people" (*P*, p. 81).

Militarily, Machiavelli's counsel on fortresses runs counter to the prevailing views in Tuscany in the early Renaissance. Fortresses were considered useful in defending a dominion from outside enemies. In opposition to this, Machiavelli argues that a *fortezza* is useless and cites the example of the Castello Sforzesco, which gave "more trouble to the house of Francesco Sforza than any other disorder in the state" (*P*, p. 81).⁷ At best, Machiavelli's military analysis of this matter is exceedingly thin. He seems more interested in the internal, political implications of this strategy, rather than the external military ones. Again, we must examine what such an internal strategy

would mean in the context of Florence under a Medici lord.

If the tradition of liberty distinguished Florentine republicanism in a political sense, then the walls of the city marked her republicanism in a strategic one (Hale, 1968, p. 502). The Florentines were notoriously wary of the subject of fortresses within the city. A *fortezza* symbolized the antithesis of republicanism, signaling the demise of popular governance and the emergence of an inner power elite by providing an autocrat with an impregnable stronghold. Observing the circumstances of neighboring city states, the Florentines saw that princes often constructed fortresses in the name of military security, but in fact used them for purposes of domestic oppression. Not surprisingly, then, the Florentines, with their strong republican traditions, viewed the building of a fortress as both a symbolic and a literal danger.

Machiavelli shares this suspicion. In a letter to Guicciardini, written in 1526, he equates the building of a fortress with the enslavement of the Florentines and warns that "the most harmful thing a republic can undertake is to enact something strong or that easily can be made strong within its body" (Machiavelli, 1961, p. 235). He goes on to observe that, if a fortress existed in Florence, "any powerful man" who conquered the city would, upon entering, find it a convenient stronghold, and the Florentines "would become slaves without any protection" (Machiavelli, 1961, p. 235).⁸ These observations raise yet another puzzle. If Machiavelli is so convinced of the danger a fortress poses to a free Florence and of the advantages it holds for a prince, then why, when devising a strategy for the Medici, does he not recommend the building of a *fortezza*? Indeed, what would a Medici prince who is backed by Spanish troops in a city under siege stand to gain by not fortifying himself? Yet in the face of such facts, and knowing the

problems a fortress would present for republican activity, Machiavelli does not recommend that Lorenzo build one; nor does he recommend any strategies of "containment" other than the "love of the people." How can we account for this puzzling advice on arms and fortresses?

The mystery or oddity of Machiavelli's treatment of arms and fortresses can be explained in only one way. He offers Lorenzo advice on security, with the intention of delivering him into republican hands. Machiavelli has not lost sight of the reality of Florentine politics; he knows full well what the consequences will be if Lorenzo resides in the city, foregoes liberality, arms the people, distrusts the nobles, refuses a fortress, and mingles "from time to time" with the Florentines. In a city where "the desire for vengeance" runs deep and "the memory of ancient liberty" shines bright, an "unarmed prophet" is never fully secure; an unwanted prince who arms his subjects and does not protect himself is even less likely to survive. As his "advice book" proceeds, Machiavelli's warning in chapter 5, "whoever becomes the ruler of a free city and does not destroy it, can be expected to be destroyed by it," (*P*, p. 18) takes on the character of prophecy. Lorenzo will not destroy Florence; that much is clear. His only alternative (if he takes Machiavelli's counsel) is to reside in the city. Once therein, Machiavelli will have him adopt policies that are, in fact, republican snares designed to entrap him. He will be destroyed. These are the "ditches and pit-falls" that lie beneath the seemingly solid ground of Machiavelli's advice to his Medici lords.

Machiavelli and "The New Sons of Brutus"

If I read it aright, *The Prince* is itself an act of political deception. In addition to the deceitful "advice" in the text itself,

signs of crafty assault are also to be found outside Machiavelli's text, and all point in only one direction: not only was Machiavelli no friend of the Medici; he was a decided enemy. He believed that the Florentine republic had to rid itself of their control if it was to revive and flourish. Other documentary sources and Machiavelli's own political biography help shore up my case.

Among Machiavelli scholars, it is generally agreed that in 1513 he was concerned with getting into the Medici's good graces, finding employment, and returning to active political life. According to Quentin Skinner (1981, p. 21), "As soon as he came out of prison, Machiavelli began scheming to recommend himself to the city's new authorities." To insure the success of his scheming, Machiavelli wrote numerous letters to his friend, the erstwhile republican Francesco Vettori, now the Medici's ambassador to Pope Julius II and Machiavelli's only access to the corridors of power. At every turn, the political exile appears eager to ingratiate himself to the Medici and, through Vettori, to assure the family of his trustworthiness, his honesty, and his support. In the famous letter of December 10, 1513, Machiavelli (1961, p. 142) tells Vettori of his "little work" *On Princedoms* and of his intention to offer it to the new prince, Giuliano, in the hope that the prince will welcome it and make use of the talents of the author. The dedicatory pages of *The Prince* seem to provide further evidence that Machiavelli was concerned with promoting the greatness of the Medici and with assuring their success through the benefit of his knowledge of the "art of the state."

That Machiavelli was a schemer is beyond doubt. Nor does there seem to be any question that he was eager to have *The Prince* gain the eye and approval of Giuliano and, later, Lorenzo. However, those who are tempted to read *The Prince* as so much Machiavellian opportunism

would do well to consider what Machiavelli has to say in *The Discourses* about "the sagacity and severity of Junius Brutus," the "father of Roman liberty" (*D*, p. 402). We will return to the severity of Brutus shortly. Let us first consider his sagacity.

In book 3, chapter 2 of *The Discourses*, Machiavelli notes that more than anyone else, Junius Brutus deserves to be esteemed for his "simulation of folly" (*D*, p. 403). Having neither the arms nor the forces to mount an open war against the kings of Rome, Brutus instead ingratiated himself with those in power. On this matter, Machiavelli takes issue with Livy's interpretation of Brutus's motives and suggests a reading of his own:

Titus Livius gives but one reason that induced Brutus to this simulation, namely, that he might live in greater security and preserve his patrimony, yet if we well consider his conduct we are led to believe that he had another reason, which was that by thus avoiding observation he would have a better chance of destroying the kings and of liberating his country, whenever an opportunity should offer. (*D*, p. 403)

Clearly, Machiavelli not only holds Brutus in great esteem for his simulation of folly, but also for his commitment to liberating his country, and he offers Brutus as a model for others who are "dissatisfied with their ruler." In Machiavellian terms, if one cannot play the lion and threaten the prince directly by force of arms, then one must be a fox and undermine the enemy from within. "It is advisable . . . at times to feign folly, as Brutus did," Machiavelli writes, "and this is sufficiently done by praising, speaking, seeing and doing things contrary to your way of thinking and merely to please the prince" (*D*, p. 404).

Interpreters of Machiavelli should be wary of repeating Livy's mistake about Brutus, and so avoid being tricked by appearances. If Machiavelli had designs on the Medici, as I think he did, then it seems reasonable to expect that he would seek to

prove himself a trustworthy advisor, and so get the Medici to follow his advice. If we keep Machiavelli's praise of Brutus's sagacity in mind, then his own flattery of Lorenzo and his appeals to Vettori seem even less likely to be matters of simple opportunism, and rather more deeply political. Like Brutus, Machiavelli trades on the appearance of friendship and admiration for his ruler; he "feigns folly" for a political purpose—to ingratiate himself to Lorenzo, thereby earning his trust so that the prince might be destroyed—much as Junius Brutus destroyed the kings and restored the liberty of Rome.

There are other reasons to question whether Machiavelli was so monomaniacally consumed with getting his old job back that he simply shed his republican sympathies and dedicated himself to serving Florence's Medici lords. First, there is the political history of the Machiavelli family itself. Though family legacy need not determine one's loyalties, it generally serves as a source of personal identity as well as of reflection, particularly in an age where a family's identification with the political order is of great and lasting importance. Machiavelli himself points out in a chapter in *The Discourses*—straightforwardly entitled "Reasons why the same family in a city always preserves the same character"—that what a youth hears praised or censured within his family "becomes afterwards the rule of his life for all time" (*D*, p. 535). As Machiavelli's biographer tells us, the Machiavelli were an old Florentine family, noted for their active participation in Florentine public life and, most significantly, for their devotion to the republic. They gave the city some 12 gonfalonieri and 54 priors (Ridolfi, 1963, p. 2). As I have noted, Girolamo Machiavelli died in prison because he dared to speak out against the oligarchy of Cosimo de Medici, and another Machiavelli, Francesco, was remembered for a public speech in 1424 that condemned tyranny and praised

liberty: "The enjoyment of freedom makes cities and citizens great: this is well known. But places under tyranny become deserted by their citizens and engage in their extermination" (Pitkin, 1984, p. 204). Whether Machiavelli knew of Francesco's speech is uncertain, but its sentiments were in all likelihood passed on, for they are clearly evocative of some of the central tenets of *The Discourses*.

In short, there seems little question that the Machiavelli family viewed Piero de Medici's ouster in 1494 (when Niccolò was 25) and the revival of republicanism more favorably than did the aristocratic Tournabuoni, Guicciardini, Strozzi, or Neroni families, who feared for their interests under a radically republican regime. Also, the sentiments of Florence itself were generally more "Machiavellian" than aristocratic. Piero's three attempts to return forcibly were met with armed resistance from the citizenry. Effectively defeated in 1498—the year Niccolò was appointed Second Chancellor—the Medici finally ceased plotting against the republic, retired to their country villas, and left *fortuna* to do what they could not.

In compiling evidence of Machiavelli's animus toward the Medici, we must, secondly, consider some crucial events in his own life, as well as the wary view the Medici took of him. Although the family was a suspicious lot, they were not wholly indiscriminating in their purge of republicans. Thus, when the chancery was reorganized in 1512, the First Chancellor, Marcello Virgilio, was allowed to remain in office (Hale, 1961, p. 134). In fact, Machiavelli was the only chancery official dismissed by the Medici (Gilbert, 1984, p. 173).⁹ Without doubt, the Medici regarded Machiavelli with considerable suspicion. As we know, nearly a decade later they granted him a modest stipend to write his Florentine history, but even though his literary skills were gaining fame, his political trustworthiness was

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still very much in doubt. Indeed, the family never allowed him back into any position of political power.

We must also remember the Boscoli-Capponi affair. A few months after his removal from office, Machiavelli was implicated in a conspiracy against Giuliano when his name was found on a list in the possession of one of the two young conspirators. The Medici imprisoned and tortured him on the rack but found out nothing (Mattingly, 1958, p. 485). Machiavelli may have been ignorant of the plot, but it is a significant political fact that the anti-Mediceans surely perceived him to be a potential ally, one who might be counted on for support had the assassination succeeded.

Nine years later, in 1522, Machiavelli again fell under suspicion following the abortive plot to assassinate Cardinal Giulio de Medici. The plot was organized by two of his closest friends, Zanobi Buondelmonti (to whom he had dedicated *The Discourses* a few years earlier) and Luigi Alamanni, a poet and fellow member of the Oricellari circle. In 1524, one of the accomplices revealed that Buondelmonti had mentioned Machiavelli's name as one of several citizens who should be invited to join the plot (Ridolfi, 1963, p. 203), but by then the dust had settled. Buondelmonti and Alamanni had fled the country, two others had been executed, and Machiavelli was in refuge in San Casciano, writing his Florentine history.

For all we know, Machiavelli may have or may not have been involved in either or both of these conspiracies. Assuming, conservatively, that he was not, we can read this noninvolvement either as a sign that he was loath to conspire against and more willing to work with the Medici in order to stabilize Florence, or as a sign of his wariness about the success of conspiracies in general, even if he wanted to see the Medici removed from power. What Machiavelli writes appears to substantiate

the latter view, at least in part. His famous chapter on conspiracies in *The Discourses* (which Buondelmonti must have read), though filled with advice on how to conspire, is replete with warnings about the slim chances conspirators have for success (*D*, pp. 410–36). And in his history, Machiavelli writes, in reference to attempted assassinations of the Medici, that “because conspiracies rarely succeed, they most often bring about the ruin of those who plan them and they bring greatness to those against whom they are directed” (*D*, p. 263). We might expect, then, that Machiavelli's reluctance (if reluctance it was) to participate in conspiracies owed more to caution than to allegiance. Indeed, his republican friends must have taken his noninvolvement in their conspiracies (if again, noninvolvement it was) in this latter light, for in 1527, when the Medici were once again forced from Florence, Buondelmonti and Alamanni, now returned, supported their friend's appeal for employment in the restored republic, at a time when the “enemies of the republic,” Guicciardini and Vettori among them, were being called into court (Gilbert, 1984; Ridolfi, 1963).

Apart from *The Prince*, Machiavelli's writings provide us with some final clues about his attitude toward the Medici. What he writes in reference to the family and their supporters is decidedly negative, although his true opinion is not always immediately apparent—nor could it be. These were treacherous times and one risked imprisonment, or worse, if one spoke too critically of the Medici lords or their policies. Political tracts and correspondence had to be crafted slyly; an enemy of the regime had to know how to appear to be loyal, even though he actually was not.¹⁰

Machiavelli practices this political strategy in the *History of Florence*. The work was not simply an intellectual endeavor; there were political implica-

tions as well, since it had been commissioned by Cardinal Guilio, a member of the Medici family. Machiavelli was not unaware of the delicacy of his task. He wrote to Guicciardini asking for advice on what to say about the family and how to say it. Then he concluded, "I . . . shall try to act in such a way that, since I tell the truth, nobody will be able to complain" (Machiavelli, 1961, p. 206). What we find in the history, particularly in the sections devoted to the Medici, is truth telling of a particularly "Machiavellian" kind. There are numerous flattering references to the Medici, to be sure. Machiavelli calls Cosimo, "the most famous and respected citizen . . . who ever lived," describes Piero de Medici as a man of "*virtù* and goodness" and a great citizen, and extolls Lorenzo the Magnificent's beneficence, his contribution to the city, his dignity, and his property, "worthy of a King" (Machiavelli, 1970, pp. 220, 246, 315-17). In short, Machiavelli's truth telling seems designed to cast the Medici in the best possible light, and to play to the cardinal's family pride.

A closer reading, however, reveals a different sort of truth telling. If we put Machiavelli's assessment of the Medici princes in the context of some of his more general comments on the corruption of Florence, the family does not fare so well. At the start of book 7, where he shifts from a consideration of foreign affairs to "troubles at home," Machiavelli notes that the unity of a city is threatened most by the presence of factions and partisans. Citizens, he says, can make a reputation either publicly or privately. The latter course is reprehensible, for "this sort of behavior gives rise to factions and partisans, and a reputation won in this way is as offensive as the other kind is valuable" (Machiavelli, 1970, pp. 214-15). The tactics employed by private citizens include doing good to various other citizens, helping someone with money, getting him undeserved honors, and beguiling the

lower classes with public benefactions and amusements. In short, the private citizen creates a coterie of "hangers-on," as Machiavelli puts it, in order to advance his own personal goals. Machiavelli's tone indicates his contempt for such activity and for citizens such as these, who contribute to the corruption of cities like Florence.

We need only match Machiavelli's description of the offensive behavior of private citizens with his ostensible praise of the Medici to see that in extolling the princes he is actually condemning them. By his account, the Medici are private citizens; they corrupt the republic by playing to factions. Liberality was Cosimo's forte. We have already seen that Machiavelli thinks liberality deafens a people to the cry of liberty and lulls them into forgetting their freedom. Lorenzo dispensed pensions and aid to the nobility and put on tournaments and pageants for the populace, tactics used by the private citizen in order to foster partisan support. It is Machiavelli's lengthy account of Piero's short-lived regime, however, that best captures his aversion for Medici maneuvers, for he gives there a detailed picture of the ravages of factional and party circumstances that plagued Florence during the Medici years (1970, pp. 228-41). In various ways, then, Machiavelli shows us how circumstances at once necessary for this family's perseverance were profoundly destructive of Florence herself.

Guilio's (now Pope Clement) enthusiastic acceptance of this historical masterwork suggests that Machiavelli achieved his goal—writing a truthful account in such a way that nobody complained. He had also, however, registered a distinctively "Machiavellian" conviction, one that took the form of subtle historical analysis: in order to survive, the Florentine republic must rid itself of the Medici.¹¹

We might turn to one final piece of

written evidence. Machiavelli's conviction that the Medici were a threat to Florentine liberty surfaces in *The Discourses* as well, and returns us to his discussion of Junius Brutus. If Brutus's sagacity enabled him to restore the republic of Rome, his severity helped him to maintain it. The father of the Roman republic condemned his own sons to death because they were the enemies of liberty, even as he was liberty's defender. The lesson Machiavelli (*D*, p. 405) draws from Brutus's example is a characteristic one; whoever makes himself a tyrant and fails to kill Brutus, or restores liberty to a former republic and fails to kill the sons of Brutus, will not maintain himself for long. This seemingly nonpartisan advice is followed by an example, that of Piero Soderini, the deposed gonfalonier of Florence. Soderini realized that the "new sons of Brutus" had to be destroyed, but, as Machiavelli (*D*, p. 405) writes, he did not have the courage to do it. However, Machiavelli's story of Soderini is more than just a counterexample of the severity of Brutus; what makes it interesting is the moral gloss he adds after telling the tale of the fallen gonfalonier:

[O]ne should never allow an evil to run on out of respect for the law, especially when the law itself might easily be destroyed by the evil and [Soderini] should have born in mind that as his acts and motives would have to be judged by the result . . . everybody would have attested that what he had done was for the good of his country and not for the advancement of any ambitious purposes of his own. . . . But Soderini was the dupe of his opinions, not knowing that malignity is neither effaced by time, nor placated by gifts. So that by failing to imitate Brutus he lost at the same time his country, his state and his reputation. (*D*, p. 406)

Machiavelli's harsh judgment of Soderini can be read cynically, of course; the gonfalonier's decline was Machiavelli's as well, and he had reason to resent it. However, the nature of Machiavelli's criticism—his reference to the "evil" that threatened the country and the "malignity" that would not disappear over

time—suggests there is more at stake for him here than the mere salvaging of his reputation. When evil threatens liberty, hopes hang on the sagacity and severity of those who revere the republic. Brutus met this test; Soderini failed it, and so Florence lost her freedom. In Machiavelli's eyes, Soderini's great weakness was that he did not love the republic enough to act boldly and eliminate her enemies before they could conquer Florence and obliterate liberty.¹² Machiavelli's disdain for Soderini is outweighed only by his hatred for those whom Soderini could not destroy—those who threatened liberty—the "new sons of Brutus," the Medici and their allies.

The Prince in Perspective

I began by suggesting that Machiavelli's genius resides in his appreciation of crafty assault in all its guises—the lover's trickery, the general's stratagem, the prince's artifice—but in truth, Machiavelli directs his most penetrating attention to the actor/advisor behind the assault, the one who, observing the scene from a distance, controls the lover, the general, the prince. That is, what Machiavelli admires is a kind of Renaissance artistry—a strategic perspective—that allows for a unique conception of space or terrain, and consequently makes possible the manipulation of persons and events. Ligurio employs just such a perspective in *Mandragola*; Fabrizio exhibits it in his topographical advice to generals in *The Art of War*. But *Mandragola* and *The Art of War* are simply later versions—one dramatic, the other military—of the strategic perspective Machiavelli himself practices as advisor to the prince.

We might measure Machiavelli's success as a political advisor who sees things strategically by the labels he has earned—"political realist" and "master of *realpolitik*"—and by the statesmen and politicians, from Metternich to Kissinger, who

have adapted his strategic perspective to their own times and circumstances. Yet to stop here, as do so many of the political scientists and political actors who cite him, is to overlook a matter of deepest importance to Machiavelli, namely, the political values—republicanism and liberty—that inform his perspective as advisor to Lorenzo de Medici. When, in the introduction to *The Discourses*, Machiavelli (*D*, p. 101) tells his friends to “[look] rather to the intention of him who gives than to the thing offered,” he implicitly underscores the distinction between the apparent meaning of any given work, political counsel, or strategic perspective and its deeper purpose. To put this more broadly, political advising involves more than the capacity to analyze events or to see things as they “really are,” for the “reality” that informs the analysis is neither a neutral observation nor a scientific truth, but a perspective colored by the values, purposes, and political commitments of the advisor who offers them. When these are at odds with the interests of those in power, the advisor may choose to retire, to capitulate, to oppose openly, or (as Ligurio puts it) “to pursue deceit to its envisioned dearest goal” (Machiavelli, 1957, p. 38) by painting a particular vision of reality for the ruler whom he or she counsels, with a precise purpose in mind. The latter is Machiavelli’s strategy as advisor in *The Prince*; his purpose is the restoration of republican liberty.

I want to argue, then, that there is more involved in Machiavelli’s advice in his little treatise than a presentation of *realpolitik*, but at the same time suggest that his deeper purpose—to deceive—is not at odds with reading *The Prince* either in terms of a new science or as a work of Renaissance artistry. By way of clarification, let us consider how Machiavelli himself depicts his perspective in *The Prince* and thereby gain one final interpretative clue to his aims and intentions.

In his dedication to Lorenzo, Machia-

velli consciously invokes Renaissance artistry in its most literal sense, and draws an analogy between himself, the advisor to princes, and the landscape painter:

[F]or in the same way that landscape painters station themselves in the valleys in order to draw mountains or high ground and ascend an eminence in order to get a good view of the plains, so it is necessary to be a prince to know thoroughly the nature of a people and one of the populace to know the nature of princes. (*P*, p. 4)

By inviting us to recall the great innovation of Florentine painting—its attention to accurate representation of pictorial space—Machiavelli also discloses a necessary quality of the political advisor. The intellectual disposition, or, to return to Machiavelli’s visual metaphor, the “vantage point” of the advisor, must be fully dimensional and complete. It encompasses the actors and influences that populate and permeate the vast political landscape, and thus avoids the restricted perspectives of the prince or the populace, whose visions are governed solely by their respective relationships to one another. Unlike the actors he observes, the advisor stands “outside” the political canvas and integrates particulars into a sweeping contextual vision of reality. He sees actors not as isolated figures and events not as disconnected instances, but as parts of a richly constituted tapestry, a variegated field of competing interests and ambitions. The advisor’s special disposition and imagination are, then, the very opposite of the short-sightedness Machiavelli deplors as the mark of politically ineffectual men, those who cannot control events or see beyond their immediate circumstances.¹³

But, as I have argued, there is more involved in Machiavelli’s advice than a detached depiction of political reality, just as there was more involved in the Renaissance art of perspective than the achievement of pictorial veracity. In a literal sense, the discovery of perspective also introduced the art of deception to Renais-

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sance painting. Though the depiction of reality was a central concern for the painter, it did not involve a simple mirroring of the physical universe. Rather, the painter selected particular elements of the visible world, then arranged and conveyed them so as to give the illusion of reality (Brucker, 1969). This act of artistic deception involved more than a dazzling display of technical virtuosity; also vital to it was the relationship the painter forged between the illusion he presented and the person who observed it. Thinking of his canvas as a window through which he viewed the world, the artist sought to convey the illusion as reality, and to stimulate the observer's emotions and sense of possibility (Ackerman, 1969; Brucker, 1958). From "inside" the painting, the artist tantalized his observers with a seductive vista and pulled them toward a point or prospect that seemed attainable. At its most powerful, perspectival art induced the viewers into actually feeling a part of the painting, as though they could step into it and secure the prospect that beckoned them. The artist performed a feat of aesthetic manipulation even as he accomplished an act of pictorial veracity. He used his science to produce a material work of deception, an art.

In much the same way as the art of deception is a distinguishing characteristic of Renaissance perspectival painting, so it is a part of Machiavelli's strategic perspective in *The Prince*. Just as we can only appreciate the artist's act of aesthetic manipulation if we consider how the painting plays upon the observer's sensory impressions and "tactile values" (Berenson, 1909, p. 11), so we can confirm Machiavelli's act of political manipulation only if we consider how *The Prince* as text plays upon his reader's—Lorenzo de Medici's—values, desires, and sense of political possibility. Machiavelli will entice Lorenzo with a vision that will overwhelm his every other thought and distort his senses. With this in mind, we might

recall the moment in *Mandragola* where Machiavelli (1957, p. 25) offers a poetic comment on Ligurio's power and on the outrageous gullibility of old Nicia:

Our doctor here, would not suspect a lie
If he were told that jackasses can fly;
He has a heart so set on fatherhood,
That he's forgotten every other good.

Ligurio can deceive Nicia because of his strategic perspective. He knows how to play upon the old man's desires and to organize his field of choices by advancing some alternatives and concealing others. He makes the prospect of Nicia's fathering a child so palpable that this promise of living on comes to control Nicia's world, his sensibilities, and his every perception. Thus the old doctor is trapped; duped not only by Ligurio's wiles but by his own vanity, his grandiose expectations set the stage for his becoming the cuckold.

If we bring our own strategic perspective to *The Prince* and look to the relationship Machiavelli establishes between his text and its intended reader, we might see a political version of Ligurian deception at work. Machiavelli offers Lorenzo the promise of a different sort of fatherhood—the fathering of the state of Italy. Machiavelli's strategy is Ligurian—to promise greatness to the Medici lord and thus render him susceptible to the further flatteries that will, in fact, undo him. Nowhere in *The Prince* is the Ligurian strategy as evident as in the famous chapter 26. There Machiavelli paints the prospect of the prince as saviour of Italy, leader of his people, unifier of the fractious city-states, forever immortalized by his power and glory. The passion and spirit of these Machiavellian declamations have long troubled many of his interpreters, who puzzle over the marked contrast between this final chapter and the cold calculation of the rest of *The Prince*. However, the troublesomeness of chapter 26 begins to recede if we remember that technical

precision and vivid imagination were no strangers to the Renaissance painter nor, for that matter to Ligurio as he set out to trap his prey. Accordingly, we might read Machiavelli's final call to action as the "bait," or, to return once more to perspectival art, as the "vista" he offers Lorenzo. If the chapter does its work, Lorenzo, like Nicia, will "forget every other good" and so become not only Machiavelli's puppet, but the dupe of his own grandiose expectations of earthly power and political immortality.

Thus, Machiavelli sets out to manipulate the dimensions of Lorenzo's world. After presenting a particular scope of possibilities in *The Prince*, he artfully narrows the field of choices so that, in the end, the prince will live, act, and arm himself in the manner that his advisor recommends. Thus Machiavelli performs a feat of crafty assault, even as he accomplishes an act of political veracity. Lorenzo will be lured into following his advisor's dangerous counsel even as he reads this indeed unprecedented work of *realpolitik*. The beauty of the deception, were it to work, lies in Lorenzo's belief that his acts follow from his own *virtù* and seem perfectly in keeping with his aim to maintain power in life and achieve glory after death, while in reality they work to restore the republic.

Postscript

As a text, *The Prince* succeeded in securing Machiavelli's future fame and in sealing his notoriety. As a trap, it secured nothing. From all we know, Lorenzo never even read it. The republic Machiavelli wanted so passionately to see revived in Florence did indeed come later, but by different means than he envisioned and for but three short years, after which the Medici were installed in the city again. How could Machiavelli's stratagem have come to naught? How could his trap have failed to spring as he had hoped?

The deceiver himself would have a wry and ready answer: *Fortuna*, that mysterious goddess who governs half our actions, thwarted his plans and fouled his chances for success. As the chronicler tells it, on the day Machiavelli presented *The Prince* at the palace, Lorenzo was also given a gift of greyhounds, an unfortunate circumstance indeed, for the Medici lord was more intrigued with his hounds than with princely governance (Barincou, 1961, pp. 76-78). Yet there is more to the turn of fortune's wheel than this. Despite the greyhounds, it is hard to imagine why Lorenzo, a suspicious prince, would have taken this former republican, this *mannerino* of Soderini, into his confidence in the first place. Machiavelli's every attempt to appear to be other than he was in the end was no match for his unblemished reputation as a Florentine republican, and so *The Prince* remained unread and Machiavelli unsummoned, forced to return to the countryside, where he divided his days between the "ancient courts" and his favorite and altogether appropriate pastime—snaring thrushes with his bare hands (Ridolfi, 1963, p. 140).

His misfortune takes yet one more turn, however, and the story is well known. When the republic was restored in 1527, Machiavelli eagerly reapplied for his old job at the Second Chancery. The new republicans, however, were suspicious—at the least they viewed him as an untrustworthy opportunist, at the most as a pro-Medicean. They had, it seems, been more successfully duped by *The Prince* than Lorenzo himself, and they too refused to allow Machiavelli's return to political life. The irony is hard to miss: Machiavelli had, quite simply, outfoxed himself.

Whatever misfortune was dealt this master of deception, however, his designs in *The Prince* now seem clear. We need only to remember circumstances and recall what the chronicler reports on the occasion when the advice book was eclipsed by the hounds. Upon leaving the

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Medici palace, Machiavelli was said to have muttered that "though he was not a man to plot against princes, his little book would avenge him" (Barincou, 1961, p. 78). Far from avenging him, *The Prince* has for five centuries accused this Florentine patriot. His vindication is long overdue.

Notes

The research for this article was supported by a Summer Research Fellowship from the University of Minnesota. I thank Terence Ball, J. Peter Euben, James Farr, and Joan Tronto for their careful reading and helpful criticisms of my argument, and Norman Jacobson for the inspiration behind it.

1. In international relations, see Waltz (1954) and Gulick (1955); in comparative politics, see Bluhm (1965); in organization theory, see Pfeffer (1981); in political psychology, see Nardulli, Flemming, and Eisenstein (1984).

2. See, among others, Wolin (1960), Pocock (1975), Shumer (1979), Skinner (1981), Hulliung (1983), and Pitkin (1984).

3. Quotations from Machiavelli's works are cited in the text using the following abbreviations: *P*: *The Prince* (1950, pp. 3-98); *D*: *The Discourses* (1950, pp. 101-540).

4. In a related fashion, J.R. Hale (1961, p. 175) suggests that Machiavelli thought "regeneration can be best organized by a prince, but when he feels that civic virtue has been restored, he should retire." Yet surely Machiavelli would not think that a prince would simply "retire" after restoring civic virtue or, for that matter, be interested in restoring the only virtue Machiavelli considers "civic"—republicanism. He knows too much of political rulership and Renaissance Florence to expect that.

5. Machiavelli (*P*, p. 78) offers one exception to this armament rule: the prince who acquires a new state in addition to the old one where his troops are stationed should disarm the former. However, this exception does not apply to the Medici, who were in exile as private citizens before their return to Florence and in control of no "old" state.

6. Furthermore, circumstances did not change dramatically. A report on Lorenzo, made in 1515 by the Venetian ambassador, notes: "This Lorenzo has been made captain of the Florentines against their own laws. He has become ruler of Florence: he orders and is obeyed. . . . They used to cast lots; no longer . . . the majority of the Florentines have no taste for the power of the house of Medici" (Hale, 1977, p. 99).

7. Overall, Machiavelli's advice on fortresses is ambiguous and could be a short essay in itself. In *The Art of War*, Fabrizio never advises against for-

trresses; in fact, his discussion centers not upon their usefulness but upon their size, their relation to surrounding ditches, the design of portulisses, and the like. Machiavelli (1965, pp. 183-94) seems to be suggesting that fortresses are both important and necessary. In *The Discourses*, however, he appears resolutely opposed to fortresses, deeming them both "unnecessary" and "injurious" to prince and republic alike. "Good armies," he writes, will suffice instead of citadels (*D*, p. 365). The fact remains, however, that Machiavelli argues against a *fortezza* in *The Prince*, and the advice, whatever else it is, is fully in keeping with Florentine republican sensibilities.

8. Machiavelli's thesis was tested dramatically in 1534, when Alessandro de Medici not only disarmed the Florentines, but also constructed a fortress. The *Fortezza da Basso* secured Alessandro from his subjects, but not from his cousin Lorenzino, who assassinated him in bed in 1537. More importantly, however, it seems Machiavelli's prediction was accurate—Florentine republicanism was never restored. Hale (1968, p. 502) notes that the *Fortezza da Basso* was "the visible evidence that freedom was in fetters."

9. Machiavelli's dismissal seems to have been motivated by at least three factors: (1) his special friendship with Gonfalonier Soderini (he was contemptuously known as Soderini's *mannerino*); (2) the hostility of the pro-Medicean aristocracy, who never ceased viewing Machiavelli as an enemy of their class and a supporter of the republican cause; and (3) his reputation as the organizer of the Florentine civilian militia that had fought the Medici and their Spanish allies at Prato (see Gilbert, 1984, pp. 172-74; Hale, 1961, pp. 134-35; and Ridolfi, 1963, pp. 130-32).

10. Although my argument bears some similarity to that of Leo Strauss, especially as expressed in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), the differences seem to me much more important. Strauss (1952, p. 33) excepts Machiavelli's name in his list of persecuted writers, but surely Machiavelli was politically persecuted; we have the biographical evidence, and Machiavelli himself (circumspectly) expresses as much on a number of occasions (Machiavelli, *P*, p. 4; 1961, pp. 10, 104, 143-44). I suspect that Strauss did not include the Florentine in his list because of his commitment to reading Machiavelli as a teacher of evil and his writings as "immoral and irreligious" (Strauss, 1958, p. 12), a view that often blinds him to the historical context and the political and biographical circumstances we must bring to bear upon our understanding of Machiavelli's aims and intentions.

11. A number of scholars have drawn this conclusion on the basis of their reading of *The History of Florence* as so much Machiavellian dissembling (see Gilbert, 1977, pp. 82-92; Najemy, 1982, pp. 575-76; and Skinner, 1981, pp. 84-86).

12. Ridolfi (1963, p. 203) cites an epitaph Machia-

velli wrote for Soderini that gives graphic evidence of his opinion of the man who might have saved the republic but had not the *virtù* to do so:

The night Pier Soderini died
His soul went to the mouth of Hell;
And Pluto cried: Silly soul,
Why come to Hell?
Go to Limbo with the Infants.

13. Wolin (1960, pp. 21-22, 203-9) quite rightly characterizes similar attributes as part of the political theorist's vocation, Machiavelli's included. However, the tension between the role of "advisor" and the vocation of "theorist" is equally important, and though beyond the scope of this essay, deserves more concentrated attention.

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