

The New York Times
Book Review

Bookend; Formerly Known as Prince

By Jonathan Mahler

Sunday, September 3, 2000

Riding the subway home late one night this summer, I looked up from my newspaper and noticed a man in a fedora and a dark pinstriped suit -- it was dirty and frayed, but recently pressed. He was lost in a slender, well-worn paperback adorned with a familiar etching. It was Niccolo Machiavelli, peering out from the cover of his most famous work, "The Prince."

Anyone who has ever taken Government 101 would recognize this portrait: the black frock with the thin red collar; the smooth, peach-colored skin; the closely cropped brown hair descending into a dramatic widow's peak above the forehead; and finally, that mouth, curling up into what looks like a smirk.

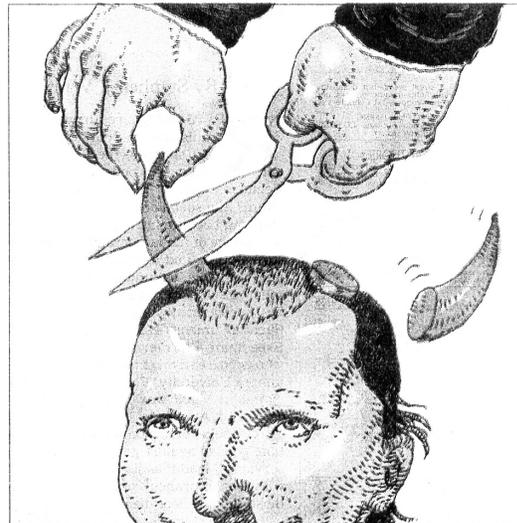
Until recently, this diminutive Italian philosopher (1469-1527) had little to smile about. Underappreciated during his lifetime, Machiavelli never got to see "The Prince" in print. When the book was posthumously published, a prominent English bishop claimed that it had been inspired by the Devil. Our founding fathers demonized the book as well, wrinkling their puritanical noses at its instructions for good governing. For much of the 20th century, American politicians invoked his name to impugn a rival's character. But those were different times: the Machiavellian Moment is now upon us.

Simply type his name into Amazon.com and you'll discover a whole trove of Machiavelliana. There's Harriet Rubin's book "The Princessa: Machiavelli for Women," written for a new generation of feminists -- Why fight like Machiavelli," Rubin asks, "when we can fight like Machiavella?" -- and Machiavelli for precocious kids. "A Child's Machiavelli: A Primer on Power" (alas, "The Little Prince" was taken) certainly looks like a children's book, with its cuddly illustrations of Peter Rabbit, but Claudia Hart's text doesn't quite conform: "Either be really nice to people or kill 'em," the author writes, and adds, "A gun is man's best friend." Put that .22 away until you've finished your homework, young man!

In the field of politics, there's Michael A. Ledeen's "Machiavelli on Modern Leadership," a conservative rehabilitation of Machiavelli arguing that his hard-headed realism is exactly what America needs now. On the other end of the ideological spectrum is "The New Prince: Machiavelli Updated for the Twenty-first Century," which claims that Machiavelli would have counseled today's politicians to simply follow the polls. The cover of "The New Prince" describes its author as Machiavelli's "modern equivalent" -- yes, it's Clinton's erstwhile consigliere, Dick Morris.

Then there's Machiavelli as self-help guru for hapless middle managers: "What Would Machiavelli Do? The Ends Justify the Meanness," described to me by its author, Stanley Bing, as "a how-to book for people who are insufficiently unkind." This fall will yield yet another book, a biography by a professor of politics at Princeton, Maurizio Viroli. Viroli assumes a radically different task: to humanize his subject. His Machiavelli is the ultimate patriot, a man whose principal concern was the freedom of his beloved Florence.

The Machiavelli industry hasn't simply domesticated the late philosopher, it has democratized him too. He's become an icon for the oppressed. The rapper Tupac Shakur recorded a CD under the name "Makaveli," and Mike Tyson studied Machiavelli while in prison.



So what is it, exactly, about 21st-century America that seems to be calling us back to Renaissance Italy? The theories that Machiavelli gave voice to in "The Prince" began germinating during his years as Florence's defense secretary. At the time, Florence was in a precarious place, caught in the middle of regional warfare between the papal states, Spain, Venice, France and the Holy Roman Empire. As the Florentine Republic's chief emissary, Machiavelli spent his days galloping from one far-flung palace to the next, attempting (usually in vain) to negotiate agreements that would keep his homeland, which at the time had no organized militia, independent.

It was, in short, a difficult time to be a prince. Today's commanders in chief can relate. After all, what's the value of military supremacy when a few casualties will turn public opinion against you? The modern president faces meddlesome news media, an aggressively partisan Congress and a public that is hostile to regulation -- a problem Machiavelli cleverly anticipated when he declared that there are two kinds of people: those who want to rule, and those who don't want to be ruled. (Consider its modern-day echo: the era of big government is over.)

Machiavelli also understood the value of spin. A prince, he wrote, must not actually be religious, but he must be able to simulate religious belief. What's more, Machiavelli knew that commanding a majority requires a certain, well, flexibility. A prince, he wrote, "needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him." Behold the birth of triangulation.

The Machiavellian Moment is by no means confined to the realm of politics. "The Prince" is a how-to book for leaders, and these days you're not likely to find our nation's most dynamic leaders in Washington. Business has replaced politics as the best means of acquiring and maintaining power, which is, at bottom, a prince's main concern. In this context, it seems fitting that "The Prince" was, in effect, an unsolicited job application. Machiavelli addressed the book to Lorenzo de' Medici in hopes of currying favor with the ruling family and gaining a government position, any position -- even, as he put it at the time, "rolling along a stone." (As it turned out, Lorenzo promptly set the book aside and never returned to it; he was more interested in two large dogs that had been presented to him on the same day.)

Machiavelli wrote that to rule is to rule alone -- uno solo -- an ideal maxim, it would seem, for the new economy, where a 20-year-old millionaire is born every day. The new economy rewards entrepreneurs, not company men. Loyalty is for suckers. Machiavelli also knew that perception is more important than reality -- men judge more by their eyes than by their hands" -- another cherished truism on Wall Street today.

Of course, things change quickly. As sure as "Machiavellian" once meant evil, "dot-com" may soon enter our lexicon as a synonym for fraud. And thanks in no small part to Bill Gates's recent run-in with the government, a rather un-Machiavellian motto seems to be gaining currency in the marketplace, one first uttered by none other than Abraham Lincoln: "Malice toward none."

So does this mean that the Machiavellian Moment has almost passed, that Niccolò Machiavelli's famous smile may soon turn into a frown?

Not necessarily. Machiavelli's most relevant legacy to us may be a good deal more timeless, more universal, than our recent fixation on his maxims would suggest. Interestingly, perhaps his most enduring insights into the human condition are to be found not in his political writings but in his personal letters, where he reflects on a life characterized not by Machiavellian triumphs but by guileless defeats. It's a life that invites neither hatred nor envy, but sympathy.

In 1513, the year Machiavelli started writing "Of Principalities," the booklet that would become known as "The Prince," he was living in forced retirement in his farmhouse in the Italian countryside. Wrongly accused of having participated in a plot to overthrow the Medici, Machiavelli had been imprisoned, tortured and beaten nearly to death before finally being released. Freedom provided little solace to poor Machiavelli. Once among Florence's great men, he had been disgraced and discarded, shut out of the affairs of state and the bustling intellectual life of Florence that had been so dear to him.

Machiavelli described his days on the farm and his method of recapturing -- if just for a moment -- the nobility of his life as it had been in a letter to a friend. His secret? Some great books and an active imagination. "When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; on the threshold, I take off my workday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and put on the garments of court and palace," Machiavelli wrote. "Fitted out appropriately, I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me."

Living during the Renaissance, Machiavelli was surrounded by the best and the brightest, which must have only exacerbated his feelings of frustration. Yet he managed to keep everything in perspective. Toward the end of his life, he signed a letter "NiccolRated R Machiavelli, Historian, Comic Author and Tragic Author." The thing is, NiccolRated R Machiavelli never wrote any tragedies. Like the rest of us, he was just trying to preserve his dignity in a world that was taking him for granted -- while never losing his sense of humor about his many failures. Maybe this is the true Machiavelli of the moment.