The Italian author and statesman Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) is best known for *The Prince*, in which he enunciated his political philosophy.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence, Italy, of an aristocratic, though by no means wealthy, family. Little is known of the first half of his life, prior to his first appointment to public office. His writings proved him to have been a very assiduous reader of the classics, especially the historical works of Livy and Tacitus; in all probability he knew the Greek classics only in translation.

In 1498 Machiavelli was named chancellor and secretary of the second (and less important) chancellery of the Florentine Republic. His duties consisted chiefly of executing the policy decisions of others, carrying on diplomatic correspondence, digesting and composing reports, and compiling minutes; he also undertook some 23 missions to foreign states. His embassies included four to the French king and two to the court of Rome. His most memorable mission is described in a report of 1503 entitled "Description of the Manner Employed by Duke Valentino [Cesare Borgia] in Slaying Vitellozzo Vitelli, Oliverotto da Fermo, Signor Pagolo and the Duke of Gravina, Orsini;" with surgical precision he details Borgia's series of political murders, implicitly as a lesson in the art of politics for Florence's indecisive and timorous gonfalonier, Pier Soderini.

In 1502 Machiavelli married Marietta Corsini, who bore him four sons and two daughters. To his grandson Giovanni Ricci, we owed the preservation of many of his letters and minor works.

In 1510 Machiavelli, inspired by his reading of Roman history, was instrumental in organizing a citizen militia of the Florentine Republic. In August of 1512, a Spanish army entered Tuscany and sacked Prato. The Florentines in terror deposed Soderini, whom Machiavelli characterized as “good, but weak,” and allowed the Medici to return to power. On November 7, Machiavelli was dismissed; soon afterward he was arrested, imprisoned, and subjected to torture as a suspected conspirator against the Medici. Though innocent, he remained suspect for years to come; unable to secure an appointment from the reinstated Medici, he turned to writing.

In all likelihood, Machiavelli interrupted the writing of his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* to write the brief treatise on which his fame rests, *Il Principe (The Prince)* (1513). Other works followed: *The Art of War* and *The Life of Castruccio Castracani* (1520); three extant plays, *Mandragola* (1518; The Mandrake), *Clizia*, and *Andria*; the *Istorie fiorentine* (History of Florence) (1526); a short story, *Belfagor*; and several minor works in verse and prose.

In 1526 Machiavelli was commissioned by Pope Clement VII to inspect the fortifications of Florence. Later that year and the following year, his friend and critic Francesco Guicciardini, Papal Commissary of War in Lombardy, employed him in two minor diplomatic missions. He died in Florence in June of 1527, receiving the last rites of the Church that he had bitterly criticized.

**The Prince**

Machiavelli shared with Renaissance humanists a passion for classical antiquity. To their wish for a
literary and spiritual revival of ancient values, guided by such authors as Plato, Cicero, and St. Augustine, he added a fierce desire for a political and moral renewal on the model of the Roman Republic as depicted by Livy and Tacitus. Though a republican at heart, he saw as the crying need of his day a strong political and military leader who could forge a unitary state in northern Italy to eliminate French and Spanish hegemony from Italian soil. At the moment that he wrote *The Prince*, he envisioned such a possibility while the restored Medici ruled both Florence and the papacy. He had taken to heart Cesare Borgia's energetic creation of a new state in Romagna in the few brief years while Borgia's father, Alexander VI, occupied the papal throne. The final chapter of *The Prince* is a ringing plea to his Medici patrons to set Italy free from the “barbarians.” It concludes with a quotation from Petrarch's patriotic poem *Italia mia*: “Virtue will take arms against fury, and the battle will be brief; for the ancient valor in Italian hearts is not yet dead.” This exhortation fell on deaf ears in 1513 but was to play a role three centuries later in the Risorgimento (a movement for Italian unification).

The chapters of *The Prince* are written in a terse, analytical, and frequently aphoristic style. Preceding political writers, from Plato and Aristotle in ancient times to the fifteenth-century humanists, had all concurred in treating politics as a branch of morals. Machiavelli's chief innovation was to break with this long tradition and to confer autonomy upon politics. In Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, he wrote: “My intent being to write a useful work for those who understand, it seemed to me more appropriate to pursue the actual truth of the matter than the imagination of it. Many have imagined republics and principalities that were never seen or known really to exist; because how one lives is so far removed from how one ought to live that he who abandons what one does for what one ought to do, learns rather his own ruin than his preservation.” Like Galileo in astronomy at the end of the sixteenth century, Machiavelli in politics chose to describe the world as it is, rather than as people are taught that it should be. Although his longest work, the *Discourses on Livy*, takes the familiar humanistic form of a commentary on a classical text, his approach to political theory marks a sharp break with tradition.

Fundamental to Machiavelli's conception of history and politics is the binomial of *fortuna* and *virtù*. Abandoning the Christian view of history as providential, Machiavelli viewed events in purely human terms. Often it is fortune that gives--or terminates--the political leader's opportunity for decisive action. Borgia, though a virtuoso politician, succumbed to an “extreme malignity of fortune” when he fell ill just as his father died. Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus alike received their occasions from fortune. Sacred history implicitly is reduced to the same plane as secular history. In some passages it seems that fortune itself hinges upon human habits and institutions: “I believe that the fortune which the Romans had would be enjoyed by all princes who proceeded as the Romans did and who were of the same virtue as they.” Like others in the Renaissance, Machiavelli believed in man's capacity for determining his own destiny in opposition to the medieval concept of an omnipotent divine will or the crushing fate of the ancient Greeks. *Virtù* in politics--unlike Christian virtue--is an effective combination of force and shrewdness, the lion and the fox, with a touch of greatness.

The kernel of *The Prince* is found in Chapter 17, “On Cruelty and Clemency, and Whether It Is Better To Be Loved or Feared,” and Chapter 18, “How Princes Should Keep Their Word.” As Machiavelli frequently said also in other works, the innate badness of men requires that the prince instill fear rather than love in his subjects and break his pledge, when necessary, with other princes, who in any case will be no more honest than he. Moralistic critics of Machiavelli have sometimes forgotten that he is attempting to describe rather than to invent the rules of political success. For him the state is an organism, greater than the sum of its citizens and individual interests, subject to laws of growth and decay; its health

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consists in unity, but even in the best of circumstances its longevity is limited.

The founding of a state is the work of one man; its continuance, however, is better trusted to many
than to one (Discourses, I, 9 and 58). If this maxim is kept in mind, much of the alleged discrepancy
between the monarchical Prince and the republican Discourses vanishes. The two books differ little in
their teachings; the Discourses is more leisurely and somewhat fragmentary, The Prince more
“scientific,” absolute, revolutionary, and exciting. Both works are excessively exemplary; unlike
Guicciardini, Machiavelli thought it possible to find in his Roman ideal a practical guide to contemporary
Italian politics. Particularly in The Prince, he combines recent examples with ancient ones to illustrate his
axioms.

Other Works
Certain passages in the Discourses (I, 11 and 12; II, 2) set forth Machiavelli’s quarrel with the Church: by
the bad example of the court of Rome, Italy has lost its devotion and religion; the Italian states are
weak and divided because the Church, too feeble politically to dominate them, has nevertheless
prevented any one state from uniting them. He suggests that the Church might have been destroyed
by its own corruption had not St. Francis and St. Dominic restored it to its original principles by founding
new orders. However, in an unusual if not unique departure from traditional anticlericalism, Machiavelli
contrasts favorably the fiercely civil and militaristic pagan religion of ancient Rome with the humble and
otherworldly Christian religion.

The Mandragola, the finest comedy of the Italian Renaissance, is not unrelated to Machiavelli's political
writings in its comic indictment of contemporary Florentine society. In a well-knit intrigue, the simpleton
Nicia contributes to his own cuckolding. Nicia's beautiful and virtuous wife, Lucrezia (so named by the
author with an eye to Roman history), is corrupted by those who should be her closest protectors: her
mother, her husband, and her unscrupulous confessor, Fra Timoteo, all pawns in the skillful hands of the
manipulator Ligurio.

Although not equaling Guicciardini as a historian, Machiavelli in his History of Florence nevertheless
marks an advance over earlier histories in his attention to underlying causes rather than the mere
succession of events as he tells the history of the Florentines from the death of Lorenzo de’ Medici in
1492.

Machiavelli closely adhered to his maxim that a servant of government must be loyal and self-sacrificing.
He nowhere suggests that the political morality of princes is a model for day-to-day dealings between
ordinary citizens. His reputation as a sinister and pernicious counselor of fraud is largely undeserved; it
began not long after his death. His works were banned in the first printed Index (1559). In Elizabethan
England, Machiavelli was represented on the stage and in literature as diabolically evil. The primary
source of this misrepresentation was the translation into English by Simon Patericke in 1577 of a work
popularity called Contre-Machiavel, by the French Huguenot Gentillet, who distorted Machiavelli and
blamed his teachings for the St. Bartholomew Night massacre of 1572. A poem by Gabriel Harvey the
following year falsely attributed four principal crimes to Machiavelli: poison, murder, fraud, and violence.
Christopher Marlowe's The Jew of Malta (1588) introduces “Machiavel” as the speaker of an atrocious
prologue; Machiavellian villains followed in works by other playwrights.

Many of Machiavelli's authentic values are incorporated into nineteenth-century liberalism: the
supremacy of civil over religious power; the conscription of citizen armies; the preference for

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republican rather than monarchical government; and the republican Roman ideals of honesty, work, and the people’s collective responsibility for values that transcend those of the individual.

**Machiavelli in the Twenty-First Century**

Machiavelli’s name came up in 2012, when he was the basis for a book by author Michael Ennis. In the historical novel *The Malice of Fortune*, Ennis pairs Machiavelli and Leonardo da Vinci as the lead investigators of a murder case. Also in 2012, Machiavelli was the subject of a lecture at the Valene L. Smith Museum of Anthropology at California State University, Chico.

Recommended translations of Machiavelli’s works are

- The Prince and the Discourses, translated by Luigi Ricci; E. R. P. Vincent; Christian E. Detmold (1940);
- Mandragola, translated by Anne; Henry Paolucci (1957);
- Literary Works, edited by Hale, J. R. (1961); and

. Among the many works about Machiavelli are

- Villari, Pasquale, *Life and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli* (2 vols., 1877-1883; trans., rev. ed. 1892);
- Chabod, Federico, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance* (1926; trans. 1958);
- Praz, Mario, *Machiavelli and the Elizabethans* (1928);
- Roeder, Ralph, *The Man of the Renaissance* (1933);
- Muir, D. Erskine, *Machiavelli and His Times* (1936);
- Olschki, Leonardo, *Machiavelli the Scientist* (1945);
- Whitfield, J. H., *Machiavelli* (1947);
- Ridolfi, Roberto, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli* (1954; trans. 1963); and

