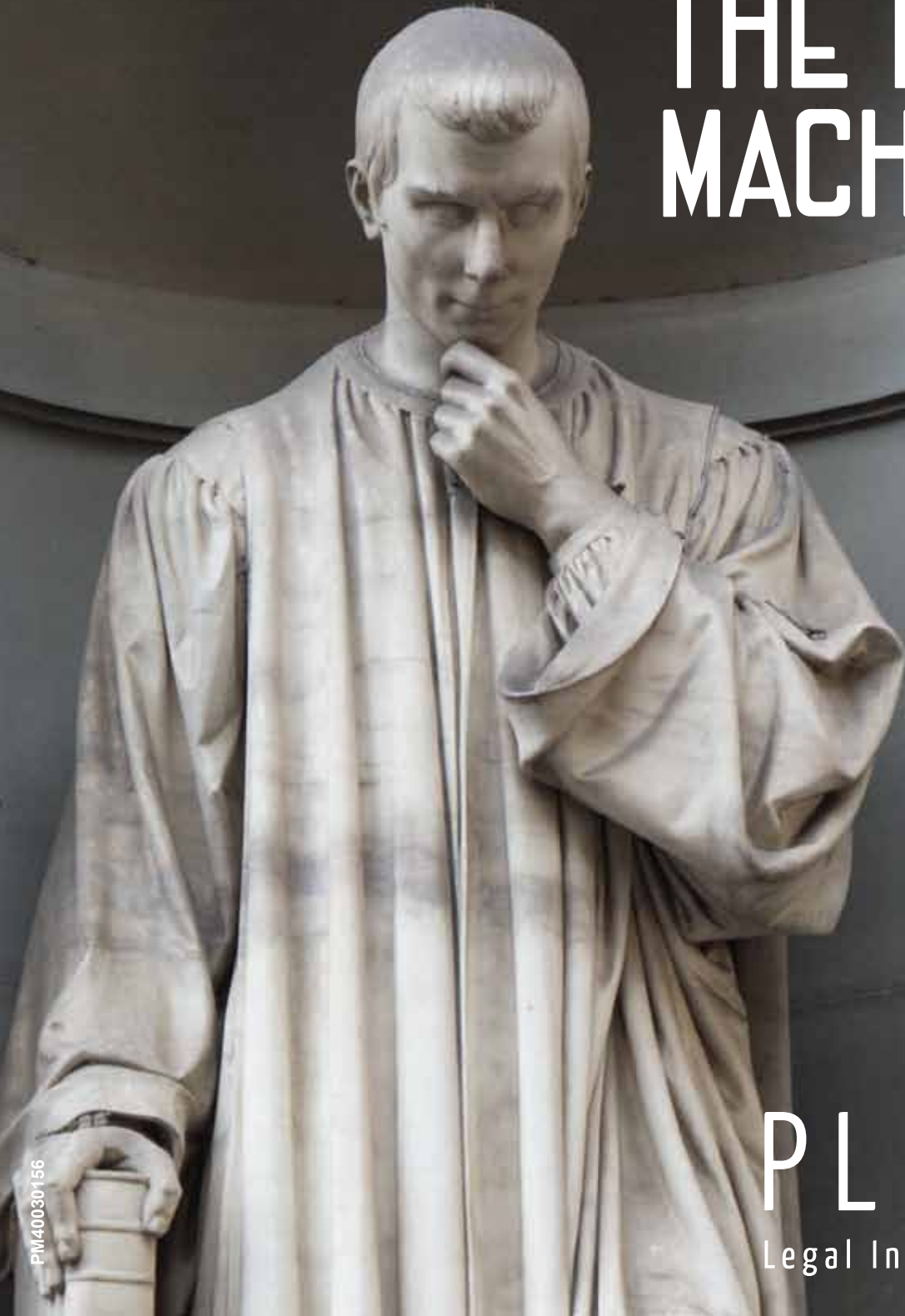


Vol. 40 No. 1

THE PLEA

THE MIND OF MACHIAVELLI



PLEA 

Legal Information for Everyone

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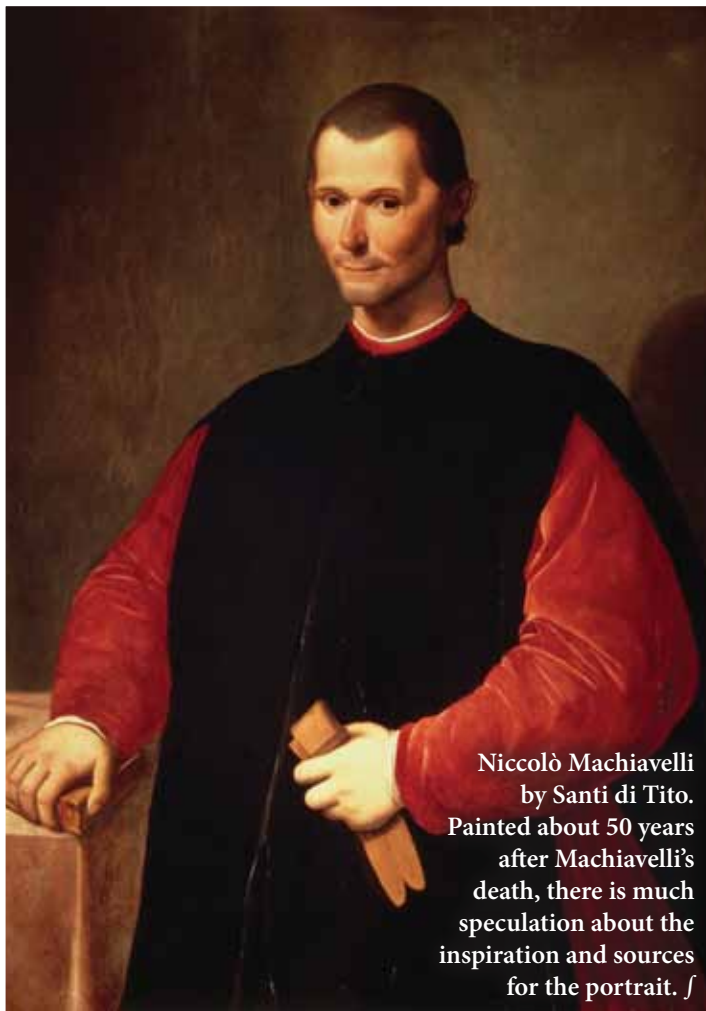
The word “Machiavellian” brings deception, cunning behaviour, and bad faith to mind. This is because of Niccolò Machiavelli, and specifically his 16th-century book *The Prince*. *The Prince* shocked the ruling establishment with its dark exploration of political leadership. Lesser-known but equally important is Machiavelli's book *The Discourses*. *The Discourses* analysed how government could be ideally structured. Together, these books have become foundational to the study of modern government.

So who was Niccolò Machiavelli? What drove his unorthodox thoughts? And why are his works still relevant today? This issue of *The PLEA* explores these questions. It considers:

- how Machiavelli's life shaped his theories,
- the Florence of Machiavelli's time,
- the ideal structure of government spelled out in *The Discourses*, and
- the cynical theory of leadership spelled out in *The Prince*.

Ideal for most any reader, *The Mind of Machiavelli* fulfills several requirements across Saskatchewan's social science curricula. It will also be of interest to people curious about the history of western governance and law-making processes.

Who was Niccolò Machiavelli?



Niccolò Machiavelli
by Santi di Tito.
Painted about 50 years
after Machiavelli's
death, there is much
speculation about the
inspiration and sources
for the portrait. *f*

From common man to top diplomat to political prisoner, Machiavelli experienced government like few others.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence, Italy on May 3, 1469. At the time, Italy was not the unified country we know today. Instead, it was a collection of rivalrous city-states. Florence and its surrounding territory was a city-state controlled by the House of Medici. The Medici family ruled from 1434 to 1737, with two interruptions. The first interruption in Medici Rule, from 1494-1512, was when Machiavelli rose to prominence in Florence.

In 1492, Florence's beloved ruler Lorenzo de' Medici passed away. Known as Lorenzo the Magnificent, he was not only a respected politician but also a patron of the arts. Notably, Michelangelo, famous for such works of art as the Statue of David and the Sistine Chapel, received early support from Lorenzo the Magnificent. With Lorenzo the Magnificent's death, Florence's leadership passed down to Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici. Unlike his "magnificent" father, history graced Piero with a rather unflattering name: Piero the Unfortunate.

Piero's biggest fear was King Charles VIII of France, who was making plans to invade Italy. In response, Piero made the fateful decision to abandon Florence's alliance with France in favour of an alliance with Naples, the southern Italian city-state.

When France's soldiers poured into Florentian territory in 1494, Piero panicked. He rode off to meet Charles VIII and negotiate peace. The peace deal gave in to almost every French demand: the French would prop up Medici rule if

Florence turned over key fortresses. The deal all but guaranteed Florence would lose control of Pisa, the rival city it conquered in 1406. Florentians were enraged. Riots broke out, mobs sacked the Medici Palace, and Piero went into exile.

The power vacuum created by Piero's exit allowed a fanatical priest named Girolamo Savonarola to become Florence's most influential man. Savonarola endorsed the *popolani* (populists), paving the way for a Great Council government. The new government gave voting rights to almost half of Florence's adult male population, a level of democracy unmatched in Italy of the time.

Having used his considerable sway at the pulpit to usher in a democratic government, Savonarola pivoted

towards his next goal. Savonarola had plans to turn Florence into a City of God. God had different plans. In 1498, the city revolted against Savonarola's puritan excesses, and he was burned at the stake.

1498: Enter Machiavelli

Despite Savonarola's execution, the Great Council government he was instrumental in creating remained intact. Mere weeks after his death, a 29-year-old Niccolò Machiavelli joined this government as head of Florence's second chancery, a high diplomatic office.

At first blush, Machiavelli is a peculiar pick for a senior civil service job. While the Machiavellis were counted amongst Florence's elite, Niccolò's arm of the family were black sheep: his father's piles of unpaid debt left him ineligible to work in his profession as a lawyer or hold public office. Nevertheless, both Niccolò and his father

remained friendly with many Florentian elite. Such connections were helpful for attaining government work. Adding to Machiavelli's suitability for the job, he was an avid reader with a classic humanist education. Such skills were useful for a job that required documentation and correspondence. Rounding out Machiavelli's formal education was the street learning he picked up as a fixture in Florence's brothels and taverns.

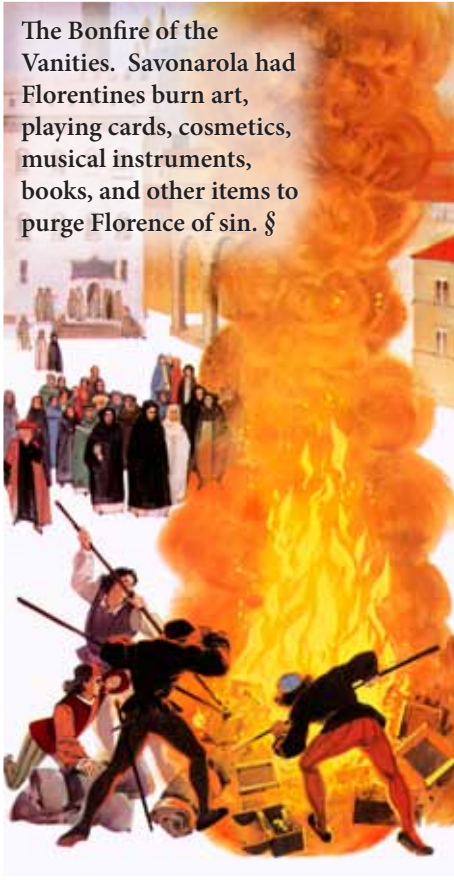
Such experiences were valuable for understanding common people's views. That Machiavelli had always been sceptical of Savonarola's extremist politics didn't hurt, either.

Machiavelli's work took him on diplomatic missions, where he observed and negotiated with rulers and governments of all kinds. His analysis and statesmanship impressed Piero Soderini, the man elected in 1502 as Florence's *gonfalonier*—a sort of high justice—for life. Machiavelli soon became Soderini's right-hand man, placing him at the centre of Florence's political and diplomatic life.

Machiavelli's proudest achievement under Soderini was replacing Florence's paid mercenaries with a citizen army. Machiavelli believed that mercenaries made ineffective soldiers: their allegiance was to their paycheques and their own glory, not to the state. This military reorganisation proved successful when Florence took back control of Pisa in 1509.

Machiavelli's next great project did not turn out as well. France still had its eyes on large parts of Italy. Machiavelli set out to convince France's Louis XII and Pope Julius II to make peace with each other, or at the very least keep Florence out of their battles. He was unsuccessful. In order to secure Italian territories, the Pope's Holy League army—backed by Spain—marched into Florence in 1512. Machiavelli's citizen militia crumbled, Soderini was ousted, and Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici—

The Bonfire of the Vanities. Savonarola had Florentines burn art, playing cards, cosmetics, musical instruments, books, and other items to purge Florence of sin. §



**MACHIAVELLI'S
PROUDEST
ACHIEVEMENT UNDER
SODERINI WAS
REPLACING FLORENCE'S
PAID MERCENARIES
WITH A CITIZEN ARMY**

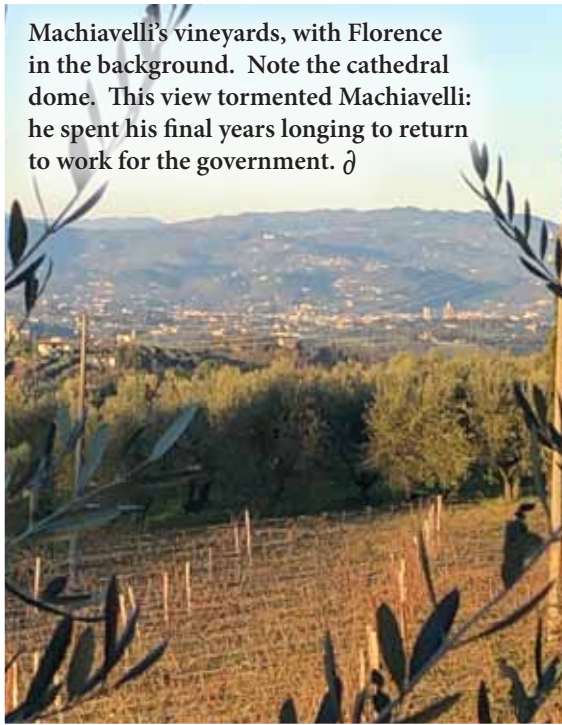
later Pope Leo X—assumed power. The Medicis were back.

Perhaps naively, Machiavelli believed he could carry on as a civil servant under the restored Medici regime: he considered himself a truth-teller, not a party man. However, the Medicis sent Machiavelli packing.

Things took a turn for the worse in 1513. Machiavelli was wrongly accused of taking part in an anti-Medicean conspiracy.

He was locked away and tortured, destined for execution until fate intervened. When Giovanni was appointed Pope Leo X, the Medicis granted Florence's prisoners a mass amnesty as part of the celebrations. Machiavelli walked out of prison and returned to his family's small plot of land, ten miles south of Florence.

Machiavelli's vineyards, with Florence in the background. Note the cathedral dome. This view tormented Machiavelli: he spent his final years longing to return to work for the government. ☹



On his land, Machiavelli settled into a life of sustenance labour and writing, sometimes struggling to keep his family fed. It was here, outside the halls of power, where Machiavelli composed *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, the two works that made him the so-called “founder of modern political science.” 📖

THINK

- Foreign armies helped overthrow the Medici regime in 1494, and helped bring it back to power in 1512.
 - Can you think of instances today where foreign governments involve themselves in the affairs of other countries?
 - Discuss the ethics of one country getting involved in another country. Are there times when it is justified?
- Machiavelli had experience inside and outside the halls of power. As well, he was acquainted with both powerful and common people.
 - Why must the ruling class understand the lives of common people?
 - Do the ruling class know how to govern better than common people?

THE WRITINGS OF MACHIAVELLI

Most of us know Machiavelli as a political writer. However, his writing spanned the genres. He also wrote poetry, histories, and plays.

Even the Medicis recognised his brilliance as a writer. In 1521 Cardinal Giulio, the nephew of Lorenzo the Magnificent, commissioned Machiavelli to write *Florentine Histories*, an eight-volume retrospective of the city. It was published in 1532, five years after his death.

Machiavelli did not live to see *The Prince* published, either. Manuscripts of this 1513 book floated around Italy, but it never saw official release until 1532. In fact, his only major political work to be published in his lifetime was 1520's *The Art of War*.

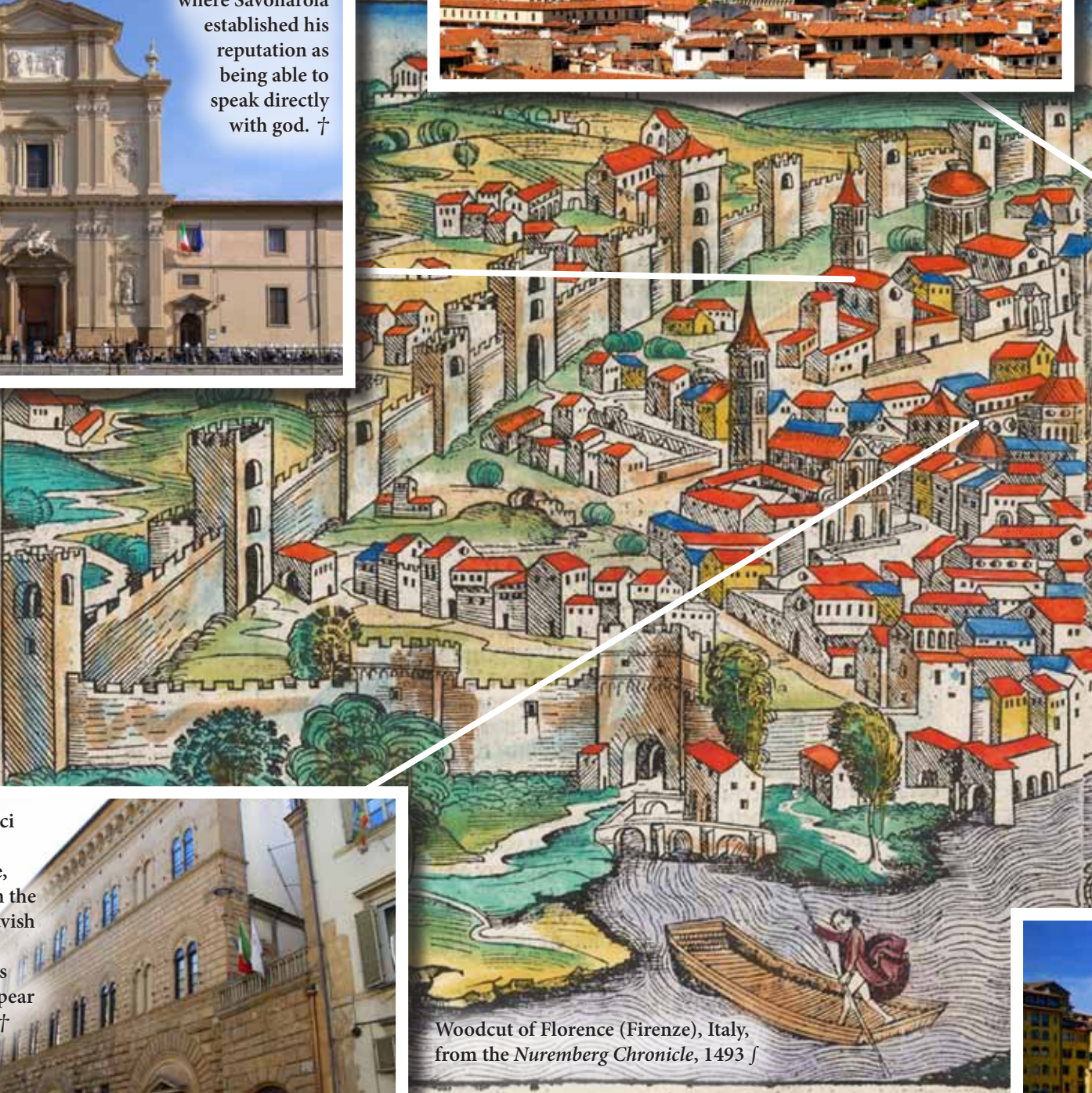
While alive, Machiavelli was better-known as a satirist. His 1518 play *La Mandragola* (The Mandrake) was widely praised. This farce about a miraculous fertility potion—often called the greatest comedy in the Italian language—is still being staged today.

EXPLORING

Duomo di Firenze, where Savonarola preached, had the world's largest cathedral dome at the time of the Renaissance. †



San Marco Monastery, where Savonarola established his reputation as being able to speak directly with god. †

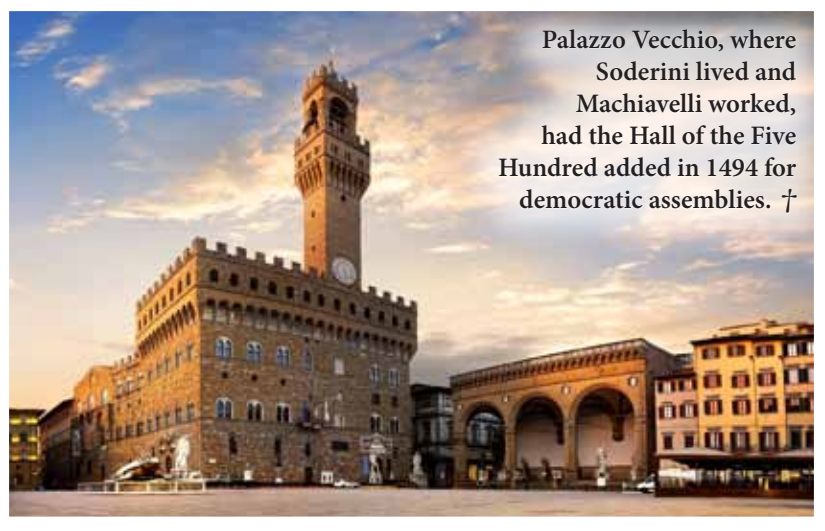


Woodcut of Florence (Firenze), Italy, from the Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493 f

Palazzo Medici Riccardi, the Medici palace, was simple on the outside but lavish on the inside so the Medicis would not appear extravagant. †



MACHIAVELLI'S FLORENCE



Palazzo Vecchio, where Soderini lived and Machiavelli worked, had the Hall of the Five Hundred added in 1494 for democratic assemblies. †



Ponte Vecchio became a place of upscale business when Cosimo Medici banned the bridge's "vile arts" of butcher shops in favour of goldsmiths and jewellers. †



Oltrarno, the less-fashionable neighbourhood where Machiavelli grew up was across the river from the central district. †



The Grounded Idealism of *The Discourses*

Machiavelli said that states are not natural creations: they are human constructions. How can we make these constructions work?

Machiavelli believed that states could only survive in the long run if they found a way to become politically stable. Each type of government common in his day had a destabilising flaw. Monarchies—the rule of kings and queens—would fail due to the overreach of royalty. Aristocracies—the rule of the “best”—would fail due to the insular nature of the elite. Democracies—the rule of the common people—would fail due to the excesses of the mob.

But what would happen if kings and queens, the best, and common people all got together at the table of government?

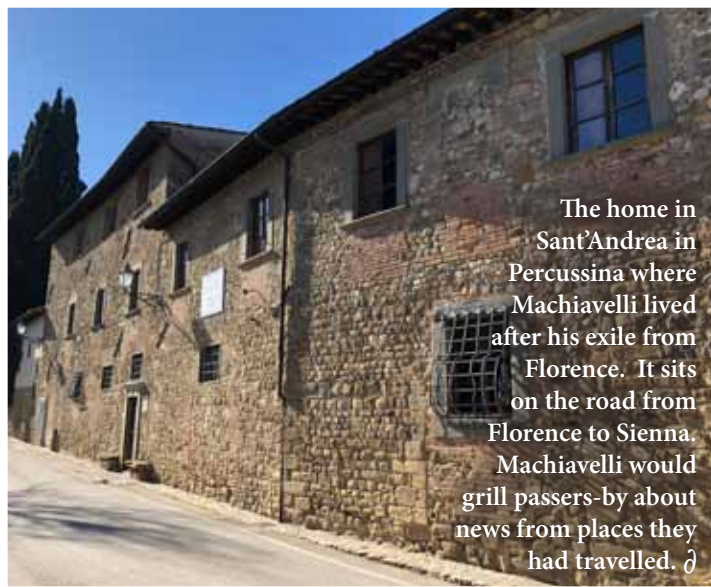
This is a key question tackled in Machiavelli’s *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*. *The Discourses* is a how-to guide for achieving political stability. Machiavelli said that the friction between royalty, the best, and the commoners—if all seated at the table of government—could be

used to achieve political stability. To demonstrate his theory, he analysed Titus Livy’s *History of Rome*.

In Rome, power was shared by three groups: royal power in the consuls, aristocratic power in the senate, and popular power in the tribunes. This mixed form of government gave royalty, the best, and commoners a seat at the table, able to voice their concerns and exercise their will. As he put it, “each would keep watch over the other.” In fact, Machiavelli said that the quarrels between the upper classes and the commoners were “the primary cause of Rome’s retaining her freedom.”

Of the three groups—royalty, the best, and the commoners—the watchful eyes of commoners were key to preserving a free society. Upper classes have “a great desire to dominate,” but common people merely have “the desire not to be dominated.” To ensure that the commoners were not dominated, Machiavelli advocated for a wide-range of democratic powers. They included the ability to elect representatives, the right of individuals to propose laws, and the power of public indictment, where the masses could collectively pass judgment on an individual.

Machiavelli was confident that commoners could be trusted with these democratic powers. In his mind, “when two speakers of equal skill are heard advocating different alternatives, very rarely does one find the populace failing to adopt the better view or incapable of appreciating the truth of what it hears.” In other words, people are sensible enough to make good decisions.



The home in Sant'Andrea in Percussina where Machiavelli lived after his exile from Florence. It sits on the road from Florence to Sienna. Machiavelli would grill passers-by about news from places they had travelled. *d*

THE ENDS JUSTIFIES THE MEANS

Machiavelli is sometimes credited with the saying “the ends justifies the means.” However, he never wrote those words. That said, passages in *The Discourses* as well as *The Prince* come close.

In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli said that states need a founder—what he called a “prudent organizer”—to establish the institutions that create long-term political stability. The organizer must be an expert in constitutional rights, lack self-interest, and be prepared to engage in extraordinary means to create the “perfect commonwealth.”

Machiavelli’s belief that the prudent organizer should be free to engage in extraordinary means to establish the state included the right to use “reprehensible actions.” Machiavelli thought that “when the effect is good... it always justifies the action. For it is the man who uses violence to spoil things, not the man who uses it to mend them, that is blameworthy.” His view on the use of violence is debatable, but in these words we see Machiavelli invoking the *idea* that the ends justifies the means.

That said, Machiavelli also worried that people can be “easily moved by Splendid Hopes and Rash Promises.” If a clever person tried to lead people in a bad direction, he pinned his hopes on a “grave man” emerging. This grave man would convincingly warn the people of looming danger.

In many ways, Machiavelli’s prescription for government—a mixed system that spreads power around—lives on in today’s western liberal democracies. For example,

consider Canada: our head of state is the Queen or her representative (monarchy), our senate is supposedly made up of the best members of society (aristocracy), and citizens elect representatives to the House of Commons (democracy). If we look to lower levels of government, we find other democratic rights that Machiavelli advocated. For example, in Saskatchewan we have the power to propose municipal bylaws through referendums.

And in British Columbia there is recall legislation, a sort of public indictment for the masses to pass judgment on elected representatives.

Machiavelli did not invent mixed government: he was merely contemplating how Ancient Rome was governed. The legacy of *The Discourses* is that it was the first modern political work to explicitly advocate for a mixed system of government as a way to preserve everyone’s freedom. 🇩🇪

THINK

1. Machiavelli said that a state with diverse groups at the table of power would be more successful, because “it is better able to adapt itself to diverse circumstances owing to the diversity found among its citizens.” Do you agree? Do diverse groups make better decisions?
2. Talking about mobs, Machiavelli said “there is nothing more formidable than the masses disorganized and without a head, in another sense there is nothing more weak.” In other words, an angry mob will simply dissolve without leadership. Is this true?
3. Machiavelli was an advocate for free speech. He believed that “there can be no harm in defending an opinion by arguments so long as one has no intention of appealing either to authority or force.” Discuss the role of free speech in society.
4. Machiavelli said that a state could only survive “so long as the citizens are good.” Discuss.

The Cynical Realism of *The Prince*

Machiavelli said that successful leaders had no choice but to be cunning, because people were “fickle, hypocritical, and greedy of gain.”

In Machiavelli’s time, most political thinkers busied themselves proposing utopias. Machiavelli, on the other hand, was not interested in dreaming up a perfect world. He was interested in making the real world work. To make it work, Machiavelli believed that leaders needed to “follow the real truth of things [rather] than an imaginary view of them.” Hence, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*.

Quite possibly, *The Prince* was written as a job application. Despite being booted out of Florence following the Soderini government’s overthrow, Machiavelli held out hope that the Medici would recognise his talents as a political observer and civil servant. *The Prince*, he told a friend, opened up the possibility that “these Medici princes will put me to work.” To that end, he dedicated the book to Lorenzo Di Piero De’ Medici. The

dedication asked Lorenzo to consider the book’s wisdom and understand



The desk where Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, one of his few remaining personal belongings. ¶

“how umeritedly I suffer a great and continued malignity of fortune.”

If *The Prince* was a job application, it failed. There is no evidence that Lorenzo read it. Machiavelli was not invited back into the halls of power, aside from the occasional government contract. Nevertheless, the book went on to

become one of political science’s most influential works.

The Prince built on ideas in *The Discourses: The Discourses* spelled out the best possible form of government and *The Prince* advised leaders how to gain and keep power. Underlying Machiavelli’s advice was a low view of human nature and a belief that rulers were constantly under threat. With human nature less-than-ideal and power always fragile, leaders should sometimes use cunning and deceptive acts. In Machiavelli’s words, “it would serve [the Prince] to appear pious, faithful, humane, true, religious, and even to be so, but only if he is willing, should it become necessary, to act in the opposite manner.”

MACHIAVELLI’S BELIEF THAT LEADERS SOMETIMES NEEDED TO DO EVIL WAS INFLUENCED BY THE COLLAPSE OF THE SODERINI GOVERNMENT.

By suggesting that honesty is laudable but evil is sometimes necessary, *The Prince* undermined virtue. Such advice flew in the face of the era's powerful religious doctrines. Churches were encouraging people to be good. This, alongside passages that cast doubt on the motivations of religious leaders, contributed to Pope Paul IV banning the book in 1559.

Machiavelli's belief that leaders sometimes needed to do evil was influenced by the collapse of the Soderini government. Political theorist Maurizio Viroli pointed out that Machiavelli

directly witnessed the fall of the Florentine Republic, due, in part, to the fact that the good and honest [Piero] Soderini ... refused to take exceptional measures against the enemies of the Republic because he did not want to incur the reputation of being an ambitious and unjust man.

Had Soderini resorted to evil, perhaps the Medicis would have failed to take back Florence. In fact, passages in *The Discourses* grumble about Soderini's reluctance to be ruthless.

It is important to understand that *The Prince* does not advocate evil for evil's sake. Rather, it suggests ways to use the shortcomings of human nature to stay in power. Nevertheless, tyrants from Napoleon to Stalin to Hitler read *The Prince*. In fact, Italian fascist Benito Mussolini described it as "the statesman's supreme guide."

In the 400 years since Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, many interpretations have been offered. Some people view it as a guide, others as a warning, and a few even see it as a satire. Regardless, even if a cynical power-grabber uses *The Prince* as a guide, the rest of us can use it as an antidote. *The Prince* tells opportunistic leaders what to do, but also tells the rest of us what to look out for. 📖

THINK

1. *The Prince* is based on something called "consequentialist morality." Put more simply, the ends justifies the means. Does the ends ever justify the means?
2. *The Prince* said that it is better to be feared than loved. Do you agree?
3. *The Prince* says nothing about the religious idea of a final judgment day. Why is this absence significant?
4. Do you think that people are "fickle, hypocritical, and greedy of gain." Or are we better than that?
5. If you were forming a new state today, what lessons would you take from *The Prince* and *The Discourses*?

HOW MACHIAVELLIAN ARE YOU?

Social psychologists Richard Christie and Florence Geis are known for their work on how to identify a distinct personality trait: Machiavellianism. By studying Machiavelli's writings—primarily *The Prince* and *The Discourses*—they were able to create a 20-question test that measures Machiavellian attitudes and beliefs.

The test asks people to agree or disagree with statements such as "Never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so." The higher you score, the more Machiavellian you are.

Since the test was developed, it has been administered on countless people by dozens of researchers. Some research has shown that men generally score higher than women. However, other research has suggested that human nature is universal, given the similar scores between people of different races, sexual orientations, and even political ideologies.

Take the test for yourself at <https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/MACH-IV/>

Further Resources



REVOLUTION

Learn how revolutions overturn laws and institutions.



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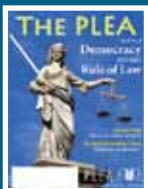
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The best fortress is to be found in the love of the people, for although you may have fortresses they will not save you if you are hated by the people.

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

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