Niccolo Machiavelli: 
Renaissance Political Thinker

(NOTE: You may wish to complete Activity #1 before reading about Machiavelli.)

One of the most important books of the Renaissance was a small volume called
The Prince written by Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). Machiavelli had been a
government worker, close to powerful men, but never a leader himself. In this book
he offered advice to princes on how to rule. His political philosophy (ideas on
government) was startling. It was very different from medieval notions about the
proper duties, obligations, and policies of good rulers.

Machiavelli said, among other things:

1. "It is better to be feared than loved." (When it is impossible to be both feared and
   loved, he advised, choose to be feared. Affections are very changeable, but terror
   keeps people loyal.)

2. "A prince should imitate the lion and the fox. The fox recognizes traps; the lion
   frightens the wolves."

3. "A man forgets more easily the death of his father than the loss of his money."

4. "Men are ungrateful, changeable [pretenders], runaways in danger, eager for gain."

5. "By no means can a prudent ruler keep his word . . . . [I]f all men were good [it
   would be all right to keep promises], but because they are bad and do not keep
   promises to you, you likewise do not have to keep your promises to them."

6. The end justifies the means. If you have a good purpose, any way you go about
   accomplishing it is all right.

Where did Machiavelli get such ideas? Clearly not from the Bible. Nor did they come
from the ancient Greek (Athenian) philosophers who stressed the well-being of the
entire community and the rule of law. His best sources were the rulers he observed—
Francesco Sforza, Lorenzo de Medici, and above all Cesare Borgia. The biographers of
these men reveal them to be powerful, tricky, and often dishonest.

Some historians question whether or not Machiavelli was really as amoral (without
standards of right and wrong) as he sounds. Perhaps he was actually making fun of men
like Borgia and exposing the extremes to which they would go to keep themselves in
power. Whatever his purpose, the adjective "Machiavellian" has come to mean
unscrupulous, amoral, tricky, and manipulative.
Activities for Understanding

1. How Machiavellian are you? There is a little bit of Machiavelli in all of us. For each of the following statements check the statement that best describes your reaction. After you have finished, use the directions on the next page to rate yourself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
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<td>(a)</td>
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1. Most people are honest.
2. Most people think first about their pocketbooks and later about right and wrong.
3. To get someone to like you, tell that person what he or she wants to hear.
4. The best way to earn someone’s respect is to be kind and honest.
5. The best way to earn someone’s loyalty is to show him or her your power.
6. There are no absolute rights and wrongs. “Right” is what works.
7. A good president reads the polls to find out what people want and makes those things his or her policies.
8. Most people are extremely selfish.
9. A promise is a sacred trust.
10. Nice guys finish last.

How to Score Your Test:

1. a. 1  b. 3  c. 5
2. a. 5  b. 3  c. 1
3. a. 5  b. 3  c. 1
4. a. 1  b. 3  c. 5
5. a. 5  b. 3  c. 1
6. a. 5  b. 3  c. 1
7. a. 1  b. 3  c. 5
8. a. 5  b. 3  c. 5
9. a. 5  b. 3  c. 5
10. b. 3  c. 1  a. 5

Add the point values for your answers to determine your “Machiavellian Score.”

If your Machiavellian Score is:

10-23 (Type A) You are not at all Machiavellian. Some would say you are an idealist and an optimist about human nature. You have strong ideas about right and wrong.

24-36 (Type B) You are more cautious about trusting human nature and less idealistic than those above. You know that selfishness can sometimes get in the way of lofty ideals.

37-50 (Type C) You are extremely Machiavellian, practical to the point of being a hard-headed cynic, not very trusting about human nature, and ready to deal with what is, rather than what ought to be.
RENAISSANCE STATECRAFT

Machiavelli (1469–1527) presented a new science of politics—the end proposed was simply to win and hold power by any effective means. What was Machiavelli's view of human nature? How did this affect his advice to rulers? Was his work essentially immoral?

Italy: Prince and State

From Machiavelli, The Prince

Having spoken particularly of all the various kinds of Princedom whereof at the outset I proposed to treat, considered in some measure what are the causes

of their strengths and weaknesses, and pointed out the methods by which men commonly seek to acquire them, it now remains that I should discourse generally concerning the means for attack and defence of which each of these different kinds of Princedom may make use.

I say then that the arms wherewith a Prince defends his State are either his own subjects, or they are mercenaries, or they are auxiliaries, or they are partly one and partly another. Mercenaries and auxiliaries are at once useless and dangerous, and he who holds his State by means of mercenary troops can never be solidly or securely seated. For such troops are disunited, ambitious, insubordinate, treacherous, insolent among friends, cowardly before foes, and without fear of God or faith with man. Whenever they are attacked defeat follows; so that in peace you are plundered by them, in war by your enemies. And this because they have no tie or motive to keep them in the field beyond their paltry pay, in return for which it would be too much to expect them to give their lives.

It now remains for us to consider what ought to be the conduct and bearing of a Prince in relation to his subjects and friends. And since I know that many have written on this subject, I fear it may be thought presumptuous in me to write of it also: the more so, because in my treatment of it I depart from the views that others have taken.

But since it is my object to write what shall be useful to whosoever understands it, it seems to me better to follow the real truth of things than an imaginary view of them. For many Republics and Princedoms have been imagined that were never seen or known to exist in reality. And the manner in which we live, and that in which we ought to live, are things so wide asunder, that he who quits the one to betake himself to the other is more likely to destroy than to save himself; since any one who would act up to a perfect standard of goodness in everything, must be ruined among so many who are not good. It is essential, therefore, for a Prince who desires to maintain his position, to have learned how to be other than good, and to use or not to use his goodness as necessity requires.

Beginning, then, with the first of the qualities above noticed, I say that it may be a good thing to be reputed liberal, but, nevertheless, that liberality without the reputation of it is harmful; because, though it be worthily and rightly used, still if it be not known, you escape not the reproach of its opposite vice. Hence, to have credit for liberality with the world at large, you must neglect no circumstance of sumptuous display; the result being, that a Prince of a liberal disposition will consume his whole substance in things of this sort, and, after all, be obliged, if he would maintain his reputation for liberality, to burden his subjects with extraordinary taxes, and to resort to confiscations and all the other shifts whereby money is raised. But in this way he becomes hateful to his subjects, and growing impoverished is held in little esteem by any. So that in the end, having by his liberality offended many and obliged few, he is worse off than when he began, and is exposed to all his original dangers. Recognizing this, and endeavouring to retrace his steps, he at once incurs the infamy of miserliness.

A Prince, therefore, since he cannot without injury to himself practise the virtue of liberality so that it may be known, will not, if he be wise, greatly concern himself though he be called miserly. Because in time he will come to be regarded as more and more liberal, when it is seen that through his parsimony his
revenues are sufficient; that he is able to defend himself against any who make war on him; that he can engage in enterprises against others without burdening his subjects; and thus exercise liberality towards all from whom he does not take, whose number is infinite, while he is miserly in respect of those only to whom he does not give, whose number is few.

Passing to the other qualities above referred to, I say that every Prince should desire to be accounted merciful and not cruel. Nevertheless, he should be on his guard against the abuse of this quality of mercy. Casare Borgia was reputed cruel, yet his cruelty restored Romagna, united it, and brought it to order and obedience; so that if we look at things in their true light, it will be seen that he was in reality far more merciful than the people of Florence, who, to avoid the imputation of cruelty, suffered Pistoja to be torn to pieces by factions.

A Prince should therefore disregard the reproach of being thought cruel where it enables him to keep his subjects united and obedient. For he who quells disorder by a very few signal examples will in the end be more merciful than he who from too great leniency permits things to take their course and so to result in rapine and bloodshed; for these hurt the whole State, whereas the severities of the Prince injure individuals only.

And here comes in the question whether it is better to be loved rather than feared, or feared rather than loved. It might perhaps be answered that we should wish to be both; but since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved. For of men it may generally be affirmed that they are thankless, fickle, false, studious to avoid danger, greedy of gain, devoted to you while you are able to confer benefits upon them, and ready, as I said before, while danger is distant, to shed their blood, and sacrifice their property, their lives, and their children for you; but in the hour of need they turn against you.

Nevertheless a Prince should inspire fear in such a fashion that if he do not win love he may escape hate. For a man may very well be feared and yet not hated, and this will be the case so long as he does not meddle with the property or with the women of his citizens and subjects. And if constrained to put any to death, he should do so only when there is manifest cause or reasonable justification. But, above all, he must abstain from the property of others. For men will sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony. . . .

A Prince should, therefore, understand how to use well both the man and the beast. And this lesson has been covertly taught by the ancient writers, who relate how Achilles and many others of these old Princes were given over to be brought up and trained by Chiron the Centaur; since the only meaning of their having for instructor one who was half man and half beast is, that it is necessary for a Prince to know how to use both natures, and that the one without the other has no stability.

But since a Prince should know how to use the beast's nature wisely, he ought of beasts to choose both the lion and the fox; for the lion cannot guard himself from the toils, nor the fox from wolves. He must therefore be a fox to discern toils, and a lion to drive off wolves.

To rely wholly on the lion is unwise; and for this reason a prudent Prince neither can nor ought to keep his word when to keep it is hurtful to him and the
causes which led him to pledge it are removed. If all men were good, this would not be good advice, but since they are dishonest, and do not keep faith with you, you, in return, need not keep faith with them; and no Prince was ever at a loss for plausible reasons to cloak a breach of faith. Of this numberless recent instances could be given, and it might be shown how many solemn treaties and engagements have been rendered inoperative and idle through want of faith in Princes, and that he who has best known to play the fox has had the best success.

It is necessary, indeed, to put a good colour on this nature, and to be skilful in simulating and dissembling. But men are so simple, and governed so absolutely by their present needs, that he who wishes to deceive will never fail in finding willing dupes. One recent example I will not omit. Pope Alexander VI had no care or thought but how to deceive, and always found material to work on. No man ever had a more effective manner of asseverating, or made promises with more solemn protestations, or observed them less. And yet, because he understood this side of human nature, his frauds always succeeded.

It is not essential, then, that a Prince should have all the good qualities which I have enumerated above, but it is most essential that he should seem to have them; I will even venture to affirm that if he has and invariably practises them all, they are hurtful, whereas the appearance of having them is useful. Thus, it is well to seem merciful, faithful, humane, religious, and upright, and also to be so; but the mind should remain so balanced that were it needful not to be so, you should be able and know how to change to the contrary.

And you are to understand that a Prince, and most of all a new Prince, cannot observe all those rules of conduct in respect whereof men are accounted good, being often forced, in order to preserve his Princedom, to act in opposition to good faith, charity, humanity, and religion. He must therefore keep his mind ready to shift as the winds and tides of Fortune turn, and, as I have already said, he ought not to quit good courses if he can help it, but should know how to follow evil courses if he must.

A Prince should therefore be very careful that nothing ever escapes his lips which is not replete with the five qualities above named, so that to see and hear him, one would think him the embodiment of mercy, good faith, integrity, humanity, and religion. And there is no virtue which it is more necessary for him to seem to possess than this last; because men in general judge rather by the eye than by the hand, for every one can see but few can touch. Every one sees what you seem, but few know what you are, and these few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the State to back them up.

Moreover, in the actions of all men, and most of all of Princes, where there is no tribunal to which we can appeal, we look to results. Wherefore if a prince succeeds in establishing and maintaining his authority, the means will always be judged honourable and be approved by every one. For the vulgar are always taken by appearances and by results, and the world is made up of the vulgar, the few only finding room when the many have no longer ground to stand on.

Toward 1500, "new monarchs" in various parts of Europe, including France and England, succeeded in repressing aristocratic rebellions and imposing stronger centralized governments on