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War and Politics in the Thought of Machiavelli

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Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) was an author of political thought and theory during the Renaissance whose ideas on corruption in government, as well as the benevolence of a republic, were widely recognized as an authority on what to do and what not to do in the field of politics. Even though “Machiavellian” became the term used to describe his cynical analysis of deceptive politics, his greatest contribution to historical thought was coupling his ideas of politics to a subject that had never before been considered a political issue: war. Prior to Machiavelli, war was regarded as a means of gaining territory, resources, settling religious differences or achieving glory for oneself on the field of battle. Machiavelli discussed how his experiences had taught him that war, and military matters in general, had always been used politically. With his learned knowledge as a historian, Niccolò Machiavelli compiles within the chapters of *The Art of War* (1521), *Discourses on Livy* (1531) and *The Prince* (1532) that war is an extension of political values and goals, and that politics itself could be used in either a benevolent or maniacal fashion in either ending or starting a conflict.

Machiavelli served the Republic of Florence (1115–1532) in two ways during his life as The Secretary of the Militia and the Chancellor of the Republic itself. With both of these held stations, he had the opportunity to learn how to fuse military matters into politics. One such

military and political collaboration that still serves a purpose today was the use of citizen soldiers. In Machiavelli's view, citizen soldiers were less dangerous to the stability of a state than regular soldiers. He believed soldiers who were also occupied with their own private professions would want a war to come to a speedy conclusion so they may return home in peace and not cause any more trouble for the state, because that would mean more trouble for them.¹ It would appear Machiavelli's thoughts on citizen soldiers was correct as he, and the Republic of Florence, never suffered from internal problems in regards to its militia army generating conflict. Machiavelli also postulated that the citizen soldier was more loyal and obedient to the state he fought for. Because the soldiers of Florence had other work outside of soldiering that disciplined their professionalism, they ended up being more responsive to the protocol of their well-governed commonwealth in regards to practicing war, participating in war and who was in charge of the soldiers during a war.² Machiavelli's historic experience showed that citizen soldiers who were more dedicated to the job at hand and the collective success of their state were more effective than warlords and conquerors.

One such group of occupational conquerors whom Machiavelli disdained and thought of as ineffective were mercenaries. Mercenaries, as Machiavelli pointed out, were too individualistic in their own personal gain and wealth and lacked discipline and union. Machiavelli believed that the lack of care mercenaries had for the state they fought for, who just paid them for a time, put those nations in more danger than safety.³ Mercenaries and profiteers of war who ventured into no other practice were the living examples as to why Machiavelli was so vocal about the benevolence of the citizen soldier who was both a peace seeker and war fighter.

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, ed. Ellis Farnsworth, trans. Neal Wood (Washington DC: De Capo Press, 2001), 18.

² Ibid. 19.

³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. W.K. Marriot (San Bernardino: Millennium Publications, 2014), 27.

Machiavelli not only argued that citizen soldiers were loyal and effective in war, but that they also took the time to advance themselves through individual opportunity and education as loyal citizens who held their governors in check and labored to better the state.⁴ Machiavelli's ideals on the value of a militia army were powerful in politics and leadership, but he also knew if the army could not win on the battlefield that the ideals and philosophies he used to inspire individual thought would become useless.

Machiavelli made it a point in his dialogues to discuss the historical importance of war's mechanics and how those mechanics could be used to achieve victory in combat as well as in the political assembly. In terms of battle tactics, Machiavelli recorded the statements of his colleague Fabrizio Colonna (1450–1520), a cavalry officer, in order to shed light on the improvements of the cavalry in renaissance warfare. Through Machiavelli's review, Fabrizio mentioned how the cavalry of his time in the Renaissance had improved from ancient era due to technology and new strategy.⁵ Machiavelli made sure to educate political leaders and the citizens of his republic that the advancement of arms was good in order to achieve victory, whatever the motives of the armies in question may be. Machiavelli suggested that one such use of an army to satisfy a political motive was for the army to be a symbol of power for a leader. He believed a prince who had a large and powerful army would not only be seen as self-reliable, but as a leader of a state that should not be trifled with.⁶ Whether it was a King of Egypt or an Emperor of Rome, history showed that Machiavelli was correct concerning the idea of a military being a political demonstration of absolute power.

⁴ Paul A. Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar: Machiavelli and Political Theory under the English Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57.

⁵ Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, 52.

⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 24.

Machiavelli also promoted compare and contrast methods of studying history so commanders and regents could learn the proper tactical uses of an army in war and in politics. Through Fabrizio again, Machiavelli explained how it was important for a modern general to study what worked for past commanders and what did not.⁷ Though the study of an army's political use sometimes led to its abuse, Machiavelli's decision to compare and contrast the commanders, the wars, and the duty of government in those wars completely altered how the modern world conducted war and developed new strategic military leaders.

In order to discuss certain strategies that were used in war, Machiavelli studied and discussed historically prestigious commanders and leaders who were familiar with these specific strategies related to war that were used for or against them in politics. When discussing the legacy of Caesar (100–44 BCE), Machiavelli illustrated conspiracy as a version of war and conflict inside the political forums. Caesar's enemies had strategically planned to kill him in the halls of the senate where he would be out in the open, which violently removed the new emperor from power, thus giving it back to them in the senate.⁸ As Machiavelli discovered, conspiracy was the war being conducted by politicians against each other without a blatant use of arms and armies. Another war-like strategy used in politics, as Machiavelli explained, was assassination. Machiavelli's political concept of the secret enemy in politics was "Brutus and Brutus' sons," and that a leader had to destroy Brutus and his sons in order to retain control of a state or an army. A politician of Machiavelli's time period, Piero Soderini (1452–1522), was a statesman who did not kill "Brutus and his sons" and was ruined for it.⁹ Just as assassinations that are not executed in order to remove key leaders who would make winning a war very difficult for an

⁷ Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, 52.

⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, ed. and trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 258.

⁹ *Ibid.* 252-253.

opposing commander, Soderini's example connected that same military defeat of not assassinating key enemies in a political setting.

Allying methods of governance through military protocol was probably the most applicable war-like tool Machiavelli discussed in relation to politics. His leaders of interest on the matter were Roman generals Manlius Torquatus (d. 384 BCE) and Valerius Corvinus (64 BCE-8 ACE). Torquatus was a strict commander while Corvinus was a benevolent commander, but when the two leadership strategies are combined together in politics, these two former generals inspired discipline and loyalty from Rome.¹⁰ Machiavelli, and many other politicians after him, enjoyed a successful career as a statesman by practicing the combined strategies of war commanders in politics, thus making political governance and military leadership coherently linked.

As discussed earlier, war was not seen as another area of politics in time periods before Machiavelli's age. Even though those earlier eras were points in history where war was separate from politics and was usually about conquest, glory, and sheer dominating force over an enemy, Machiavelli proved that war was still used for political gain and achievement even though war was not recognized as a political tool. As far back as the ancient era, war was used to draw rival empires into conflict by attacking the allies of the rival state, thus justifying the attacking empire's claim and the defending empire's reasons for going to war. Machiavelli pointed out that the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) was brought about in this way when the Carthaginians attacked the Saguntines in order to provoke their ally, Rome, into war.¹¹ Machiavelli's astute observation that political alliances drew nations into war on purpose is something that he

¹⁰ Ibid. 309-312.

¹¹ Ibid. 176.

experienced as a statesman in the Republic of Florence, in relation with other Italian nation-states, and was also what the world experienced in the 20th century with two world wars. Even though glory, conquest, and wealth had been seen as the motivating constructs of war, Machiavelli argued against those notions. Through his study of powerful leaders like Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) and Croesus (595–546 BCE), King of the Lydians, Machiavelli observed that the intelligent leader's main goals in war were centered on using their powerful army to gain territory and attain political influence through exemplified force of the army.¹² According to Machiavelli's research, plunder is secondary to the ambitious conqueror who is intending on expanding their political power through empire.

Machiavelli discussed how war in a state is used properly and necessarily, and not in a fashion of ambition or primal conquest, when the people of a state are informed of the use of war. Through Fabrizio, Machiavelli illustrated how nations with great citizens of virtue and intelligence had historically possessed less of a likelihood to be engaged in war because those citizens understood the uses of war, recognized its necessity, and did not hunger for its carnage.¹³ Machiavelli's historical research revealed how ancient political leadership used war and the military for political gains, and how enlightened citizens who acknowledge that fact were a threat to those ambitious leaders who sent soldiers to war for their political ambition.

Machiavelli, even though he was a religious man, was not afraid of pointing out religion's historical presence in politics, which was another entity guilty of using war as a political tool. Since Machiavelli was Italian, he focused his studies more so on the religious hierarchy brought on by the Romans: before and after the creation of the Catholic Church. By

¹² Ibid. 178-179.

¹³ Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, 76-77.

studying the Roman politician Livy (59 BCE–17 CE), Machiavelli was able to point out how the Romans used their gods before Constantine (272–337) to keep the population in fear while certain individuals could gain and control power.¹⁴ Machiavelli discovered that the political dominance of religion in government and society had been around well before the existence of the Church. Machiavelli was notoriously famous for pointing out a political leadership's ability to take advantage of an uneducated citizenry, and religious leaders did just that. In order to retain obedience in a population only able to conceive value of worldly goods, Machiavelli discussed how religious leaders used obedience and faith to god as a weapon to retain loyalty for or against a government depending on their position.¹⁵ Machiavelli's explanation exposed the matter of religious wars contesting the people's loyalty to one religious governing body over another.

Machiavelli further pointed out that religious leaders did not just promote violence and war to advance their goals, but they also took part in that violence. As far back as the Crusades (1095–1291), the Church was guilty of hiring men of violence and war to punish dissenters and eliminate infidels.¹⁶ Because of Machiavelli's closer analysis of religion's use of war and conflict to advance its own political power, he conceptualized the use of *Realpolitik* (1832), the idea that politics continues through war, 263 years before the theory's founder, Carl Von Clausewitz (1780–1831), was even alive.

Furthering his link between military matters and politics, Machiavelli uncovered the historic truth that weak leadership deteriorates a state and an army equally, and sometimes synchronized in their fall. Because of this truth, Machiavelli emphasized the need of successors in government to be as strong as or even stronger than their predecessors. To extend this point,

¹⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 56-57.

¹⁵ Maurizio Viroli, *Founders Machiavelli* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 37.

¹⁶ Rahe, 87.

Machiavelli observed the strength of Romulus (theoretically existed), the first king of Rome, and how Romulus' successor would have to be greater or just as great. If the successor was not as great as their predecessor they would bring down the nation, as the successor would only be benefiting from the memory of the past leader.¹⁷ A state and an army had to have consistency in great leadership in order to improve and survive according to Machiavelli. Besides strength, Machiavelli emphasized the need for virtue in leadership. Machiavelli considered virtue a must for political leaders, and leaders who did not possess virtue would eventually fall.¹⁸ Though Machiavelli was a political realist, he was also a republican who ultimately believed in the benevolence of governance and wanted leaders to emulate that benevolence.

Machiavelli's thoughts on leadership were also brought on by his studies of the ancient philosophers. By studying Aristotle (384–322 BCE), Machiavelli believed it was a prudent leader who did what was necessary, rather than a frivolous and greedy leader who was the model example of a leader that would retain a nation's glory and survivability.¹⁹ Machiavelli himself proved the historic importance of good leadership, which would become an application for most social sciences in the future. What Machiavelli believed to be the key to eliminating weakness as a leader was surrendering certain amounts of power to an independent minded people. He suggested that a good leader who wants to retain power and control over a city that is accustomed to its own laws must be liberal and accepting of those laws, but also require tribute as the governor of the city in order to demand loyalty.²⁰ However controversial at the time, Machiavelli's analysis of governing leadership was correct as many modern nations practice his

¹⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 71.

¹⁸ Katherine Philippakis and Michael S. Kochin, "On Machiavelli's Literary Message," *Conference Papers-American Political Science Association*, 1. EBSCOhost, accessed February 3, 2016.

¹⁹ Eugene Garver, *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 129.

²⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 11-12.

methods of proper leadership today and historically weak leaders since his time have either been overthrown, killed or conquered.

In politics, as in war, Machiavelli astutely pointed out through his time in public service that history repeated itself due to the fact that certain people did not learn to do things differently, and thus continued the current problems or consistent solutions. To advance this point, Machiavelli delved further into ancient politics for evidence. He discovered through his own practice that a close study of ancient politics and application of what worked, while learning what didn't work, was the assurance of strength in any republic.²¹ Machiavelli also championed the acknowledgement, and use, of fictional characters to generate historical realities of heroes and leaders that should govern a state or an army. One fictitious individual being used to advance historical leadership was Machiavelli's own Ligurio (from *The Mandrake*, 1526): the strong warrior figure who fought oppression.²² Machiavelli simply continued the historical reality that stories advance the mentalities of civilizations throughout history, especially when it came to war.

Though Machiavelli's thoughts regarding historical learning on war and politics rang true, they did not go unquestioned, even in his time. Machiavelli's thoughts on learning about past politics and not repeating the same historical mistakes were criticized and almost silenced by many of his colleagues, political opponents, and powerful enemies, such as the Venetian crime family, the Medici (r. 1169–1737).²⁶ Machiavelli plainly, and controversially, stated that

²¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 105.

²² Philippakis and Kochin.

²⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 12.

²⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 19.

²⁶ Daniel C. Boughner, *The Devil's Disciple* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1968), 140.

history repeats itself politically because, all too often, citizens and governors of a state don't consider remembering history as important or criticize someone who says it is.

In probably his most important contribution to the historic business of politics and war, Machiavelli discussed the effect of the civilian's feelings and opinions on a state's politics and war policy. Machiavelli's recorded description of Fabrizio's words was actually a conversation between a military man and his civilian colleagues on the very point of the civilian's contribution to war. Fabrizio, through Machiavelli's interpretation, encouraged his civilian friends to ask questions about his profession so he may enlighten them on his business of soldiering so they would not become resentful of soldiers' participation in war since most civilians had the tendency of being anti-war, and therefore, anti-soldier.²⁷ As a civilian himself, Machiavelli wanted to introduce a military knowledge into civilian opinion so debate over decisions on war would become less frequent when decisions had to be made. Machiavelli was also a romanticist of glory and loved the idea of glorious triumph in war as well as life. He wanted that historic idea of glory to be combined among soldiers and civilians, as it benefited the republic as a whole.²⁸ Visions of glory and success did benefit Machiavelli's Florence, as it did every other nation's military and society. Machiavelli also found it to be important for the citizens to have a formal military education so when they criticized or agreed with a conflict, they would do so from a place of knowledge. As it was practiced in Rome, Machiavelli promoted the idea of training citizens in military discipline for the purpose of making every citizen capable and educated in the face of danger and incorruptible in the face negative temptations.²⁹ As a republican, Machiavelli

²⁷ Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, 52.

²⁸ Maurizio Viroli, *Founders Machiavelli* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 139.

always valued the opinions of the people and did not want the people to be ignorant, especially on the matters of government and war.

As strongly as he defended the idea of military men educating the opinions of civilians, he equally defended the civilians' ability to educate the opinions of the military men. Referencing himself as one of these civilians, Machiavelli defended his rationale for discussing war as a civilian by stating the mistakes he made in his writing wouldn't get anyone killed, while mistakes on the battlefield would.³⁰ The need for discussion before bloodshed was a necessity that Machiavelli thought civilians brought to the matter of war. Possibly the most important contribution civilians brought to the political reality of war was their support. Machiavelli suggested that it would be foolish of a prince to go to war without the support of his state's population, unless that prince wanted to risk rebellion and protest, causing chaos in his kingdom.³¹ The most empowering truth to citizens that Machiavelli proclaimed in 1523 ACE was that, fundamentally, armies do not march and go to war without their say so.

In conclusion, Niccolò Machiavelli's rich knowledge of ancient history regarding governance and conflict of nations generated controversial thinking in his time and significantly affected political and military thought. It would seem that Machiavelli continues to shape the world with his research since his ideals of politics have been portrayed frequently in modern pop culture, and his republican thoughts and theories on the citizen soldier have been emulated in many modern first world countries militaries, including the United States of America.

³⁰ Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, 5.

³¹ Yves Winter, "The Prince and his Art of War: Machiavelli's Military Populism," *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (March 2014): 176.

Machiavelli could be seen as a challenging historian as each of his writings is individual in scope and purpose while at the same time linked when applied to conjoined political and military matters. However difficult and complicated, Niccolò Machiavelli was a historian who studied, participated and affected history, and continues to affect history even to this day.

About the author

Alexander Amoroso has been writing since he was 12 years old. At 18 he wrote his first essay called “High School: Why Does It Suck?” The essay he wrote at age 20, “The Death of the American Teenager,” was his first publication with *Thought Notebook*. Currently as a history major at San Jose State University as a history major, he continues to actively contribute to *Thought Notebook*, with titles such as “From Fate to Destiny,” “Excellence: The Non-Negotiable Quality of All Humankind,” “A Struggle with Patience” and many more. With a love and passion for the planet and an ambition to keep writing, Alexander plans on further developing his intellectual writing style, which he hopes will inspire in some way to whomever reads it.