No More Mister Nice Guy

CARNES LORD

REVIEW OF MICHAEL A. LEDEEN,

Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli's Iron Rules Are As Timely and Important Today As Five Centuries Ago

(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). U.S. $22.95 cloth, U.S. $13.95 paper

Executives of the world, forget casual Fridays, teamwork, empathy and focus groups. Get in touch with your inner prince! That is what Michael Ledeen counsels us to do in this entertaining, iconoclastic, occasionally outrageous, but also genuinely thought-provoking treatise on the way the world works and the foibles of contemporary political and corporate culture.

Written in Florence in 1513, Machiavelli's *Prince* has proven a popular and enduring classic of political analysis. But does it really speak to the situation of contemporary man? At a time when popes led armies, and poison and the rack were accepted methods of political struggle, Machiavelli's frequently bloody-minded advice to the would-be prince might have been useful. For today's aspiring executives or politicians, however, one is tempted to suppose that a primer in opinion polling, public relations or litigation might come in handier. Ledeen insists otherwise. Times change, he admits, echoing an important Machiavellian theme, and leaders must adjust their behavior accordingly; but human nature remains fundamentally the same: people are selfish, fickle, light-minded, lascivious, driven by desires and ambitions. "Unconstrained," Ledeen writes, "by any political or social instinct, unguided by a hidden hand, we humans claw for wealth and power. Once victorious, we degenerate, leaving our conquests and acquisitions open to domination by others or disintegration caused by the rot within."[1]

It is tempting to conclude from all this, to quote Machiavelli himself, that "all men are wicked," and therefore get what they deserve at the hands of their

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necessarily self-serving political leaders. As Ledeen rightly notes, however, this is a deliberate overstatement.[2] Indeed, so are many of Machiavelli's more notorious observations in the *Prince*. That war is the only serious pursuit for a prince, that good arms are more necessary than good laws, that it is better for a prince to be feared than loved—these and similar *obiter dicta* are half-truths at best, intentional counterweights to what Machiavelli saw as the lack of realism of a political culture decisively shaped by the Christian religion.

Once one comes to appreciate this rhetorical dimension of Machiavelli's teaching, its relevance to our own situation is perhaps more apparent. In its tendency to flinch from the hard necessities of politics, the political culture of our day (which in key respects is, after all, Christianity in secular dress) bears comparison with that of Machiavelli's era. Sentimentality, moralism and the catechism of political correctness tend to dominate our political discourse. Machiavelli's fundamental point is not simply that a politics built on such elements fails, but that it fails on its own terms. The Florentines, Machiavelli tells us, fearing a reputation for cruelty, allowed their subject city of Pistoia to destroy itself in factional struggles. The military adventurer Cesare Borgia, on the other hand, through the harshest measures reduced the misruled Romagna to peace and "good government," and eventually gained the gratitude and loyalty of its people.[3] The ruthless Borgia is Machiavelli's most conspicuous model prince; Machiavelli's own Florentines, in spite of their proto-democratic politics and Christian piety, exemplify all that is wrong with modern statecraft.

Ledeen's Machiavelli is certainly not politically correct, but neither is he the moral monster of popular legend. To begin with, Machiavelli was not simply a promoter of princely government. Not only does he judge many of the princes of his day harshly, but he shows a marked preference for republican over monarchic regimes. Precisely because of his pessimistic view of human nature, Machiavelli is fully aware of the drawbacks of hereditary succession as well as the tendency of unchecked one-man rule to degenerate into tyranny. He favors regimes that mix and balance the power of the one, the few and the many. Machiavelli's ideal prince is a man of *virtù*—not effeminate, but manly (the core meaning of the Latin word from which it is derived); not light-minded, but serious; not indolent, but active and energetic. He is capable of taking long views and subduing his animal appetites. Virtue in Machiavelli's sense is not virtue in the traditional (and certainly not in the Christian) sense, since it is compatible with actions generally considered immoral. But it has a certain moral nobility. It is the quality or set of qualities required of a prince who is to be a genuine leader of men, not merely their master.

One might suppose that constitutional democracies are structured so as to avoid the necessity of relying on princes. In the *Federalist Papers*, the classic analysis of the American constitutional order, there is much talk of the importance of officers of the government being endowed with "virtue and wisdom." But it is

also assumed that "enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm" of the ship of state.[4] While he certainly recognizes that genuine political talent is always in deficit, Machiavelli's view of the requirements of democratic leadership is a more robust one. Machiavellian virtue, Ledeen tells us, is particularly in demand in extraordinary political times—at the founding of states, during revolutions, or in great national crises such as the American Civil War. But it is also needed in ordinary times. In such times, the great challenge to statecraft—democratic or otherwise—is the problem of corruption. If adversity is the mother of virtue, prosperity and the absence of serious external threats tend to breed corruption. Good leaders can only do so much to impede the progress of corruption in a society; but bad or indifferent leaders can do much to accelerate it. "When the perception is that corruption begins at the top," says an Ecuadorian politician quoted by Ledeen, "everything falls into decay. If the minister himself steals, the undersecretaries will commit assaults and the departmental directors will engage in theft, extortion, robbery, and murder."[5]

Ledeen rightly draws attention to the central role of corruption in Machiavelli's thought and makes it a key element in his case for the relevance of the great Florentine to our own era. The inexorability of corruption in circumstances like the present—unprecedented economic prosperity together with a benign security environment—requires vigilant leadership that is prepared to take strong measures to discipline its people and (especially, one should add) its elites. Machiavelli seems to have believed that some dramatic reassertion of princely power is needed every ten years or so. As he puts it, "Men begin to change their habits and to transgress the laws, and if their memory of punishment is not refreshed, and fear is not renewed in their spirit, soon so many delinquents will be found that they cannot be punished without danger."[6] Ledeen comments:

> Our periodic purges of corrupt politicians are just the sort of thing he has in mind, whether Watergate or Whitewater in America, the destruction of the old political class in Italy, or the humiliation of politicians and managers in Japan. Nowadays we generally destroy men's reputations and careers rather than taking their lives...but the effect on the public is the same, especially as many of our most deadly modern executioners are journalists and broadcasters who provide the necessary stage and bring the drama to a large audience.[7]

Ledeen's Machiavelli can plainly be made more palatable to present-day sensibilities if his bloody-mindedness does not have to be taken literally. But Ledeen won't let us off the hook quite that easily. While denying that Machiavelli believed that the ends always justify any means, he argues that Machiavelli insists that certain kinds of circumstances require princes to "enter into evil" for the sake of the well-being of the state as a whole. He reminds us of Machiavelli's impertinent but

effective appeal to the authority of the Old Testament: "Whoever reads the Bible sensibly will see that Moses was forced, were his laws and institutions to go forward, to kill numberless men."[8] Founders of states and religions, revolutionaries, wartime leaders and tyrannicides are foremost among those who can excuse what would otherwise be atrocious crimes with the claim of necessity. The only moral criterion we can apply to such men is the economy of their criminality, or their ability to "exit" promptly from the evil they enter once the larger task has been accomplished. Contemporary examples offered by Ledeen include Winston Churchill's failure to warn the citizens of Coventry of a massive German air raid in order to protect vital intelligence methods, Allied deception attending the D-Day invasion of France, and the Turkish military's seizure of power and extra-legal war on terrorism in the early 1980s.[9]

Readers can make up their own minds about these difficult issues, but Churchill is probably as good a guide as any to the fine lines distinguishing prudence from immorality under conditions of wartime adversity. During the Second World War, Churchill didn't hesitate to violate international law by mining the territorial waters of neutral Norway. Nor was he constrained by accepted standards of *jus in bello* in the terror bombing of German cities (though he later gave clear evidence of second thoughts about the latter). He felt such measures were justified not only by wartime exigencies in general, but by the particular menace of the Nazi foe: At stake was not only national independence for Britain, but the very survival of the civilization of the West. However, it is quite another matter to imagine Churchill sanctioning the sacrifice of Coventry—and skepticism on this point is well-founded. Though the protection of the "Ultra" intelligence source was a very high priority for him, the oft-told tale of Churchill and Coventry turns out to be a myth.[10] One is inclined to suppose there are things to which a leader like Churchill would never stoop even in extreme circumstances, simply as a matter of national or personal honor. After all, unlike Cesare Borgia, Churchill was a gentleman.

Assuming all this is true, what should one conclude? Are the Churchills of this world fatally disadvantaged in any struggle with the Borgias of this world? In fact, a good case can be made for the utility of honor as a dimension of statecraft—and for the dysfunctionality of genuine evil. Stalin's purges almost destroyed the Red Army before the Nazis got to fire a shot at it. The sycophancy and corruption of the Nazi elite greatly undermined the wartime performance of the German government. Churchill's defiance of Germany in May 1940 in what seemed like a hopeless situation, and against the tide of elite opinion, galvanized the public and set Britain on the only possible course toward an honorable outcome of the war. By contrast, a purely Machiavellian arrangement like the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 can be seen in retrospect as a short-sighted move that severely damaged the USSR's international standing.

What, then, of the present? Ledeen cannot resist quoting a passage from Machiavelli's *Art of War* describing the outlook of the Italian princes of his day—and calling the turn on Bill Clinton:

> They thought...that it sufficed for a prince in the writing-rooms of palaces to think up a sharp reply, to write a beautiful letter, to demonstrate wit and readiness in saying and words, to know how to weave a fraud...to keep many lascivious women around, to conduct himself avariciously and proudly, to rot in idleness, to give military rank by favor, to be scornful if anyone might show them any praiseworthy path, to want their words to be oracular responses; nor did these no-accounts realize that they were preparing themselves to be the prey of whoever assaulted them.[11]

Ledeen's analysis plausibly links President Clinton's personal self-indulgence with his arguable neglect and misuse of America's armed forces. Ledeen writes, "Such self-indulgent princes are extremely reluctant to send armies into the field. Even when Clinton felt he must do so, as in Iraq, he ordered his generals to avoid casualties, and therefore any hope of victory .... Such leaders use military power to enhance their image, not to advance the common good."[12]

Yet one wonders whether Ledeen really has this right. If Clinton is in one sense the opposite of Machiavelli's model prince, in another sense he is the most Machiavellian American president since Franklin Roosevelt. While eschewing actual murder, the president has demonstrated considerable virtuosity in "the politics of personal destruction;" he has proven no mean general in what Ledeen himself refers to as "the war of politics" generally; and, in accordance with Machiavelli's dictum that a real prince must possess the qualities of the "fox" as much as or more than those of the "lion," he has raised fraud, mendacity and deception to a new level of art. Perhaps one should leave it at saying that Bill Clinton gives Machiavelli a bad name. But Clinton does raise broader questions about the adequacy of Ledeen's overall analysis of Machiavelli's usefulness as a lodestar for contemporary politicians. ■

NOTES

[1] Michael A. Ledeen, *Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli's Iron Rules are as Timely and Important Today as Five Centuries Ago* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 88.
[2] Ledeen, 61.
[3] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (published 1532), Chapter 17.
[4] James Madison, *The Federalist* (1788), No. 10.
[5] Ledeen, 155.
[6] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (published 1531), Book III, Chapter 1.
[7] Ledeen, 158.
[8] Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Book III, Chapter 30.
[9] Ledeen, 93-102.
[10] See David Stafford, *Churchill and Secret Service* (New York: Overlook Press, 1997), Chapter 11.
[11] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War* (1521), Book VII.
[12] Ledeen, 77.