The Restoration of America: Machiavellian Influence

By Karla Perry

More than two centuries before American Independence, an exiled political philosopher, Niccolo Machiavelli, penned the classic works *The Prince* and *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*. While historians debate the extent of his influence upon the Founding Fathers, they agree that his books were found in their personal libraries.

John Adams, however, extensively quoted Machiavelli in his *Defense of the Constitution*. Adams wrote that Machiavelli restored reason to matters of government. Just the same, Adams sifted through Machiavelli praising that which had merit and criticizing that which did not. Adams’ approach is wise, as there is a mixture of wisdom and weeds within the works of Machiavelli. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the wisdom and leave the weeds alone.

Machiavelli [1496 -1527], a native of Florence, Italy, with a humble heritage, served as the Head of the Second Chancery, placing him in direct proximity to the head of the government for fourteen years. This positioned him as counselor to the governor in matters of foreign defense and gave him full access to the inner workings of European politics. The Republic of Florence fell with the Spanish invasion of Italy in 1512. Imprisonment and torture befell Machiavelli before being exiled beyond the city limits. It was here in his villa that he put his knowledge to paper providing the world the first works of political science.¹

Unlike John Locke, Machiavelli spoke from the perspective of the best interests of a national leader to maintain a lasting and stable society. *The Prince* is written almost exclusively in this manner, but his *Discourses on Livy* delve deeper into the philosophy of empowering the people.

The Prince belongs in a way to a particular genre of literature called by the ancient world speculum principis or “the mirror for princes.” Among this classification we find Thomas Moore’s Utopia and Desiderius Erasmus’ The Education of a Christian Prince. These works attempted to provide ideal principles for governance to their respective leaders. The authors hoped to effect change by providing a template for the way things ought to be.  

In contrast, Machiavelli attempted to write without idealizing reality. He wrote a work to deal with governing in terms of the reality as it existed. In so doing, his work is replete with less than ideal advice for the governing of a free nation. Notwithstanding, mixed within the realism is a certain degree of wisdom of the ages where we find him writing about a free people—a Republic different from the fallen Rome. We also find tidbits of wisdom about evaluating national health, and the pitfalls that nations, leaders, and citizens must avoid.  

In fact, particular passages of Machiavelli seem to comment upon our present American concerns. As a prophetically minded community considers this passage from The Prince:

“... Romans did what all wise princes should do: they have to look not only to the present dangers but also to future ones, and make every effort to forestall them. For, if they are seen from afar, they can easily be remedied, but if you wait until they present themselves, there is no longer time to use medicine, since the malady has become incurable. What doctors say about consumption applies here: at the beginning the disease is easy to cure but difficult to diagnose, but in the course of time, when it was not diagnosed at first and treated, it becomes easy to diagnose but difficult to cure. Thus it happens in the affairs of state: if the evils that are developing are diagnosed from afar (which only the prudent man can do), they are quickly cured but when they have not been diagnosed and are allowed to grow so that everyone recognizes them, then there is no longer any remedy for them.”

America is at the stage where the prudent see the present and future dangers, and while the masses feel the symptoms, they do not yet recognize the disease. The cure is best administered in this interim stage while the remedy is still possible.

Machiavelli goes on to explain that “whoever becomes the master of a city accustomed to living in freedom and does not destroy it may expect to be destroyed by it, for during a rebellion it always takes refuge in the name of liberty and its ancient institutions, which are not forgotten either with the passage of time or because of the benefits received.”

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2 Ibid, p.xxii
4 Ibid, p.22
A people who are used to freedom are not apt to surrender it. It is because Americans are like the proverbial frog in a pot of heating water that we slowly surrender what we would never allow to be summarily stolen from us. The key is not to mount a rebellion, but to procure a restoration. Restoring our history of liberty to our ancient institutions is paramount to reeducating a people to manage and retain their freedom. For “a city used to living in freedom can be held more easily by means of its citizens than in any other way—if you want to keep it.”

These Machiavellian words bring to remembrance the eccentric American statesman, Benjamin Franklin, at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention. Upon leaving the meeting, a woman approached Franklin to inquire as to the new government. Franklin replied, “It’s a Republic, if you can keep it.” The duty of maintaining the Republic rests squarely where it should, on the shoulders of the people.

In his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli, shares this sentiment, “…the government which has been organized will not last long if it rests on the shoulders of one man. However, it will do so if left to the care of many, provided that preserving it is something dear to their hearts.” He goes on to say that if the people understand that they have a good government “they will never agree to give it up.” He argues that a state built upon one man will die with the one man, but a nation built upon the people will continue to live on with the people. A people who work to preserve such an established government “attain the same glory as those that established [it].”

The problem is that we have forgotten who we are. Our national heritage is largely unknown by the common populace to such an extent that we have lost sight of the glory of our Founding generation. Educators have successfully illuminated the weaknesses of our Founders so that they have lost their place in our modern world. The Revolutionary generation lived and died for future generations they would not see in hopes that we could experience what they wanted to leave for us by their sacrifice.

I once submitted a research paper in a history contest in college, writing on the honorable life of George Washington. I cast him in a heroic light as one who did not take power for himself even when it was twice offered to him. I spoke of his faith, courage, bravery, and honor. Much to my surprise, my paper won first place in its classification. I was told by several professors that they and the judges found its perspective refreshing as they were accustomed to negative perspectives on the lives of the Founders. One professor, who was master of ceremony for that particular classification, made known to those listening that she thought my perspective idealistic and quaint. I encountered those who thought like her far too often in my university education.

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5 Ibid p. 22
6 Ibid, p. 166
7 Ibid, p. 166
8 Ibid, p. 183
Just the same, it is past the time for the church to begin to take the reins by educating the nation about our national heritage. Machiavelli believed that people would work to preserve a government they understand to be good. Let us start by restoring the view that our Constitutional Republic is a good government as far as governments go so that it can rest safely on the shoulders of the people.

Machiavelli proposed that “the observance of religious teaching is the cause of the greatness of republics; similarly, the disdain for it is the cause of their ruin.” The Founders understood that the people must be educated in how to keep the Republic. They did not create any governmental institution, or department of education, to procure this end. They saw this as the job of the community, families, and the church to instruct people in civic virtue and care for the nation.

We can continue to be angry about the failure of the educational system in America, or we can do something proactive and start teaching our heritage to the people with whom we have influence. Denouncing the failure of something is not the same as taking responsibility for it. Organizations do not change because people proclaim how bad they have become. They change because a group of people see what they are to be and work to bring it about. Picture an America full of people who know their history and who understand and are responsible for their freedom. This is an attainable goal necessary to procure the restoration of America.

9 Ibid, p. 171
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