



# **THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS**

**NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI (1469–1527)**





## IN CONTEXT

## BRANCH

Political philosophy

## APPROACH

Realism

## BEFORE

**1st century BCE** Plato argues in his *Republic* that the state should be governed by a philosopher-king.

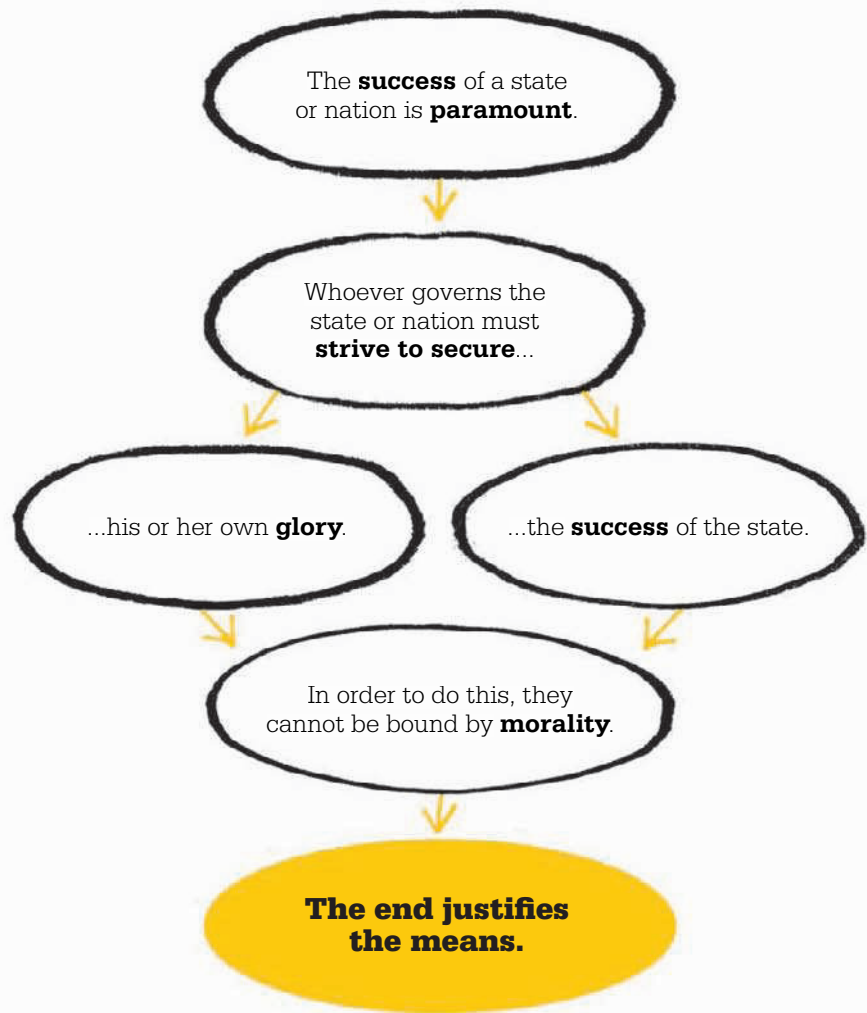
**1st century BCE** The Roman writer Cicero argues that the Roman Republic is the best form of government.

## AFTER

**16th century** Machiavelli's peers begin to use the adjective "Machiavellian" to describe acts of devious cunning.

**1762** Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues that people should hold on to their liberty and resist the rule of princes.

**1928** Italian dictator Benito Mussolini describes *The Prince* as "the statesman's supreme guide."



In order fully to understand Machiavelli's views on power, it is necessary to understand the background to his political concerns. Machiavelli was born in Florence, Italy, during a time of almost constant upheaval. The Medici family had been in open but unofficial control of the city-state for some 35 years, and the year of Machiavelli's birth saw Lorenzo de' Medici (Lorenzo the Magnificent) succeed his father as ruler, ushering in a period of great artistic activity in Florence. Lorenzo was succeeded in 1492 by his son Piero (known as

Piero the Unfortunate), whose reign was short-lived. The French under Charles VIII invaded Italy in considerable force in 1494, and Piero was forced to surrender and then flee the city, as the citizens rebelled against him. Florence was declared a republic that same year.

The Dominican prior of the San Marco monastery, Girolamo Savonarola, then came to dominate Florentine political life. The city-state entered a democratic period under his guidance, but after accusing the pope of corruption Savonarola was eventually arrested

and burnt as a heretic. This led to Machiavelli's first known involvement in Florentine politics, and he became Secretary to the second Chancery in 1498.

## Career and influences

The invasion by Charles VIII in 1494 had sparked a turbulent period in the history of Italy, which at the time was divided into five powers: the papacy, Naples, Venice, Milan, and Florence. The country was fought over by various foreign powers, mainly France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire. Florence

**See also:** Plato 50–55 ■ Francis Bacon 110–11 ■ Jean-Jacques Rousseau 154–59 ■ Karl Marx 196–203



was weak in the face of their armies, and Machiavelli spent 14 years travelling between various cities on diplomatic missions, trying to shore up the struggling republic.

In the course of his diplomatic activities, Machiavelli met Cesare Borgia, the illegitimate son of Pope Alexander VI. The pope was a powerful figure in northern Italy, and a significant threat to Florence. Although Cesare was Florence's enemy, Machiavelli—despite his republican views—was impressed by his vigor, intelligence, and ability. Here we see one of the sources for Machiavelli's famous work, *The Prince*.

Pope Alexander VI died in 1503, and his successor Pope Julius II was another strong and successful

man who impressed Machiavelli with both his military ability and his cunning. But tension between France and the papacy led to Florence fighting with the French against the pope and his allies, the Spanish. The French lost, and Florence with them. In 1512 the Spanish dissolved the city-state's government, the Medicis returned, and what was in effect a tyranny under Cardinal de' Medici was installed. Machiavelli was fired from his political office and exiled to his farm in Florence. His political career might have revived under the rule of the Medicis, but in February 1513 he was falsely implicated in a plot against the family, and he was tortured, fined, and imprisoned.

**Lorenzo the Magnificent** (1449–1492) effectively ruled Florence from the death of his father in 1469 until his death. Though he ruled as a despot, the republic flourished under his guidance.

Machiavelli was released from prison within a month, but his chances of re-employment were slim, and his attempts to find a new political position came to nothing. He decided to present the head of the de' Medici family in Florence, Giuliano, with a book. By the time it was ready Giuliano had died, so Machiavelli changed the dedication to Giuliano's successor, Lorenzo. The book was of a type popular at the time: advice to a prince.

## The Prince

Machiavelli's book *The Prince* was witty and cynical, and showed a great understanding of Italy in general and Florence in particular. In it, Machiavelli sets out his argument that the goals of a ruler justify the means used to obtain them. *The Prince* differed markedly from other books of its type in its resolute setting aside of Christian morality. Machiavelli wanted to »

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How difficult it is for a people accustomed to live under a prince to preserve their liberty!

**Niccolò Machiavelli**

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give ruthlessly practical advice to a prince and, as his experience with extremely successful popes and cardinals had shown him, Christian values should be cast aside if they got in the way.

Machiavelli's approach centers on the notion of *virtù*, but this is not the modern notion of moral virtue. It shares more similarities with the medieval notion of virtues as the powers or functions of things, such as the healing powers of plants or minerals. Machiavelli is writing about the virtues of princes, and these were the powers and functions that concerned rule. The Latin root of *virtù* also relates it to manliness (as in "virile"), and this feeds into what Machiavelli has to say in its application both to the prince himself and to the state—where

sometimes *virtù* is used to mean "success", and describes a state that is to be admired and imitated.

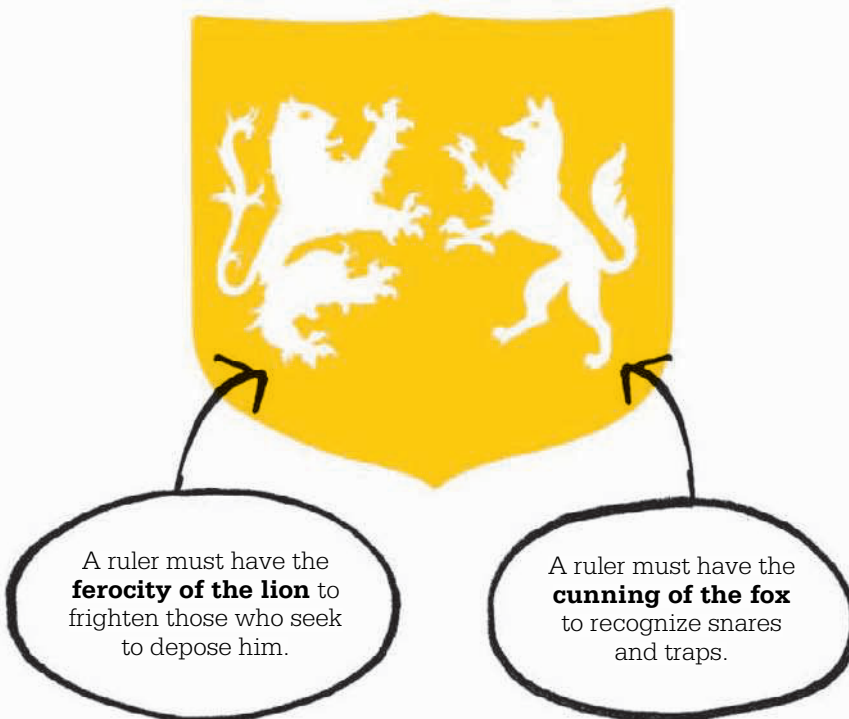
Part of Machiavelli's point is that a ruler cannot be bound by morality, but must do what it takes to secure his own glory and the success of the state over which he rules—an approach that became known as realism. But Machiavelli does not argue that the end justifies the means in all cases. There are certain means that a wise prince must avoid, for though they might achieve the desired ends, they lay him open to future dangers.

The main means to be avoided consist of those that would make the people hate their prince. They may love him, they may fear him—preferably both, Machiavelli says, though it is more important for a

prince to be feared than to be loved. But the people must not hate him, for this is likely to lead to rebellion. Also, a prince who mistreats his people unnecessarily will be despised—a prince should have a reputation for compassion, not for cruelty. This might involve harsh punishment of a few in order to achieve general social order, which benefits more people in the long run.

In cases where Machiavelli does think that the end justifies the means, this rule applies only to princes. The proper conduct of citizens of the state is not at all the same as that of the prince. But even for ordinary citizens, Machiavelli generally disdains conventional Christian morality as being weak and unsuitable for a strong city.

**A ruler needs to know** how to act like a beast, Machiavelli says in *The Prince*, and must imitate the qualities of the fox as well as the lion.



### Prince or republic

There are reasons to suspect that *The Prince* does not represent Machiavelli's own views. Perhaps the most important is the disparity between the ideas it contains and those expressed in his other main work, *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy*. In the *Discourses* Machiavelli argues that a republic is the ideal regime, and that it

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It must be understood that a prince cannot observe all those things which are considered good in men.

**Niccolò Machiavelli**

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should be instituted whenever a reasonable degree of equality exists or can be established. A principdom is only suitable when equality does not exist in a state, and cannot be introduced. However, it can be argued that *The Prince* represents Machiavelli's genuine ideas about how the ruler should rule in such cases; if principdoms are sometimes a necessary evil, it is best that they be ruled as well as possible. Moreover, Machiavelli did believe that Florence was in such political turmoil that it needed a strong ruler to get it into shape.

### Pleasing the readers

The fact that *The Prince* was written by Machiavelli in order to ingratiate himself with the Medici is another reason to treat its contents with caution. However, he also dedicated the *Discourses* to members of Florence's republican government. Machiavelli, it could be argued, would have written what the dedicatee wanted to read.

*The Prince*, however, contains much that Machiavelli is thought to have genuinely believed, such as the need for a citizens' militia rather than reliance on mercenaries.

**Ruthlessness** has been a virtue of leadership throughout history. In the 20th century, the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini used a mixture of fear and love to hold on to power in Italy.

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The world has become more like that of Machiavelli.

**Bertrand Russell**

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The problem lies in discerning which parts are his actual beliefs and which are not. It is tempting to divide them according to how well they fit with the intended reader's own beliefs, but that is unlikely to give an accurate result.

It has also been suggested that Machiavelli was attempting satire, and his real intended audience was the republicans, not the ruling elite. This idea is supported by the fact that Machiavelli did not write it in



Latin, the language of the elite, but in Italian, the language of the people. Certainly, *The Prince* at times reads satirically, as though the audience is expected to conclude: “if that is how a good prince should behave, we should at all costs avoid being ruled by one!” If Machiavelli was also satirizing the idea that “the end justifies the means”, then the purpose of this small, deceptively simple book is far more intriguing than one might originally assume. ■

### Niccolò Machiavelli



Machiavelli was born in Florence in 1469. Little is known of the first 28 years of his life; apart from a few inconclusive mentions in his father's diary, the first direct evidence is a business letter written in 1497. From his writings, though, it is clear that he received a good education, perhaps at the University of Florence.

By 1498, Machiavelli had become a politician and diplomat of the Florentine Republic. After his enforced retirement on the return of the Medici to Florence in 1512, he devoted himself to various literary activities, as well

as persistent attempts to return to the political arena. Eventually he regained the trust of the Medici, and Cardinal Giulio de' Medici commissioned him to write a history of Florence. The book was finished in 1525, after the cardinal had become Pope Clement VII. Machiavelli died in 1527, without achieving his ambition to return to public life.

### Key works

**1513** *The Prince*

**1517** *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy*