



Book The Prince

Niccolò Machiavelli
Oxford UP, 2008
First Edition:1513
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Recommendation

The end justifies the means. This simple, pragmatic maxim underpins Niccolò Machiavelli’s classic work, *The Prince*. Written in 1513, when Machiavelli was a Florentine registry official, this handbook of political power provoked controversy like no other. Its central theme is how Renaissance rulers should act if they want to prevail. According to the author, a strong state requires a leader who is able to defend his power at all costs. Machiavelli maintains that a ruler may deceive, trick, oppress and even murder his opponents, as long as his misdeeds serve the state’s stability. Without question, this short treatise offers enough material to demonize its author. However, Machiavelli does not champion unlimited ruthlessness and violence. Nor does he justify any objectives that seem to warrant violence. However, he also does not try to align his work to Christian morals as he examines the practice of statecraft and leadership. The term “Machiavellian” emerged in the 16th century to describe a devious, cruel tyrant, who uses any means to achieve his goals. When 20th century dictators praised Machiavelli’s masterpiece, it came into disrepute, but in contemporary thought, its literary foresight makes it a classic. Modern readers will be able to understand the book’s significance thanks to the accessible translation and annotations by Peter Bondanella. To put the treatise in context, Maurizio Viroli explains in his introduction, “For Machiavelli, the old way of building and preserving a regime...had to be abandoned in order to embrace a new conception...based on the principle that no state is a true dominion unless it is sustained by an army composed of citizens or subjects.” *BooksInShort* recommends *The Prince* to literature and history buffs, be they subjects or citizens, and to strategists and political scientists as a core work in their field.

Take-Aways

- Niccolò Machiavelli’s classic treatise instructs rulers to focus on political reality, not moral ideals.
- Two forms of rule exist: free states, such as republics, and principalities, such as autocracies.
- The ruler must do everything to secure his power, even if he has to use force.
- He can secure his power either by using foul play or by gaining his subjects’ loyalty through good deeds.
- As a ruler, it is better to be feared than loved.
- The prince must make his subjects happy, facilitate trade and, at all costs, avoid becoming hated by the people.
- A leader should always appreciate the art of war.
- After conquering a region, rulers must assure their power. Retaining power is harder than gaining it.
- The best methods of securing power are to destroy the captured capital city, establish a residence and set up a loyal local government.
- A private army recruited from the people is more reliable than mercenary troops.

Summary

Forms of Rule

People live under two types of governance: Either they are citizens of a free state, such as a republic, or subjects of a principality, such as an autocracy. A leader can achieve sole rule through inheritance or through obtaining new territories. The leader can be the founder of new entities, as was the case in Milan, or he can conquer existing towns and regions.

“A man who wishes to profess goodness at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good.”

A leader who inherits his kingdom will encounter fewer problems in both ruling and retaining it. First, the people accept and respect his power because he comes from a long tradition of leadership. And second, any potential opponents would be at a disadvantage since they would have to turn to cruelty to gain respect, thus losing the support of the people.

The Correct Form of Conquest

Language plays a large role in the successful annexing of states. When the new, added territory uses the same tongue as the existing territory, the ruler can take over by ousting the former ruling family and keeping the existing laws. In most such cases, the subjects will pose no problem. However, to assert his authority and make his presence known, a head of state should always erect an official residence. Creating colonies is a cheap, effective way to increase your power, and it is easier than conquering whole countries. With colonies, a ruler needs to dispossess only a few powerful inhabitants and render them too poor to pose any meaningful threat thereafter. Drive them away and settle your followers on their land. In general, aim to strip the powerful of their power and make the less powerful your allies.

Retaining Power

Kingdoms, such as Turkey, are more difficult to take over since they have sole, supreme leaders who are hard to depose or eliminate. If you do manage to dethrone a king, leading subsequently will prove relatively easy since the land had only one ruler, so you won't have to tackle territorial lords pushing their own agendas. In states such as France, seizing power is simple, but holding it is difficult. A number of power-hungry princes and barons surround the king and so forging alliances is easy. Should you defeat the king, but fail to dispossess the other barons, maintaining power will become a miserable, Sisyphean undertaking. Once you conquer a territory, take three necessary steps to secure your governance:

1. Destroy the capital city. This is the safest thing to do.
2. Establish a residence in the region.
3. Create a government from loyal locals. This way, the state may retain its own laws, but it will still heed your authority.

Conquest Through Ability and Luck: Cesare Borgia

A ruler who takes over an empire by conquest must use his forces to maintain his dominance. However, an individual who rises from citizen to ruler generally has no private army and thus must proceed with caution. If he acquired power with someone else's help, he must act cleverly, so as not to lose his position too quickly.

“Since it is difficult to be both together, it is much safer to be feared than to be loved...Men are less hesitant about injuring someone who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared.”

For example, to gain power, Cesare Borgia relied too heavily on his father, Rodrigo Borgia, elected in 1492 as Pope Alexander VI. Cesare Borgia saw his chance to take over Romagna, Italy, when the pope granted the French king dissolution of his marriage, and the monarch expressed his gratitude by sending troops to the pope. With that might, Borgia soon appointed himself duke. The new ruler used every means to consolidate his rule. He murdered his political opponents and chose a new governor, Remirro Del Orco, a Spaniard known for cruelty. At the time, Romagna was overrun by lawlessness and debauchery, and Del Orco restored order using an iron fist. However, his harsh methods made the new governor hugely unpopular. To distance himself from Del Orco's actions and to get the public back on his side, Borgia had the governor executed, putting his remains on display to satisfy the masses.

“A prince can never make himself secure when the people are his enemy, because there are so many of them; he can make himself secure against the nobles, because they are so few.”

To eliminate the threat of a new pope, who would have been dangerous to him and his father, Borgia ousted the entire ruling family, and won over the nobles of Rome and the majority of the College of Cardinals. As an extra measure, he strove to broaden his power with further conquests. However, before he succeeded, his father died and he himself became deathly sick. In the end, he was unable to fight off the attacking Spanish and French armies.

Other Forms of Acquisition

A private citizen can become the ruler in two other ways. First, he can use foul play to gain power. Luck plays no role in exercising this option. The individual secures control independently and ruthlessly, and relies on no one for help.

“Those who...become princes through their virtue acquire the principality with difficulty, but they hold on to it easily.”

Agathocles of Syracuse used underhandedness to gain command in 300 B.C. The son of a potter, he rose through the military ranks and eventually sought the title of prince. One day, he organized a gathering of the state's wealthy citizens and Senate members. Once the city's most powerful inhabitants had assembled, his guards sealed the doors of the meeting room and every attendee soon met a grisly end. After this, no one dared to challenge Agathocles' rule.

“Although someone may have the most powerful of armies, he always needs the support of the inhabitants to seize a region.”

This method of seizing power is cowardly, however, and Agathocles will never count among the greats because of it. Should atrocities be necessary to acquire power, a would-be ruler should carry them out quickly and in bouts. Once he has achieved the desired result, he must rein in his actions. Under no circumstances should he continue using force. Those who expose their subjects to increasing degrees of violence soon lose dominance.

“It cannot be called virtue to kill one’s fellow citizens, to betray allies, to be without faith, without pity, without religion; by these means one can acquire power, but not glory.”

Second, citizens can rise to power either with the assistance of the public or with the help of the powerful. The latter is difficult because each of these “mighty men” feels that he himself should rule, and as a group, these powerful individuals seek to oppress the public. However, leaders who are true men of the people bolster their rule by securing the support of their subjects. If the public anticipates that their ruler will be cruel, he can use good deeds to encourage their loyalty.

Under Siege

A strong ruler generally needs a private army so that he can compete well on the battlefield. However, if a ruler with no army comes under siege, his only recourse is to retreat to a fortress. For this plan to work, the city must be prepared in advance. The imperial urban areas in Germany are the prototypes of such “free” cities. They are so well protected and own so many supplies that they can withstand siege easily for a year. This long period leaves attackers vulnerable to the changing seasons, and in most cases, they are forced to retreat shamefully.

“Men...are ungrateful, fickle, simulators and deceivers, avoiders of danger, and greedy for gain.”

Another weapon in a ruler’s arsenal is popularity. If the people cherish him, they will remain loyal, and a foreign attacker will have an even harder time penetrating the land’s defenses. Finally, spiritual leadership is a useful tool: If the ruler promotes religion, tradition and God, his citizens will not dare rebel against these powerful forces.

Mercenary Forces

Whoever seeks to consolidate his rule needs good laws and good armies. Those who must rely on mercenary soldiers will eventually encounter betrayal and treachery. These soldiers serve their masters out of greed, not honor or duty. They are generally dishonest and steal from the public in times of peace.

“The prince must read histories and in them consider the deeds of excellent men.”

In wartime, mercenaries often become cowardly and can even switch sides. Mercenary leaders are especially dangerous: If they are masters of their craft, they seek to draw power to themselves. Amateur mercenary leaders, on the other hand, damage the country through poor management.

Auxiliary troops, which might arrive thanks to a powerful ally, usually do more harm than good. Only those states that possess their own locally recruited forces, such as Switzerland, can really call themselves free. For this reason it is important that they remain especially well fortified.

The Art of War

A ruler should never neglect the art of war since he is expected to excel in warfare and defense above all other things. Many citizens rose to power by perfecting their wartime skills and battle techniques. The opposite is also true: Many rulers have been relieved of their power because they avoided going to war. Even during times of peace, leaders should keep their armies ready for battle. Preparation is the key to victory. A prince must also know his territories inside and out, since he does not want to falter in his own marshes when trying to outsmart the enemy. The wise ruler should study the lessons of others who succeeded in battle using guile and skill.

Best Behavior

No gain can come to a leader from adhering to ideals. Surrounded by unscrupulous people, the good person inevitably will suffer defeat. If a ruler possesses certain virtues – all the better. If he possesses any bad qualities, he must keep them hidden. People believe what they observe without further investigating the matter. For instance, generosity is by and large a useless characteristic in a head of state. Eventually he will have to raise taxes and in no time people far and wide will hate him. Whoever has the reputation of a miser should not try to change it. He can fall back on his thriftiness when he needs money to serve the general good, such as when the country is under attack.

“Ordinary people are always taken in by appearances and by the outcome of an event. And in the world there are only ordinary people.”

A prince should be loved and feared equally. If he must choose only one or the other, he should opt for the fear of his people, but not so much so that it turns to hatred. By being charitable, he feeds anarchy, whereas by using cruelty, he keeps the peace. A kind ruler can rarely rely on his subjects’ gratitude: They are often fickle and will not repay his kindness.

“Everyone sees what you seem to be, few touch upon what you are.”

If need be, the head of state may break his word. After all, everybody eventually does. However, he must have a valid reason for this breach of promise. Whoever can create the appearance of absolute virtue will be in a strong position. The populace believes what it sees and is happy to follow.

“A certain prince...preaches nothing but peace and faith, and to both one and the other he is extremely hostile. If he had observed both peace and faith, he would have had either his reputation or his state taken away from him many times over.”

Employ capable ministers who are committed to the interests of the state. If they are confident and clever, allow them to tell you the truth rather than flatter you when unpleasant matters arise. Their insights will serve you better than their compliments. Consider these final precautions:

- Never interfere with citizens’ possessions or their women.
- Protect their livelihoods and encourage their work.
- Encourage festivals and celebrations. They increase the people’s happiness.

About the Author

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence in 1469. After the Medicis and their successor, Savonarola, lost power in 1497, the new “republican regime” appointed Machiavelli as a political secretary. He attended the Italian, German and French courts, and the Holy See. From 1499 to 1512, he met all the major leaders of his time, serving as a diplomat who urged the Florentine rulers to raise an army to protect their republic. Yet, the 400-man army could not hold Florence against Spanish and papal troops. After the republic fell in 1513, the Medicis returned to power, fired Machiavelli and eventually tortured him as a conspiracy suspect. He retired to his farmhouse near the city to write political works, such as *The Prince*, *Discourses*, *The Art of War* and *The Florentine Histories*. He also wrote a historical novel, poetry and drama. Machiavelli never totally regained the Medicis’ favor. He died penniless on June 21, 1527. Indiana University professor of Italian and comparative literature **Peter Bondanella** translated and edited this edition. Princeton University professor of politics **Maurizio Viroli** wrote the introduction. He explains that Machiavelli composed this book to show that “he knew the art of the state better than anybody else in his time” and could teach all “the goals and the means of political action.”
