

THE PRINCE

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THE PRINCE: ANNOTATED EDITION

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FOREWORD

By Erica Abbett

THERE AREN'T MANY PEOPLE whose behavior is so distasteful that a new word is invented in their honor. Even the most notorious dictators only get a generic “esque” after their name when transformed into an adjective, as in “his Stalin-esque tactics.”

Niccolò Machiavelli, a 15th-century diplomat from Florence, inspired a word complete in itself: *Machiavellian*.

The word conjures images of smoky backroom deals and politicians knifing each other in the back—sometimes literally as well as metaphorically. While listening to a podcast today, I heard a certain politician referred to as “Machiavellian” on no fewer than three occasions. I encountered the word on television as many times last week. Almost 500 years after Machiavelli’s death, the public cannot forget his sinister scheming.

But after doing a deep dive into *The Prince*, I can’t help but feel that Machiavelli has been rather maligned¹ by history. I opened his magnum opus² expecting to find something truly wicked, but I actually found it more boring than barbarous.

It took me a *long* time to make sense of this little tome, reading multiple translations, the original Italian, and countless books on the man and his era. In the next few pages, I’m going

¹ Maligned - Wronged

² Magnum opus - An artist’s greatest work

to tell you what I wish I'd known before my first read. It would've made the experience much more meaningful (and productive!). After that, keep an eye on the annotations whenever you want a little extra clarity!

“The Prince”

The first thing you need to know about *The Prince* is that it isn't really a book; it's an encyclopedia on taking and maintaining power. There is no *plot* in the traditional sense. Rather, Machiavelli opens with a vocabulary lesson before highlighting all the challenges a prince might face. Different terms or scenarios get their own chapters.

The second thing you need to know is that Machiavelli's definition of “prince” was not the same as yours or mine. To him, a “prince” was not necessarily the son of a king or queen. Instead, a prince was anyone who ruled over a *principality*, which is just a fancy term for “a place with borders.”

So while we differentiate between mayors, governors, presidents, kings, dictators, and pharaohs, Machiavelli didn't. To him, they were all princes.

Historical Context

When Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, he was an exiled elder diplomat desperate to return to power. He ardently¹ hoped this little book would be the key to his comeback (hence his excessive flattery for the new ruler of Florence in the introduction).

Unfortunately Machiavelli lived during an era that was tumultuous² even by historical standards. Throughout his life, his home city of Florence went from the rich center of art we associate with the Renaissance to a theocratic³ cesspit where they burned paintings, books, and other “vanities” in a bon-

¹ Ardently - Passionately; greatly

² Tumultuous - Unstable

³ Theocratic - Relating to a strict religious-based government

fire in the city square.¹

Machiavelli's period of greatest influence came right after the aforementioned theocracy collapsed in 1498, at which point Florence "reverted" to a republic. I put "reverted" in quotes because Florence had long been a republic in name only—in truth, it was ruled by the rich and powerful Medici family. This new republic kept the Medicis in exile, so it all felt very new, lacking the money and stability provided by the powerful bankers.

At 29 years old, Machiavelli was appointed chancellor and second secretary (basically a diplomat). Starry-eyed (and likely still in shock at how quickly Florence had descended into madness), he traveled to France, the Vatican, and elsewhere in the service of his republic. He particularly enjoyed his time with Cesare Borgia,² the son of the infamous Pope Alexander VI—who scandalized the world by keeping a mistress and likely assumed the papacy³ through a combination of blackmail and bribery.

But for Machiavelli, everything came to a screeching halt in 1512. The Medicis returned to power, and though Machiavelli had nothing to do with ousting them, they didn't trust anyone from the previous government. They threw Machiavelli in jail, where he was tortured—and though they eventually concluded he was guilty of no crime, he was still sent into exile...just in case.

That's how Machiavelli came to spend his final years in the country, reading and writing. In a charming letter to a friend, Machiavelli described long days with his family and neighbors, followed by reverential, almost magical, evenings with his books:

"I return home and go to my study; at the entrance I pull off my peasant-clothes, covered with dust and

¹ Led by the radical Friar Girolamo Savonarola, the "bonfire of the vanities" occurred in 1497.

² Pronounced *CHEH-sar-ay BORE-ja*, he lived from 1475-1507

³ Papacy - Office of the pope

dirt, and put on my noble court dress, and thus becomingly re-clothed I pass into the ancient courts of the men of old, where, being lovingly received by them, I am fed with that food which is mine alone; where I do not hesitate to speak with them, and to ask for the reason of their actions, and they in their benignity¹ answer me; and for four hours I feel no weariness, I forget every trouble, poverty does not dismay, death does not terrify me; I am possessed entirely by those great men."

Alas, Machiavelli died without ever returning to power. There is no evidence Lorenzo de Medici, the man he was trying desperately to impress, even read *The Prince*.

However, I think Machiavelli would be thrilled to know his memory lives on. Remember when he described the joy of "conversing" with long-gone historical figures each evening? I love that image—it's as though Romulus, Alexander the Great, and Hannibal Barca were actually there with him, shouting over one another and pointing animatedly at maps, their ghostlike bodies wavering in the candlelight.

But whereas Machiavelli was a mere supplicant² in life, scribbling down notes and watching those historical figures in fascination, he now has a seat at the table beside them.

Why Is He So Hated?

Much effort has been made in recent years to rehabilitate the reputation of Niccoló Machiavelli.

Personally, I think the term "Machiavellian" is pretty accurate. The term is distinct from other evil epithets, like "sadistic," which implies someone is committing evil acts because they enjoy it. Rather, "Machiavellian" means a person approaches morality only through the lens of power—an approach Machiavelli heartily encourages, particularly at the

¹ Benignity - Kindness; goodness

² Supplicant - Someone making a request of a person in power

end of the book.

For instance, Machiavelli is very matter-of-fact in his suggestion that anyone hoping to wrest control from a long-established family should kill everyone in that family—including the children. This is obviously evil. But it was also common practice throughout almost all of history. So why was there so much horror that Machiavelli wrote it down?

Part of it was just that: he wrote it down. And he did it as a *suggestion*, not a, “this is what bad rulers do” historical fact.

Beyond that, Machiavelli’s ideal “prince” was none other than Cesare Borgia, the syphilis-ridden bastard son of a corrupt pope. “If that’s your ideal,” many said, “I want nothing to do with it.”

The Borgias

You need to know a little bit about the Borgias if you hope to understand *The Prince*.

Rodrigo Borgia was a Spanish cardinal who became Pope Alexander VI in 1492—Machiavelli would have been about 23 years old at the time. Borgia’s papacy lasted until 1503, overlapping Machiavelli’s time as a diplomat for about three years.

These three years—when the Borgias were at their most powerful—were deeply influential for Machiavelli. He saw Cesare Borgia as a conquering hero, leading his father’s army and shrewdly transforming the papal states into an unofficial hereditary monarchy.

Machiavelli repeatedly describes Cesare Borgia as the ideal prince, going so far as to argue that he could’ve united Italy and freed her from foreign oppression if he hadn’t died young. (At the time, the French had a habit of invading Italy and slaughtering their way through the countryside.)

Alas, Cesare and his father both fell fatally ill in 1503 (prompting some historians to speculate that they were poisoned). Rodrigo died, and Cesare was unable to exert his influence during the crucial period of transition. He never fully recovered and died himself a few years later.

Pope Julius II took power after Rodrigo Borgia's death,¹ and he'd long despised the Borgias, even colluding with the French against them. Though countless died when the French invaded, crafty Rodrigo tricked the French into heading to plague-ridden Naples, where their army was decimated. Rodrigo, also known as Pope Alexander VI, kept his seat...for the time being.

But after Rodrigo's death, Pope Julius II proved nearly as corrupt as his predecessor. But in the same way Napoleon wasn't a king because he was the emperor, Pope Julius II wasn't corrupt because he wasn't a Borgia. He waged wars, consolidated power, sold indulgences, and had illegitimate children—but at least he wasn't a Borgia!

All of this brings us back to *The Prince* and its rather obsequious² introduction. When Pope Julius II died in 1513, the Medicis made their triumphant return. Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici became Pope Leo X, and with a Medici pope on the throne, no one dared question the Medicis' return to Florence.

Machiavelli dedicated *The Prince* to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici, the young, new ruler of Florence. "I hope you're as successful as my hero, Cesare Borgia," Machiavelli wrote, though not in those precise words. "Cesare totally could've unified Italy if he hadn't died. Since you're still alive, you must do your best to finish the job he started!"

One Last Thing

Italy wasn't a unified country until 1861, more than 300 years after Machiavelli's death. Throughout his life, the Italian peninsula was a feuding collection of city-states whose borders and rulers changed with dizzying rapidity.

Many of the places we consider cities or regions were independent kingdoms in his day. As such, when Machiavelli

¹ There was an interim ruler for less than a month, but for all intents and purposes, Pope Julius II was the next pope.

² Obsequious - Excessively eager to please

speaks of Italy, he is typically referring to the geographic region (the “boot”), not the modern nation we know and love.

To help you get your bearings, you’ll find a map of the era as it appeared in Machiavelli’s time below. However, remember that power changed hands so quickly, this map could’ve been re-drawn several times during his life!



And there you have it: you now know everything I wish *I'd* known before starting this world-famous treatise on taking and maintaining power.

As always, I will be in the footnotes to help you along! There's also a glossary of terms at the back of the book.

See you in the coming pages,

-Erica Abbett

2024

THE PRINCE

DEDICATION

To the Magnificent Lorenzo Di Piero De' Medici

THOSE WHO STRIVE to obtain the good graces of a prince typically offer him things that they themselves hold dear, or things they see him delight in. That's why princes are often given horses, weapons, golden fabrics, precious stones, and the like.

In wishing to prove my devotion to you, your Magnificence,¹ I have not found among my possessions anything I hold more dear than my knowledge of the actions of great men, acquired by long personal experience and a continual study of antiquity. Having reflected upon it with great and prolonged diligence, I have put everything into this short book, which I now send to you.

Though I may consider this work unworthy,² I trust that you will find it acceptable, for it is not possible for me to make a better gift than the opportunity to understand in the shortest time all that I have learned in so many years of terror and turmoil. I have not embellished it with big words or sweeping sentences, the way so many others pad their works. I prefer

¹ See my introduction for more details, but as a reminder, Machiavelli is writing this book to the young Lorenzo de Medici, whose family had long ruled Florence and recently returned to power. The Medicis killed or banished anyone who served in the interim government; being one of the latter, Machiavelli is desperate to return.

² Such a classic, obsequious line. "We are not worthy..."

the truth and weightiness of the theme to shine.

Others may consider it presumptuous for a low and humble man to advise a prince, but I offer another perspective. Consider an artist wishing to draw the mountains; it is from standing in the fields that he has the best view. Similarly, an artist wishing to draw the fields will have the best perspective from the mountains. In this way, one must be a prince to truly know the people, and one must be of the people to truly know a prince.¹

Your Magnificence, please accept this gift in the spirit in which I send it. Read it closely, and you can attain the greatness which your fortune and other attributes promise. And if your Magnificence, from the summit of your greatness, you will sometimes turn your eyes to these lower regions, you will see how undeservedly I suffer a great and continued wretchedness of fortune.²

¹ I don't think this is necessarily true, but it provides a plausible explanation for a commoner to give advice to a prince.

² "If you have time to look my way, you'll see that I am your humble servant, wrongly exiled...Let me return to power! Please!"

CHAPTER ONE

Types of Principalities and How They Are Acquired

EVERY STATE is either a republic or a principality. In a republic, power comes from the people; in a principality, power comes from a powerful man we shall call “the prince.”¹

Principalities can be hereditary, ruled by families that are long established, or they can be new. When they are new, they can be entirely new, like Milan to Francesco Sforza, or they can be added to an existing state, like the kingdom of Naples to the king of Spain. They can be accustomed to living under a prince, or living in freedom.

Acquired dominions are accustomed to living in freedom, or living under a prince. The prince may have acquired this new territory by himself, with the help of another’s army, with luck, or because he truly deserved the victory.

¹ I added this sentence, but I believe it’s faithful to the original text. Contemporary readers would’ve known that a republic translates to “thing of the people;” they also would’ve known that a “prince” wasn’t necessarily the son of a king. It basically clarifies some of the implied knowledge.

CHAPTER TWO

Hereditary Principalities

I WILL NOT discuss republics here, for I have already written about them elsewhere. Instead, I will focus on principalities, specifically how they are best ruled and preserved.

To begin, you should know that there are fewer difficulties in holding hereditary states because they are already accustomed to the family of their prince. All he must do to stay in power is maintain the customs of his ancestors and deal prudently with circumstances as they arise. Even if he is deprived of power by some extraordinary and excessive force, he will regain it when something sinister happens to the usurper.¹

In Italy, for example, we have the Duke of Ferrara, who could not have withstood the Venetians in '84 nor Pope Julius in '10 unless he had been long established in his dominions.²

This is because the hereditary prince has less cause and less necessity to offend, and a result he will be more loved. Unless extraordinary vices cause him to be hated, it is reasonable to

¹ He may be obliquely referencing Lorenzo de Medici here—the young man to whom *The Prince* is dedicated. As you'll recall, the Medicis were ousted from Florence, but later returned.

² Don't worry about the details as much as the lesson: someone from a long-established ruling family will have an easier time maintaining power than a new ruler.

expect that his subjects will be naturally well-disposed towards him. Over generations, memories and motivations for change fade.

Upheaval, on the other hand, always leaves the people wanting more change.

CHAPTER THREE

Mixed Principalities

MORE DIFFICULTIES ARISE with new principalities, of which there are two types. Let us start with the principality that isn't entirely new, but has been added to another.

This prince is bound to have upset those newly-submitted to him with his soldiering, so he's made enemies of all he injured in seizing that principality. Nor can he count on the friends who put him there, for they can never be satisfied in the way they hoped. Nevertheless, the prince cannot take strong measures against them because he still needs them—it doesn't matter how strong your army is; you'll always need at least *some* local support.

So now the prince faces an inherent conflict, which is that men are willing to take up arms and rebel when they believe things could be better, and things are *always* worse after such a change.

This is why Louis XII lost Milan as quickly as he occupied it. Ludovico retook it easily because the same people who had opened the gates to the French—finding themselves deceived in their hopes of future benefit—would not endure ill-treat-

ment by a new prince.¹

However, it is also true that provinces are not easily lost a second time. Having returned, the prince is more likely to torture troublemakers and root out dissidents, strengthening himself in the weakest places. That is why all it took for France to lose Milan the first time was Duke Ludovico raising a rabble at the borders; to lose it a second time, the whole world had to unite in driving the French armies out of Italy.²

Nevertheless Milan *was* taken from France a first and second time. The reason for the first has already been discussed. But how was it taken a second time? What counter-measures could the king of France have taken to maintain this conquest?³

Here I must make a distinction among these new territories. When they are in the same country and speak the same language, it is easier to hold them, especially when they are not accustomed to self-government. To hold them securely, it is enough to have destroyed the family of the prince who was ruling them. The two peoples, alike in customs, will live quietly together, as one has seen in Brittany, Burgundy, Gascony, and Normandy, which have been bound to France for so long. There is some difference in language, but the customs are similar enough, and the people get along amongst themselves.

He who has annexed them need only bear in mind two considerations: one, that the family of their former lord is extin-

¹ He's referencing Ludivoco Sforza, but again, you don't need to remember all the historical details. The lesson in this chapter is that anyone who takes over a new territory will have a harder time holding it than a long-established prince.

² A bit of an overstatement, but yes, it took a large alliance of powers to kick King Louis XII out of France in 1504.

³ Statements like this probably didn't endear Machiavelli to the Italians (who weren't formally united under one country yet, but did see themselves as something of a united geographic entity in that they spoke a similar language and shared the Italian peninsula). The French were incredibly brutal in their invasions, so Machiavelli's detached tone—wondering how the enemy could have been more *effective*—would've been like an American asking how the English could've been more successful after the Revolutionary War. Slight traitor vibes.

guished;¹ the other, that their laws and taxes are not altered, so that in a very short time they become entirely one body with the old principality.

But when the acquired principality differs in language, customs, or laws, there are many difficulties, and good fortune and great energy are needed to hold them.

The greatest step a prince can take to secure his conquest is to go and live there himself. This makes his position more secure, as it has with the Turk in Greece, who, if he had not settled there, would not have been able to keep it. If one is on the spot, problems are seen as they spring up, and one can quickly remedy them; but if one is not at hand, they are heard of only when they are great, by which point you can no longer do anything.

Besides this, the country is not pillaged by your officials. If your officials do commit unjust acts, subjects are satisfied because they have easy access to the prince. Indeed, your prompt recourse will bring many to love you. Those who might rebel are deterred by this new support, and he who would attack from the outside must have the utmost caution. As long as the prince resides in his new territory, it can only be wrested from him with the greatest difficulty.

Another good option is to create one or two colonies, which act like links in a chain, binding the new principality to your own. If you do not do this, you must station an army within or nearby to maintain control. Colonies are cheap in comparison. The only citizens a prince really offends are the people whose homes and land he seizes, to give them to the new inhabitants. The offended are now poor and scattered, so they have little ability to cause harm. The rest are more motivated to keep quiet, so their own properties are not seized. In conclusion, I

¹ Language like this was another reason why Machiavelli was so reviled. He wasn't advocating anything people hadn't already been doing since the dawn of man—killing their enemies—but the fact that he was so blunt about it was off-putting.

say that colonies are cheap, faithful, make fewer enemies than armies, and any new enemies are poor, scattered, and usually harmless.¹

All of this illustrates a central point, which is that a prince must always consider his enemies' revenge. You must either treat people so well they have no desire for it, or you must crush them so completely that they are not capable of it.²

In maintaining armies instead of colonies, the costs are so much higher that the military victory is turned into a financial loss, and many more will have cause to seek revenge. With an army, more people are turned out of their homes to provide barracks, and they all become hostile. These are enemies who, though beaten on their own ground, can still cause you harm. For all these reasons, occupying armies are as useless as colonies are useful.

Next, the prince ought to make himself a champion of the powerless, doing what he can to weaken the more powerful, and taking care that no foreigner as powerful as himself can establish support nearby. It is when people are unhappy that they bring in new, foreign princes.

The Romans were brought into Greece by the Aetolians, and in every other country where they obtained a footing, they were brought in by the inhabitants. Once a powerful foreigner enters a country, the weaker elements are naturally drawn to him, if for no other reason than the resentment they felt toward the previous regime. He need take no special trouble to win them over, for they are naturally inclined to rally to his side. While encouraging their support, he need only make sure they do not get too much power. Between his own forces and their goodwill, he can easily keep down his more powerful opponents, remaining master in the country. This is why a

¹ When you think about how many places were colonized in the centuries following the publication of *The Prince*, it certainly makes you wonder how many kings and consiglieri were reading Machiavelli in secret...

² Honestly, this isn't bad advice.

prince who does not properly manage his people will soon lose what he has acquired, and while he does hold it, he will have endless difficulties and troubles.¹

The Romans observed these measures closely in the territories they annexed: they sent colonies, entertained the minor powers without increasing their strength, and did not allow strong foreign powers to gain authority.

Look at Greece, for example. The Romans were friendly to the Achaeans and Aetolians, and they humbled the kingdom of Macedonia in driving Antiochus out. But the Achaeans and Aetolians never increased their power, Philip found no friendship with the Romans until they humbled him, and Antiochus's influence did not help him maintain any influence over the country.

The Romans did what prudent princes ought to do—they kept an eye on present troubles *and* future ones. When foreseen, problems are easily remedied; but if you wait until they are upon you, it is too late. Think about how doctors describe an illness—in the beginning, ailments are easy to cure but difficult to detect. As time progresses, they become easy to detect but difficult to cure. It is no different in affairs of the state. The Romans dealt with problems at once, even if it meant going to war. They knew war couldn't be avoided forever, and putting it off would only help their enemies. Looking ahead, they knew that fighting Philip and Antiochus in Greece was preferable to doing it in Italy. The Romans never spoke like the supposedly wise men of our age, saying things like, "Let us enjoy the benefits of our time." Rather, they enjoyed the benefits of their valor and foresight. They knew that time drives everything before it, and it's capable of bringing good as well as evil.²

¹ While the primary motivation is to maintain power, this advice ultimately benefits the people—treat them well, and they're less likely to rebel. "Proper management" often looked like cleaning the roads, jailing the bandits, etc.

² Wise words.

Let us now return to France and see whether she did any of this. Speaking specifically about Louis XII (1462-1515) and not Charles VIII (1470-1498), you will see that he did the opposite of what ought to be done to retain a state composed of diverse elements.

King Louis was brought into Italy by the ambition of the Venetians, who wanted half the state of Lombardy by his intervention. I will not blame the course taken by the king—he had no friends in the country thanks to the conduct of Charles,¹ and he wished to get a foothold in Italy, so he had to accept friendship where he could find it.

Once he acquired Lombardy, the king regained the authority which Charles had lost: Genoa yielded; the Florentines became his friends; the Marquess of Mantua, the Duke of Ferrara, the Bentivogli, my lady of Forli, the Lords of Faenza, of Pesaro, of Rimini, of Camerino, of Piombino, the Lucchese, the Pisans, the Sienese—everybody made advances to him to become his friend. Only then could the Venetians realize the rashness of their decision. In order to secure two towns in Lombardy, they gave the French king two-thirds of Italy.

Consider how easily the king could have maintained his position in Italy if only he'd observed the rules I laid out, how he could have kept his friends secure and protected. He had many friends, but they were weak and timid, some afraid of the Church, some of the Venetians, and thus they would have stood with him for their own protection; by their numbers, he could easily have made himself secure against those who remained powerful.

But soon after King Louis became master of Milan, he assisted Pope Alexander² in occupying the Romagna³. It never occurred to the king that he was depriving himself of friends

¹ King Charles' brutality was notorious during the 1494 invasion, so King Louis found few friends during his 1499 expedition.

² Pope Alexander VI, formerly known as Rodrigo Borgia

³ Pronounced *Ro-MAHN-yuh*

who had thrown themselves into his lap, or that he was weakening himself in aggrandizing the church.¹ And having committed this prime error, he was obliged to put an end to the ambition of Alexander lest he become the master of Tuscany, so much so that he was forced to advance further into Italy.²

Not content with losing friends and aggrandizing the church, King Louis wished to have the kingdom of Naples,³ so he made a deal to divide it with the King of Spain. This was a capital error! Louis was the prime power in Italy, but in bringing in an equally powerful foreigner, he gave ambitious malcontents a new champion. Louis could have left a puppet in charge of Naples, but he drove him out, too, and in doing so, invited in someone who could drive *him* out.

The wish to acquire territory is natural and common, and men always do it when they can. They are praised when successful, or at the very least they are not blamed. But when a man lacks the resources to expand and carries on regardless of the consequences, then we can rightly assign blame.

If Louis could've won Naples with his own forces, he should have done it. If he lacked the power to do it, all the less reason to invite in a foreign power to share it. Dividing Lombardy with the Venetians made sense because the French *were* the foreign power, and it gave them a foothold in Italy—the partition of Naples was simply stupid because there was no reason for it.

Therefore Louis made these five errors:

- 1) He destroyed the minor powers
- 2) He increased the strength of one of the greater powers in Italy

¹ Many of his allies weren't fans of the Borgias and considered the papal states their rivals.

² The French king helped Pope Alexander (formerly known as Rodrigo Borgia), but the pope became so powerful that the French turned on him.

³ Which Charles before him tried to conquer, but he invaded during a time of plague. His army decimated, he was forced to retreat.

- 3) He brought in a foreign power
- 4) He did not settle in the country
- 5) He did not establish colonies

These errors might not have led to the French downfall within his lifetime had he not made a sixth mistake in stripping Venice of its power. Of course, this was only a problem because of those earlier errors. Had he not aggrandized the Church or brought Spain into Italy, it would have been very reasonable to humble the Venetians. They were strong neighbors. But having made these other mistakes, he should never have consented to their ruin. Being powerful, they would have kept others away from Lombardy¹. The Venetians would never countenance² an invasion if they were not master at the end of it. Furthermore, no power was strong enough to counter France and Venice together.

Now, if anyone should say: "King Louis yielded the Romagna to Alexander and Naples to Spain to avoid war!" I remind him that war cannot to be avoided altogether, only postponed your disadvantage.

Another person might say, "King Louis promised to help the Pope in exchange for the dissolution of his marriage and making the Archbishop of Rouen a cardinal!"³ To him I say that I will write later about when a prince is better off breaking his promises.

This is why King Louis lost Lombardy; there is no mystery in it. I said as much to the Cardinal of Rouen in Nantes, when Duke Valentino (as Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander,

¹ Lombardy - A region of northern Italy near Venice

² Countenance (v.) - Allow (something) to happen

³ "Louis acted as he did for a reason! He got the pope to give him an annulment, and he got a Frenchman in the College of Cardinals, where he could influence the pope!"

was usually called),¹ occupied the Romagna.² Cardinal Rouen told me the Italians did not understand war, and I replied to him that the French did not understand statecraft, or they would not have allowed the Church to reach such greatness.³ And in fact, we have seen how France caused both the Church and Spain to rise to greatness in Italy, and France's ruin in Italy may be attributed to them.

From this comes a general rule which rarely, if ever, proves untrue: when you help someone else become powerful, you bring about your own ruin.⁴ The intelligence or military power which made you powerful in the first place will eventually be seen as a threat to the person you helped.⁵

¹ This is one of the first references Machiavelli makes to Cesare Borgia, but he'll reference him more as the pages progress. Borgia was made the Duke of Valentinois by his marriage to a French woman, but the Italian equivalent was "Valentino." I can't help but think Machiavelli appreciated the connotation between his favorite prince and Saint Valentine.

² One of Cesare Borgia's early military conquests was taking the Romagna, an area in northern Italy.

³ In the early 1500's, France was a formidable military power. They'd recently won the 100 Years' War with England, and their troops were battle-hardened indeed. They had cannons, discipline, and determination. The Italians, on the other hand, were a hodgepodge collection of feuding city-states more accustomed to galloping around a field with swords. The French cardinal said as much to Machiavelli, probably with a sneer. Machiavelli's response was, "You guys might have cannons, but we have brains. You'll see." And he was proven right: King Louis was soon expelled from Italy.

⁴ I beg to differ, but I'm not a Machiavellian politician.

⁵ "If you make someone powerful, you obviously already *have* power, so you're creating your own rival."

CHAPTER FOUR

Why the Kingdom of Darius, Conquered by Alexander, Did Not Rebel Against the Successors of Alexander at His Death

CONSIDERING HOW DIFFICULT it is to maintain a new state, some might wonder how Alexander the Great managed to become the master of Asia in a few years, dying while it was scarcely settled, but his empire remained largely intact.¹ The only real threat to his successors arose from one another.²

Well, remember that all principalities are governed in one of two ways. Either the prince appoints magistrates to assist him in governing, and these magistrates maintain their power only by his favor and permission; or he rules with noblemen who hold that power by antiquity of blood, and not by the favor of

¹ Machiavelli is refuting potential counter-arguments. He knows any audience with a lot of unanswered “what about...?” questions hasn’t been convinced of anything.

² When Alexander the Great (356 B.C.E.-323 B.C.E.) died, he had no legitimate children (his wife was pregnant, but the baby hadn’t been born yet). Asked who would inherit his empire, Alexander set a cat among the pigeons with his answer: “the strongest.” His generals eventually divided the empire among themselves, creating their own dynasties where they ruled. General Ptolemy took Egypt, for instance, and stylized himself the new pharaoh. The Ptolemies were the final pharaohs of Egypt, the last one being Cleopatra.

the prince.¹ These noblemen have their own subjects, who recognize them as lords and hold them in natural affection.

When a prince governs with appointed officials, he naturally has more authority. If people are obedient to a baron, it may be out of loyalty to the baron rather than the prince. However, when people are obedient to a government official, it is not out of any special affection; the prince is still the ultimate power.

We see this principle in our own time with the Turks and the French. The entire empire of the Turk is governed by one sultan; the others are his servants. He divides his kingdom into *sanjaks* and sends different officials to administer them, but he can shift and change these people as he chooses.

But the king of France is positioned amid an ancient body of lords, acknowledged and beloved by their subjects. They have their power, and the king strips them of their positions at his peril.

Considering this, you will recognize that the kingdom of the Turk would be far harder to seize, but easier to hold. With the Turk, a usurper cannot be called in by princes of the kingdom, nor can he hope to be assisted by those the sultan has around him. His ministers are little more than servants, so they can only be corrupted with great difficulty. Hence, he who attacks the Turk must bear in mind that he will find the kingdom united, and he will have to rely more on his own strength than on the support of others.

But once the Turk has been thoroughly defeated in battle, you need not fear anyone except his family. Kill his kin, and the people have no one else to be loyal to. Just as there were no barons or princes to help you, there are also none to challenge you. The empire is yours.

The opposite is true in kingdoms like France, where one can

¹ Princes need people to make day-to-day decisions. These people can be political appointees or noblemen who inherited their status.

easily find a foothold with some nobleman. Such men make your victory easy, but holding that principality will be filled with endless difficulties, both from those who assisted you and those you crushed. Nor do the problems disappear if you exterminate the former prince's family because noblemen always plot fresh rebellions. You can never satisfy nor kill all of them, so you'll lose the land whenever time brings the opportunity.

Considering the nature government of Darius in Persia,¹ you will find that it was similar to the kingdom of the Turk, and therefore it was only necessary for Alexander to overthrow him in battle. With Darius dead, control of the state shifted to Alexander. If his successors had been united, they would have enjoyed it securely and easily, for there was no tumult² in the kingdom except that which they provoked.

But it is impossible to peacefully hold states like France. That's why there were frequent rebellions against the Romans in Spain, France, and Greece—there were many princes within these states, and as long as their memory endured, the Roman position was tenuous³. But in time, their memory faded, and the Romans became secure possessors. Even when the Romans began fighting each other, they could bring different provinces onto their side. The families of the former lords exterminated, the only rulers that mattered were Roman.

Knowing this, no one will marvel at how easy it was for Alexander to hold Asia, nor will they be surprised by the difficulties others have had in keeping their conquests (Pyrrhus⁴ and many more come to mind). The ability of the conquerer

¹ Machiavelli is closing the argument here. Alexander the Great conquered Persia under Darius III.

² Tumult - Disorder; chaos

³ Tenuous - Weak; shaky

⁴ King Pyrrhus won a battle against the Romans in 279 BCE, but his losses were devastating. This is where the term "pyrrhic victory" comes from—it's a victory where, even if you won, you lost so much in the process that the success is bittersweet at best.

isn't all that matters; one must also consider the existing power structure in the place he invaded.

CHAPTER FIVE

Governing People Who Previously Lived Under Their Own Laws

IF THE ACQUIRED STATE was a republic, its people accustomed to living in freedom under their own laws, a prince wishing to hold it has three options. He can burn it to the ground,¹ go reside there in person, or allow the people to continue living under their laws while paying him a tribute. To do this last option, he must install a small government of local men to keep it friendly.

Let's look at the Spartans and the Romans. The Spartans held Athens and Thebes, establishing there a small government; nevertheless, they lost them. The Romans, on the other hand, destroyed Capua, Carthage, and Numantia, and did not lose them.² When they turned to Greece, the Romans wished to hold it like the Spartans had, making it free and permitting its laws, but they did not succeed. To hold it, the Romans were forced to destroy a good many towns, for in truth there is no sure way to retain former republics other than by ruining

¹ Well that's a matter-of-fact way of describing it...

² I originally thought the "burn it to the ground" option was sarcastic, but he appears to be suggesting it in earnest!

them.¹

If you conquer a city accustomed to freedom and do not destroy it, you can expect it to destroy you.² People will always rally to the calls of freedom and liberty. It doesn't matter how much time has passed or how well you've treated them; these concepts can never be forgotten. Unless the people are completely scattered and broken, they will rise back up at the first opportunity, just as Pisa did after 100 years of Florentine occupation.

When a city or country is accustomed to living under a prince and his family is wiped out, they are accustomed to obeying and do not know how to govern themselves. For this reason, they are very slow to take up arms, and a prince can secure them much more easily.

But in republics there is more vitality³, more hatred, and more desire for revenge, all of which will never allow the memory of liberty to rest. So ultimately, it is safest to destroy them or reside there.⁴

¹ In chapter 3, Machiavelli suggested princes move to the places they've conquered—but that was assuming he conquered a principality already governed by a prince. With pesky republics and free men, he says, you're better off just burning them down.

² Great line—makes me think of a bald eagle waving an American flag from its beak.

³ Vitality - Energy; liveliness

⁴ "Reside there" is a casual alternative, but clearly not the preferred option. "You're best off killing every man, woman, and child who's ever tasted freedom, but you could try living there, too. Whatever you think.." Machiavelli really does not factor morality into these conversations!

CHAPTER SIX

New Principalities Acquired by One's Own Arms and Ability

LET NO ONE be surprised if I reference only the most famous examples when speaking of entirely new principalities. Men usually walk in paths beaten by others, imitating but not entirely replicating their journey.¹ That is why it's wise to follow in the footsteps of the greatest men, so even if our ability does not equal theirs, it might still be great. It is like the clever archer who knows he cannot reach his target, so he aims much higher than the mark—not to reach so great a height, but to hit the mark he wishes to reach with a much higher aim.

Let us first note that in new principalities, much depends on the ability of the prince. The very fact that he has become a prince indicates that he has some talent or luck, and those will certainly help. Nevertheless, he who relies on luck the least will be stronger. Another benefit a new prince has is that, because he has no other state to manage, he has every reason to live in this new territory.

Of those who became princes through their own ability, I

¹ Great thematic statement

say that Moses, Cyrus¹, Romulus², Theseus³, and similar men are the most excellent examples. One could say Moses was a mere executor of the will of God, but he still ought to be admired, if only to study the qualities that made God select him.

But in considering Cyrus and others who have acquired or founded kingdoms, we will still find them admirable. In examining their actions, it is clear they owed nothing to luck beyond the initial opportunity, which brought them the material to mold that which seemed best to them. Without opportunity, their talent would have been wasted; without talent, the opportunity would have come in vain.

Had the people of Israel not been enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians, Moses could not have delivered them from bondage. Had Romulus not been abandoned at birth, he could not have become the first king of Rome. Had the Persians not been unhappy with the government of the Medes, Cyrus would have had no opportunity to found an empire. And had the Athenians not been utterly defeated, Theseus could not have become a hero.⁴ It was opportunity that made these men fortunate,⁵ but ability which enabled them to recognize it and gain glory.

Those who become princes through talent and valor acquire their principalities with difficulty, but keep them with ease.

¹ Cyrus the Great founded the Persian (Achaemenian) Empire around 550 BCE. At one point, the Persian empire was the largest in history.

² Romulus founded Rome in 753 B.C.E., according to legend.

³ Theseus was a mythological hero of ancient Greece who was one of the early kings of Athens. He was also a disgusting brute and a pig (see Vocabett podcast episode 63, "Theseus THE Pig + Helen of Troy" for the whole story).

⁴ Theseus became a hero by killing the minotaur. Mythological backstory: King Minos of Crete hated the Athenians because an Athenian killed his son, so he got revenge by requiring them to send over 14 young men and women every 9 years. King Minos would lock these youngsters in a labyrinth beneath his palace where the minotaur—a monster that was half-bull, half-man—lived. Theseus volunteered to be one of these sacrifices, but killed the minotaur and led his fellow Athenians home.

⁵ Unusual to see slavery and bondage as "fortunate."

Any difficulties arise from the fact that they must establish a new government—and there is nothing more difficult, dangerous, or more uncertain than taking the lead in a new system of government. The innovator makes enemies of all those who did well in the old days,¹ and only gains lukewarm defenders of those doing well now. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, and partly because men rarely believe in new things until they've long experienced them. The prince will always be attacked by those who are hostile to him, defended only lukewarmly,² and as such is in danger.

It is necessary, therefore, if we wish to discuss this matter thoroughly, to ask whether these innovators can rely on themselves, or are they dependent on the support of others? Do they need the support of the people, or can they use force? A man who waits for help will never accomplish anything; a man who relies on himself and his own resources is rarely endangered.³ This is why armed visionaries end up as conquerors, but unarmed visionaries end up dead.⁴ Besides everything else, you simply cannot count on the support of the people. They are too easily persuaded this way and that. And so, when the people stop believing in you, you must be in a position to make them believe.

If Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus had been unarmed, they could not have enforced their constitutions for long—as happened in our time to Fra Girolamo Savonarola, who was

¹ This is actually a near-universal truth that can be applied to any relationship with a power dynamic. If you're a new boss, for instance, you might have a hard time winning over the employees who were doing well under the old boss, especially if you make significant changes.

² This applies to the modern workplace, as well. People who hate the new boss usually rant about every little change, while "defenders" usually just listen, and if they chime in, they say something half-hearted like, "I don't know. It doesn't seem that bad..."

³ A decent piece of advice, this.

⁴ I laughed a little...Don't know why! "Don't have a vision and go unarmed..." Probably good advice, as well.

ruined the moment the masses believed in him no longer.¹ He had no means of keeping steadfast those who believed, or of making the unbelievers believe.

To these great examples I wish to add a lesser one, who bears some resemblance to them and can act as a stand-in for countless others. It is Hiero the Syracusan (307 BC-216 BC). He rose from regular citizen to be Prince of Syracuse, and he owed nothing to fortune except the initial opportunity. The oppressed people of Syracuse chose him as their military captain, and he later became their prince. His ability was so remarkable that, even when he was still a private citizen, someone wrote that he was a king who only lacked a kingdom. He abolished the old army, organized a new one, gave up old alliances, made new ones; and since he had his own soldiers and allies, he was on firm ground to build anything he wanted. Thus, while he endured much trouble in acquiring his kingdom, he had little trouble keeping it.

¹ Savonarola is the radical friar who burned luxuries ("vanities") in the town center after driving the Medicis out of Florence (referenced in the introduction).