INTRODUCTION

Why Ask Machiavelli?

With so many competent political commentators at hand it may sound rather extravagant to ask Niccolò Machiavelli for advice on how to choose our representatives and our president. He lived many years ago (1469–1527), had no idea of what a democratic republic would be like, and owes most of his fame to *The Prince*, a book in which he offered his counsel to princes, not citizens.

Americans in general regard Machiavelli as a "teacher of evil," as Professor Leo Strauss put it in his influential book *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958),[1] and therefore as a writer who has nothing at all to teach the citizens of a democracy. Before turning their backs to Machiavelli and disregarding his counsels, however, readers should pause for a moment and consider that Machiavelli's political and social ideas had a remarkable impact, directly or indirectly, on the views of America's Founding Fathers. John Adams, for instance, quoted extensively from Machiavelli, and he openly acknowledged an intellectual debt to the Florentine political advisor. Adams even claimed to have been a "student of Machiavelli." In his *Defense of the Constitutions*

of Government of the United States of America, he insisted that the "world" was much indebted to Machiavelli for "the revival of reason in matters of government," and praised him for having been the first to have "revived the ancient politics." In his commentary on Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*, Adams quotes Machiavelli to the effect that, "the most useful erudition for republicans is that which exposes the causes of discord; by which they may learn wisdom and unanimity from the examples of others." Adams criticized Machiavelli for not having adequately understood that a well-framed constitution designed by a constitutional assembly can effectively channel the bad humors of nobles and citizens alike and tame the destructive passions of factions. Yet he boldly asserted that the most revered authorities of republican political thought were all indebted to Machiavelli. Milton, Harrington, and Sidney "were intimately acquainted with the ancients and with Machiavel"; John Locke was a student of the Machiavellian tradition; and Montesquieu "borrowed the best part of his book from Machiavel, without acknowledging the quotation."[2]

Machiavelli has offered American political thinkers and leaders a rich republican theory centered on the principle of liberty as "non-domination," a word that well describes what tyranny is *not*; the conviction that a government of the people

is wiser than the government of a prince; the view that the best constitutional arrangement is a mixed government and that a free government needs citizens inspired by a sincere love of country and a strong commitment to uphold the common good; the belief that the Christian religion properly interpreted supports republican freedom; and the persuasion that a fine army composed of citizens is needed to defend the citizens' liberty. In addition, Machiavelli outlined the theory of political revolution that inspired the birth of the Republic of the United States.[3] As Hannah Arendt has rightly noted, Machiavelli is "the spiritual father of revolution in the modern sense," because great modern revolutions originated as "restorations or renewals," in the Machiavellian meaning of "renovations," movements that return the body politic to its origins and thus save it from corruption and death.

The impact of Machiavelli's ideas over the centuries, within very different intellectual and political contexts, can only be explained, I think, by his special understanding of political life. His friends, and even his enemies, recognized this. When he was serving as secretary to the Second Chancery of the Republic of Florence, the governors were amazed by the acumen of his diplomatic reports. His friend Filippo Casavecchia once saluted him as "a greater prophet than the Hebrews or any other nation ever had." After he was fired from his

post, Florentine political leaders continued to solicit his opinion in their efforts to understand and predict political events. Francesco Vettori (1474–1539), who served as ambassador of Florence to the papal court in Rome, wrote him, on December 3, 1514: "Examine everything, and I know you have such intelligence that although two years have gone by since you have left the shop, I do not think you have forgotten the art."

The art that Machiavelli mastered was that of interpreting the intentions and the motives of princes and republican leaders. Thanks to this art, he was able to understand real political action, in particular the actions of the founders and redeemers of republics and principalities. He composed all of his works to inspire, educate, and teach great political action: in *The Prince* he sketched the myth of a redeemer of Italy; in the *Discourses on Livy* he offered future generations the political wisdom that had permitted Rome to preserve its liberty and attain an unsurpassed greatness; in *The Art of War* he endeavored to resuscitate the ancient military valor of the Italians. If we elect Machiavelli as our political mentor, therefore, we will benefit from his astute understanding of political life in general and of grand political action in particular, and, made aware of the qualities of a great political leader, we will be in a better position to choose such a leader, if we should encounter him or her.

Machiavelli has yet another virtue of the good political advisor, namely, honesty. After almost fifteen years of public service in which he administered large sums of money, he proudly proclaimed that "my poverty is the evidence of my honesty." None, not even his most ferocious enemies—and he had many of them in his life, as he still does today—have been able to refute this assertion. He also had the habit of speaking frankly even to very powerful people, and he was not afraid of challenging the most revered beliefs of his time. "Contrary to the common opinion, I maintain that . . ." is a phrase that we find many times in his writings. In addition, he rejects the principle of authority, including the authority of Aristotle, still the most respected of all political writers in Machiavelli's day. When Francesco Vettori cited Aristotle's *Politics* to support his ideas on the expansionist ambitions of the Swiss, Machiavelli replied: "I do not know what Aristotle says about confederate republics, but I certainly can say what might reasonably exist, what exists, and what has existed."[4]

Machiavelli based his political judgments (and predictions) on facts (conveniently selected and interpreted) and on reason. They were the product of careful comparisons, historical analogies, evaluations of the consequences of actions, and assessments of the beliefs of political actors and

of their motivations for acting in a particular manner. "I do not want to be prompted by any authority but reason," he wrote to Vettori on April 29, 1513. Machiavelli is not only aware, but quite proud of his critical and free style of thinking: "I do not judge to be it a defect to defend any opinion with reasons, without wishing to use either authority or force."[5] In the preface to the first book of the *Discourses*, he asserts that true intellectual advancement calls for the courage to search out "new methods and systems," a courage comparable to that required by explorers of "unknown lands and seas," and it requires as well the will to benefit all. He was also aware, however, that the political truths he had discovered were not definitive, and that others would likely be able to improve on his work: "and although my feeble discernment, my slender experience of current affairs, and imperfect knowledge of ancient events, render these efforts of mine defective and of no great utility, they may at least open the way to some other, who, with better parts and sounder reasoning and judgment, shall carry out my design; whereby, if I gain no credit, at all events I ought to incur no blame."

We also know that he loved his country more than his soul, as he wrote Vettori in one of his last letters. Even if Florence had been ungrateful, unfair, and even cruel to him, he never abandoned it. To the contrary, he dedicated his

best intellectual and moral energies to serving the liberty of Florence, and of Italy. In the preface to the second book of his *Discourses on Livy*, he asserted: "It is the duty of every good man to teach others those wholesome lessons which the malice of time or of Fortune has not permitted him to put in practice; to the end that out of many who have the knowledge, some one better loved by Heaven may be found able to carry them out." To teach, at least to teach, what would be of benefit to his country, though he himself had not been able to put it into practice, was the guiding principle of all his works. A powerful reason, it seems to me, to trust his advice.

Machiavelli was ambitious, eager to improve his social status and, above all, to gain glory. But he believed that the right way to attain these goals was to use "public modes," that is, "counseling well and acting well for the common benefit." The way to honors, he stressed, "ought to be opened to every citizen, and rewards proposed for their good counsels and good works, so that they may obtain honors and be satisfied: and when such reputation is obtained through these pure and simple ways, it will never be dangerous." Conversely, he condemned "private ways" of attaining power and fame, namely, by "doing good to this and that private individual by lending them money, marrying their

daughters, defending them in front of magistrates, and doing them similar private favors, which make men partisans, and give encouragement to whoever is thus favored to be able to corrupt the public and break the laws."[6]

The fact that Machiavelli lived many years ago assures us that his advice is disinterested. Whether we vote Republican or Democrat, he will continue to repose in peace in Santa Croce in Florence, a most enviable resting place. This fact makes his candidacy as our political counselor even more attractive. If we consider the matter carefully, we will discover that politics has not changed much since his day. Political leaders, and citizens, are guided in their deliberations by the same passions. Some are possessed by the ambition to dominate, some by lust for money, or avarice, or fear, or envy, or hatred; others are led by love of liberty, or compassion, or high-mindedness, or hope. A good student of sixteenth-century politics will be of equal benefit in our own times.

Today, the majority of political advisors believe that abstract models can help us to understand political action; Machiavelli maintains that the true skill of the political advisor is the art of interpreting passions, the passions of individuals and of peoples. To accomplish this difficult task he usually turned for help to history, because for him

the political events that occur under our eyes have already happened in the past, in a similar manner. It was thanks to his method that he was able to identify the political problems of Italy and to indicate the right solutions. Italian princes and republican rulers of his time did not, however, listen to him. As a result, Italy fell under foreign domination and experienced three centuries of political and social decline. We can, and must, do better.

On balance, then, it would not be possible to find another counselor as disinterested, competent, and honest as Niccolò Machiavelli, not to mention that he offers his advice freely, out of the pure pleasure of helping us. For to be of assistance to the citizens of the greatest free republic that the world has ever seen would be for him the best of all conceivable rewards, indeed the fulfillment of his life's dream. Can there be any doubt, then, that Machiavelli will work hard to give us the best possible counsel?

I hope readers will not be disappointed to find in these pages mainly cautions intended to help us avoid some of the rather common mistakes we make in our choice of representatives, for they will get a picture of truly excellent political leaders, as well. They will meet statesmen devoted to republican liberty, willing to serve the common good of their country and respectful of the liberty and the dignity

of all countries and all peoples; prepared, albeit reluctantly, to set aside moral principles of justice, compassion, and truthfulness, as well as the rule of law, should the safety of the country so require; content to forgo personal success; respectful of the opinions and the concerns of their citizens, but also able to stand above and ahead of them; attentive to the history and the moral and intellectual traditions of their country; and immune from the naive belief that political events can be controlled at will.

Once we are warned against chronic mistakes and we have a clear idea of the most relevant qualities of a good political leader, we can, and must, make up our own minds. No political thinker that I know of, and no scientific methodology, however refined and sophisticated, can relieve us of the burden of choice. "The remainder, you must do it by yourself," as Machiavelli wrote in the last chapter of *The Prince*.

My contribution has been to select from Machiavelli's counsels, to comment upon them, often with the help of citations from his works, and to provide some contemporary examples that confirm their validity. I have been careful to let Machiavelli's voice speak always the louder.