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This book is in two main parts, and the complexity of its theme must be the justification of its length. In the first half—subdivided into Parts One and Two—I attempt a treatment of Florentine thought in the era of Machiavelli, which groups him with his contemporaries and peers—Savonarola, Guicciardini, Giannotti, and others—in a manner not previously attempted in English; and I do this by seeking to situate Florentine republicanism in a context analyzed in the three chapters composing Part One. I here presume that the revival of the republican ideal by civic humanists posed the problem of a society, in which the political nature of man as described by Aristotle was to receive its fulfillment, seeking to exist in the framework of a Christian time-scheme which denied the possibility of any secular fulfillment. Further, I presume that the European intellect of this period was possessed of a limited number of ways of rendering secular time intelligible, which I discuss in the first three chapters and group under the headings of custom, grace, and fortune. The problem of the republic’s existence in time had to be dealt with by these means and no others; and it is the way in which the Florentines of the first quarter of the sixteenth century—Machiavelli in particular—stated and explored the problem thus posed which gives their thought its remarkable character.

“The Machiavellian moment” is a phrase to be interpreted in two ways. In the first place, it denotes the moment, and the manner, in which Machiavellian thought made its appearance; and here the reader is asked to remember that this is not a “history of political thought,” whatever that might be, in the last years of the Florentine republic, or a history of the political experience of Florentines in that era, designed to “explain” their articulation of the ideas studied. The “moment” in question is selectively and thematically defined. It is asserted that certain enduring patterns in the temporal consciousness of medieval and early modern Europeans led to the presentation of the republic, and the citizen’s participation in it, as constituting a problem in historical
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self-understanding, with which Machiavelli and his contemporaries can be seen both explicitly and implicitly contending. It became crucial in their times and remained so, largely as a result of what they did with it, for two or three centuries afterwards. Their struggle with this problem is presented as historically real, though as one selected aspect of the complex historical reality of their thought; and their “moment” is defined as that in which they confronted the problem grown crucial.

In the second place, “the Machiavellian moment” denotes the problem itself. It is a name for the moment in conceptualized time in which the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability. In the language which had been developed for the purpose, this was spoken of as the confrontation of “virtue” with “fortune” and “corruption”; and the study of Florentine thought is the study of how Machiavelli and his contemporaries pursued the intimations of these words, in the context of those ways of thinking about time explored in the earlier chapters. In seeking to show that Machiavelli was one of a number of greater and lesser men engrossed in the common pursuit of this problem, I hope also to show that this is an appropriate context in which to study his thought, and that to study it in this way may diminish the amount of magniloquent and unspecific interpretation to which it has been subjected.

It is further affirmed that “the Machiavellian moment” had a continuing history, in the sense that secular political self-consciousness continued to pose problems in historical self-awareness, which form part of the journey of Western thought from the medieval Christian to the modern historical mode. To these continuing problems Machiavelli and his contemporaries, Florentine theory and its image of Venetian practice, left an important paradigmatic legacy: concepts of balanced government, dynamic virtù, and the role of arms and property in shaping the civic personality. In the second half of the book—Part Three—I pursue the history of “the Machiavellian moment” into English and American thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and seek to show that the English-speaking political tradition has been a bearer of republican and Machiavellian, as well as constitutionalist, Lockean and Burkean, concepts and values. The crucial figure here, it is asserted, is James Harrington, who brought about a synthesis of civic humanist thought with English political and social awareness, and of Machiavelli’s theory of arms with a common-law understanding of the importance of freehold property. The first three chapters of Part Three are devoted to a consideration of how a classical republi-
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can presentation of politics came to appear appropriate in the other-
wise unlikely setting of Civil War England, where the conflict of
Tudor monarchism with Puritan religious nationalism and sectarianism
ensured the presence of many more competing styles and languages of
thought than seems to have been the case in Florence. The steady
growth of a neoclassical conception of politics, as in some sort an heir
to Puritan millennialism, and its ascendancy in eighteenth-century Eng-
land and America, is a phenomenon that requires exploration, and this
the remainder of the book seeks to provide.

"The Machiavellian moment" in its eighteenth-century form pro-
vides the subject of the concluding chapters, whose emphasis is increas-
ingly American. The confrontation of "virtue" with "corruption" is
seen to have been a vital problem in social and historical philosophy
during that era, and its humanist and Machiavellian vocabulary is
shown to have been the vehicle of a basically hostile perception of
early modern capitalism, grounded in awareness of the elaborate con-
ventions of public credit rather than of the more direct interchanges
of the market. The role of "fortune" was increasingly assumed by the
concepts of "credit" and "commerce"; but while this led thinkers to
perceive secular time more as dynamic and less as merely disorderly,
the antithesis of "virtue" with "corruption"—or "virtue" with "com-
merce"—continued to operate as the means of expressing the quarrel
between value and personality on the one hand, history and society on
the other, in its first modern and secular form. This quarrel culminates,
so far as the eighteenth century is concerned, with the beginnings of
a dialectical perception of history in Europe, and of a utopian percep-
tion of global space in America, where an essentially Renaissance
awareness of time is seen to have endured into the nineteenth century.
What started with Florentine humanists as far back as Leonardo Bruni
is affirmed to have played an important role in the shaping of the mod-
ern sense of history, and of alienation from history.

The book originated when Norman F. Cantor asked me to write a
study of European constitutional thought in the sixteenth and seven-
teenth centuries for a series he was then editing. It has developed far
from his or my original intention during nearly ten years; but I must
not neglect to acknowledge his initial encouragement, or the gener-
osity of his then publishers (John Wiley and Sons) in releasing me
from obligations which I had formed.

When I seek to name those scholars whose work has meant most to
me in writing this study, the presence of Hans Baron looms numinously
if controversially (and entirely without his prior knowledge) over the
whole scene. Among those whose works and conversations I have
more immediately consulted, the names of Felix Gilbert, Donald Wein-
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stein, William J. Bouwsma, John M. Wallace and Gordon S. Wood stand out in a host of others; and closer still to the historian’s work-
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