​NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI (1469-1527)
The Prince (c.1513; 1532)



The most famous document of Renaissance political science was written by an involuntarily "retired" Florentine republican to curry favor with the incoming Medici princes. Dedicated to Lorenzo, who promptly ignored it, The Prince went on to become an underground bestseller in its own time and, afterwards, the single most influential source of the realpolitik practiced by Napoleon, Richelieu, Bismarck, Mussolini, Lenin, and Stalin. Max Lerner called Machiavelli, "the first modern analyst of power," and The Prince, "a grammar of power." The word "machiavellian," broadcast by nearly all the playwrights of the British Renaissance, has become synonymous with justifying the means with the end. Machiavelli himself justified his wish to empower the Medici prince by reason of his lifelong vision of the unity of Italy.

When the banking family not only took over Florence, but also raised one of their own to the papacy with the coronation of Giovanni de' Medici as Leo X, Machiavelli's vision suddenly seemed possible. Machiavelli, from his exile, wrote The Prince to encourage Lorenzo to consolidate and expand his personal authority.

What distinguishes this seminal treatise from its author's more ambitious and lengthier Discourses, Art of War, or History of Italy is the degree to which it abandons classical and idealistic sources and arguments, in favor of a practical, experiential, fully realistic vision of human nature. Machiavelli believed that humans will more quickly forgive the slaughter of a family member than the stealth of property, and that although the best would be for the prince to be simultaneously loved and feared, if only one could be chosen fear would be the safer choice. Unlike Renaissance essayists who seek to prescribe the ideal behavior of a courtier, a soldier, or a governor, Machiavelli's only intention is to make his princely reader more equipped for the jungle where effectiveness is determined by the brutal laws of necessity and not by an Aristotelian norm.

Yet for all its cynicism, the earnest language of this remarkable document resounds with veracity. A prince who is too merciful will be ineffective. The commonwealth always requires some individuals to suffer pain. So decision-making always causes pain, and the prince must accustom himself to that harsh certainty or he will be judged to be ineffective by the very people he fears to harm. He must relish his power and find comfort in its natural repercussions. He must learn to dissemble, for the general good, and recognize that he is above the moral and social laws he must use to govern others.

Shakespeare's lago, in Othello, and Marlowe's Barabas, in The Jew of Malta, are two of the most powerful artistic embodiments of Machiavelli's political philosophy. At its most benign this philosophy feeds the fever of patriotism, becomes a handbook for nationalism and a guide to international strategy—used so effectively by Henry Kissinger. But, at the other end of the spectrum, when a sociopath, a man without conscience, steeped in The Prince, becomes himself a prince--we have the mesmerizing horrors of Richard Ill, or of Adolf Hitler, or of Richard Nixon.