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Abstract: Presents a biographical sketch of Nicolo Machiavelli, author of the power handbook 'The Prince.' Political life in Florence, Italy, during the 1400s and 1500s; Machiavelli's portrayal of human nature in 'The Prince'; His dedication of the book to Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino.

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MACHIAVELLI'S THE PRINCE

Mention the name Machiavelli, and most people will think of dictators, leaders who will stop at nothing to gain and keep absolute control over their fellow citizens. In the United States, as in most of the world, absolute power is a hateful and disturbing idea. It need not surprise us, then, to see the term "Machiavellian" used in angry or insulting contexts. Call a politician's proposal Machiavellian, and you have implied that he or she is interested only in power, not the public's well-being.

Who was this man whose name still causes such strong reactions? And is his reputation deserved?

To answer these questions, we must consider the circumstances under which he lived. Born in 1469, Niccolo Machiavelli was a native of Florence, a city famous throughout Europe for the beauty of its art and for the instability and intrigue of its political life. The people of Florence lacked the kind of rich political heritage that other cities and states enjoyed. There was no king or House of Lords to maintain order. With armed gangs fighting in the streets, people sought protection by associating themselves with one of a few powerful and wealthy families, the greatest of which was the Medici.

In return for this protection, the great families required armed service from their more humble neighbors, a demand that only increased the size and influence of the street gangs. Each family eyed the others nervously, fearing secret conspiracies and hostile intent. Such worries were often justified, for one family's power could come only at another's expense--or so the ambitious claimed, as they plotted and schemed their way to the top.

It is not surprising, then, to find Florence's political history in the 1400s and 1500s littered with betrayals and doublecrosses. But the intrigue did not stop there. Betrayals occurred within families as well. Those who betrayed their city, however, were considered worse and could be found in Florence, often working for France, the rival city of Pisa, or the Papal States that surrounded Rome.

In 1519, Machiavelli completed *The Prince*, a handbook for those interested in gaining or maintaining power in the midst of such turmoil. Some of his advice seems brutal to us today: "A prince must not mind incurring the charge of cruelty in order to keep his subjects united and loyal," for example, or "A prince who wishes to maintain the state is often forced to do evil." In the end, however, what we remember most is not his brutality, but the truth in his depictions of human behavior. He portrayed people not as they ought to be, but as they are.

It was this knowledge of human nature that prompted Machiavelli to dedicate *The Prince* to a Medici prince, Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino. Machiavelli had incurred the displeasure of the Medici by working for the republican regime that briefly held power after the French invasion of 1494. At the time, both the city and the Medici family were weak. Thus, the dedication seems strange, but part of Machiavelli's reasoning can be found in his own handbook: "Adapt your mind according to the wind." To that wise principle we can add two more: Know when to cut your losses, and never bet against the Medici family.

PHOTO (COLOR): A writer and statesman, Machiavelli is considered one of the most significant contributors to the history of political thought.

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By R. Anthony Kugler

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