

## INTRODUCTION

Many people are familiar with the controversial thinking of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Florentine political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (d. 1527). His influence has been so widespread that the word “Machiavellian” has been incorporated into our language as a pejorative, equated with “cunning, duplicity and bad faith.”<sup>2</sup>

What might be less well known is Machiavelli’s influence on the contemporary American political panorama. The long-dead Florentine thinker’s ideas still inspire political actors. More importantly, in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America, following his counsel leads to electoral victory. The more “Machiavellian” the American politician, the more likely they are to win.

*Machiavelli in America* examines this disturbing dynamic. First looking at Machiavelli and his ideas, the study then examines the specific way in which his guidance influences political society today. At the end of the book, I offer one activist response — a method for those of us who believe that “Machiavellian” and “American politics” shouldn’t be synonymous may fight back. *Machiavelli in America* proposes one specific strategy for combatting the pernicious energy that too-often defines American politics.

### LE PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Whoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been. So it is an easy thing for whoever examines past things diligently to foresee future things in every republic.<sup>3</sup>

Since Niccolò Machiavelli’s era, the world and its inhabitants have undergone major changes in technology, organizations of countries, social

consciousness and interaction, energy use, transportation and variations in other aspects of human society.

Oftentimes, these transformations have been presented as “progress.” Empires have risen, to be replaced by better, more humane ones. Religions have spawned other, more refined holy paths. The number of poor in the world has been eased, while violence appears to be abating as we ascend into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Yet through it all, human nature — that which lies at the heart of all of these innovations — remains constant. The driving force behind all human history remains as invariable as atoms.

Machiavelli assured that there was no greater place to search for clues to how things will be in the present and future than the past. The constancy of the human character assured that whether history was being written by the Athenians and Melians (415 B.C.E.), Guelphs and Ghibellines (12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Italy), or Democrats and Republicans (21<sup>st</sup> century), the dynamic behind the political and social machinations remained the same. The same human nature defined the conflict in each situation.

This invariable characteristic of humankind inspired the Florentine philosopher to develop one of the most enduring political treatises in human history, *The Prince*. Persistent because its distasteful analysis of human social and political life appeared, and still appears, to be correct. That is to say, the Machiavellian prescriptions described for attaining and retaining power *work*.

For Machiavelli selfishness defined the primary motivation for all human activity. A narcissistic desire lay at the heart of the human temperament, pitting individuals against each other with the sole desire to advance their own personal interests. Society simply provided the framework within which each person might master those around him or her.

As Machiavelli scholar Harvey Mansfield (William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University) noted:

For Machiavelli, there is just one beginning — necessity. Every human institution begins without an inheritance from God or nature . . . We begin bare, unprotected, insecure and justly fearful.<sup>5</sup>

Machiavelli, being a man of letters, added nuance to the animal bases of his political philosophy. He discussed the social motivators of fear and propaganda, the fraud of religion and language, as well as the importance of sometimes applying outright violence. However, the foundation of his political ideology remained straightforward: *everyone* in a society acts primarily for personal gain. And for a politician to succeed in mastering this world, he had to either manipulate or frighten people into believing that their interests allied with his own.

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THE IMMUTABILITY OF HUMAN NATURE AND TODAY'S AMERICA

Machiavelli assured that any statesman wishing to master the unruly mob of society had to do so with the understanding that human traits are eternal. Far from ruling in the hopes that things might get better, political leaders must implement all programs with the appreciation that humans are often mean, small and selfish. As Machiavelli noted:

Whosoever desires to found a state and give it laws must start with assuming that all men are bad and ever ready to display their vicious nature, whenever they may find occasion for it.<sup>6</sup>

It was this claim of humanity's unchanging "vicious nature" that inspired me to write this book. Are we really this bad, I asked myself? Is human political interaction defined more by Josef Stalin (d. 1953; Russian dictator from 1941-1953) or Benito Mussolini (d. 1945; one of the key figures in the creation of fascism) than Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr.? And even when a Gandhi does gain an occasional political victory, he does so by living sexless and eating nuts for most of his life, before being gunned down in cold blood. Hardly the model that most of us want to follow in remaking the world.

Even more provocative, however, was my growing awareness that Machiavelli's ideas are central to the American political process. The far-off Florentine is perhaps the single most important political advisor in the United States *today!* This fact will be explored in detail below.

Until we look in the mirror of American politics and see Machiavelli's smug visage staring back at us, we won't be able to move beyond the selfish, narrow and destructive cycle that we in this country — and around the world — find ourselves. Choosing between bad and worse for virtually all political leaders will not, in the end, help us find our way to a better world.

In this inquiry, I examine the Florentine's ideas, and then explore how they reverberate in American society. Prescient or simply lucky, Niccolò Machiavelli foretold the American political dynamic. Many of us in the voting public may not be aware, but Machiavelli and his writings were important not only at the seminal point in American history — its founding — but continue to be so today.

As Renaissance scholar Paul Grendler noted:

After World War II, [Machiavelli] came into his own as an advisor to American policymakers. Today, Machiavelli's influence on political policy may be greater than at any time since he served the Florentine government. Machiavelli has become American.<sup>7</sup>

If human nature is, as Machiavelli assures, mean, small and selfish. And the Florentine's worldview permeates American political life, then what hope can there be? The United States is currently the richest and most powerful nation in the world, equivalent to Rome of the Ancient World or the Papacy of the Renaissance. While some of us might hope that it would use

its vast power for the common good, the Machiavellian reality is that instead it often uses it to satiate base animal desires through political, economic and military domination.

Machiavelli's American program works beautifully for successful power management.

It doesn't always make the planet a better place to live.

#### MACHIAVELLI: BECAUSE IT WORKS

Machiavelli's program concentrated on subjugation and mastery. He did not concern himself with the common good, democracy or human rights. "I have thought it proper," he wrote, "to represent things as they are in a real truth, rather than as they are imagined."<sup>8</sup>

And the way things *are* in truth has little to do with utopias or universal justice.

Yet a question lingers: *why* do Machiavelli's ideas work? Why do Gandhi's theories, or those of Thomas Merton (d. 1968), Simone Weil (d. 1943), the Sufi saint Jallaludin Rumi (d. 1273) and even Jesus Christ simply provide a backdrop against which the truth of Machiavellian ideals are thrown into relief?

For Machiavelli, the concepts of moral philosophers and actors from Socrates to the Sufis and the religions within which they operated were certainly important. But only because they provided a fraudulent tool for the relentless, morally unhinged pursuit of power. In terms of their direct relation to political reality, however, he considered them as meaningless as music. Machiavelli never once mentioned in his writings the concept of the "common good," or even human conscience.<sup>9</sup>

Machiavelli's ideas continue to fascinate and function for precisely this reason: they deal with the world as it is. His leadership model has not only inspired many of America's most successful politicians. They have also instigated shelves full of recent books, bearing titles such as *The New Machiavelli: the Art of Politics in Business*; *A Guide to the Corporate Machiavelli*; *Machiavelli on Modern Leadership*; *The Modern Machiavelli*; *What Would Machiavelli Do*<sup>10</sup> and a host of other treatises, most of which inform today's leaders how to apply Machiavellian ideas to the worlds of politics and business.

Renaissance scholar Paul Grendler made note of specific contemporary American political officials and advisors who look to Machiavelli's books for political counsel. He assured that admirers of the Florentine's thought attained key positions in the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush, spanning the last two decades of Republican presidential administrations. He specifically named former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz; former conservative presidential candidate Alan Keyes; Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork; former Secretary

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of Education Robert Bennett; Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and conservative columnist and pundit William Kristol, among others.<sup>11</sup>

#### HUMAN CONSTANCY: THE AMYGDALA

There is no need of gods or conspiracies to make men rush headlong into the most absurd, self-inflicted disasters. Human nature suffices.<sup>12</sup>

Richard Gregg (d. 1974; a social philosopher said to be the first American to develop a substantial theory of nonviolent resistance) said: “Governments are the institutionalized forms of our habitual inner attitudes. Each one of us is partly responsible.”<sup>13</sup> But what are these “habitual inner attitudes” which have led Machiavelli to be a more relevant contemporary political advisor than Mahatma Gandhi?

Human experience is situated in the brain. Like the computer, the brain was not created of a piece, regardless of what fanatical religious believers might propose. It emerged through an evolutionary process, with new cortical structures being built on top of old.

We share much with earlier forms of life, from fish to rats. Later neural additions — those that separate us from the more primitive animal species — were simply added on top of the earlier structure. The human animal is still beholden to the primal aspects of our brain stem. These prehistoric drivers control necessary facets of life, from breathing to eating to modulating emotional responses.

It is vital to grasp this Erector Set™ quality of the mind. Machiavelli’s political philosophy does not emerge from an appreciation of the most recent (evolutionary) features of the human brain structure, those contained in the neo-cortex. These latest facets of the neural architecture define what makes us most “human.” Here resides the brain structure supporting consciousness: introspection, advanced learning and moral thought.

Machiavelli’s system bypasses this center of academic learning and spiritual understanding to access a far more powerful and primitive aspect of the human character, the subcortical amygdala. In this ancient neural bundle sub- and pre-conscious decisions are made that propel the vast majority of individuals in their actions.

The amygdala, a small, nut-sized structure situated at the base of the human brain stem, stands at the center of the human condition. In humans and other animals, this brain structure is linked to both fear responses and pleasure. Its size has been shown to positively correlate with aggressive behavior across species. The larger the amygdala, the more aggressive the individual.

It is also linked to the neuroses that sometimes define humanity’s interaction with the world around it. Conditions such as anxiety, autism, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and phobias are suspected of being linked to abnormal functioning of the amygdala.<sup>14</sup>

It is here, deep in the recesses of the human brain, that Machiavelli's ideas take root. Pre-conscious motivations around which our thoughts and beliefs form often stem from primal survival impulses originating in the amygdala. These are then re-interpreted by the consciousness and shaped into thoughts and beliefs.

IT IS BETTER TO BE FEARED THAN LOVED

Since men love at their own pleasure and fear at the prince's pleasure, a wise prince must base himself upon that which is his, not upon that which is other men's.<sup>15</sup>

Machiavelli posited that a prince's surest method of controlling people was by inspiring fear. By frightening them into following the leader. Love, respect and bribes might sometimes be efficacious in inspiring a population, but only heartfelt terror would always work.

The amygdala helps control fear responses. Machiavelli's contention that it is better to be feared than loved has its basis in the human brain stem. When people cause others to feel fear, they have accessed a primitive aspect of humanity, one existing beyond rationalizing or conscious thought. We feel the fear first. Then we interpret it with our higher brain functions.

Fear stands at the heart of civilization. It is more important to human society than love, compassion or the search for a common good. Fear drives us to action in ways that the other, higher aspects of our character are unable to do. As Machiavelli assured, and I will concur throughout this study, fear has been at the center of political experience through all times, including today in the United States.

The power of this insistent, unconscious emotion is a leftover from a time when survival depended on it. To be afraid of what lurked in the dark was necessary to early humanity. It remains so for every animal from starfish to wildebeest. Death comes in a split second when awareness is at a lull. Fear keeps the senses tingling and the ability to avoid danger at a maximum.

Long before Machiavelli distilled this ancient dynamic into his brutal political program, some of humanity's greatest thinkers acknowledged this pre-human facet lying at the center of human experience. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.E.) maintained:

Man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but if he is isolated from law and justice, is the worst of all . . . That is why, if he is without virtue, he is a most savage being, and worse than all others in the indulgence of [his] lust and gluttony.<sup>16</sup>

And the Islamic mystic Jallaludin Rumi said:

Man is a mixture of animality and rationality, and his animality is as inseparable a part of him as his rationality. He is like a torrent in which mud is mixed. The clear water is his rational speech, and the mud his animality.<sup>17</sup>

Machiavelli noted and then explained how leaders might exploit this innate aspect of humankind:

It is necessary for the prince to know how to use both the beast and the man. This part was taught to princes covertly by the ancient writers, who write that Achilles, and many other ancient princes, were given to Chiron, the centaur, to be nourished that he might raise them under his discipline . . . a prince is constrained by necessity to know well how to use the beast.<sup>18</sup>

The most certain way to “use the beast” was, according to the Florentine political thinker, to inspire fear in people.

#### MACHIAVELLI ON THE BRAIN

That whereby man differs from the lower animals is but small. The mass of people cast it away, while the superior men preserve it.<sup>19</sup>

The bases for Aristotle’s “animal nature,” Rumi’s “mud” or Machiavelli’s “Chiron” are localized in humanity’s hard wiring. What’s more, it has been scientifically proven that the animal in humanity is more powerful than the rational, as Machiavelli contended. Human beings are captives to the primal neural aspects of their carnal selves, rather than master of them.

Even more disturbing, it has been shown that Machiavellian techniques of relating to others are innate to animals, and therefore to man.

A group of comparative primatologists studying the evolution of intelligence in primates (apes, baboons, chimpanzees, monkeys and man) coined the term “Machiavellian intelligence” to explain certain kinds of behavior. They discovered that baboons and monkeys purposefully deceived and manipulated others in order to obtain desired personal ends . . . They see it as an essential part of intelligence in primates, including man . . . It might be called social problem solving unchecked by morality.<sup>20</sup>

The author of this passage continued on to note that “Machiavellian intelligence postulates that intelligence begins in cunning, deceit and manipulation.”<sup>21</sup>

Animals have no, or very little, morality. Humans, at their best, can and do behave in a moral way. However, our species is still molded by an animal past where morality plays little role, leaving society too often with “social problem solving unchecked by morality.” Oftentimes in communal and political situations, the higher aspects of the human being melt away, and “Machiavellian intelligence” rules.

Joshua Greene (a researcher at Harvard University and leader in the field of moral psychology) has explored this dynamic in detail. He noted: “Most of the time when we are deciding the right thing to do, what’s happening in the brain is an emotional response, not a reasoned one.”<sup>22</sup>

Decisions on right and wrong, morality and religion and a host of other fundamental aspects of an individual’s belief system are made in areas of the brain far more primitive than the higher functioning neo-cortex. The rational self then *interprets* these pre-conscious messages. The logical and moral are

held hostage to the more primal, emotional aspects of the character, exactly as Machiavelli proposed. Only in the greatest humans — Gandhi or Jesus or Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (d. 1972) or Rumi (or perhaps yourself) — does the neo-cortex wrest control of the thought and action, to make an individual both moral and truly conscious.

This human nature explains the difference between what many people say and study in religious institutions over the weekend and the way they spend the rest of their week. Their actions are often driven by the Machiavellian desire to succeed in life at any cost, not the soothing messages of their spiritual formation.

This dynamic can be clearly seen in political and social decisions. It has led American society in recent times to take from the poor to give to the rich, start war after war of choice over the past 50 years and chew the marrow out of the bones of poor Mother Earth herself. Although this last one — as evidenced by the fouling of our earth and depletion of vital resources — might lead to the downfall of civilization itself, our species is so driven by primal needs that we cannot stop ourselves. Like a dying addict, unable to give up smoking or heroin or alcohol.

#### A FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM

Five or six times a day man experiences involuntary disappointment and pain. Absolutely these things do not come from him; therefore, they must come from other than him, and so he is subject to that other.<sup>23</sup>

The first step on the road to recovery is acknowledging the illness. As long as we (as a society and species) reward Machiavellian intelligence with social success and electoral victory, we are sick. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu (c. 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.) said: “first realize that you are sick; then you can move toward health.”<sup>24</sup> Once we admit our challenge, however, an even more difficult task is to develop a *response* to Machiavellian intelligence. One that operates in the world of emotion and the subconscious, and masters them for the common good.

This book is one attempt to acknowledge our shared illness as well as to propose a solution. If we continue to be driven by primal urges and fears, we will soon find ourselves headed off a cliff caused by warfare, gluttonous use of resources, ethnic hatreds and other behaviors in which messages from the amygdala metastasize in human experience.

#### MACHIAVELLIAN POLITICS

In the footsteps of Machiavelli many American politicians seek to gain the support of the electorate by any conceivable method. They chatter, coax, and cajole, and if this is ineffective, they pretend, deceive, and promise the world. Since people are taken in by appearance, politicians appear devout and loyal; yet, in political theory, it is better to be a clever winner than to be a devout loser. Indeed, many American politicians are instinctively Ma-

chiavellian, denying the relevance of morality in political affairs and holding that craft and deceit are justified in pursuing and maintaining political power.<sup>25</sup>

Contemporary scientists have explored how brain chemistry affects politics. According to a 2011 study, people with different political views have different brain makeups.<sup>26</sup> It was demonstrated that people with conservative views<sup>27</sup> have a larger amygdala than those with more progressive stances.

Additionally, as was noted, the size of the amygdala correlates positively with aggression, leading more conservative members of society to be more violent in considering political options. Not to say that conservatives would stab someone in the grocery line. But they are more likely to support aggressive political responses to social and geo-political issues. Science writer Joanna Schaffhausen noted in *The Biological Basis of Aggression*:

A large body of research implicates the amygdala as a key brain structure for mediating violence. In animals, electrical stimulation of the amygdala augments all types of aggressive behavior, and there is evidence for a similar reaction in humans. It is also possible to increase aggression through modulation of the amygdala.<sup>28</sup>

Researchers have recently begun to examine the amygdala and how it affects political decisions.

The difference in brain structure could explain some of the traits that distinguish conservatives and liberals, researchers said. People with larger amygdalae tend to respond with more aggression in situations where they feel threatened and are more sensitive to fear and disgust.<sup>29</sup>

It's easy to see how accessing this aspect of political supporters would be advantageous. The amygdala shoots primal, emotional stimuli into the neo-cortex, where these motivators are then interpreted within the conscious structure of a personality. By attaching this fear and disgust to a political adversary, one can gain advantage. Machiavelli understood this, as do most successful politicians and leaders.

Even individuals who might not have overlarge amygdalae are susceptible to suggestion by those with high "Machiavellian intelligence."

Research has found that political orientation is influenced by short-term events related to fear and disgust. Thus, simply asking persons to wash their hands caused their views to become more conservative. Reminding persons of the existence of threats such as terrorism caused political views to become more conservative.<sup>30</sup>

This dynamic was explicitly examined in an article in the *Washington Post* entitled "The World is Safer, but No One Will Say So," on the eve of the 2012 presidential election:

There's one foreign policy fact that President Obama and Mitt Romney dare not mention this election season. No American general will speak of it. Nor will it displace the usual hot topics at Washington's myriad foreign

policy think tanks. Measured by most relevant statistics, the United States — and the world — have never been safer . . . The candidates' rhetoric, however, suggests that the globe is ablaze.<sup>31</sup>

The reason is clear: fear works. Even if these politicians were dealing with a more thoughtful electorate, one with smaller amygdalae, the citizens could still be bent to the leader's will through aggressive language and fear mongering. Members of the public may be viewed as a *tabula rasa*, to have fear and aggression smeared over them. This turns them into partisans for the very leader who is frightening them.

Politicians, or Machiavelli's "princes," understand how to stimulate fear to manipulate their audiences and thereby achieve the goal of leadership. The political goal is to forge an "us" against a "them" by situating the fear response in someone or something outside of the chosen group (be it homosexuals, Democrats, Arabs, immigrants or other). Then the motivator (politician) of the primal fear stimulus offers him or herself as the palliative, capable of stemming the sense of dread emitted from deep within the individual's psyche and focused on the outside stimulus.

As the 2012 election cycle drew to a close, Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan (R-WI) utilized exactly this motivation in describing the terrifying result of his opponent's victory:

Representative Paul D. Ryan accused President Obama on Sunday of taking the country down a path that compromised Judeo-Christian values and the traditions of Western civilization . . . "It's a dangerous path," Mr. Ryan said, describing Mr. Obama's policies. "It's a path that grows government, restricts freedom and liberty and compromises those values, those Judeo-Christian, Western civilization values that made us such a great and exceptional nation in the first place."<sup>32</sup>

This is Machiavellian intelligence. And it still reigns supreme in the worlds of politics and business. The linkage between the amygdala and politics makes explicit the neurobiological bases to Machiavellian theory.

#### CHAOS AND CONTROL

Without "ordered government," human beings exist in a condition of "ambitious license," where "everything is full of confusion and disorder." To escape this natural condition, they need to be constrained by a "new prince" who comes to power by the ruthless use of force.<sup>33</sup>

Chaos represents the birthplace of fear. Fear of an ungovernable power which lies within us, of a pathological anarchy which might be unleashed if we do not somehow control ourselves through social boundaries and civilizing conventions. Security for individuals and societies is the antidote to the terror of a violent anarchy lurking within the human soul. Political culture represents one method of controlling these aggressive urges.

Fear — the manipulating impetus utilized by those with high “Machiavellian intelligence” — pairs naturally with this threat of internal chaos. Politicians, however, must remove the chaos from the internal experience of his or her constituents, situating it in an enemy. In this way, a politician may bring citizens together around his or her leadership, promising to annihilate the chaos out there, safeguarding the followers.

George W. Bush once said (February 2008), as he was attempting to gain support for a piece of security legislation: “At this moment, somewhere in the world, terrorists are planning new attacks on our country.”<sup>34</sup> The hypothetical terrorist attacks represented the potential chaos. Those who stood between President Bush and his legislative goal were portrayed as being on the side of chaos.

Richard Gregg noted that governments represent the institutionalization of this interior dread of chaos. They are manifestations of our terror, not ameliorations of it. Each individual leader is sometimes little more than a mirror of humanity’s primal fear.

Or as the Muslim mystic Jallaludin Rumi asserted:

When I see distinctly that a hundred thousand forms without bound and hosts without end, multitude upon multitude, are held captive by a person who is held captive in turn by a miserable thought, then all these are prisoners of that one thought.<sup>35</sup>

It is that single thought that expresses something deep within the soul of each of us.

## CHAOS AND CONTROL II

Necessity is always one’s own necessity, that is why necessity overpowers any human capacity of detachment.<sup>36</sup>

“Detachment” is the first step toward intellectual understanding, where the neo-cortex can play a governing role over thoughts and emotions. The place where “necessity overpowers detachment” represents the nexus of Machiavellian theory and human biology.

However, each of us enjoys the belief that we are master of our own thoughts and feelings. It is in this disconnect that a whole range of beliefs — some even completely independent of reality — take hold in society. Examples of this type of (incorrect) belief are that the Earth was flat (we got over this one); that humans play no role in global climate change (in 2010, half of all Americans believed that<sup>37</sup>); that President Obama is a Muslim (17% in 2012<sup>38</sup>); that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction prior to the 2003 war (63% of Republicans in 2012<sup>39</sup>). These and a host of other completely false beliefs are held tight due, ultimately, to a fear of chaos buried deep in our brains.

The views are born of fear and then are held tightly regardless of what the facts of the matter might be.

Faith in the autonomy of the individual self, in one's own ideas and thoughts and beliefs, is a means to fend off chaos while at the same time creating it. It represents a stylized image of the self and the world. One that helps twist nuance and muddy reality into a hardened, though often false, vision of the universe and our place within it.

What's more, individuals become attached to their versions of reality, false though they may be, as these chimerical images become enmeshed with their own existential sense. The great Muslim spiritual thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) noted: "You only truly possess that which cannot be lost in a shipwreck."<sup>40</sup> For the vast majority of humans, however, their beliefs and thoughts define them. These must be held onto or the sense of self unravels. And then the chaos lurking just below human consciousness explodes into the human psyche.

Ronald Lindsay, president of the *Committee of Skeptical Inquiry*, was quoted in the *Washington Post* addressing the underlying motivation for people choosing their inklings over truth. He was discussing a question in American politics which may have been forgotten by the time you read this: whether or not President Barack Obama was actually born in the United States, otherwise known as the "birther" controversy. But the dynamic he explored holds true for any set of deeply held beliefs:

If you have a pre-commitment to your view, and that point of view is important for your identity — if you are emotionally attached to it — your emotion is going to shape your reasoning process. You'll be presented with facts, but you'll find some way to minimize the significance of those facts.<sup>41</sup>

This construction — holding onto unfounded beliefs and having them color one's view of the world — represents the beginning of chaos, as it demarcates the first step away from truth. And it is here that Machiavelian political tactics make their inroads and allow a political theory based on fraud and raw power to continue to hold sway in our world.

#### EMOTIONAL MATURITY: ELUSIVE AND RARE

We live in a world of unreality and dream. To give up our imaginary position at the center . . . means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence.<sup>42</sup>

Machiavelli's influence on modern and contemporary politics is undeniable. It's as if he brought out of the shadows some widely held secret — something that all political leaders prior to his time had thought but dared not utter. The resiliency of his ideas is astounding, and it only seems to grow with time. As was earlier noted, "Machiavelli's influence on political policy may be greater than at any time since he served the Florentine government."<sup>43</sup>

Niccolò Machiavelli did not concern himself with what might or should be, but with what is. And, as Machiavelli assured and politicians have forever proven, it is the least emotionally mature among us who are driven the most powerfully to control the world by leading it. The least emotionally mature

(that is to say, those “whose lust overcomes [their] intellect”<sup>44</sup>) externalize their primal emotional stirrings, centered in the amygdala. Machiavelli’s prince is often one who “tends to be more rigid and closed-minded, less tolerant of ambiguity and less open to new experiences.”<sup>45</sup>

The people who are driven most by their unconscious impulses, who most desperately need control, glory, power and wealth to have a sense of self-worth, are those who best master the Machiavellian game of worldly success. These leaders in business and politics are the ones I will be discussing throughout this study. They are the least spiritually healthy among us, yet the most temporally important. It is these men and woman who stand behind every war, every clear-cut forest, every oil spill, every homeless veteran moldering on the streets of countries around the world.

Spiritual realization represents the antithesis of the brain that “tends to be more rigid and closed-minded.” Spirituality concerns a deep study of the self, an attempt to have the higher aspects of the brain structure (the neo-cortex) control the lower (amygdala). As Confucius advised: “Attack the evil that is within yourself, rather than attacking the evil that is in others.”<sup>46</sup> And Shems-i Tabrizi (d. 1248), Rumi’s teacher, said: “The measure of life that you do have should be spent in investigating your own state”<sup>47</sup> of mind.

Truly spiritual people yearn for self-awareness, not worldly success. These men and women eschew worldly gain and power. In fact, they view temporal success with great suspicion. As Rumi noted:

Not all gallows are made of wood. Official positions, exalted rank and worldly success are also very high gallows. When God wishes to catch someone, He gives him a great position or a large kingdom in the world. All that is like a gallows on which God puts them so that all people may be aware.<sup>48</sup>

Ergo, it is those least qualified — those furthest from controlling the primal emotional drivers deep within the human brain — who climb onto Rumi’s gallows and wrest control of the levers of society through their unremitting application of Machiavellian tactics to the social and political worlds.

#### TRUTH

Nature is synonymous with Truth. To lie deliberately is to blaspheme. And likewise to lie without realizing it. Because the involuntary liar disrupts the harmony of nature. Nature gave him the resources to distinguish between true and false. And he neglected them.<sup>49</sup>

Before descending into the social reality where Machiavellian rules are the order of the day, it is important to consider truth. It is a force often irrelevant and even oppositional to what is considered objective reality, yet it sits at the center of all political and social conversations. It is often ignored or even actively eschewed.

The conservative columnist Cal Thomas put forward an interesting proposal concerning the insertion of truth into politics:

Before an election, have candidates take a lie detector test. Put it on TV and/or the Internet. A panel of reporters or other experts could ask the questions, just like they do in presidential debates. In fact, this could be a five-minute segment at the end of the debates. “And now, to the lie detectors . . .”<sup>50</sup>

Ha, ha, ha! Political participants on either side of the aisle would never accept common sense remedies such as this one. It would too easily and clearly unmask the whole pernicious system. Lie detector tests are for criminals, not for politicians, they would aver.

Within the social and political realms, we — as a culture and a species — rarely attempt to find the place of truth. We opt instead for a dubious objectivity that often represents little more than a midpoint between two opposing political or social opinions. This objective reality merely reflects popular attitudes, subject to polling data, gut reactions, propaganda, a narrow reading of history, the weight of tradition and a basket of other impressions. Truth is shunted into the shadows of social, cultural and political conversations.

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century prophet Thomas Merton addressed this disconnect between truth and the narrative of accepted reality:

The process which Kierkegaard calls “leveling” is that by which the individual person loses himself in the vast emptiness of a public mind. Because he identifies this abstraction with objective reality, or simply with the “truth,” he abdicates his own experience and intuition.<sup>51</sup>

While truth and objective reality are certainly different, it is beyond the scope of this work to provide a definitive philosophical definition of truth. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* noted, “Truth is one of the central subjects in philosophy. It is also one of the largest. Truth has been a topic of discussion in its own right for thousands of years. Moreover, a huge variety of issues in philosophy relate to truth, either by relying on theses about truth, or implying theses about truth.”<sup>52</sup>

In terms of this book, truth is not a philosophical issue. Within the political and social ambits, we can uncover an ideal of truth that has more than relative meaning. There are opinions, issues and concerns that are closer to actuality than others. However, these almost always become lost in the muddle of political speech, partisan warfare and the desires of the ruling or moneyed class in any society.

For instance, the national narrative in the United States includes the notion of “manifest destiny.” In textbooks and the national chronicle, this is often represented as the country being the new Israel, a land of gentle, civilizing suasion, with Europeans aiding the primitive natives who inhabited the country before the coming of the Caucasian saviors. The truth, however,

is far different, as the United States was forged from genocide of the Native Americans and then built on the backs of nearly 300 years of slave labor.

Further, specific truths exist in contemporary society — that human activity contributes to global warming, that the ubiquitous use of plastics is a cause of cancer and the United States is a nation of growing inequality. However, within the world of politics, these are treated as opinions. The media presents them alongside opposing points of view, complete with polling data and party affiliation. Truth in the political world is viewed with great suspicion. Telling the truth is frowned upon. As journalist Michael Kinsley (b. 1951) noted: “A gaffe is when a politician tells the truth — some obvious truth he isn’t supposed to say.”<sup>53</sup>

Within the world of Machiavellian intelligence, political speech becomes hostile to truth. As the 20<sup>th</sup>-century prophet Simone Weil (d. 1943) noted: “on inspection, almost all the words and phrases of our political vocabulary turn out to be hollow.”<sup>54</sup> They are hollowed out so truth can be obscured, and a shared social reality — as proposed by the economic and political princes — can overwhelm it. It is those who master the realms of propaganda, social myth and public lying who become princes in our world, while the truth-tellers and self aware spend their time in quietude, barely affecting the public square.

This is the arena in which Machiavellian actors are at their strongest: overwhelming truth to shape reality. However, the objective reality they propose is, in many instances, so far from the truth as to have little relation to it. “Reality” describes the external world that we appear to live in, as defined by politicians, the media, popular culture, advertising and other means of presenting a narrative of a shared history, society or realm. Reality can be controlled through propaganda and the mass media. It takes on a life of its own.

Agreement between several men brings with it a feeling of reality. Divergence, where this agreement is concerned, appears as sin. The state of conformity is an imitation of grace.<sup>55</sup>

The difficulty with inserting truth into the general human narrative has been well documented. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish spiritual leader Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760) stated: “What does it mean when people say that Truth goes all over the world? It means that Truth is driven out of one place after another, and must wander on and on.”<sup>56</sup> Political reality, on the other hand, as proposed by a respected media organization such as CNN, can be viewed simultaneously in more than 200 countries around the world, giving it the veneer of truth that a lone voice can never create.

Machiavelli, ever aware of this fundamental human dynamic as well as methods to exploit it, noted:

The vulgar are taken by what seems [to be] and by the outcome of the thing, and in the world there are only the vulgar; and the few don't stand a chance against them when the many have so many upon whom to lean.<sup>57</sup>

He also noted:

The great majority of humans is satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and are often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are.<sup>58</sup>

Of the many pithy statements that we can cull from Machiavelli's writings, this might be one of the most chilling. Because it is true: we have a world that often divorces social reality from truth. This leaves us, as Simone Weil bitterly noted, with a "present situation more or less resembling that of a party of absolutely ignorant travellers who find themselves in a motor-car launched at full speed and driverless across broken country."<sup>59</sup>

And far from attempting to ameliorate the situation, the vast majority of successful politicians simply exploit it, only deepening the crisis.

#### A RESPONSE TO MACHIAVELLI

It has been a common view among political philosophers that there exists a special relationship between moral goodness and legitimate authority . . . Rulers were counseled that if they wanted to succeed, they must be sure to behave in accordance with conventional standards of ethical goodness. It was thought that rulers did well when they did good; they earned the right to be obeyed and respected inasmuch as they showed themselves to be virtuous and morally upright. It is precisely this moralistic view of authority that Machiavelli criticizes at length . . . For Machiavelli, there is no moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power.<sup>60</sup>

The ensuing voyage through Machiavellian politics can appear grim, especially as we explore how the Renaissance philosopher inspires politicians in our era. However, this exposition does not end in a hopeless jumble. The final chapter of the book proposes a response to Machiavelli. I outline a specific approach for how we might begin to turn our political system away from what is known as "realpolitik" (another name for Machiavellian realism) to the kind of morally centered social world envisioned by prophets from Marcus Aurelius (d. 180) to Thomas Merton and Simone Weil.

A "Moral Ombudsman" — a non-profit group developing a moral code for social and political interaction, using the thoughts of our greatest religious, spiritual and social thinkers over the past few thousand years — would examine our contemporary political milieu from a true moral center, that place that lies at the heart of all religions. Additionally, this activist think tank would use some Machiavellian means to influence the public discourse for the greater good.

A specific program for the Moral Ombudsman is addressed at the end of this study. It is vital to note at this juncture, however, that this proposi-

tion moves beyond the teachings of individual religions, which often divide people from each other, into the highest realm of the human spirit. It utilizes spiritual (not religious, per se) thinking to examine and influence human political interactions.

Within political life, religious institutions often appear to be little more than super energized partisan arms. However, spirituality represents the unifying force at the heart of all sacred paths. It centers on an individual's search for a direct relationship with the Divine, in whatever form he or she imagines It. A solitary and meditational path, it represents one in which the searcher concentrates far more on the quality of their own character than that of those around them.

In addition, spiritual adepts attempt to understand the world — the living beings, the ecosystem, the universe in general — as a seamless whole, united through sub-atomic physics as well as heart and soul. It is rare that a spiritually-centered person would attempt to achieve personal gain at the expense of another person or community.

Although religion in America has become politicized and is used, too often, as a Machiavellian tool (something that the Florentine philosopher heartily endorsed), this misuse of human spirituality cannot erase the fact that the moral and social coalesce at the heart of all religions. It is this energy that must be unearthed and brought to bear on the social and political worlds, to counteract the spiritually immature, Machiavellian aspects of our culture.

If we do not do this, our greedy, selfish and self-destructive primal nature is going to win — and all of us here on this earth are going to lose. As a recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* stated, showing one child sharing a story around a fire with a few other tattered kids: “Yes, the planet got destroyed. But for a beautiful moment in time we created a lot of value for our shareholders.”<sup>61</sup>

This tipping point is coming soon. There is no time for delay. Those who want to work for the common good must work and work hard, if we are to survive with a semblance of the civilization that we have so painstakingly built here together.

One approach to this appears in the final chapter of this book.