



Monday, July 23, 2007

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Nation & World

Bill, Meet Niccolo

By Michael Barone

Posted 9/10/95

As Bill Clinton looks ahead to conflicts with Congress on the budget and with the Serbs in Bosnia, one might well ask: How does he measure up as a leader according to that expert on American politics, Niccolo Machiavelli? Machiavelli never saw America, but *The Prince*, his landmark discourse on political science, remains a manual for rulers, which is to say every American president.

President Clinton, however, is almost precisely the opposite of Machiavelli's ideal Prince in every regard. Begin with Machiavelli's central question, "whether it is better to be loved or feared." Classical and medieval commentators assumed it is better to be loved. Machiavelli had a cooler eye. "It is much safer to be feared than loved," he wrote. "Men have less hesitation to offend one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared; for love is held by a chain of obligation, which, because men are wicked, is broken at every opportunity for their own utility, but fear is held by a dread of punishment that never forsakes you." Clinton, of course, thirsts to be loved and is probably less feared than any president in living memory.

Machiavelli also holds that it is better to have a reputation for stinginess than for generosity. A ruler believed to be generous must "burden the people extraordinarily, to be rigorous with taxes, and to do all those things that can be done to get money." People's expectations will never be satisfied and their resentments will easily be aroused, which is what happened when candidate Clinton promised a middle-class tax cut and incumbent Clinton pushed through a middle-class tax increase. Promises of benefits--a new national health care plan, job training programs, college education loans--are heavily discounted while a prince with a reputation for stinginess gets credit for the smallest generosity. "Above all, he must abstain from the property of others, because men forget the death of a father more quickly than the loss of a patrimony." In English: "Read my lips: no new taxes!"

Thoughts of war. But Machiavelli has an even higher priority. "A prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but the art of war and its orders and discipline," he writes. "He should never lift his thoughts from the exercise of war." Bill Clinton, of course, is notoriously uninterested in things military. For years he forgot that he received a draft notice while at Oxford; for months he was visibly uncomfortable saluting military officers; he has had far fewer military and intelligence briefings than other recent presidents. Even when he pays thoughtful and eloquent tribute to American servicemen and women, as he did at Pearl Harbor on V-J Day, he can make an embarrassing mistake: In recalling the Japanese surrender, he called the battleship *Missouri* an aircraft carrier.

Machiavelli warned against "flatterers of whom courts are full," and of seeking advice widely: "When everyone can tell you the truth, they lack reverence for you." So a prince should keep only a few close advisers and give them freedom to speak the truth only on subjects he asks about. "He should ask them about everything and listen to their opinions; then he should decide by himself, in his own mode. ... Aside from these, he should not want to hear [from] anyone; he should move directly to the thing that was decided and be obstinate in his decisions. Whoever does otherwise either falls headlong because of flatterers or changes often because of the variability of views, from which a low estimation of him arises." As a bad example, he cites the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. When his policies "begin to be contradicted by those who he has around him, he, an agreeable person, is dissuaded from them. From this it arises that the things he does on one day he destroys on another, that no one ever understands what he wants or plans to do, and that one cannot found oneself on his decisions." Sound familiar?

Some White House advisers say we are now seeing a new Bill Clinton, disciplined and resolute, steady and steely in his determination to stare down Congress and set back the Serbs. Perhaps. But he is no longer a new prince and he has not established a reputation for Machiavelli's virtue, which is not virtue as we conceive it today but the strength of character "which enables him to achieve great works and deeds," as historian Felix Gilbert describes it. One American president whose virtue enabled him to achieve his goals over the extremists of his own party and the congressional leaders of the other was the seemingly guileless Dwight Eisenhower who, as columnist Murray Kempton once said, "could learn nothing from Machiavelli except to denounce Machiavelli." Bill Clinton, who is constantly proclaiming that he is not playing politics, still has a lot to learn from *The Prince*.

This story appears in the September 18, 1995 print edition of U.S. News & World Report.

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