WHY MACHIAVELLI MATTERS
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Apocalypse Then: Prophecy and the Making of the Modern World 
Arthur H. Williamson
For Artis, “friend and dear friend”
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This book has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is a belated homage to a seminal thinker who has profoundly influenced my life. On the other hand, it is a plea by one concerned citizen to others to become actively engaged in preserving our precious democracy.

In my former vocation as an English professor, I spent over twenty-five years in a first-rate honors program (later college) at the University of Houston. Up to then, I had been a pretty straightforward specialist in Renaissance English poetry. But beginning in 1979, I spent a large part of my classroom time team-teaching a “Great Books” course to exceptionally bright freshmen and sophomores, in various areas of concentration, under the inspiring leadership of Ted Estess, director of the program, and later dean of the college.

Although I had read The Prince in college, my acquaintance with its author up to that time was shallow and my sense of him conventional. The program in which I then renewed the acquaintance was dominated by a succession of political theorists from schools like Chicago, Toronto, and Yale that were steeped in the tradition of Leo Strauss. The Straussian take on Machiavelli, relentlessly driven home to both students and neophyte professors, was not flattering. We took away two “facts” from the week or so devoted to Machiavelli: he was (in the master’s phrase) a “teacher of evil,” and—his one redeeming feature, I suppose—in the retiring years when he produced his wicked tome he communed with the wise men of antiquity. But the main thing we learned from this introduction to one of the world’s great republican thinkers was the one thing everyone knew already: that Machiavelli was indeed “Machiavellian.”

While repeating this academic ritual over two-and-a-half decades, I gradually developed my own reading of Machiavelli, aided by other colleagues with very different perspectives. Putting the text in its historical and biographical contexts, I came to read The Prince in more subtle ways. So when Machiavelli notes (in Chapter 5) that anyone
who acquires a “city accustomed to freedom, and does not destroy it, may be expected to be destroyed by it”—a wicked one-liner guaranteed to arouse in Straussian a frisson of self-righteous indignation—it could be conceded that he is at least acknowledging the powerful hold that liberty has on those who enjoy it.

Even more telling were the circumstances in which the text came to be. Machiavelli had been a major player in the revived Florentine republic under his friend Piero Soderini. As second chancellor and secretary of the Ten while still only in his late twenties and early thirties, he combined the responsibilities of an American secretary of state and secretary of defense. Then, almost apocalyptically, on the Republic’s dissolution and the restoration of the anti-republican Medici, Machiavelli found his occupation gone. Discharged from all his offices by the new regime, briefly imprisoned and tortured on the mistaken belief that he had joined a conspiracy against it, and finally consigned to a kind of house arrest on his farm twenty miles from Florence, he had no outlet for his patriotism—he would later famously write that “I love my country more than my own soul”—for the fifteen years’ worth of practical political wisdom he had acquired in the Second Chancery, and perhaps most of all for the sharp wit and uncontainable energy his acquaintances consistently recorded.

Still, I had a career to pursue and books and articles on Renaissance literature to write. Only after retiring in Maine and reassessing my own life post res perditas—Machiavelli’s phrase for the premature enforced retirement he faced at age thirty-four—did I begin to suspect that the old “prick,” as his friends never tired of calling him, still had a hold on me. Having decided to reverse Machiavelli’s pattern and dedicate my own declining years to civic engagement, I found my activism haunted by the spirit of his life and writings. When Maine’s notorious “tax burden” was bemoaned in letters to the editor or in the halls of the state house, there Machiavelli would be, proclaiming that “well-ordered republics have to keep the public rich but their citizens poor.” Or when the Thatcherian mantra sounded—athema to my grassroots activist cohort—that “there is no community, there are only individuals,” Machiavelli would be there to stubbornly counter, “it is not the well-being of individuals that makes cities great, but that of the community.” Clearly, in the work I had chosen to do as a senior citizen, “Citizen Machiavelli” would be one of my spiritual mentors.

And so he has been, and a debt must be repaid. If Machiavelli matters to this citizen-activist in twenty-first-century America, then a public that mostly knows him about as well as I did when I started teaching him to honors students deserves to make his acquaintance and, if possible, be helped to acquire my own sense of what he has to tell us about life in a political community.
Here, of course, a problem arises. Despite the historical gap of nearly five hundred years—written in 1512–1513, The Prince was not published until 1532, five years after its author’s death—Machiavelli’s best-known work retains its wicked, if specious, glow. Even to those of us who have never read it, the familiar epithet “Machiavellian” derives from its sensational pages. But his other major works—the Discourses, the Florentine Histories, perhaps especially the public correspondence in his Legations and the private one in his Letters—are even less accessible. True, they have all, except the Legations, been completely translated into English. And many first-rate books, not to mention hundreds of articles, have been dedicated to expounding them. But even so, Machiavelli’s writing remains deeply rooted in the historical and cultural soil of a long-forgotten era. Unless you’re willing to familiarize yourself with the arcana of sixteenth-century Florence, Italy, and Europe, you’ll have a hard time appreciating much of his best work. The one exception is his scintillating Mandragola. Almost universally recognized as the greatest comedy of the Italian Renaissance, and believed by many to be the best comedy in any language not written by Shakespeare, the play remains as popular and accessible as it was in its own time.

Still, there can be no doubt of the timeliness of Machiavelli’s example of civic engagement. His sensitivity to the intoxicating influence of power is borne out by the “fascist shift” inaugurated by our own present leaders. Where Machiavelli’s countrymen feared the imperial ambitions of other states, our menace comes from within, from executives who make decisions not pragmatically but ideologically, not legally but in blatant violation of the Constitution, and not publicly but behind closed doors. During the Vietnam War, the comic strip character Pogo chided us, “We have met the enemy, and they are us.” As I write these words in 2008, the catchwords of our public discourse are Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and extraordinary rendition, while lawsuits and Congressional hearings probe an American president’s self-proclaimed authority to spy on U.S. citizens in the name of “homeland security.” If Machiavelli matters to contemporary Americans, it is at least partly due to his reminder that the first duty of a citizen in a republic is to be informed about the facts underlying any political decision and to channel that information to the skeptical exchange of opinion in the public marketplace of political discourse.

The book’s plan is fairly straightforward. Chapter 1 sketches the historical context in which Machiavelli worked and wrote. After tracing the evolution of the Florentine Republic to its fall in 1512, I review Machiavelli’s main activities during his fourteen-year tenure in the Soderini Republic and then his mostly writerly endeavors in the remaining fifteen years of his life following its fall. Readers more interested in
Machiavelli’s thought than in his work might want to skip this chapter and/or return to it later. Chapter 2 outlines Machiavelli’s practical reportage as his city’s interpreter, recording first the practical substance of his dispatches, then his analyses of current events, and finally his “metadiscourses” or reflections on his own role. In Chapter 3, I take up the question of Machiavelli’s political philosophy, concentrating on his three major works: The Prince, the Discourses, and the Florentine Histories. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two key terms in Machiavelli’s take on the citizen in the world: virtù, especially as it denotes civic virtue, in Chapter 4; and fortuna, in the sense of external challenges to that virtue, in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 attempts to assess Machiavelli’s stature as a writer, taking account of the full range of his poetic and dramatic writing, as well as his view of himself as poet and writer. A brief concluding chapter directly takes up the titular question of the book. Again, to get a glimpse of where all this is leading with respect to our own times, the reader may want to sneak a look at this part before plunging into the body of the text.

In lieu of a formal acknowledgment, I would like to thank Jennifer Bernard for combing through the manuscript with her keen writer’s eye and excising dozens of errors and infelicities, and Artis Bernard for reading it through not once but twice! I also want to thank Ray Waddington, the editor of this series, for kindly inviting me to write the book, as well as my editor, Brian Foster, for his encouragement and patience.

I should emphasize at the outset that this book is not for specialists. Though no doubt my opinions on matters Machiavellian will differ from, and of course owe much to, those of scholars who have studied his life and works, I do not intend here to offer a new interpretation of them or to alter the consensus, such as it is, on their implications. My sole aim is to try to persuade my readers that Machiavelli does indeed matter to those of us who would accept the burden of democratic citizenship. For that reason, besides my formal dedication, I wish to dedicate the book to my fellow grassroots activists in the Maine People’s Alliance—my Second Chancery! At the risk of omitting others who belong here, I write in the hope of sharing my debt to and inspiration by Machiavelli with Adam, Ali, Amy, Andre, Artis, Ashley, Ben, Billy, David, Donna, Greg, JB, Jacquie, Jay, Jenny, Jesse, Josh, Judy, Kate B., Kate W., Kevin, Mal, Milt, Nikki, Paul, Pete, Peter, Rufus, Sara, Seth, Steve, Sue, Tammy, Wells, and many more with whom I’ve been privileged to occupy the trenches in the battle to strengthen the democratic fabric of my adoptive state.

If they or other readers of this book come to recognize in Machiavelli a guardian spirit of the communal values we cherish, I’ll be content.
Niccolò Machiavelli, the man destined to be a seminal figure for those living in a democracy for centuries to come, was born in Florence on May 3, 1469, and baptized on May 4 in the baptistery at San Giovanni. His father, Bernardo di Niccolò di Buoninsegna, belonged to an impoverished branch of the family that had occupied high offices in the city government. Little is known of his early life; he began learning Latin grammar from one Maestro Matteo in 1476, and his mother died some twenty years later. Then in 1498, at the exact midpoint of his life—nel mezzo del cammin di sua vita, to paraphrase Dante—and five days after the execution of the firebrand Dominican friar Savonarola, he was appointed by the Florentine council as second chancellor of the republic, with a special responsibility for military affairs. In that post for the remaining fourteen years of the republic, he lived the active political life of a citizen. During these critical years he worked in close association with Piero Soderini, who in 1502 was granted a lifetime appointment as gonfalonier or standard-bearer, the highest magistrate in medieval Italian city-states.

The author of The Prince, then, that scandalous treatise on authoritarian rule, was a dyed-in-the-wool republican. Hence the appropriate context in which to view Machiavelli’s political career is the Florentine Republic itself. From its origins in the twelfth century until its fall in 1512, the storied mercantile commune on the banks of the Arno River furnishes a compelling chapter in the emergence of modern Europe out of the ruins of the Islamic Middle Ages. Whereas southern Italy remained feudal well into the early modern period, the cities and towns of the north were, almost from the outset, dominated by
commerce. Even in the so-called Dark Ages urban life under the Romans was never completely wiped out on the peninsula, especially north of Rome. In Venice, trade, and in Milan, finance, took hold and gradually increased from the eleventh century on. In Tuscany, the urban revival centered in protective associations of merchant venturers, guilds of craftsmen, and executive committees of distinguished citizens known first as “good men” and later, in homage to ancient Rome, “consuls.”

Prime among the Tuscan cities was Florence. The first authoritative reference to consuls dates from 1138, and the earliest surviving record of a merchant guild from 1182. In both cases, the institution itself is undoubtedly older. The guilds or arti were the city’s greatest source of strength, though membership probably was never more than 3,000 to 4,000 out of a total population of 100,000 enrolled in some twenty-one guilds. From the twelfth to the early fifteenth centuries, the guilds surmounted recurring tensions—including periodic armed conflict—both among themselves and with the much larger proletariat, to maintain a degree of internal liberty and a wavering prosperity.

In the fifteenth century, republicanism gave way to oligarchic rule, eventually under the Medici. This regime virtually excluded the “people.” Though theoretically limited by the will of the populace, power resided in the Signoria, whose members were elected from a political class of about 2,000 out of about 10,000 males over the age of twenty-five. These domestic changes are inseparable from external events. The city’s military victory over Milan in 1402 triggered a rise in civic pride, expressed in the myths of “humanist” culture. From the beginning, political power in Florence had been concentrated in a tight fraternity of rich merchant families. This order was firmly established when a pro-Medici government took power. The Medici hegemony can be traced to the family’s dominance, under Giovanni di Bicci (d. 1419) and his son Cosimo, over the rival Albizzi following the war with Lucca in 1433. A year later, Cosimo was recalled from exile, launching over half a century of effective Medici rule in the nominal republic.

Throughout his thirty-year reign, Cosimo kept a low profile, quietly building a family dynasty while allowing himself to be appointed gonfalonier, or magistrate, only in 1435, 1439, and 1445. His power was secured with the death of Rinaldo degli Albizzi in 1442. He strategically married the Contessina Bardi, who bore him two sons, Giovanni
and Piero. While Giovanni’s only son died young, and Giovanni died in 1463, Piero and his offspring played a prominent role in both the family’s and the city’s fortunes, as we will see. As always, the former depended in great part on the latter. In the shifting power struggle for preeminence on the peninsula, in 1450 Francesco Sforza had become the first Duke of Milan. Cosimo supported Milan and its duke against the seemingly greater threat of Venice, until that threat was weakened by the Turks’ capture of Constantinople in 1453. Dissension arising from the peace of Lodi between Milan and Venice in 1454 led to a restoration of elections, as well as to additional reforms four years later.

Following Cosimo’s death in 1464, power in Florence devolved to his surviving son, Piero. Like his father, Piero married within the upper echelons of Florentine commercial society; in due course, Lucrezia Tornabuoni bore him two sons, Lorenzo (b. 1449) and Giuliano, as well as three daughters. Piero outlived his father by only five years. Having surmounted more trouble with the Sforza and an internal conspiracy, he died in 1469, six months after Lorenzo’s marriage to Clarice Orsini, and the year of Machiavelli’s birth. Piero’s brief reign figures in history as a minor parenthesis between the stealth reign of Cosimo, also known as the “father of his country,” and the more glittering one of his “magnificent” son, Lorenzo.

Lorenzo’s court was impressive. Culturally, it encompassed the Neoplatonic flights of Marsilio Ficino, the classical scholarship of Poliziano, and the visual splendors of Botticelli. Put another way, it ran the gamut from the “serene perfection of Leonardo,” to the “tragic realism of Machiavelli,” the “creative imagination of Michelangelo” and the “compulsive rantings of Savonarola.” Like his father and grandfather, Lorenzo presided over this scene as an “under-cover ruler,” his sobriquet “Il Magnifico” being a typical courtesy title of the time. The early years of his reign were relatively uneventful, as he sought to maintain peace on the peninsula through alliances with Milan and Naples. Inexorably, however, relations with the Church worsened when Pope Sixtus IV annexed Imola in 1474, prompting Lorenzo to abandon his Milan-Naples alliance against Venice for a Milan-Venice pact against Naples, now allied with the Pope.

Meanwhile, things at home took a dark turn, ultimately reversed by a combination of Lorenzo’s luck and his skills. In 1478, Girolamo
Riario organized the so-called Pazzi Conspiracy in Florence. On April 26 of that year, assassins boldly attacked the Medici brothers at the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, better known as the “Duomo,” killing Giuliano but allowing the wounded Lorenzo to escape. The following summer, the Pope tried to capitalize on the resulting instability by launching a war throughout Italy. This conflict ended in 1480 when Lorenzo risked capture in Naples to achieve a peace treaty. When the Turks seized Otranto in August, the Pope grudgingly signed on to a reconciliation with Florence.

In the decade or so remaining to him, Lorenzo sought to restore stability both in Italy and at home. Yet despite his efforts to keep the Pope from turning Rome into a fifth major Italian state, after Sixtus died in 1484, Innocent VIII maintained the threat of a peninsular war by attacking Naples. In the decade that followed, Lorenzo married his daughter Maddelena to the new Pope’s son, and saw his own seventeen-year-old son Giovanni, the future Leo X, installed as a cardinal. Soon thereafter, Lorenzo retreated to his villa at Careggi, where he died in April 1492. Two years later, Piero was driven out of office. The next eighteen years saw the last heroic struggle of the Florentine Republic to ward off Medici domination. Two weeks after Piero’s banishment, as the French king Charles VIII was staging his triumphal entry into Florence on November 17, 1494, the republic was renewed. Florence would pay the price of this stubborn loyalty to France when the treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis cemented Spanish conquest of the peninsula in 1559.

The glory days of the restored republic were to be short-lived. Reveling in their victory, the republicans honed their civic skills under the new regime led by Savonarola, who dominated the city from 1494 to 1498. After his fall, they continued to do so for the fourteen years of the Soderini republic, during which time the distrusted Medici remained in exile. As we have seen, at this time Machiavelli himself was installed as second chancellor, a position he retained to the end, and four years later his friend Piero Soderini was made the republic’s first gonfalonier for life. His, and the republic’s, nemesis was as always imperial Spain. When in 1510 Pope Julius II rallied the peninsula against the foreign invaders, Florence once again cast its lot with France. The Spanish victory at Ravenna triggered Cardinal Giovanni de’ Medici’s installation as ruler of Florence in 1512. On the death of
Pope Julius, Giovanni was elected Leo X and his brother Giuliano was installed in Florence, to be succeeded on his death in 1516 by Piero II’s son Lorenzo, later Duke of Urbino. When Lorenzo died in 1519, he was succeeded by Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici, the illegitimate son of Giuliano, who in 1523 was elected Pope Clement VII.

Machiavelli’s part in these events was neither spectacular nor negligible. In his role as second chancellor, his duties dealt mainly with correspondence regarding the administration of Florence’s territories. But he also functioned as one of the six secretaries to the first chancellor and as such was asked to serve the Ten of War, who were also responsible for the republic’s foreign and diplomatic relations. In this capacity, he was frequently asked to travel abroad, acting as secretary to the Ten’s ambassadors and helping to file reports on foreign affairs.

Throughout his thirties, then, Machiavelli was basically a foot soldier for the republic, revered as a boon companion by his colleagues in the chancery, but also frequently chosen by the Council to take part in crucial negotiations abroad. On these missions, because of his relatively modest social status, Machiavelli usually accompanied and advised a member of the Florentine aristocracy who was nominally the key player. As an “envoy,” not ambassador, his job on such missions was not to negotiate, but to observe and report back to the Council or Signoria in official legations. He also communicated with his friends and patrons in private correspondence. When he wasn’t performing diplomatic tasks, his chief preoccupation was organizing local militia. Convinced that the key to preserving liberty was to replace Florence’s traditional reliance on mercenaries with a citizen army, Machiavelli devoted much of his energy in Florence to selling this idea to his countrymen and much of his time in the countryside to enlisting and training troops. While this chapter will focus on his diplomatic missions, there is little doubt that if asked, Machiavelli would have said that his most important work was military preparation.

Machiavelli’s first five years in the chancery culminated in his, and Florence’s, wary relations with Cesare Borgia, the charismatic military champion of his father, the Pope. Machiavelli spent much of this period either at the court of Duke Valentino, as Borgia preferred to be called, or negotiating directly or indirectly with King Louis XII of France to help check the Duke’s expanding influence, as well as to help Florence regain its lost territories around Pisa. Before his close
association with Duke Valentino began, however, he made several other diplomatic junkets: to Caterina Sforza, Countess of Imoli and Forlì, in 1499; and to Georges d’Amboise, Cardinal of Rouen, and Louis XII a year later. Having returned to Florence in January 1501, the next month Machiavelli was in Carmignano dealing with a rebellion in Pistoia; the rest of the year he spent tracking the Duke’s movements in the Romagna.

At this time, Machiavelli initiated nearly a year of intense relations with Duke Valentino, richly recorded in his letters and, less directly, in The Prince. After the briefest of respites, during which he married Marietta, the daughter of Luigi Corsini, in June 1502, he met with the duke at Urbino. There, Valentino warned Florence of the consequences of its loyalty to France, casting himself not as a tyrant but as a conqueror of tyrants. In October, Machiavelli reencountered the duke at Imola, where he professed his faith in the Florentine Republic. On the following day, the duke called him back to offer an alliance with Florence, which Machiavelli duly reported to the Ten, along with his suspicions of the duke’s treachery.

Remaining at court until the end of the year, Machiavelli reported every few days on his continuing conversations with Valentino. At this time, he witnessed firsthand the dramatic events at Cesena recorded in Chapter 7 of The Prince: the public retribution bestowed on Ramiro Lorqua in the public square of Cesena on December 26, and the assassination of various Orsini and Vitelli five days later at Senigallia. Though he could hardly have suspected it, in this period of relentless negotiation Machiavelli was witnessing the swan song of Cesare Borgia. On returning to Florence a few weeks later, he wrote several reports on matters in Pistoia and Pisa as well as the Description of the Method Used by Duke Valentino in Killing Vitellozzi Vitelli, Oliverotto da Fermo. He had barely completed a trip to Siena when news arrived in August of the death of Pope Alexander VI, the one contingency capable of thwarting the duke’s ambitions and precipitating his fall from power.

The death of the Pope and waning of his son prompted a period of instability in Italy. For Machiavelli, despite his continuing missions abroad, it meant redirecting his energies to the war with Pisa and his efforts to recruit a citizen army. The Pisan adventure might have ended in 1505 had not the Florentine army, fresh from a major victory at San Vincenzo in August, failed to breach the Pisan walls. For the
next four years, Machiavelli tirelessly pursued this enterprise. In the first half of 1506, he sought and trained peasant conscripts, reviewing his recruits in February in the Piazza della Signoria. Finally, after several months of military and diplomatic maneuvering, in which Machiavelli played a central part, on June 4, 1509, Pisa surrendered. Four days later, culminating a fifteen-year conflict, the Florentine forces, with Machiavelli in their ranks, entered the city.

In the meantime, Machiavelli maintained a brisk diplomatic schedule, visiting several of the major courts of Europe from 1503 to 1509. In October 1503, following the death of Pius III, he was sent by the Ten to Rome to observe the ensuing Conclave, at which Giuliano delle Rovere was elected as Julius II in early November. Duke Valentino was also in Rome for these events, and Machiavelli met with him to hear his complaints at the Florentines’ refusal of his request for a safe conduct for his troops on their way to Romagna. Assured of the Pope’s mistrust of the duke, Machiavelli advised the Ten to ignore his ambassador even though his army was counting on their safe conduct.9 A few days later, he was with the Pope when he learned of the duke’s capture. His mission in Rome had been accomplished, the city was experiencing a plague, and he had learned of the birth of a son, Bernardo. Nevertheless, despite repeated orders from the Ten, Machiavelli resisted leaving Rome. Only after more than a month there did he reluctantly return to Florence, in December 1503.

With one major exception, Machiavelli’s remaining diplomatic assignments at this time were in Italy. The exception came in late January and February 1504, when he was sent with the Florentine ambassador Niccolò Valori to Lyons, where the two Niccolòs failed to deflect the French from concluding a truce with Spain. Back in Florence, toward the end of October he completed the first Decennale, a 550-line poem on events in Italy during the decade beginning with the descent of Charles VIII in 1494. The following April saw him haggling with Giam-paolo Baglioni, lord of Perugia, at Castiglione del Lago over the latter’s abandonment of his commission to defend Florence against a hostile coalition. In May, Machiavelli vainly sought help against this plot from the Marquis of Mantua, and in July from Pandolfo Petrucci of Siena.

Apart from his military activities, the next three years were a relatively light period. The second half of 1506—as we have seen, the first half was given to military efforts—was spent mostly with the Pope.