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HISTORYMAKERS Niccolò Machiavelli

Inventor of Political Science

"My intent being to write a useful work . . . it seemed to me more appropriate to pursue the actual truth of the matter than the imagination of it. Many have imagined republics and principalities which were never seen or known really to exist; because how one lives is so far removed from how one ought to live that he who abandons what one does for what one ought to do, learns rather his own ruin than his preservation."—Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince (1513)

Niccolò Machiavelli, an intellectual and sometime government official, nearly lived an anonymous life. He was an educated man who had written plays but remained an unknown citizen of Florence, Italy, well into middle age. It was not until the age of 44 that he single-handedly revolutionized the study of governments and politics.

Machiavelli was born in 1469 to a noble family in Florence, one of the intellectual centers of the Italian Renaissance. He received a solid education. During his twenties, he worked in Rome on behalf of a Florentine banker. Florence was experiencing political upheaval at the time. Lorenzo de' Medici, the great banker and patron of the arts, had ruled 'he city until his death in 1492. His son proved to be an incompetent heir and was banished from the city. A few years later, the people of Florence decided to form a republic.

Machiavelli became an official in the new government. He served the city-state on several diplomatic missions that allowed him close observation of some of the leading political figures of his time. He grew to respect those who knew how to gain and use power. He also took the role of organizing a citizen-army for Florence, which he modeled after the army of the ancient Roman Republic.

Machiavelli's militia did not have the fighting ability of Rome's famed legions, though. In 1512, the Spanish army defeated the Florentine troops, and the Medici family once again took power. Machiavelli was dismissed from the government and retired to his country estate to write.

Among Machiavelli's creations was *The Prince*. A devoted supporter of republican government, he nevertheless dedicated the work to the new Medici ruler of Florence. Machiavelli hoped *The Prince* would prove his intelligence so he could win a job in the new regime. He also hoped to spur the Medici family to unite northern Italy and insulate it rom foreign interference.

Previous writers of political philosophy tried to describe perfect governments. Machiavelli had a different idea in mind. He wanted to understand how political leaders could best obtain and hold power. He thought that trickery was more effective in achieving these goals than honesty. He also thought that acquiring and maintaining power was more important to rulers than being a "good" leader. The chapter title "On Cruelty and [compassion], and Whether It Is Better To Be Loved or Feared" reveals the core of his view of government, which is based on his view of human nature:

It will naturally be answered that it would be desirable to be both [loved] and [feared]; but as it is difficult to be both at the same time, it is much more safe to be feared than to be loved, when you have to choose between the two. For it may be said of men in general that they are ungrateful and fickle, dissemblers, avoiders of danger, and greedy of gain.

His name became an adjective—"Machiavellian" came to describe any leader who used deceit to impose his or her will.

Ironically, Machiavelli was ruined by his own ambitions. The Medici gave him diplomatic work. However, when they were overthrown and the republic restored again, Machiavelli was tainted by his association with the Medici. He was turned down for employment and died shortly thereafter.

Questions

- 1. **Drawing Conclusions** How did Machiavelli's ideas and actions reflect his respect for ancient Rome?
- 2. **Analyzing Issues** Why is it appropriate to call Machiavelli's work political science?
- 3. **Making Inferences** What was Machiavelli's view of human nature?

section, utterly spent, he had Michi pull his boots off for him, the skin came away with them.

He fed off himself. When he grew dizzy from standing and painting with his head and shoulders thrown back, his neck arched so that he could peer straight upward, his arms aching in every joint from the vertical effort, his eyes blurred from the dripping paint even though he had learned to paint through slits and to blink them shut with each brush stroke as he did against flying marble chips, he had Rosselli make him a still higher platform, the fourth on top of the scaffolding. He painted sitting down, his thighs drawn up tight against his belly for balance, his eyes a few inches from the ceiling, until the unpadded bones of his buttocks became so bruised and sore he could no longer endure the agony. Then he lay flat on his back, his knees in the air, doubled over as tightly as possible against his chest to steady his painting arm. Since he no longer bothered to shave, his beard became an excellent catchall for the constant drip of paint and water. No matter which way he leaned, crouched, lay or knelt, on his feet, knees or back, it was always in strain.

Then he thought he was going blind. A letter arrived from Buonarroto, and when he tried to read it he could see nothing but a blur. He put the letter down, washed his face, ate a few forkfuls of the overcooked pasta Michi had made for him, went back to the letter. He could not decipher a word.

He threw himself on his bed, sorely beset. What was he doing to himself? He had refused to paint the simple commission the Pope had requested, and now he would come out of this chapel a gnarled, twisted, ugly, blind dwarf, deformed and aged by his own colossal stupidity. What Torrigiani had done to his face, the vault would do to his body. He would carry its scars to his dying day. Why couldn't he have let well enough alone? He would have made his peace with the Pope, been back in Florence long since, enjoying dinner with the Company of the Cauldron, living in his comfortable house, carving the Hercules.

Sleepless, racked with pain, homesick, lonely, he rose in the inky blackness, lit a candle, and on the back of an old sketch tried to lighten his mood by pouring out his woes:

I've grown a goitre by dwelling in this den as cats from stagnant streams in Lombardy, or in what other land they hap to be which drives the belly close beneath the chin:

My beard turns up to heaven; my nape falls in, fixed on my spine: my breast-bone visibly grows like a harp: a rich embroidery bedews my face from brush-drops thick and thin.

My loins into my paunch like levers grind: my buttock like a crupper bears my weight; my feet unguided wander to and fro;

In front my skin grows loose and long; behind by bending it becomes more taut and strait; crosswise I strain me like a Syrian bow:. . .

Come then, try to succor my dead pictures and my fame; since foul I fare and painting is my shame.

Research Options

- 1. *Using Research in Writing* Find out more about Michelangelo. Then work with classmates to plan and arrange a bulletin board display about his life. Include a brief biographical sketch and pictures of his works of art. Use captions to identify each work of art you use in the display.
- 2. Writing Expository Paragraphs Research how frescoes are created. Write a brief step-by-step explanation of the process, including definitions of such terms as pozzolana and intonaco, and share it with a small group of classmates.
- 3. *Perceiving Relationships* Find pictures of the Sistine Chapel frescoes. Match the images you see with descriptions in this passage from *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. For example, find depictions of the Deluge, the Sacrifice of Noah, the Garden of Eden, the Prophet Isaiah, and so forth.