

Hard Guy Discourse

Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli's on Rules Are as Timely and Important Today as Five Centuries Ago

Michael A. Ledeen

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VIEWED BY
Igis Valiunas

The world is crueler and more dangerous than most Americans like to believe it is; periodically that it is brought to the national attention in the crudest fashion, and our might and ire are roused for a time, only to subside as soon as the inconvenience is dealt with and we can return to life as it is supposed to be lived. We are never warlike for long, and tend to consider war, or even the tension that accompanies serious international disagreement, as an untoward interruption of the pursuit of happiness that ours by inalienable right. We prefer not to think of ourselves as the sort of people who have enemies.

Of course there are always those who insist on being difficult and spoiling everybody else's good time: among them, the occasional intellectual saboteur who will tempt to stop the orderly flow of traffic on the bridge to the twenty-first century by executing a perfect swan dive from its thrilling height, a chain saw clenched between his teeth, and, once he is in the water below, will cut every last stanchion flat at the knees. Something has to be done to get the attention of the advancing multitude, or at least of those leading the advance. In *Machiavelli on Modern Leadership*, Michael Ledeen has written a book of admonition and exhortation that deserves more notice than it is likely to get; he examines the late twentieth century through the eyes of the great Italian Renaissance philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, author of *The Prince* and *Discourses* and *Livy*, whose name is synonymous with

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the worst sort of political devilment. Brief but rich, *Machiavelli on Modern Leadership* is a tribute to the matchless "brutal clarity" with which Machiavelli spells out "the political and moral requirements of leadership."

The foundation of Machiavellian wisdom is the certainty—distressing for some, exhilarating for others—that the natural condition of mankind is war. Machiavelli writes, "A prince must have no other objective or other thought or take anything for his craft, except war." Nothing can be gained, or kept, or increased, without a fight. Men are made in such a way that they want everything but can never get everything they want. The more they have, the more they covet the things they don't have yet.

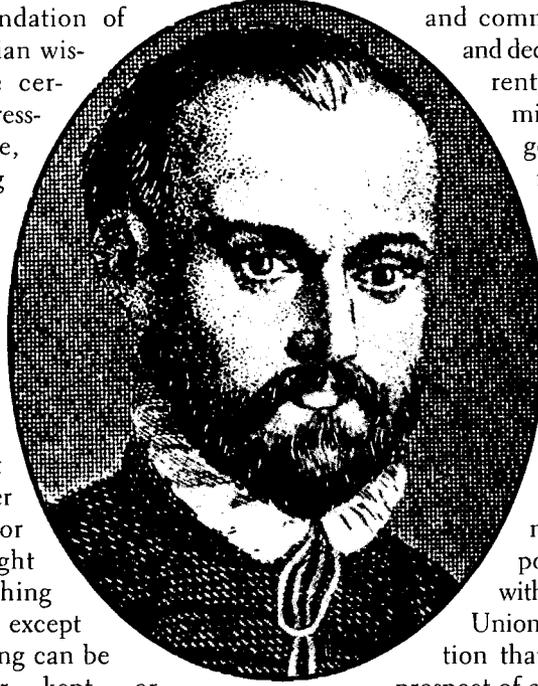
Ledeen has a laugh at the expense of Ted Turner, who complained a couple of years ago that the "Star-Spangled Banner" was "a war song," and proposed that, now the world was at peace, we adopt a gentler ditty as our national anthem. Turner's own life, Ledeen points out, has been "a constant battle" for wealth, power, and distinction. Why then should he expect his country to renounce the same desires that have driven him all along?

The clash of competing wills and appetites is endless, so that peaceableness can be more hazardous than pugnacity. In our peace-loving foolishness, Ledeen contends, we have already given away certain safeguards of our freedom and power to those who, much as we might wish for their affection, can hardly be called our

friends. Under the Clinton administration, improvidence nothing short of suicidal has marked our dealings with China. Operating on the assumption that, if we supply them with our best weapons, they will never think of using them against us, we have sold the "hot section" technology that makes our fighter jets the best in the world, and more supercomputers—

crucial to advanced weapons design and communications coding and decoding—than we currently use ourselves for military and intelligence purposes. The most disturbing thing about this dealing is that we did not even do it for the money. A want of moral stamina underlies this potentially ruinous policy: We did it because we wanted to relax. The Communist threat was supposed to be finished with the fall of the Soviet Union, and any confrontation that even hints at the prospect of another Cold War is simply unthinkable. Tail hopefully wagging, we intend to show the Chinese that they have nothing to fear from us; and what more do they need for proof?

We hate war so much that the thought of actually doing what is necessary to win one troubles us as much as losing would do; when events compel us to fight, we declare victory and go home while the enemy remains alive and dangerous. Ledeen derides President Bush's and General Powell's conduct of the Gulf War, with its pitiable spectacle of "victory interruptus": We pulled out just as the Iraqi Republican Guard was about to be done in, and with it Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Ledeen scornfully cites the usual reasons that Bush apologists give for not finishing off Saddam—Vietnam, quagmire—but a reason he does not mention is more maddening still. Reportedly Bush eschewed disposing of Saddam, not because it would have been too difficult, but because it would have been too easy: Delivering the



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death blow would have been unsporting, like shooting fish in a barrel. We would have seemed bloodthirsty, and we have a reputation to uphold. Decent people don't do that kind of thing.

At the heart of Ledeen's book is the Machiavellian insistence that decent people must on occasion do indecent things; for if they are unwilling to soil their hands, then the indecent people, who are not vexed by such reservations, will have goodness entirely at their mercy. "Machiavelli expands the earlier paradox: just as the quest for peace at any price invites war and, worse than war, defeat and domination, so good acts sometimes advance the triumph of evil, as there are circumstances when only doing evil ensures the victory of a good cause."

Ledeen offers chilling examples of the way the enemies of decency go about their everyday business. Soon after the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks surreptitiously founded "the Trust," an apparently anti-Soviet organization operating in the West. The British and French were so taken with the Trust that they paid for its upkeep and put its agents in touch with real anti-Communists. To maintain the charade, the Soviets contrived that some of their own installations be sabotaged and some of their own men assassinated. The payoff was rich, "exceeding Lenin's prediction that the capitalists would [sell him] the rope he would use to hang them. In this case, they even paid for the rope."

Yasir Arafat has shown himself similarly accomplished in the Machiavellian game of deadly dissembling. Needing on the one hand to eliminate his rivals for the leadership of the PLO and on the other to secure his reputation as a moderate, Arafat secretly begot Abu Nidal, a terrorist outfit that targeted his Palestinian political enemies and whose rampaging murderousness made him look all the more demure and agreeable. Arafat had even the Israelis fooled, until the head of Romanian intelligence defected in the late 1970's and gave the game away. More recently, Arafat has presented himself as a man of peace to the peaceable and a man of blood to those whom only blood will satisfy: "Throughout the 'peace process,' his reputation as a moderate and a man of peace grew apace with

the increasing tempo of the killing of Israelis by Palestinians whom he publicly praised and embraced."

When decent regimes like the Western democracies and Israel have enemies who are devoted to their destruction, good men find themselves obliged to "enter into evil." Ledeen is adamant that only the most extreme circumstances call for such measures, that those who enter into evil must make their exit from it as soon as they can, and that any necessary evil be done strictly with the common good in view. These are the principles of a stern moral understanding that recognizes how hard a place the world can be, and, although doing anything wrong even for the sake of good will be unpalatable to many, most reasonable people will admit the justice of Ledeen's imperatives. The only problem with Ledeen's Machiavellian teaching is that it rests upon a bowdlerized Machiavelli.

Ledeen is among the readers of Machiavelli who see him above all as the champion of republican virtue, and who tend to regard the *Discourses* rather than *The Prince* as his definitive work. Although Ledeen does not overlook *The Prince* altogether—that life is war and that good men must sometimes enter into evil are precepts found in that book—he does disregard or misconstrue some of its more repugnant aspects in order to bring it into line with the less distressing teaching of the *Discourses*. *The Prince* must be given its due; Harvey C. Mansfield, a reader of exceeding delicacy, has called it the most famous and the most infamous book ever written on politics, and it is known for offering instruction in how to win power to tyrants and republicans alike. Ledeen cannot bring himself to admit that Machiavelli might find admirable virtue in the cruelest tyrant: "Machiavelli wants virtuous leaders who create great enterprises, not usurpers of power who dominate others for their own pleasure." Thus Ledeen argues that Machiavelli simply denounces the immensely successful Syracusan tyrant Agathocles, the most wicked man in any of Machiavelli's books, who entered into evil and found it so much to his liking that he never left. Here is what Machi-

avelli has to say about Agathocles, in Chapter 8 of *The Prince*:

Still, one cannot call it virtue to kill his fellow citizens, to betray his friends, to be without faith, without pity, without religion; which modes enabled him to acquire imperium, but not glory. For if one considers the virtue of Agathocles in entering into and escaping from dangers, and the greatness of his mind in standing up to and overcoming adverse things, one does not see why he should have to be judged inferior to any of the most excellent captains; nevertheless, his brutal cruelty and inhumanity and his infinite wickedness do not allow that he be among the most excellent celebrated men.

This morally gnarled passage shows a new understanding of virtue—the sort of virtue Agathocles has in abundance—attempting to drive out the old. Machiavelli cranks up the tension between what can be called virtue and what virtue really is. An arresting ambiguity that is commonly lost in translation adds a revealing complication: "*Non si può ancora chiamare virtù ammazzare li sue cittadini*" also reads, "One cannot yet call it virtue to kill his fellow citizens...." Machiavelli intimates that the time will come when one can indeed call it virtue, and he is doing what he can to usher in that time. Ledeen assumes that acquiring glory is more desirable than acquiring imperium, or domination; but Machiavelli suggests the opposite. Imperium is something you acquire by your own virtue; glory is something you acquire if others are willing to give it to you. Machiavelli famously and infamously remarks that it is better for a prince to be feared than to be loved, "since men love at their own pleasure and fear at the prince's pleasure." So Agathocles evidently got what he most wanted, and did not concern himself unduly with what other men thought of him.

Ledeen has written an astute book about modern leadership, but his Machiavelli is only a shadow of the real thing. In Ledeen's domesticated republican there is little trace of the utterly fearless audacity that makes Machiavelli so daring. In a letter written toward the end of his life, Machiavelli declares that he loves his country more than his own sou-

he word soul does not appear even once in either *The Prince* or the *Discourses*, the two books in which he said he wrote everything he knew. He knew about politics in a world where men have no souls to speak of; and however one might admire his daring and force of mind, one loes so with a shudder. In the world of our own time, when the gravest threats to democracy and freedom come either

from nations that have abolished the soul or from those that have perverted an estimable faith, it is essential that we preserve such souls as we have left. They are ultimately what we are fighting for. Ledeen knows this, and one understands readily enough his need to make an intellectual and spiritual hero of so great a figure as Machiavelli, who believed otherwise all the same. ❧

and about the men he designates as architects, and worked with many of the participants. And what he's produced is terrific journalism, a highly readable book that should be as accessible to a mass audience ten or twenty years from now as it is today.

So who, besides Ronald Reagan, are Shattan's heroes? Harry Truman, Winston Churchill, Konrad Adenauer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Pope John Paul II. Truman, Solzhenitsyn, the Pope, and Reagan are obvious choices, and I don't quibble with them. But Churchill and Adenauer aren't, which makes Shattan's treatment of them so compelling.

Churchill is one leader who had the Soviets—and Lenin—pegged from the start. Maybe it's common knowledge that he tried to drive out the new Bolshevik government in Russia in 1919, but it wasn't to me. Even back then, Churchill was a voice in the wilderness, Shattan notes. "With the rest of the British Cabinet preoccupied with other pressing postwar issues, Churchill (as minister of war) single-mindedly sought to overthrow the Bolshevik regime by lending support and encouragement to a suc-

A Textbook Performance

Architects of Victory: Six Heroes of the Cold War

Joseph Shattan
The Heritage Foundation
343 pages / \$24.95; \$14.95 paper

REVIEWED BY
Fred Barnes

The most appalling thing about the political heroes that Bill Bradley cited in the Democratic presidential debate in New Hampshire last October was that he was serious about them. Not half-serious, not sarcastic, not ironic—nope, he was deadly serious. Two of his heroes, Jimmy Carter and Mikhail Gorbachev, were players in the Cold War, and this was significant, too. The great story of the second half of the twentieth century was the defeat of Soviet Communism by the United States and its allies, and neither of Bradley's heroes stood tall in that struggle. During Carter's four years in the White House, Communism not only gained enormous ground but also picked up political momentum. And Gorbachev's goal was not to transform the Soviet Union into a democracy, but to prevent exactly that from happening. Fortunately, he turned out to be one of history's great bumblerers, and thus helped bring about what he desperately wanted to avert. Yet Bradley praises Gorbachev for courage and Carter for honesty.

I belabor the point about Bradley only because his musing about heroes is so representative of the thinking that dominates

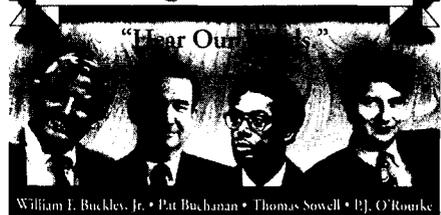
mainstream journalism, much of the political community, nearly all of academia, and most of book publishing. People in that world are in a state of denial. It's going on a decade now since Communism collapsed, and they still don't know why it happened or who caused it. And they don't want to know. They'd rather pretend the accommodationist policies of Carter and others—not the rejection of those policies—and Gorbachev's reforms brought the Cold War to a peaceful end.

Which is why Joseph Shattan's wonderful rendering of the real masterminds of victory in the Cold War couldn't find a conventional publisher and was instead published by the Heritage Foundation. Shattan got lots of excuses, such as his book was about too many people (six). But the truth is his thesis (hard-line anti-Communism prevailed) and his heroes (Ronald Reagan, Alexander Solzhenitsyn etc.) didn't pass muster in the liberal world of mainstream publishing.

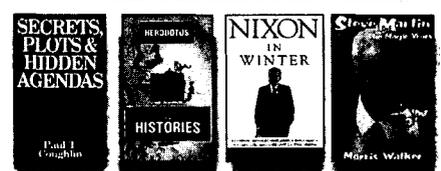
True, there have been other books that gave some credit to anti-Communists for the demise of Soviet Communism. Don Oberdorfer's *The Turn* comes to mind. But there haven't been many, and certainly not one quite like Shattan's. "I wrote this book because I thought it very much needed writing," he says, "and because I felt I could do it right." He's correct on both counts.

Architects of Victory is not a scholarly account. Shattan has not done original research. His line of work is speechwriting, and he's one of the best in the business, having written for Vice President Dan Quayle, Jeane Kirkpatrick, William Bennett, and Elliott Abrams. But he's read everything written about the Cold War

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