

THE RETURN OF THE THING

How A Prince Should Keep His Word

Everyone knows how praiseworthy it is for a Prince to keep his word, and to live by integrity, and not by deceit.

Nevertheless,

one sees from the experience of our times that the Princes who have accomplished great deeds are those who have cared little for keeping their promises, and who have known how to manipulate people's minds by shrewdness; and in the end, they have surpassed those who laid their foundations upon loyalty.

You must, therefore, know that there are two means of fighting: one according to the laws, the other with force. The first way is proper to man, the second to beasts. But because the first, in many cases is insufficient, it becomes necessary to have recourse to the second. Therefore, a Prince must know how to use wisely the natures of the beast and of man. This policy was taught to Princes allegorically by the ancient writers, who described how Achilles, and many other ancient Princes, were given to Chiron the Centaur to be raised and taught under his discipline. This can only mean that, having a half-beast and half-man as a teacher, a Prince must know how to employ the nature of the one and the other; the one without the other cannot endure.

Since, then, a Prince must know how to make good use of the nature of the beast, he should choose from among the beasts the fox and the lion. For the lion cannot defend itself against traps, and the fox cannot protect itself from wolves. It is therefore necessary to be a fox in order to recognise the traps, and a lion in order to frighten the wolves. Those who play the part only of the lion do not understand matters. The wise ruler, therefore, cannot and should not keep his word, when such an observance of faith would be to his disadvantage, and when the reasons that made him promise are removed. And if men were all good, this rule would not be good. But since men are a

contemptible lot, and will not keep their promises to you, you likewise need not keep yours to them. A Prince never lacks legitimate reasons to break his promise; of this one could cite an endless number of modern examples to show how many pacts, how many promises have been made null and void because of the infidelity of Princes; and he who has known best how to use the fox has come to a bitter end. It is necessary to know how to disguise this nature well, and to be a great hypocrite and liar; and men are so simple-minded and so controlled by their present needs that one who deceives will always find another who will allow himself to be deceived.

These words were written in 1513 by a 44-year old diplomat who had suddenly been exiled from court and had leisure to distil his observations of political life. Niccolò Machiavelli was out of favour, and this gave him a certain freedom to be honest. His honesty was pilloried throughout the Protestant world, where he seemed to be a perfect incarnation of what they thought a Jesuit was, and in the Catholic world, where perhaps he was perceived as dangerously truthful: one of his most cogent examples of princely cunning was Pope Alexander VI Borgia. Fortunately for him, by the time his book *The Prince* was published (1532) he was too dead to be personally burned; but his book was burned instead.

Slick Willy and Not Quite Deceiving the Nation The endless brouhaha surrounding goings-on in the Oval Office seems to show the incumbent US President as one who has forgotten to be a fox, though his leonine qualities may also be open to debate. What interests me is: *Can a known liar also be a trusted President?* For Machiavelli the question obviously needs no answer; a good President is *ipso facto* a good liar. The question for America, perhaps, in Machiavellian terms, is rather, *Can a bad liar be a trusted President?*

It would be praiseworthy to find in a Prince...qualities...that are held to be good;

But

since it is impossible to have them all in perfection, because the human condition does not permit it, a Prince must be prudent enough to know how to escape the bad reputation of those vices that would lose the state for him, and should protect himself from the vices that would not lose the state for him if possible; but if he cannot, he need not concern himself unduly if he ignores these less serious vices. Moreover, he need not worry about incurring the bad reputation of those vices without which holding on to the state would be difficult: since, taking everything carefully into account, he will discover that

*something that appears as a virtue, if pursued, may end in his destruction;
while some other thing that seems to be a vice, if pursued, may end in his
safety and well-being*

Fairly clearly the categories of *vice* and *virtue* have been replaced here by *what will lose you the state* and *what will not*. In a great leader, thought Niccolò, virtue means *hanging on to the state*.

If retaining the state means doing nothing that is against the interest of the people, we may find a way through to virtue at last. Our author thought that ideals were a waste of time if they conflicted with the political necessities of rule. In *saying* this he was well ahead of his time; but there is evidence that most successful politicians have in fact lived like this for centuries. Now that there is little that can be screened from public knowledge, even state secrets and the most private of our lives, it is less and less possible for what Niccolò calls *vices* to be concealed. This has led to the open admission of cynicism and unscrupulousness on the part of electorate and press; perhaps we are approaching the moment where politicians will themselves openly practise Machiavellian principles and, in the name of honesty (!) forbear to disguise the fact. This will very bluntly raise the question of our attitude to brute pragmatism in our politicians.

Questions for your consideration:

Can a man who is personally dishonest be properly trusted with power over the state?

Is it permissible for a Christian knowingly to vote for a Machiavellian leader? Should we be *looking for* a successful liar with a balanced character between fox and lion?

Does effective political power *demand* deception, callous disregard for others, and a loyalty to self-interest (or to national interest), irrespective of the demands of justice and truth?

Can politicians have a private life that is of concern to no-one outside? Do we need our modern curiosity about the great and powerful?

Is it proper categorically to deny a difficult fact - say, that you are about to devalue the currency - the day before you know you *will* devalue it?