Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy

The significance of Machiavelli’s political thinking for the development of modern republicanism is a matter of great controversy. In this volume, a distinguished team of political theorists and historians reassesses the evidence, examining the character of Machiavelli’s own republicanism and charting his influence on Marchamont Nedham, James Harrington, John Locke, Algernon Sidney, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, David Hume, the baron de Montesquieu, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton. This work argues that although Machiavelli himself was not liberal, he did set the stage for the emergence of liberal republicanism in England. To the exponents of commercial society, he provided the foundations for a moderation of commonwealth ideology, and he exercised considerable, if circumscribed, influence on the statesmen who founded the American Republic. Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy will be of great interest to political theorists, early modern historians, and students of the American political tradition.

Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy

Edited by

PAUL A. RAHE

University of Tulsa
For Harvey C. Mansfield
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Contributors


John W. Danford, Professor of Political Science at Loyola University Chicago, is author of *Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy* (1978), *David Hume and the Problem of Reason* (1990), and *Roots of Freedom* (2000, 2004). He has also published articles and book chapters on Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, and the Scottish Enlightenment.

Markus Fischer, Assistant Professor in the Department of Liberal Studies at California State University, Fullerton, is author of *Well-Ordered License: On the Unity of Machiavelli's Thought* (2000), “Machiavelli’s Political Psychology” (*Review of Politics* 1997), and “Machiavelli’s Theory of Foreign Politics” (*Security Studies* 1995/96). He has also published on the international relations of feudal Europe and the role of culture in foreign affairs.

Steven Forde, Professor of Political Science at the University of North Texas, is author of *The Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Thucydides* (1987). He has also published articles on classical and modern political thought, international ethics, and the American founding.

Gary Rosen is the managing editor of Commentary, the author of American Compact: James Madison and the Problem of Founding (1999), and the editor of The Right War? The Conservative Debate on Iraq (2005). He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University.

Margaret Michelle Barnes Smith, Instructor of Politics at Oglethorpe University, is a graduate student at Michigan State University. Her contribution to this book is her first publication.


Karl-Friedrich Walling, Associate Professor of Strategy at the United States Naval War College, is the author of Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton on War and Free Government (1999) and coeditor with Bradford Lee of Strategic Logic and Political Rationality (2003).
The project that eventuated in this book began a bit more than ten years ago in early September 1994, when three of the contributors – the authors of Chapters 8, 9, and 11 – appeared together on a panel at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. The papers they drafted for that gathering were eventually published together under the title “American Faces of Machiavelli” in *The Review of Politics* 57:3 (Summer 1995): 389–481, and are reprinted here in revised form with the permission of that journal’s editor.

Chapter 1 is adapted in part from Paul A. Rahe’s “An Inky Wretch: The Outrageous Genius of Marchamont Nedham,” *National Interest* 70 (Winter 2002–3): 55–64. That article is reprinted here in revised form with the permission of that journal’s editor. It is adapted in part from *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* by Paul A. Rahe (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), and is used here by permission of the publisher.

Chapter 3 is adapted from Vickie B. Sullivan’s, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and is used here by permission of the publisher. Parts of Chapter 10 were first published in *American Compact: James Madison and the Problem of Founding* by Gary Rosen (Laurence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), and are used here with the publisher’s permission.
Abbreviations and Brief Titles

In the footnotes, we have adopted the standard abbreviations for classical texts and inscriptions and for books of the Bible provided in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition revised, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), and in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15.50–3. Where possible, the ancient texts and medieval and modern works of similar stature are cited by the divisions and subdivisions employed by the author or introduced by subsequent editors (that is, by book, part, chapter, section number, paragraph, act, scene, line, Stephanus page, or page and line number). In some cases, where further specification is needed to help the reader to locate a particular passage, we have included as the last element in a particular citation the page or pages of the pertinent volume of the edition used. Although, for the convenience of those who do not know Italian, we cite recent English translations of Machiavelli’s works, we have on occasion altered the translation in light of the Italian original. For modern works and for journals frequently cited, the following abbreviations and short titles have been employed:


*AH* Alexander Hamilton.


*APSR* The American Political Science Review.


*CL* John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato’s Letters: or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other*
Important Subjects, ed. Ronald Hamowy (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1995).

Descartes, DM René Descartes, Discours de la méthode, in René Descartes, Oeuvres et lettres, ed. André Bridoux (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1953), 125–79.


GW George Washington.


HPT History of Political Thought.


———, EPM An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, in David Hume, Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, 3rd edition, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge with text
Abbreviations and Brief Titles


JA John Adams.


JHO James Harrington’s Oceana, ed. S. B. Liljegren (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1924).

JM James Madison.


NM Niccolò Machiavelli.
Abbreviations and Brief Titles


*Papers of John Adams*, Microfilm, Massachusetts Historical Society.


*Review of Politics.*


Thomas Jefferson.

*William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series.
Abbreviations and Brief Titles


Introduction

Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy

Paul A. Rahe

The contributors to this volume are debtors. They work in a field that others opened up, cleared, and to a certain extent tilled before most of them even came on the scholarly scene. Their creditors in this particular regard are, as one would expect, numerous – but five of these stand out.

The first is a scholar named Zera Fink. Some sixty years ago, in 1945, as the Second World War came to an end, he published a slender volume entitled *The Classical Republicans: An Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England*, which he characterized as “a chapter in the history of ideas.”1 Fink’s book was a pioneering work aimed at establishing the Machiavellian character of much of the thinking inspired by England’s abortive republican experiment and at clarifying its overall significance.

Fourteen years after the appearance of Fink’s work, Caroline Robbins brought out *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies*, a no less seminal book that took up the story of English radicalism at almost precisely the point where Fink left off.2 Eight years later, Bernard Bailyn presented to the world *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, a work of comparable significance, which traced the influence on the American colonists of the 1760s and 1770s of the thinking of Fink’s seventeenth-century classical republicans and Robbins’s eighteenth-century commonwealthmen.3 Then,

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two years later, Gordon Wood brought out The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787, which explored the manner in which the tradition of thinking investigated by Fink, Robbins, and Bailyn influenced those who framed governments for the various states within the new American union in the years following the Declaration of Independence as well as those who framed the federal constitution in the summer of 1787.4

Finally, in 1974, J. G. A. Pocock published The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition.5 Drawing on the work of Fink, Robbins, Bailyn, Wood, and others, Pocock articulated a grand synthesis suggesting an essential continuity in republican thought, stretching from Aristotle to Machiavelli, from Machiavelli to James Harrington, and from Harrington to Thomas Jefferson.

Pocock’s work was greeted with great applause – in part because it confirmed and strengthened a fashion then already gaining sway among historians and political scientists, who were increasingly inclined to contrast the public-spirited “republicanism” of America’s founders with the tawdry “liberalism” of their successors.6 The book’s authority was great and its influence immense. Within the scholarly world, however, many believed that the author of The Machiavellian Moment was inclined on occasion to lump where he should have split, and a considerable literature emerged challenging his argument in one or another particular. In 1992, the editor of this volume published a weighty tome – entitled Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution – arguing that Pocock had it almost entirely wrong: that the republicanism of the American founders was in most regards a liberal republicanism and that they were the heirs of a series of revolutions in political thought that set Machiavelli at odds with Aristotle and classical republicanism, Harrington at odds with Machiavelli, and Jefferson at odds with Harrington.7

If, however, it no longer seems obvious that “liberalism” and the species of “republicanism” embraced by the English republicans, their radical Whig successors, and the American founders are as such incompatible, it is by no means...

7 See Paul A. Rahe, Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), which cites much, if not quite all, of the prior secondary literature in favor of and against the Pocockian synthesis.
clear what it was, if anything, that Machiavelli contributed to the development of self-government in modern times. The essays in this volume constitute a series of discrete but closely interrelated attempts to throw light on this matter. They examine with care the argument presented by Machiavelli in his *Discourses on Livy*, and they explore the manner in which the most important of the figures discussed by Fink, Robbins, Bailyn, Wood, and Pocock came to grips with, developed, and adapted the Florentine’s argument.

The contributors to this book have much in common. They agree with Pocock that Machiavelli’s influence was considerable – that many of the English republicans of the seventeenth century, the English commonwealthmen of the eighteenth century, and the leading figures of the Enlightenment in France and Scotland, as well as some of the American revolutionaries, learned a great deal from reading the *Discourses on Livy* or the works of those who restated its argument in whole or in part. They are united as well in regarding Pocock’s depiction of Machiavelli’s understanding of republicanism as highly misleading, and they are persuaded that Marchamont Nedham, James Harrington, John Locke, Algernon Sidney, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, David Hume, the baron de Montesquieu, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton – all of whom Machiavelli influenced in one fashion or another – should be read not as semi-conscious speakers of a common political “language” unable to say or think what cannot be expressed in their inherited tongue but as fully conscious agents: liberated from intellectual servitude by their familiarity with a variety of ways of thinking about politics, inclined to judge what they read in light of their own considerable experience in the larger world, and wholly capable of thinking for themselves and of fashioning language with which to express their convictions, however unorthodox. One consequence is that the contributors to this book are convinced that Machiavelli’s republican legacy is, while vital for understanding the origins of modern liberal democracy, nonetheless quite complex and diverse. Their goal has been to do justice to that complexity and diversity while pointing, at the same time, to common threads. As will become clear, in receiving Machiavelli, the English commonwealthmen, their successors in the moderate Enlightenment, and the American founders adapted his teaching to their own needs, rejected it in part, and on occasion followed through on its underlying logic in a fashion that Machiavelli chose not to do.

**Machiavelli’s Modern Populism**

In the prologue, Markus Fischer sets the stage. He begins by examining the civic humanist context within which Machiavelli composed his *Discourses on Livy* – outlining the character of the republicanism found in ancient Greece and Rome; touching on its analysis in the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Polybius, Livy, and Sallust; tracing the revival of civic aspirations in the late Middle Ages and among the humanists of the Renaissance; and demonstrating that Machiavelli, in full consciousness, repudiated his classical republican and civic humanist heritage.
In its stead, as Professor Fischer shows in detail, Machiavelli advocates a new species of republicanism, liberated from the moral restraints promoted by the ancients and their scholastic and humanist admirers. The tradition of natural law the Florentine pointedly ignores; justice he treats as purely instrumental. The notion that an education in moral virtue can be relied on he debunks; and, in its place, he promotes institutions bolstered by a peculiar mixture of savagery, ambition, and dread, which he calls virtù. Where the ancients thought concord the bulwark of a republic, Machiavelli favors tumults, seeing them as conducive not only to the defense of liberty but also to the acquisition of empire. That private interests will be pursued in and socioeconomic conflicts will impinge on the public arena he regards as both inevitable and good.

The management of affairs Machiavelli leaves to those whom he terms “princes.” To found a republic, fashion its institutions, and make use of superstition to instill in the people that love of the fatherland and devotion to its defense and expansion that constitutes popular virtù takes the cunning and ruthlessness of a “new prince,” endowed with a species of ambition and a virtuosity that the people can never attain. Moreover, in the absence of leaders constrained to some degree by tumults, inspired by a love of glory, and endowed with princely virtù, such a republic cannot be sustained, for it requires frequent refounding through exemplary punishments and deeds aimed at restoring the sense of dread that underpins popular virtù. Spirited execution is a sine qua non that takes precedence over justice itself.

Such a polity is distinguished from tyranny by the fact that it serves what Machiavelli calls “the common good.” In using this term, the Florentine has in mind war, conquest, and empire aimed at satisfying at the expense of outsiders the ambition of the citizens and their longing for glory, power, and wealth. His republicanism inflames appetite; it sanctions and encourages licentiousness; and then, by means of laws and practices, especially those which institutionalize class conflict, it orders and channels appetite in such a way as to sustain liberty and promote expansion. In the end, Machiavelli’s rapacious republic is held together by fear and by greed. A republic bereft of threatening enemies and of occasions for the exploitation of outsiders cannot, he believes, be maintained. When it exhausts both by conquering the world, as Rome did in time, it is doomed.

The English Commonwealthmen

Given the rapacious character of Machiavelli’s republicanism and its repudiation of moral virtue, I argue in the preface to the book’s first part that it is by no means strange that his republicanism encountered resistance – especially since circumstances in the sixteenth century were unfriendly to republics. It took an extraordinary event to make men receptive to the Florentine’s blandishments, and the execution of Charles I on 30 January 1649 and the subsequent establishment of the English republic constituted just such an event, opening the way for a widespread consideration of what practical men intent on the preservation of liberty and the well-being of a commonwealth could learn of use from
studying the *Discourses on Livy*. This event marked the first stage in the reception of Machiavelli’s republican teaching, its adaptation and partial reorientation in light of persistent English concerns, which is the subject of the first three chapters in this book.

As I seek to make clear in this book’s initial chapter, the first to distill the fruits of such study was the journalist Marchamont Nedham, who adapted Machiavelli’s teaching to English tastes for English use and propagated a species of Machiavellian republicanism initially in the pages of the weekly gazette *Mercurius Politicus* in the period stretching from September 1651 to August 1652 and then in a book entitled *The Excellencie of a Free State*, which he published late in the spring of 1656. James Harrington followed suit with his *Commonwealth of Oceana* late that fall. Nedham emphasized Machiavelli’s populism, praising with some reservations his defense of tumults and insisting, above all else, on the need for frequent elections, while Harrington sought to eliminate class conflict and tumults by designing institutions capable of sustaining themselves without princely and popular *virtù* as an auxiliary support. In the process of restating and refining Machiavelli’s republicanism, both sought to tone it down and draw out the logic of the Florentine’s populism in such a way as to subordinate honor and glory to the more prosaic concern with the protection of personal rights and property that animated the majority of those within the political nation.

Nedham and Harrington may have been the first Englishmen to exploit the tension in Machiavelli’s republicanism between his aristocratic taste for grandeur and the populism he espouses. They were by no means the last. As Margaret Michelle Barnes Smith suggests in the second chapter of this book, John Locke followed much the same path, using Machiavelli’s debunking of aristocratic virtue against Machiavelli’s endorsement of glory to forge an understanding of liberty subordinated to the protection of personal rights and property. In their writings, Nedham and Harrington addressed, first and foremost, the small band of committed republicans who had favored England’s republican experiment. Locke’s intended audience was much larger and more diverse. In consequence, where these republicans acknowledged, at least in part, the debt they owed Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, Locke presented himself as a disciple of the venerable Anglican divine Richard Hooker and mentioned neither the Monster of Malmesbury nor the Florentine said to have given to the devil his moniker “Old Nick.”

That Locke read Machiavelli with great care seems, despite his reticence, quite clear. As Smith notes, he was an avid collector of the Florentine’s writings, and he uses as the epigraph to his *Two Treatises of Government* a passage from Livy that Machiavelli repeatedly, in crucial passages, quotes. Both are, she contends, committed to a project aimed at liberating human beings from a tyranny grounded in what Hobbes called *Aristotelity*. They share a loathing of

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what Harrington was the first to call “priestcraft,” and they embrace political liberty and acquisitiveness as a solvent. Their methods are not precisely the same, but their goal is quite similar. Where Machiavelli aims at ousting ambitious prelates from the public sphere, Locke seeks to prevent those who enter the public sphere from addressing what he defines as a private concern. Where Machiavelli favors acquisition by martial means, Locke prefers acquisition by trade. Both wish to free politics from religious and clerical influence; both cast doubt on the providential goodness of the Christian God and the natural order; both recognize Aristotelian teleology as an obstacle and seek to debunk it; both treat the common good as a sum of individual, ineluctably private interests; neither argues on behalf of moral virtue as such; and both champion appetite and promote a species of rapacity. The chief difference is twofold: Locke has in mind the conquest of nature and not the acquisition of foreign peoples and lands, and, while encouraging a Machiavellian vigilance on the part of the people and a readiness on their part to resist oppression, like Nedham, he stops just short of embracing, as an ordinary mode of governance, institutionalized class conflict and tumults.

In this book’s third chapter, Vickie B. Sullivan picks up the question of liberalism’s debt to Machiavelli precisely where Smith leaves off. Professor Sullivan begins by noting that America’s founders seemed blissfully unaware of the distinction between “liberalism” and “republicanism” that so occupied scholars in the late twentieth century. Where the latter tended to juxtapose and contrast the “liberalism” of Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* with the “republicanism” purportedly evident in Algernon Sidney’s *Discourses Concerning Government* and in the newspaper series entitled *Cato’s Letters*, which John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon penned early in the eighteenth century, these early Americans presumed that the political teaching of all three was in essence the same.

In the first half of her contribution, Professor Sullivan explores Sidney’s debt to Machiavelli, showing that it was much more profound than is normally supposed; that the English republican plays a sly game of bait and switch, shifting quickly, effortlessly, and for the most part without acknowledgment from the respectable, rational Aristotelian republicanism evident in the early chapters of his *Discourses Concerning Government* to a rapacious republicanism rooted in an unleashing of the passions quite like that espoused in the *Discourses on Livy* – seeming to distance himself from the notorious Florentine while mimicking his subversive rhetoric, following his argument in some detail, and leading his readers step by step toward embracing tumults and acknowledging the necessity of war. In the end, Sidney differs with Machiavelli only where Locke and Nedham do – in subordinating rapacity to rights – and he differs with Locke chiefly in scorning trade and thinking tumults a necessity.

Where Sidney’s Machiavellianism is muted but profound, Professor Sullivan argues in the second half of the third chapter, that of Trenchard and Gordon is manifest but comparatively shallow. *Cato’s Letters* originated in 1720 as a plea for the imposition of exemplary punishments along Machiavellian lines on the malefactors responsible for the financial crisis known as the South Sea
Introduction

Bubble, and it quickly turned into an analytical account of the principles of free government. Its authors broadcast their admiration for the Florentine, illustrating their critique of corruption at court with examples freely drawn from the Discourses on Livy, subordinating Machiavellian rapacity to the protection of rights and property in the fashion of Sidney, whom they frequently cite, and promoting aggrandizement through trade and technological progress rather than war in the manner favored by Locke.

The Moderate Enlightenment

A commitment to commerce and technology also distinguishes the three representatives of the moderate Enlightenment considered in the second part of the book – David Hume, the baron de Montesquieu, and Benjamin Franklin – and they display as well an aversion to war and a politics oriented by the pursuit of glory. They are, as I suggest in the preface to this book’s second part, heirs to the Glorious Revolution, critics of the doctrinaire politics espoused by the radical Whigs, friends of civilized monarchy in a fashion that Machiavelli seems to sanction, and proponents of a species of moderation that owes more to a sober, muted, but nonetheless Machiavellian appreciation of the dictates of material self-interest than to the high-mindedness of the ancient Romans and Greeks. They have much in common with James Harrington, the odd man out in the age of the English republicans and the radical Whigs. Their Machiavellianism is highly qualified, as was his: They bridle at the prospect of tumults, and they prefer to rely on the quiet operation of institutions. Moreover, in all but the most extreme of circumstances, they prefer gradual reform to violent revolution. Their debt to Machiavelli is nonetheless considerable.

Hume is a case in point. To grasp what the Scot took from the Florentine, John Danford indicates in the fourth chapter of this book, one must first take a detour, noting Machiavelli’s insistence that in the world of politics and morals nothing is quite as it seems and charting, if only briefly, the considerable debt owed Machiavelli by Sir Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and the other founders of modern science who applied to the natural world the skepticism and distrust he articulated first in the moral and political sphere. Like all the figures thus far considered, Hume took as his starting point Machiavelli’s lowering of sights. In doing so, like Locke and the authors of Cato’s Letters, he followed through on the logic of the Florentine’s understanding in a way that set him at odds with the republicanism espoused in the Discourses on Livy and yet in a fashion that Machiavelli himself, at times, seems to sanction. Not only did Hume relegate the cultivation of moral virtue and the salvation of souls to the private sphere, he rejected the notion that free governments should seek to instill in their citizens moral and political virtue. Ancient policy he openly rejected as violent. Trade and manufactures he ostentatiously embraced, welcoming both not only because of the prosperity they bring and the appetites they satisfy but also for their political consequences – for the manner in which they promote negotiation, a peaceful adjustment of interests, and a self-interested civility as
opposed to savagery. At the same time, Hume rejected social contract theory as likely to inflame the passions and embraced an account of the sentiments that left space for moral virtue of a sort, if only within the private sphere. Machiavelli’s claim “that every man must be supposed a knave” Hume endorsed as a just political maxim, even though he regarded it as an inadequate account of man’s moral capacities as an individual. He preferred political architecture of the sort devised by Harrington to the tumults recommended by their common Florentine mentor.

As Paul Carrese explains in the fifth chapter, Montesquieu’s Machiavellianism is mitigated in a similar fashion. That Montesquieu read Machiavelli with inordinate care is obvious on every page of his “Dissertation on the Policy of the Romans in Religion” (1716), and the same can be said for his Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline (1734), though he never cites the Discourses on Livy or mentions its author in either work. In The Spirit of Laws (1748), he is less reticent, citing the Florentine on four separate occasions, but these brief references greatly underestimate his debt.

Though it is abundantly clear that Montesquieu agrees with Machiavelli, Locke, Harrington, and Sidney in repudiating the ancient rejection of faction, he shies away from Machiavellian ferocity. Already in the Persian Letters (1721), he indicated a preference for governments that attain their goals with a minimum of friction. Moderation is for him, as it was for Hume, a watchword. In his Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline, he accepts in nearly all regards Machiavelli’s analysis of republican Roman politics, denounces ancient Rome as cruel and inhumane, and spells out the manner in which that city’s success destroyed its liberty. In The Spirit of Laws, he celebrates the fact that the growth of commerce and the invention of the letter of exchange had begun to cure the world of Machiavellism and to encourage “more moderation in councils” by rendering “great acts of authority” and “coup d’état” counterproductive. Like Hume, Montesquieu is persuaded that commerce softens mores, promotes civility, and turns men away from a harmful and self-destructive pursuit of glory in war to the salutary, peaceful pursuit of wealth. Interest thereby checks passion. Both Montesquieu and Hume learned from Machiavelli that, in politics, moral virtue is a weak reed. Moderation in politics arises from institutions of the sort that Harrington had aimed at, not from moderation in the soul. With the separation of powers and the constitutionalization of factions associated with the executive and legislative power, Montesquieu sought to achieve an equilibrium conducive to the security and tranquility of the individual. Crucial to this task, as Professor Carrese makes clear, is the judicial power – exemplified by the parlements of France, which had been singled out as a bulwark of effective government by no less an authority than Machiavelli not only in his Discourses on Livy but in The Prince as well.

Like Hume and Montesquieu, Steven Forde argues in the sixth chapter of this book, Benjamin Franklin shied away from Machiavelli’s endorsement of tumults and war while nonetheless embracing his critique of the
high-mindedness of the ancients and their Christian successors, adopting his conviction that it is interest that makes the world go round, promoting a redirection of the rapacity the Florentine favored from the conquest of men to that of nature, encouraging restraints on religious enthusiasm and zealotry, and substituting for moral fervor a general ethos of civility. He, too, was a proponent of what Hume and Montesquieu called “moderation,” grounding it, as they did, in the silent operation of well-designed institutions and in a constant calculation of petty interests on the part of the citizenry of a sort quite effectively encouraged by conditions within commercial societies. That Franklin was the most reluctant of the American revolutionaries should come as no surprise.

The American Founding

The five figures discussed in the third part of this book have one thing in common: They were not first and foremost theorists; they were practitioners. They were statesmen, and they were founders. As such, they were saddled with a responsibility not only for the welfare of their contemporaries but also for that of succeeding generations. Justice was, in consequence, their prime concern, and this fact inevitably set them at odds with the author of The Prince and the Discourses on Livy, who owed his fame in large part to the scandal aroused by his resolute refusal to dignify the question of justice by addressing it. As I point out in the preface to this book’s third part, this ruled out on the part of the American founders a wholesale adoption of Machiavelli’s republican teaching, but it did not prevent them from finding useful on occasion the devices of Machiavellian statecraft.

Early in his chapter on George Washington, Matthew Spalding issues a salutary warning that should serve as an introduction to each and every one of the chapters that follow – noting that, for all of its purported “realism,” Machiavelli’s account of politics abstracts quite radically from the actual horizon of politics, which is constituted by the principles and purposes guiding human action, especially the action of statesmen entrusted with the well-being of their political communities. He then goes on to show that any attempt to depict Washington as a Machiavellian prince must fail to do justice to the man, to his self-understanding, to the qualities of character – qualities recognized and celebrated by the most discerning of his contemporaries – that inspired trust and respect and made him simply indispensable, and to his convictions regarding the significance of national character for the future independence, prosperity, and greatness of the country he helped found. As Dr. Spalding remarks, the “connection” that Washington drew “between private morality and national character, between virtue and happiness, hardly seems Machiavellian.”

Any such warning that applies to George Washington must almost inevitably apply as well to those who admired his character and regarded it as politically indispensable. This does not mean, however, that John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton owed nothing at all
to Machiavelli. It does mean, however, that their use of Machiavelli was circumscribed and constrained – that their understanding of ends was not in accord with his and that they adopted his means only where they deemed it unavoidable.

John Adams is a case in point. As C. Bradley Thompson makes clear in his contribution to this book, Adams read Machiavelli and took him quite seriously. In his Defence of the Constitutions of the United States of America, he quoted extensively from the Florentine and openly acknowledged his debt to the man, and he drew heavily on the work of Machiavelli’s disciples among the English commonwealthmen. In the first part of his chapter, Professor Thompson shows that Adams is indebted to Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy for the political epistemology underpinning his Defence and his Discourses on Davila and for the empirical method he follows throughout. In the second part, he presents Adams’s critique of Machiavelli’s constitutionalism, showing that the American statesman believed that, in his Florentine Histories, Machiavelli had failed to isolate the crucial defect in the Florentine constitution that had left it so vulnerable to a crippling internecine disorder. Like Harrington and Montesquieu, Adams believed that a well-balanced constitution can greatly reduce the dangers attendant on faction. He departed from Machiavelli altogether when he joined his fellow founders in asserting and demonstrating by example that it was possible to form a constitution on the basis of popular reflection and choice as opposed to force and fraud.

In contrast to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson left behind very little direct evidence that he had grappled with Machiavelli’s political teaching. And yet, as I attempt to demonstrate in the ninth chapter, Jefferson’s commitment to limited government, his advocacy of a politics of distrust, his eager embrace of a species of modern populism, his ultimate understanding of the executive power, and the intention guiding the comprehensive legislative program that he devised for Virginia make sense only when understood in terms of the new science of republican politics articulated in the Discourses on Livy. In reading the chapters in this book on Adams and Jefferson, one can easily discern what it was in their thinking that eventually led the two friends to quarrel.

Like his friend and neighbor Thomas Jefferson, James Madison had next to nothing to say concerning Machiavelli. There are, however, as Gary Rosen points out in Chapter 10, “certain obvious affinities” linking the two. One cannot read Madison on the role played by faction and party in government, on the inadequacy of moral and religious motives as a check on the propensity for factions to oppress those whom they exclude, on the necessity for popular vigilance in a republic, and on liberty’s dependence on the rivalry of the ambitious without thinking of The Prince and the Discourses on Livy. The proximate source for Madison’s sensitivity in these regards is, however, more likely to have been the Florentine’s disciples Hume, Montesquieu, Locke, and Sidney than Machiavelli himself.

On one question, however, Dr. Rosen argues, there is reason to think that the Virginian went directly to the source, for his understanding of the quite different
roles assigned the few and the many, the great and the common, princes and peoples in the founding and sustaining of republics more closely resembles Machiavelli’s own than that of anyone else. Put bluntly, Madison shared the Florentine’s conviction that it takes a prince to recognize and seize upon an occasione as an opportunity for founding and his belief that the people, once the proper institutions are in place, are the best guardians of liberty.

Madison’s account differed from Machiavelli’s, however, in one particular: His assessment of the princes and of the people was more positive than that of the Florentine. He did not regard the former as “amoral seekers of glory and dominion, indifferent to the needs and claims of the many.” At least in America, he initially thought, they were genuinely committed to the republican project. And he did not think it requisite, if the people were to play their proper role, that class conflict and tumults be institutionalized. Nor did he share Machiavelli’s conviction that, in all regimes, it is the few who rule. To the American people, as Dr. Rosen puts it, he attributed “a spirited – one might even say a princely – determination to govern themselves.”

In time, Madison came to distrust the motives of some of those who had joined him in seizing the occasione afforded America’s princes by the crisis of the 1780s; and by fostering something like a republican civil religion, in which the Constitution would be honored in the manner of Holy Writ, he sought to rally the popolo against the threat he believed America’s grandi posed. It is only, then, appropriate that the republican prince whom he most feared should form the subject of the final chapter in this volume.

If Karl-Friedrich Walling is correct, however, James Madison misjudged his former colleague Alexander Hamilton, who harbored deep misgivings with regard to the sort of politics we tend to label Machiavellian. Hamilton did have one thing in common with the Florentine, and it distinguished him from his American critics and helps explain the quarrels in which he became enmeshed: He believed it inevitable that the nation be entangled in wars, and he paid extremely close attention to the necessities thereby imposed and to the difficulties that a self-governing people face when confronted with the clash of arms. One consequence of his conviction that war could not simply be sidestepped is that, in the course of the Revolutionary War and its aftermath, Hamilton came to believe that, to be viable in modern times, a republic must be led by an energetic, unitary executive – a veritable republican prince – charged with organizing and conducting the national defense.

Hamilton was equally concerned, however, with avoiding the dangers to republicanism attendant on such a concentration of power. If he favored a national bank, it was because he was intent on providing for the funding of war without resort to pillage and theft. His famous Report on Manufactures was written in response to a congressional request that America be made self-sufficient with regard to the technology requisite for war. For similar reasons, Hamilton advocated in wartime a draft and in peacetime the maintenance of a small professional force insufficient in size to be a threat to the polity, equal to the minor emergencies that so frequently arise, and able on
short notice, when armed conflict looms, to train a much larger army of citizen soldiers.

The Roman and Spartan models Hamilton thought neither desirable nor practicable. For all of his interest in war, he was, like Hume, a commercial and not a martial republican. As a consequence, he advocated the establishment of a sizeable navy capable of projecting power abroad without threatening the integrity of republican forms at home. In revolutionary France, with its levée en masse and its wars of conquest ravaging Europe, he recognized a regime of Machiavellian force and fraud attempting to revive the violent and barbaric policy of ancient Rome. To such rapacity, Hamilton preferred the restraints of the just-war doctrine of the Christian church.

The figures considered in this volume responded to Machiavelli in various ways. None adopted his teaching without reservations. All but George Washington sought to enlist his overall argument in support of ends Machiavelli thought secondary at best, and even Washington – by endorsing the institutional precautions embedded in the American Constitution and praising *The Federalist* – tacitly acknowledged that the Florentine’s critique of the virtuous republicanism of the ancients had some force. If one cannot speak of Machiavelli as the father or even the grandfather of the species of republicanism eventually adopted in the United States of America, one can hardly deny that the American founders and those who subsequently took heart from their example owed the Florentine a very great debt.
Prologue

Machiavelli’s Rapacious Republicanism

Markus Fischer

Living in Florence at the height of the Italian Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli wanted to do for politics what others had done for the arts and letters, namely to have “recourse to the examples of the ancients” (D 1.pref.2) in order to recover their greatness – which, to him, meant above all to imitate the institutions and policies of the Roman republic. In the *Discourses on Livy* (ca. 1518), he analyzed the orders and laws of the Romans to teach the youths of Italy the “true way to make a republic great and to acquire empire”; in the *Art of War* (1521), he proposed a reform of the military practices of his age along the lines of Roman military orders; and in the *Florentine Histories* (1525), he contrasted the excellence of the citizens of Rome with the corruption of the inhabitants of Florence. This concern with republics went hand in hand with Machiavelli’s tenure as secretary of the Second Chancery of the Florentine republic from 1498 to 1512, and – after the republic had fallen and he had lost his post – with his subsequent visits to the Oricellari Gardens, where young patricians discussed the fate of republics, in particular their rise to greatness, the maintenance of their liberty, their inevitable corruption, and their eventual collapse. Since these discussions were informed by the civic strand of Renaissance humanism, which had abandoned the medieval longing for universal empire and returned to the ancient republicanism celebrated in Aristotle, Cicero, Polybius, Livy, and Sallust, it can be said that civic humanism in particular and the classical republican tradition in general formed the intellectual context of Machiavelli’s republican thought.¹

Classical republicanism belongs to the communitarian strand of political thought, since it conceives republics – modeled after the Greek polis and the Roman res publica – as moral communities of men indissolubly joined by a shared way of life. While this concept was already current in Greek city-states during the fifth century B.C., it was Aristotle who gave it a lasting theoretical form. To live the “good life (eu zên)” through the collective exercise of rational speech (logos) and other intrinsically worthwhile activities, it was thought that human beings need to be joined to a self-sufficient community that seeks to make them good and just. For such a community to maintain its unity, its citizens must share a deeply felt consensus – called homonoia or “like-mindedness” in Greek and concordia or “common-heartedness” in Latin – with regard to the beliefs, virtues, and customs that shape their particular way of life. To sustain this agreement, the citizens must create networks of friendship (philia, amicitia) that consist not only of exchanges for pleasure and utility but, more importantly, of the mutual recognition of virtue. In addition, such communities should limit their size so that the citizens can know each other’s character and deliberate in assembly, they should control foreign contacts to keep out unwholesome ideas and practices, and they need to provide an education (paideia, disciplina) that develops specific virtues in the citizens by means of instruction, legal constraint, and habituation. In particular, men ought to be shown how to cultivate prudence in order to rule well, justice in order to give to each what he deserves, courage in order to fight well in defense of the city, moderation in order to demand no more than their share, friendship in order to exchange goods and services and generate concord, generosity in order to contribute funds to public projects, magnanimity in order to take the lead in great undertakings, mildness in order to avoid quarrels, truthfulness in order to be correctly known by their fellows, and piety in order to obey the laws from fear of divine punishment. In this way, classical republicanism sought to bring out the best in man and to perfect his nature as a political animal. 

While ethically homogeneous, a classical republic is nonetheless differentiated by the functions that the citizens need to perform in order to make it self-sufficient. Ideally, these functions are organized in the form of a mixed regime, which seeks to combine the distinctive excellences of the simple, unmixed regimes, promoting affective ties between ruler and ruled as in a monarchy, wisdom among the rulers as in an aristocracy, and the liberty of all as in popular

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government, while preventing the vices characteristic of these regimes: despotism, oligarchic oppression, and the licentious rule of the mob. To this end, authority is distributed among separate offices that hold each other in check. The function of governing is entrusted to elected magistrates whose powers are circumscribed by laws that are ratified by the whole body of citizens. This body, in turn, is divided into two naturally opposed parts: a council of nobles, which debates affairs of state, drafts laws, and advises the magistrates, and an assembly of commoners, which elects the magistrates and ratifies the laws. Such an arrangement encourages longevity because both the rich and the poor have a share in authority and are less likely to desire change; it is conducive to virtue because it promotes the growth of a middle class free from the arrogance of the nobles and the slavishness of the poor; and it preserves liberty, that is, the collective capacity of citizens to rule themselves, because it prevents any part of the city from dominating the whole.

This republican ideal fell into abeyance during the Roman Empire initially as a result of its increasingly autocratic rule and later as a consequence of the rise of Christianity, which directed people’s longings to the afterlife rather than to civic life. During the feudal era, the organization of political authority in accordance with the Germanic principle of personal fealty between lord and vassal made institutionalized self-rule a conceptual impossibility. Thus, it was not until the eleventh and twelfth centuries that rudiments of republican government were revived in the independent communes of northern Italy, where memories of ancient republicanism had been preserved. Subsequently, writers such as Bartolus of Saxoferato, Marsilius of Padua, John of Viterbo, and Brunetto Latini, who sought to legitimize the independence of their native cities from both emperor and pope, praised once more the communal way of life for its liberty and greatness, separated secular from religious government, argued for laws that treated men equally, and called for elected magistrates who upheld justice and citizens who maintained concord and fostered the common good.

Full recovery was not achieved until the fifteenth century, when writers of the so-called civic strand of Renaissance humanism, above all Colluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, and Leon Battista Alberti, exhumed the republican works of antiquity and incorporated them into their own treatises on the subject. Rejecting a life devoted to the contemplation of God, they recast the Aristotelian and Ciceronian notion of citizenship as the concept of vivere

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civile or vivere politico, the civil or political way of life, whereby citizens rule themselves through laws, participate in public deliberation, fill the offices of a mixed regime, develop their virtues, and maintain lasting concord. In embracing the vivere civile, these writers supposed, such citizens will come face to face with the whims of Fortune, the allegorical figure that mars the designs of men through unforeseeable calamities but also provides them with opportunities to succeed. To be up to this task, men were thought to be in need of a humanistic education that combines jurisprudence and rhetoric with philosophy, for only those who are practically skilled can realize theoretical ideals – advancing the common good but also gaining personal glory – under the considerable contingency of the human condition.4

Machiavelli’s Break with Classical Republicanism

It is clear that Machiavelli drew extensively on the rich store of terms, tropes, arguments, and metaphors of both the ancient and humanist strands of classical republicanism. In particular, he used the term vivere civile to frame his discussion of republican institutions, taking it to denote a mixed regime ordered by laws and based on a measure of equality. To maintain such a civil way of life, he supposed, the citizens need to possess “virtue,” a quality closely linked to “good customs,” whose lack spells “corruption.” Machiavelli praised republican liberty, elevated greatness as the highest good, and exalted self-sacrificing love of fatherland. The founding of such an order he described in Aristotelian terms as giving form to human matter.

But let us not be misled by this semantic continuity. In substance, a sharp break begins with Machiavelli’s famous declaration that he intended to “go directly to the effectual truth of the thing rather than to the imagination of it” (P 15), by means of which he rejects the teleological account of man so fundamental to classical theorizing about politics. From Aristotle to Cicero, Aquinas, and beyond, classical thinkers assumed that human beings have a natural capacity for the good, which they can develop by cultivating the virtues, and that the best regime is therefore a realistic goal for political action. To Machiavelli’s mind, such an approach is idealistic speculation, for many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. (P 15)