

The Discourses Study Guide

The Discourses by Niccolò Machiavelli

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Plot Summary

The famous fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli is widely regarded to have founded the field of political science. His best known work is *The Prince*, wherein Machiavelli advises princes of principalities how to rule. The term "Machiavellian" originates in Machiavelli's pragmatic advice, which seemed amoral to many. However, in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli is focused on the structure, nature and evolution of republics. It is much longer than *The Prince* and covers nearly all the major subjects of political science. Since the *Discourses* concerns republics, it is widely regarded as modern republican political theory's founding work.

The full title of the *Discourses* is *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* (or *Discourses on Livy*). The book purports to be a commentary on works of Roman historian Titus Livius (known as Livy), specifically those books which cover the history of the Roman Empire between the eighth and third centuries B.C.E. However, Livy's work is only a touchstone for Machiavelli's observations about the nature of political life and the laws governing it. Machiavelli often utilizes Livy's accounts of the Roman Empire to illustrate his points, but that is the main function of the text.

The *Discourses* is an extensive work and is divided into three volumes with different, though related, subject matters. The first book concerns the structure of a republic, discusses warfare with respect to republics and analyzes the nature of individual leadership in the republic. In the first book, Machiavelli affirms the ancient Greek view that all political societies decay systematically into their vicious counterparts, monarchies into tyrannies, democracies into anarchy, and so on. Aristotle argued that the problem could be counteracted by mixing the different forms of government.

Machiavelli agrees with Aristotle only in principle, though not with his arguments. Machiavelli conceives of the task of a political order to deal with the natural flux of the social order. Republics are intended to be lively cultures that preserve liberty and use liberty or promote the general welfare. But flux naturally gives rise to situations that threaten the integrity of republics, such as dissension, conspiracy, war, religious change, cultural change, natural disasters and the like, which inevitably lead to degeneration.

The second book concerns the growth of the Roman Empire, which Machiavelli believes was essential to the flourishing of Roman political order. Thus, Machiavelli is a kind of imperialist who thinks that conquest and government is required by many social circumstances to protect a republic's integrity, though many wars should be avoided for a number of reasons. Strong armies must always be preserved. Oddly, Machiavelli not only appeals to Roman practice but also to Roman military tactics and technology despite advances, for example, defending the use of infantry over artillery.

Book three draws eternal truths from the example of the great men of the Roman Empire. Virtuous and great leaders have a crucial function in maintaining a flourishing society. They govern the people but also have the ability to incite them to virtue and



great works, not only as citizens, but as warriors. Both forms of virtue are necessary to prevent republics from being destroyed from without and decaying from within. Machiavelli expresses moderate trust in the people, often arguing that the people are wiser than princes, though leadership is required in cases of danger.



Book One, The Development of Rome's Constitution, Preface, The Best Form of Government, Religion, The Transition From Servitude to Freedom

Book One, The Development of Rome's Constitution, Preface, The Best Form of Government, Religion, The Transition From Servitude to Freedom Summary and Analysis

In the preface, Machiavelli explains that his method of political analysis is new. He follows the high esteem for history and its lessons common in his time and will be one of the only to practice it. He claims that men and nature alike are subject to laws that all them both to be understood.

In Sections 1-10, which concern the best form of government, Machiavelli discusses the formation of cities in general and specifically Rome. Rome was founded either by Aeneas or Romulus. Machiavelli also covers the formation Athens, Venice, Alexandria and Florence. He argues that free cities form from migrations, and he uses Moses and Aeneas as examples. Fertile lands, Egypt for example, are to be preferred to barren areas like Ragusa, so long as the natural wealth of the area does not produce idleness.

The constitutions of some societies survive without change, like Sparta's, though others change often, such as Florence's, which changed between 1502 and 1512. The three simple forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy and democracy have a tendency to decay into tyranny, oligarchy, and anarchy respectively. The notion of justice originated when men sought the benefits of cooperation and looked to a strong person to separate the good from the bad. But the heirs of the original prince decayed over time, which led to tyranny and hatred of the prince, so the prince was overthrown, and so on. Cyclical transformations begin. The best form of government combines all three forms of government for balance, such as Sparta, though not in Athens. Machiavelli also thinks the gradually formed Roman Constitution is a good example.

Men are assumed to be evil by legislators, which is demonstrated by the constant fights between all groups of patricians on the one hand and plebeians on the other. These fights led to the creation of tribunes. Legislation defending liberty is produced by class conflict. This kind of legislation made Rome grow. Class conflicts should not be balked at, despite producing instability.

Wars between classes come from different desires, the desire to rule on the one hand, and the desire to not be ruled on the other. Whether the people or the nobles should be



made the guardians of freedom depends upon whether there is an empire created. Since the "haves" have more power, they will tend to produce disturbances.

The Venetian and Spartan constitutions could not have been instituted in Rome. Venice did not use its plebeians in war and Sparta did not assign non-natives citizenship rights. Rome needed both in order to expand. When Sparta and Venice tried to expand, they fell apart. Since human societies remain in flux, a society must always be ready to expand.

Courts are vital to defended liberty. The public must be able to bring charges to the court, which helps resist sedition and quiets bad sentiments among the people. Trouble comes when there is no such court; Machiavelli then gives examples. Calumnies must be avoided, because they often lead to the creation of dictators. Machiavelli then argues that to found a state, a leader does have the authority to eliminate his rivals to produce stability because the end justifies the means.

Further, those who create a tyranny are no more at fault than founders of a regime are to be praised. Only good rulers are praised by the future and those who harm it are ridiculed, though Caesar is an exception. Dictators never produce happiness and are never secure. Sixteen of Rome's twenty-six emperors were assassinated and fourteen of those were bad. All but one of the good emperors died natural deaths. All hereditary emperors were corrupt, with only one exception, and when emperors were appointed, they were good.

Sections 11-15 concern religion. The religion of the Romans is analyzed. The religious institution created by Nume helped make Rome great, particularly through employing oaths and the claim that some talked to God, such as Numa, Solon and others. It is important to account of religion, but Italy had been destroyed without it due to Roman Catholicisms. The Gentile religion was rooted in oracles and divination, along with (almost always) false miracles. But in Christendom, religion is falling away in part because foreign powers were brought to Italy by the Papacy.

The Romans used their religion to rearrange Rome to pursue their aims and produce problems. They often appealed to the gods and used religion to help patricians get elected. Sometimes they used religion to prevent bad laws from being passed and to stop revolts. The Romans interpreted their religion along with their needs and outwardly followed religion when they were forced to ignore it in practice. They still punished those who attacked it.

Sections 16-18 concern the transition from servitude to freedom. Peoples used to living under princes, once free, will face challenges preserving liberty. Despite not being totally ruined, there will be faction, benefits will be created but ignored and conspiracies will arise. Security can only come if those who oppose the new government are eliminated and the people's demand for revenge is somehow quelled. The prince cannot satisfy the demand for liberty but can enforce good laws and follow them. In bad states, free governments can be sustained or established. Though without good customs, no laws or institutions can stop corruption. Rome changed her laws but not her

fundamental institutions, and so the wrong men got into office and passed bad laws. Legal methods cannot avoid this problem. Brutal methods were employed instead.



Book One, The Development of Rome's Constitution, Sundry Reflections on the Kings of Rome, The Introduction of New Forms of Government, Ingratitude

Book One, The Development of Rome's Constitution, Sundry Reflections on the Kings of Rome, The Introduction of New Forms of Government, Ingratitude Summary and Analysis

Sections 19-24 contain reflections on the Kings of Rome relevant to political theory and practice. Weak princes who follow good princes can rule well, but weak princes who follow other weak princes cannot preserve order. Machiavelli illustrates with examples. A good prince who follows another can achieve great things.

This is particularly true in well-governed republics whose institutions produce good succession. Rome's elective system is a good example. Princes and republics that lack their own armies were hated and are pathetic. A prince should never risk all of one's fortunes on anything but the entirety of the regime's armed forces; thus, defending passes at all costs is often destructive. Well-governed republics should not balance rewards and punishments assigned against each other.

Sections 25-27 review the introduction of new forms of government. Those who recommend alterations to traditional forms of government in Free states should try to retain at least a "shadow" of old customs. Roman kings were replaced by consuls, as an example. Men are, after all, often influenced through appearances. In cities or provinces conquered, new principles should recreate the society is possible. The prince must either rule as a private citizen and change nothing or become brutal. Machiavelli also notes that few men can be either wholly good or wholly bad.

Sections 28-32 analyze ingratitude. First, Machiavelli explains what made the Romans less ungrateful to their citizens than the Athenians before them. When the people regain liberties, they are vengeful. Princes are often more ungrateful in this regard than peoples. To avoid ingratitude, principles should go with their armies on expeditions; generals should hide ambition and ingratiate themselves to the army. Republics should try to employ all citizens in their armies despite class. The Romans never crucified their generals no matter how bad. Republics and principles should not resist placing benefits on the people unless forced to do so.



Book One, The Development of Rome's Constitution, The Use and Abuse of Dictatorship, The Road to Ruin, Sundry Reflections Based on the Decemvirate

Book One, The Development of Rome's Constitution, The Use and Abuse of Dictatorship, The Road to Ruin, Sundry Reflections Based on the Decemvirate Summary and Analysis

Sections 33-36 concern the use and abuse of dictatorship. First, Machiavelli argues that if there is a dissenting faction within a state or against a state, it is best not to suppress it but rather to temporize or moderate it. Such movements' power is hard to assess at the outset. The dictatorial power given to the Roman Caesar was a good thing for the Roman republic and is a good thing generally so long as citizens freely grant the power. The real problem is when citizens take more power for themselves than they have the authority to do; this harms civic life. Precautions can be taken against the dictator, however, such as time limits. In addition, a society must adopt dictatorship during serious and pressing danger.

That said, the creation of the Decemviri in Rome was deleterious to the republic, despite free suffrage. Unrestricted authority should be given a year at a time and supervisors must be raised up to supervise abuses. Further, citizens appointed to high office should not resist accepting lower offices.

Sections 37-39 cover the road to ruin. The agrarian laws in the Roman republic gave rise to scandal in Rome. In fact, great are the scandals that result from laws that undermine ancient customs. Unlimited ambitions make fortune dangerous. The Roman plebeians demanded a part of imperial property and social status. Rome could not leave its citizens poor but keep the republic as a whole rich. The Gracchi came too late to prevent civil war. Examples include the opposition between Marius and Sulla and Caesar and Pompey.

Weak republics often get hamstrung in inefficient decision procedures. They only reach decisions through necessity. Modern Florence is one such case. These problems seem to occur across peoples.

Sections 40-45 include a number of miscellaneous observations on the Decemvirate. Machiavelli covers how the Decemvirate was created and why it was special. The creation of such institutions leads either to salvation or serfdom. Quick changes between humility to pride, kindness to cruelty and other changes are often destructive to



stability, unless they are taken through the right steps. Men are easily corrupted and those who defend the regime for glory are often good and loyal soldiers. Crowds are useless without leaders and they should not begin resisting with threats to get the authority they desire. New laws should not be broken for precedent's sake particularly if committed by legislators. Fresh injuries imposed on cities regularly is a great harm to the governor of a city.



Book One, The Development of Rome's Constitution, The Popular Demand for a Share in Government, The Management of the Populace, The Advantages of Popular Government

Book One, The Development of Rome's Constitution, The Popular Demand for a Share in Government, The Management of the Populace, The Advantages of Popular Government Summary and Analysis

Sections 46-49 concern popular demands for democratic powers. Men change ambition often; they often first attempt to stop mistreatment but then impose it upon others. Such situations are dangerous. While men err about general matters, they tend to avoid making mistake with regard to the details; some examples are given. Barring the appointment of officials that are evil, Machiavelli advises either to appoint an obviously evil candidate or a very good and noble one. City-states that from their creation have been free, like Rome, are often poor creators of laws that protect liberty. Previously servile regimes face a near impossibility.

Sections 50-55 cover how the populace is to be managed. Machiavelli maintains that no one group or person within the state should be able to prevent proceedings. Republics and kings should do what is necessary while appearing to be generous. The best way to suppress the arrogance of a person that has achieved power is to block him from using the methods he earlier used to get the power in question. The people are often deceived by illusory fortune and sometimes seek their own destruction by letting themselves be manipulated by false hopes and promises. Grave men can have great influence in stopping excited crowds. It is easy to manage a state when the masses are virtuous. Where there is equality, a principality cannot be created. Without equality, a republic cannot be created.

Sections 56-60 review the advantages of democratic and republican government. Democratic inputs often help to indicate disasters ahead of time by giving everyone a voice. When the plebeians are united they are strong, though weak in themselves. They know more and are steadier than princes. Machiavelli then reviews the types of confederations and leagues that are the most stable, whether they are created by republics or princes. Republics are better in general. Offices in Rome were assigned regardless of age, which was an advantage because it directly rewarded virtue.



Book Two, The Growth of Rome's Empire, Preface, Methods of Expansion, Colonization and War: Its Causes and Cost, Diplomacy and War

Book Two, The Growth of Rome's Empire, Preface, Methods of Expansion, Colonization and War: Its Causes and Cost, Diplomacy and War Summary and Analysis

In the preface to book two, Machiavelli discusses praising the past and hating the present. He claims that human practices are always changing, but the amount of virtue in humanity stays the same and is widely distributed over time. The desires of humans cannot be satisfied, but they change with age.

Sections 1-5 cover the methods by which the Roman Empire expanded. First, Machiavelli asks whether the expansion was caused by virtue or fortune. Machiavelli rejects the fortune explanation, though it never had two large wars at once. When she took over a nation, she helped the people become indifferent to their rulers and used neighbors to enter the nation. Many nearby powers did nothing. Examples are discussed. Next, the sorts of people the Romans fought are discussed; these people often protected their freedom with great stubbornness.

The neighbors of the Romans loved their freedom while Rome had a king. Once the Roman king was removed, Rome expanded readily, as Athens did. The Roman people developed a hatred of dictatorship. Machiavelli claims that paganism tends to create strong empires and that Christianity creates weak ones because it encourages self abnegation.

Rome as a city only became powerful and prosperous by destroying cities nearby and making it easy for foreigners to take part in its glory.

Republics typically expand by three methods: confederations based on equality, which are incoherent, headship and capital of a confederation that can force allies to fight for them and turns kingdoms into providences, and conquest. The latter is the worst; Athenian and Spartan history demonstrate this. The second option is best. Past records are often destroyed by changes in language and religion and natural disasters like floods or disease. Christianity repressed paganism, largely through Gregory the Great, and purges among humans are occasionally required because they are so evil.



Sections 6-10 discuss the causes and costs of colonization and war. The Romans wages war for gain, and so the costs of war should be kept low. Wars should aim to be short and total, like Roman wars. Colonies should be used as imperial outposts and the treasures gained from war should enrich the nation's treasury and reduce taxes. Triumph can only occur if spoils are gained. The Romans often gave land to colonists. Gaining empire and overpopulation pressures often lead to conquest and migration; Machiavelli then gives examples. Wars between powers tend to be caused through attacking allies. Those cities that cannot protect themselves should voluntarily submit to protecting powers. Money is not the main source of war-making power, but rather good troops.

Sections 11-15 discuss diplomacy and war. First, Machiavelli emphasizes that allying with rulers whose reputation exceeds their strength is a bad idea. If a country is poorly equipped, it should go on the offensive, whereas if it is well-equipped, it should await the coming of war. Men sometimes rise in position through fraud rather than force. In addition, they often err when they think that pride can be defeated by humility. Leaders who act with humility are often taken advantage of by the arrogant. Finally, choices made by weak states tend to be ambiguous and their method of coming to a choice is typically poor and destructive.



Book Two, The Growth of Rome's Empire, The Army, Its Discipline and Component Parts, The Administration of Conquered Territory and Other Problems Which Admit of No Middle Course, Mistakes Often Made in Connection With War, Rome's Dealings With Neighboring

Book Two, The Growth of Rome's Empire, The Army, Its Discipline and Component Parts, The Administration of Conquered Territory and Other Problems Which Admit of No Middle Course, Mistakes Often Made in Connection With War, Rome's Dealings With Neighboring States and Cities in Peace and War Summary and Analysis

Sections 16-18 cover the structure of the Roman Army and its culture. Machiavelli notes that troops of his day have far less discipline than those of the Romans. Artillery is not all it is cracked up to be in the modern period. It is useless when defending a town threatened by large infantry assaults. They do not cause mass death or prevent valor. Few officers are taken down by cannonballs. Infantry should receive more respect than cavalry, which is shown by Roman military practice. Machiavelli then gives some examples.

Sections 19-23 review how to govern conquered territories and some related issues. The acquisitions achieved by republics must be well-governed and handled with virtue. When the Romans failed to do this, it helped to bring about their downfall. Dangers often arise for princes or republics that use mercenary armies, as they have no intrinsic loyalty to the regime that employs them. Roman history shows this as well. Captured cities should be left to make their own laws unless a governor is requested. Men often err when they have to make decisions of great importance. Finally, Machiavelli discusses several events that compelled the Romans to judge peoples they ruled.

Sections 24-27 concerns mistakes made in war or related to it. Fortresses are generally a waste of resources and turn out to be net costs. Attacking divided cities to take advantage of the divisions is not a good policy, which Machiavelli illustrates with some

examples. Those who engage in hatred and abuse received hatred in return and gain no general advantage. Pragmatic principles and republics should rest with victory because when they go farther than mere victory, they tend to lose.

Sections 28-33 examine how Rome engaged its neighbor states and cities during peace and war. Republics and principles face danger if they do not avenge harms done to its public or one of its private people. Fortune often keeps men's minds from seeing reality when she wants to stop them from getting in her way; in other words, providence can be spiteful and deceptive. Very strong republics and princes never create alliances with money; instead, they create alliances through their virtue and the high regard held for their armies. Refugees should never receive too much confidence as they are often dangerous.

Machiavelli ends Book Two by assessing the ways in which Romans conquered towns and the discretionary powers they gave to their commanders.



Book Three, The Examples of Rome's Great Men, Reform, Security, and the Elimination of Rivals, On Conspiracies, The Need of Adaptation to Environment

Book Three, The Examples of Rome's Great Men, Reform, Security, and the Elimination of Rivals, On Conspiracies, The Need of Adaptation to Environment Summary and Analysis

Book Three analyzes the example of Rome's great men and derives from their experience insights into the nature of government and political life. Sections 1-5 address reform, security and the elimination of rivals. Institutions, religious or political, can only survive if they are regularly returned to their roots. All compounds can decay and must be renovated, which is helped by great men. Good leaders often pretend to be fools to preserve stability and peace. New liberties can only be protected by killing those hateful of the new regime. Exemplary action is also required. Princes of new regimes cannot be secure if those who the regime was taken from are still around. Hereditary kings often lose their thrones through violating ancient customs.

Section 6 assesses the nature of conspiracies and is composed of a number of themes embodied in paragraphs. Conspiracies are very dangerous and conspirators are often those with standing or close friends of princes. Conspiracies fail largely due to being informed. Plots should not be revealed until the last moment and then only to a few; they often fail when plans change. If a conspiracy is successful, the primary danger is revenge from those who survived. A conspiracy against one's country succeeds only if the regime is corrupt. Poison is a bad idea because its effects are uncertain. When trying to stop a conspiracy, the ruler should not move until he is sure he has enough strength to destroy them.

Sections 7-9 explain how to adapt to changes in the political environment. Moving between liberty and slavery or the reverse is sometimes peaceful and sometimes bloody and depends on whether the revolution starts with violence. A man who wants to change a republic should respect the governed and cannot succeed when they are strong. Individuals should adapt to their times to have good fortune.



Book Three, The Examples of Rome's Great Men, Sundry Remarks on Strategy, Tactics, New Devices and Discipline, Administrative Posts, Administrative Methods: The Rival Claims of Severity and Good Fellowship

Book Three, The Examples of Rome's Great Men, Sundry Remarks on Strategy, Tactics, New Devices and Discipline, Administrative Posts, Administrative Methods: The Rival Claims of Severity and Good Fellowship Summary and Analysis

Sections 10-15 make miscellaneous comments on battle tactics. Generals cannot block engagements if enemies will sacrifice anything to engage them. If a general has to fight several enemies, he can win even if he is weaker as long as he can survive their first attack. Practical and wise commanders should require his troops to fight but should not press his enemy to do so. It is a wash whether it is better to trust a good general with a weak army or a weak general with a good army. New inventions introduced in battle and strange cries produce a wide range of effects. Only one commander should head an army; multiple commanders is a nuisance and can result in contradictory orders.

Sections 16-18 focus on administrative posts. Machiavelli argues that genuine virtue is required in difficult periods. However, if matters go well, popularity due to wealth or parentage is more important because men care more about these matters when they are comfortable. No administrative position that matters should be given to a man who offense has been given to. Anticipating enemy plans makes a general look better than any other achievement.

Sections 19-23 are about administrative methods and the balance between fellowship and severity. When controlling the masses, it is often best to combine harshness and virtue, though harshness must be used moderately and depends on whether one is dealing with equals. Single acts of decency can have enormous effects on one's enemies, more than many legions of men.

Machiavelli then discusses how Hannibal and Scipio's distinct tactics had the same effect. Scipio was humane and kindly, while Hannibal was cruel and violent. Men can be moved to efficiency by love or hate, but nothing in between. Torquatus's severity and



Corvinus's sociability achieved the same degree of fame because both followed their natural inclinations. Sociability only works in uncorrupted republics with good laws, and severity works to the common good in more general circumstances though it can lead to tyranny.

Camillus was banished from Rome despite being a good general. His troops hated him because he took from them what they valued.



Book Three, The Example of Rome's Great Men, Internal Security, Equanimity, Insurrection, Confidence, Electioneering, and the Tendering of Advice, Advice to Generals in the Field

Book Three, The Example of Rome's Great Men, Internal Security, Equanimity, Insurrection, Confidence, Electioneering, and the Tendering of Advice, Advice to Generals in the Field Summary and Analysis

Sections 24-30 deal with internal security. Machiavelli argues that extensive military commands made Rome servile. In some cases, the poverty of many Roman farmers led them to think themselves great leaders, like Cincinnatus. Women have often brought downfall to states. Unity can be brought to a divided city to kill the ringleaders of the opposition or banish them. Reconciliation is the worst strategy.

Strict watch should be kept over citizen activities, because tyranny often arises from supposed good works because ingratiating one's self to the people makes them more content to give up their liberties. The faults of people are typically the result of petty princes. Citizens who want to use their authority to do constructive works in a republic must eliminate or reduce envy, and provisions that are used to defend a city from attack should not be given directly to citizens.

Sections 31-35 analyze a number of military and political tactics. Strong republics and good men maintain dignity in any circumstance. Sometimes outrages can be committed to prevent peace from coming to an area. If a republic or prince wants to win a battle, the army must be confident both in itself and its general. Certain sorts of gossip and reputation lead the people to support a particular person. The people tend to make fewer errors than princes when judging character but not when determining reputation. Dangers often arise from those who are lead advisors for some particular plan, particularly when the actions are unusual.

Sections 36-39 consist of advice to generals in the field. The French are often seen as powerful before a battle and weak afterwards. When fighting new enemies, armies must discern the enemy's strength. It is better to encourage allies to fend for themselves and employ a scorched-earth policy than to engage in impossible defenses. General's

actions are what inspire his army's confidence in him. Generals also should know the geography of the area where they fight.



Book Three, The Example of Rome's Great Men, Salus Populi, Suprema Lex, Further Reflections Based on the Samnite Wars, The Preservation of Freedom in a Republic

Book Three, The Example of Rome's Great Men, Salus Populi, Suprema Lex, Further Reflections Based on the Samnite Wars, The Preservation of Freedom in a Republic Summary and Analysis

Sections 40-42 review the authority of rulers. It is an important thing to employ fraud during war. A country should be defended, regardless of whether it produces ignominy or glory. It can be defended appropriately in any way at all. Promises that are force should not be maintained.

Sections 43-48 make some further observations based on the case of the Samnite Wars. First, Machiavelli claims that those born in one country tend to have similar characters throughout the history of the country. Achievements in war in many cases are brought about through daring and stubbornness, and these achievements could not have been acquired by standard methods. It is the more prudent strategy in battle to wait for any enemy offense and resisting it go on the attack.

It is worse to engage in a powerful offense at first. The features of families often come from education and often thereby keep power through similar customs maintains over time. A good citizen should not react to personal attacks if he loves his country. Finally, when enemies appear to greatly err, the opposing side should assume that they are faking.

The final section of Book Three, Section 49, focuses on how to keep a republic free. Republics that wish to stay free, should regularly prepare to defend it.



Characters

Niccolo Machiavelli

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) is the author of the Discourses. He was a well-known Italian statesman, writer, philosophy, diplomat and political scientist. Machiavelli is most well-known for writing *The Prince*, which was composed in 1513 and published after his death in 1532. Because of Machiavelli's advice in *The Prince*, the term "Machiavellian" has become a widely used term for wily and deceptive politicking.

The Prince consisted in advice to Princes or monarchs, but the Discourses were written to give advice to republics. Some think that the work was initially a commentary on Livy's history of the Roman Empire and a general theory of republican government, though the book now seems to be regarded as largely a treatise on republicanism and only secondarily as a commentary on Livy's history, due to the fact that Livy's history is used primarily to illustrate Machiavelli's views on the structure and function of republican government.

One purpose of *The Discourses* is to solve the eternal problem of how to prevent governments from decaying. It was widely believed since antiquity that governments tended to decay from their ideal original forms into shadows of their former selves. Monarchies become tyrannies, democracies become anarchy, and so on.

Machiavelli clearly prefers republics because by combining the elements of the three forms of government, monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, a balance might be achieved. Machiavelli also tries to identify stages of social and cultural evolution and then to use a periodic conception of institutional evolution to understand the causes of institutional decay. Machiavelli discusses these causes at length and most of his advice is aimed at such preservation with respect to institutional structure, foreign policy and leadership.

The Roman Empire/Republic

The Discourses is ostensibly a commentary on Titus Livius's history of the Roman Empire. However, Livy lived from 59 B.C. to A.D. 17, and so his history is primarily a history of the Roman Republic extended back to 753 B.C. Livy was a supporter of the Roman republic and Machiavelli supported republic government generally. That said, Machiavelli believed that Roman liberty could have only been protected if the Roman army engaged in conquest, colonization and empire to neutralize threats to its freedom.

The Roman republic was formed in 509 B.C. and continued for over 450 years. It was rooted in the ideas of the separation of powers and checks and balances ideas that Machiavelli, among others, reintroduced into the modern period and which later came to be the basis for a wide range of modern governments. The social structure of the republic consisted in a struggle between patricians and plebeians. The Roman republic



expanded out from central Italy to the whole Mediterranean and gradually to North Africa and southern France.

Machiavelli's use of the Roman Empire/Republic to illustrate his points is important. The Roman Empire contributed to the formation of European languages, law and political institutions. It was also by and large an institution that allowed for stable forms of political life and economic prosperity. The regime protected the rights of citizens, and for much of its history was ruled by law. It is also the longest surviving republic and the one that was most studied and analyzed in Machiavelli's day. Thus, the history of the Roman Empire/Republic is a source of many illustrations of Machiavelli's ideas. Consequently, the book is full of examples from Roman history.

The Republic

Machiavelli is focused on advising members of republics on how to government. He is likely most specifically advising the republic of the city state of Florence.

The Prince

Princes are kings or monarchical rulers of city states. Machiavelli comments on princes from time to time, but this was largely the function of his book *The Prince*.

The Citizen of a Republic

Citizens of republics, when operating together, are often wiser than princes. Machiavelli often stresses their wisdom but also advises rulers of republics on how to manage them.

Generals

Most of *Book Two* is advice to generals on how to run foreign policy and wars, along with advice to domestic leaders on how to interact with generals.

Livy

Titus Livius was one of the great historians of the Roman Empire. *The Discourses* is ostensibly a commentary on the first ten volumes of his history.

Virtuous Leaders

Virtuous leaders can maintain stability in a regime and promote prosperity. They are also often more effective leaders though moral virtue and political effectiveness do not always go together.



Administrators

Administrators in government often are sources of challenge to rulers. Machiavelli advises rulers on how to assign administrators to colonies and how to appoint them.

Allies

Free peoples must maintain allies to ward off enemies. Machiavelli thinks that allies should sometime be used as pawns in fights with enemies.

Enemies

Much of Book Two contains advice on when to fight wars and how to handle forthcoming enemy challenges from within a regime or from outside.

Rivals

Rivals must often be dealt with harshly, other times co-opted and often even killed in order to maintain regime stability.



Objects/Places

Italy

Machiavelli's home country that he thinks has been undermined by decadence. One purpose of The Discourses is to help revive virtuous government in Italian city states.

Rome

The heart of the Roman Republic and its ancient management is a source of examples for managing the Italian city-states of Machiavelli's day.

Principalities

City-states that were the dominant form of political organization in Machiavelli's time.

The Best Form of Government

One purpose of The Discourses is to defend a republican form of government as the best because it combines the features of the three forms of government.

Causes of Cultural and Political Decay

There are many causes of cultural and political decay including wars, natural disasters, famine and conspiracies.

Freedom in a Republic

One of the most valuable features of republican life is that citizens are politically free.

Wars

How and when to fight wars is a major theme of The Discourses.

Political Virtue

Political virtue is political efficacy in achieving the ruler's goals. It is not always correlated with moral virtue.



Moral Virtue

Machiavelli encourages leaders to have moral virtue, though he admits it is not always advantageous for rulers from a political perspective.

Necessity

Machiavelli's concept of necessity consists in those circumstances where a leader's hand is forced.

Fortune

Fortune refers to those chance events that bode well for a regime.

The Ends Justify the Means

Machiavelli notoriously believed that the ends justified the means and says so explicitly in *The Discourses*.

Military Tactics and Technology

Machiavelli defends Roman military tactics and disparages modern military technology in *Book Two*.

Empire

Sometimes empire is necessary to preserve the liberty of the state.

Human Corruption

Human corruption leads to the destruction of culture and political regimes.



Themes

Political Science

Machiavelli is one of the founders of political science, understood as the science of government—the structure of governments, how they function and how they malfunction. The Discourses is one of the most important works of political science because of its extensive insights and historical analysis. Machiavelli, for instance, advances a number of maxims concerning the nature of government.

A number of Machiavelli's maxims are as follows: The whole of a nation's resources should never be risked on a particular military endeavor. Cities must be independent to grow in dominions and wealth. Rulers are hated when they deprive people of what they value. Single acts of common decency in war do more to impress one's enemies than any amount of forces. Acquisitions that republics make can bring their downfall if they are not well governed. Most rise to high positions through fraud rather than force. The best soldiers are those who fight for glory rather than wealth.

At a more general level, Machiavelli argues that the natural corruption within human beings leads to the destruction of regimes, and claims that he was interested in trying to figure out how to slow or block this decay. Machiavelli defended republican forms of government in response to the problem of political decay on the grounds that mixing the different forms of government would achieve the benefits of each and counteract their natural flaws. The Discourses is devoted to the effective governance of republics for this reason.

Maintaining Political Stability

Because of human corruption, political institutions have a tendency to decay, but preventing decay was not Machiavelli's only aim. Some particularly difficult problems were the collapse of regimes and extreme forms of instability. One of the first tasks of The Discourses is to identify these causes. They include natural disasters, class conflict, tyranny, weak governments, revolt, conspiracy, war and various forms of social and cultural change.

Republican forms of government help to give many different societal interests a share in the government so that no one part of society is disenfranchised. Tyranny can be similarly blocked. Public indictments are important to maintain a public sense of justice. Leaders must not try to wholly abandon ancient customs or to replace them too quickly. Some forms of religious piety are required to maintain virtue in the republic though often decadent religion can undermine a culture, as the corrupt Papacy had in Machiavelli's day. When a free people become servile or vice versa, peoples have to adapt to their circumstances and are not very good at it. A line of weak princes is a strong threat to stability, though a weak ruler that follows a powerful one can often do well.



Stable regimes must have their own army and in many cases must engage in conquest in order to avoid be conquered themselves. Rulers must show gratitude to those parts of society that contribute.

Maintaining Freedom

Stability is not the only good that The Discourses is intended to preserve. Moving beyond stability, an individual regime can achieve a high degree of freedom. If a regime can survive the destabilizing influences of war, natural disasters, tyranny, cultural change and the like, it is capable of developing beyond a state of mere survival. A people must learn to be free if they find freedom while in a period of servitude. New forms of government, particularly republican forms of government, must be built off of old customs and not engage in radical change.

Wise rulers and peoples must engage in many different activities if freedom is to be preserved. The populace, if they achieve a share in the government, must resist the temptation to impose suffering on their enemies. The people will tend to be good judges about particular matters but not general ones. No one branch of the government should be able to stop court proceedings. Rulers must eliminate rivals when they come to power rather than accommodating them. Shows of strength must be made immediately to consolidate and stabilize rule. Conquered peoples must be appropriately managed and wars must always be fought with one's own troops or the troops of allies, never mercenaries.

Free regimes must continually be reminded of their roots and returned to their original states even if through revolution. Machiavelli calls this "renovation" and claims it can be brought about spontaneously by internal or external events. Prolonged military commands can make a regime servile and leaders must avoid envy and they must always make provisions against attack.

Style

Perspective

Niccolo Machiavelli was a fifteenth and sixteenth century statesman, scholar and philosopher and something of a Renaissance man. Most of his life was lived in Italy prior to the Protestant Reformation, a period that was characterized by a powerful and corrupt Papacy and a number of reform movements inside and outside of the Catholic Church that had been created in an attempt to reform the church. Machiavelli is deeply influenced by what he sees as general cultural and political decline in Italian due to political corruption, often less from the church and more from the rulers and elite families within Italian city states.

Machiavelli's perspective in *The Discourses* is to help rulers figure out how to combat human corruption, rule wisely and preserve the liberty of citizens from internal and external threats. Like the political philosophers of antiquity, Machiavelli believed that all forms of government were subject to decay. He was interested in how such decay might be stopped or slowed down. He thought that if the three forms of government—monarchy, aristocracy and democracy—were combined into a republic, that the people had the best chance of flourishing culturally and preserving their freedom.

The *Discourses* are divided into three books to cover the three different aspects of rule and institutional functioning involved in maintaining a society and its liberty. First Machiavelli inquires into the nature and preservation of republican government itself, the causes of its destruction and how to prevent it, he next asks how a city-state might preserve itself in matters of foreign policy and he finally explains what he believes great leaders are made of and how they should rule.

Tone

Niccolo Machiavelli practiced statecraft along with writing political philosophy and political science. He was also an artist and a poet. Nonetheless, his obviously busy and passionate approach to life do not come out in his tone. Machiavelli seems intent on giving cool, timeless and accurate advice drawn not only from sound political theory but also from a keen observation of actual political practice. In fact, Machiavelli's the reader might take his dispassionate form of writing to indicate a cynical pragmatist who faces the fact that social circumstances often necessitate aggressive political action that often violates commonly accepted moral norms.

Machiavelli is also clearly devoted to his subject matter. Consequently, he dispassionate tone probably reflects a desire to project impartiality and imply that communicating in anything but a clear and focused fashion would not serve his purposes.

That said, Machiavelli does alter his tone from time to time when he makes observations about the political state of Europe and Italy and its city-states in particular.



For instance, he sees Italy in ruins due to a decadent and corrupt Papacy. He also disparages modern armies, admiring the Romans for their military tactics and lack of obsession with new military technologies. Machiavelli speaks with great admiration for many figures in Roman history, particularly their generals and certain statesmen.

Generally speaking, Machiavelli's Discourses is a work of hard-nosed, real world advice for leaders of republics. His tone almost exclusively reflects this aim.

Structure

The Discourses is composed of three books that cover related topics concerning the proper governance of a republic. These books are subdivided into sections and then into paragraphs which Machiavelli has grouped, containing various observations. In one sense, each subsection is a self-contained observation, though it has some continuity with others in the section.

To give some examples, the first section ranges from subsection one through ten. It is named "The Best Form of Government," and contains subsections such as "How Many Kinds of Commonwealth There Are And of What Kind Was That of Rome" and "Calumnies Are As Injurious To Republics As Public Indictments are Used." Thus, while subsections focus on self-contained issues, they also cover related subject matters. Machiavelli also includes an explanation of why the work needed to be written in the preface.

The major problem facing republican government, in Machiavelli's view, is to the need to avoid human corruption's natural tendency to destroy stable cultural, moral and political order. The best way to do this is to preserve the liberty of the people with republican government, which in turn is composed of the three major types of government. A number of causes threaten the stability and liberty of republics and include wars, famine, popular revolt, and the like. The aim of Book One is to explain these causes and how domestic government should function and how to bring about that function, all the while illustrating with cases from the history of the Roman Empire.

Book Two concerns foreign policy; Machiavelli was something of a cynical realist who thought that free city-states would have to engage in aggressive military conquest and colonization to maintain their liberty in many cases. Machiavelli therefore explains how and when wars should be engaged in, how to manipulate alliances, choose one's battles, military tactics and so on.

Book Three analyzes the lives and examples of the great leaders of the Roman Republic and Empire. Leaders can play a major role in maintaining a society's cultural life. They can enable the people to increase in virtue and to make great progress in civilization, along with organizing the people into effective armies.



Quotes

"It is a sound maxim that reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects, and that when the effect is good ... it always justifies the action."

Book One, p. 234

"It should be assumed, then, as a basic and established principle that to a state which has been under a prince and has become corrupt, freedom cannot be restored even if the prince and the whole of his stock be wiped out."

Book One, p. 256

"Two Virtuous Princes, of whom one immediately succeeds the other, do Great Things: and, as in Well-ordered Republics there is of necessity such a Virtuous Succession, their Acquisitions and their Increase also is great."

Book One, p. 265

"He who desires or proposes to change the form of government in a state and wishes it to be acceptable and to be able to maintain it to everyone's satisfaction, must needs retain at least the shadow of its ancient customs, so that institutions may not appear to its people to have been changed, though in point of fact the new institutions may be radically different from the old ones."

Book One, p. 272

"[I]t was neither the name nor the rank of the dictator that made Rome servile, but the loss of authority of which the citizens were deprived by the length of his rule. If in Rome there had been no such rank, the dictator would have found some order; for it is easy for force to acquire a title, but not for a title to acquire force."

Book One, p. 289

"How difficult it is in constituting a republic to foresee all the laws required for the maintenance of liberty, is clearly shown in the development of the Roman republic."

Book One, p. 321

"Human appetites are insatiable, for by nature we are so constituted that there is nothing we cannot long for, but by fortune we are such that of these things we can attain but few."

Book Two, p. 355

"We thus see how true it is that a liberty which you have taken away is avenged with much greater ferocity than is a liberty which you have but sought to take away."

Book Two, p. 363

"A ruler should never forget his dignity, nor, if he cares for his reputation, should he ever waive a point agreed upon unless he can enforce it, or thinks he can enforce it."

Book Two, p. 394



"How frequently men form false opinions has been observed and is still observed by those who happen to be witnesses of their decisions, the which, unless made by men of first class ability, are very often the reverse of being sound."

Book Two, p. 422

"The severity used by Brutus was no less necessary than it was useful in maintaining the liberty which Rome had just acquired by his aid."

Book Three, p. 465

"A single act of common decency made a greater impression on the Falisci than did all the forces of Rome."

Book Three, p. 524

"If fortune changes, sometimes raising them, sometimes casting them down [outstanding men] do not change, but remain ever resolute, so resolute in mind and in conduct throughout life that it is easy for anyone to see that fortune holds no sway over them. Not so do weak men behave."

Book Three, p. 549

"A republic that would preserve its freedom ought daily to make fresh provisions to this end."

Book Three, p. 583



Topics for Discussion

Explain why Machiavelli thinks that constitutions and states tend to decay, factors he identifies as sources of decay, and his preferred strategies for preventing decay.

How is Livy's history of the Roman Empire employed by Machiavelli? Are the Discourses a commentary on Livy or something more? Defend your answer.

Explain Machiavelli's important concepts of fortune and necessity and how they play a role in his observations on political science.

Machiavelli is famous for claiming that the ends justify the means. Why does he think this? To what does the maxim apply?

Why does Machiavelli believe in the maintenance of a strong army? Why does he believe in using it for imperial purposes like colonization? What benefits does empire provide to a republic? When should a republic go to war? When should it avoid it?

Why does Machiavelli prefer republican government to monarchy? What are the exception cases where monarchy is more effective?

Discuss three pieces of advice that Machiavelli gives to rulers based on examples from the history of the Roman Empire. Explain his arguments.