Here’s what Machiavelli would have to say about the Republican primaries

By Alissa Ardito January 4

Although we use “Machiavellian” to mean shrewd duplicity, the real Niccolo Machiavelli was a political servant and political theorist, both realistic and idealistic. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries he served in Florence’s government and advised rulers. How would he advise the candidates and others interested in the Republican primaries? Let’s take a look.

**On inheriting rather than ascending to power**

Jeb Bush resembles a genial hereditary prince, one who assumed that primary voters would flock to him by tradition. He doesn’t appear to have tried very hard, which Machiavelli would have considered appropriate, given his status. Machiavelli believed it was comparatively easy for a hereditary prince to govern, writing, “So that if a prince is of ordinary industry he will always maintain himself in his state, unless an extraordinary and excessive force deprives him of it.”

**On remaining independent from wealthy patrons**

But our times are chaotic, unstable, much like the tumultuous era in which Machiavelli wrote. In such times, he wrote, it is risky to rely on elites or “the great.” He would caution Ted Cruz, Bush, Marco Rubio, and to a lesser extent Chris Christie, all of whom rely on the largesse of a few donors. That’s a problem, Machiavelli would tell them, adding that in doing so, a leader is stuck with “many persons about him who think they are his equals, and for this reason he can neither command nor manage them in his own way.”

A few powerful magnates exert control over some candidates’ platforms. That would anger Machiavelli, who would consider that to be corruption. His primary example of such corruption was Florence’s rich and powerful banker, Cosimo de Medici, who never held public office himself, but paid others to do so. Over time, Machiavelli argued, when private power excessively influences political decision-making, it subverts a free republic.

Moreover, Machiavelli hated dependence. He advised others to acquire power based on their own “arms and virtue” instead of relying on that of others — and urged future leaders to become independent as quickly as possible.

**On mixing political and religious fervor**

Ben Carson gets the largest amount of support from evangelical voters, for whom religion is a primary factor in political preferences and voting patterns. Machiavelli would have disapproved. He felt religion ought to remain separate from politics — mostly because the papacy, which at that time was a bona fide state with extensive territory, tended to muck up world affairs by doing such things as calling on foreign monarchies to invade Italy.

He had some respect for Savonarola, a fiery preacher whose sermons brought him political power and prominence in Florence. But Savonarola was a puritanical populist, which was his undoing.

Machiavelli would approve of the fact that Carson’s platform wisely contains nothing to offend party elites.

**On refraining from foreign adventures**

As Rand Paul has found, dissuading people from foreign adventure is thankless work. Machiavelli advised his princes that proposing adventures abroad always wins crowds — but that the people never like the taxes required to pay for those foreign wars.

Paul might find Machiavelli sympathetic to his plight. Machiavelli admired innovative leaders who establish new laws and institutions. With his consistent libertarian principles, Paul has the potential to be what Machiavelli might call a “founder” — but his creed may be too strict to be widely popular.

Machiavelli might advise reformers like Paul to keep the forms or appearances of old institutions and laws, letting change look like continuity — because people focus on appearances and are less likely to question a radical change that appears traditional.

**On seeming honest, compassionate, and loyal**

Ted Cruz might seem the most Machiavellian of the primary candidates. His calculated [rise to power](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/06/30/the-absolutist-2) looks like the expedient, duplicitous realist usually associated with the Machiavelli who wrote chapters 15 through 19 in “The Prince.” Those are the chapters that tell rulers that virtue and vice are different in the political arena; politically, what’s good is what is effective, and what’s bad is what fails.

According to this advice, a new prince — someone who’s risen to the job rather than inherited it — “has greater need of acquiring reputation than a hereditary one.” Machiavelli suggested making enemies and overcoming them to build up a reputation. Cruz has set up enemies by [criticizing other politicians](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-lot-of-people-just-dont-like-ted-cruz-how-come-thats-okay-with-him/2015/11/08/b55a0782-7758-11e5-bc80-9091021aeb69_story.html), often those in his own party. The media attention has done wonders for his reputation.

But Machiavelli would warn that a candidate or hopeful prince should be cautious when offending, and not overreach. For instance, Cesare Borgia made the great mistake of offending Pope Julius II, and then thinking old hatreds would be forgiven or at least forgotten. Once pope, Julius invaded Cesare’s territory — the beginning of the end for Cesare, Christopher Celenza explains in “[Machiavelli: A Portrait](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674416123).”

As Machiavelli wrote, “And whoever believes, in dealing with great personalities, that new benefits makes old injuries forgotten deceives himself.” For Cruz, his advice might be: Be careful when you insult Senate majority leader [Mitch McConnell](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/24/ted-cruz-calls-mitch-mcconnell-a-liar-on-the-senate-floor/). There may be a cost later.

Cruz isn’t well-liked among party elites or Senate colleagues. That’s not necessarily bad; Machiavelli famously advises it is better to be feared than loved. But he adds that it’s important to avoid being hated, which is fine line to walk. He might add that being a successful ruler while going unloved requires keeping other people afraid of your punishment. It’s not clear Cruz yet has that power.

“It is useful to seem compassionate, faithful, humane, honest, religious,” wrote Machiavelli, “and to be so,” a leader must be prepared not to be good when necessary. Cruz fails the first half: seeming honest, compassionate, faithful, and all the rest. Machiavelli would not approve. Cruz’s strategizing may be too transparent.

**On populism as a sound political strategy**

Machiavelli consistently advised leaders to “found on the people,” meaning to embrace a form of populism. He recommended cultivating support among the people rather than the elites — because even though the people have little socio-economic power, they want to be left alone, while “the great desire both to command and to oppress the people.”

Translated for our day, he meant that if a candidate climbs to power through an alliance with “the great,” he or she will have nothing but trouble; the great will never be satisfied and will easily transfer allegiance to another budding prince. People, by contrast, ask only “not to be oppressed” and to hope for their children’s future success. As a result it’s much easier to win and keep their loyalty.

If we equate Machiavelli’s “great” — the wealthy and powerful merchant bankers of Renaissance Florence — with today’s party operatives and big donors, then Donald Trump would seem to be the candidate who’s cultivating Main Street rather than Wall Street. He thumbs his nose at party elites, says he doesn’t rely on a few big donors, and voices the anger of the party rank and file.

Machiavelli praised the Tribunes of Rome, plebeians elected to represent the interests of ordinary working people, protecting them from the patricians who dominated all other government institutions. Trump fashions himself a new tribune of the people, or at least of the blue collar slice of the Republican electorate.

Trump takes the side of the many against the few who “spit poison at the plebs,” as Machiavelli put it — at least when it comes to positioning himself as a voice for ordinary Americans in a time of declining or stagnating real incomes, rising inequality, and job insecurity. In this, he’s the most Machiavellian of the Republican candidates today.

Machiavelli had little positive to say about powerful elites. The richer they were, the more dangerous they were to a popular republic. But is Trump really the populist he claims to be? Trump’s tax plan seems to favor the very prosperous; his anti-immigration stance is at odds with Machiavelli’s long-standing belief that open immigration strengthens republics.

**On the difficulties facing the populist**

But Machiavelli was aware that unless a populist had exceptional skill and good luck, he would probably fail. At the beginning of “The Prince,” Machiavelli observed that while a hereditary prince could lose his state in turbulent times, “whenever the occupier experiences some mishap he reacquires it.” The most likely to win, in Machiavelli’s eyes, would be the establishment candidate, Bush — or if he is knocked out, Rubio.

Machiavelli would not approve of letting the hereditary prince succeed by default. He advised that while the appearance of stability is reassuring, over time, people accustomed to letting others make their decisions forget how to reason about domestic or foreign policy. The result: the people “returns beneath a yoke that is more often heavier than the one it had removed from its neck a little before.”

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