

In defense of niccolo
machiavelli against
the slanderous use of
his name



In 1532, a divisive pamphlet was published which established the foundation of modern political science while merging classical pagan philosophy with Renaissance humanism. (Fry) The Prince, written by Niccolo Machiavelli, was condemned immediately after publication by Pope Clement VIII (Lin) to due Machiavelli's disdain for the socially acceptable morals of his time. The book was dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici, the head of the ruling family of Machiavelli's native city Florentine, and within its pages Machiavelli illustrated the political tract a " prince" — or ruler — should follow to retain complete power over those they rule. He advocated maintaining absolute dominance by employing any means necessary to justify a worthwhile end. Since its publication, The Prince has been attacked as a " book inspired by the devil," (Kreeft) an evil and immoral untruth. The reception of The Prince has been so adverse across the centuries that the negative connotation " Machiavellian" has entered into the English vocabulary, meaning one of " subtle or unscrupulous cunning, deception, expediency, or dishonesty." (Pearson) However, Machiavelli was by no means an evil man, and is wholly undeserving of the disparagement his name is subject to on a daily basis. Unbeknownst to many, the man behind Machiavellianism was a great philosopher, historian and patriot; he realized the human condition and dealt in reality, not idealism, shedding a light on the obscured functions of hypocrisy and propaganda in politics. To the preceding political thinkers of Machiavelli's time, the ultimate goal was to lead a moral life of virtue; however, Machiavelli believed that " the ideal should be judged from the actual, rather than the actual from the ideal". The Renaissance's " utopian" ideas had manifested themselves by defining a good society as one in which its people were good. Machiavelli's manly prowess — " virt" — is radically <https://assignbuster.com/in-defense-of-niccolo-machiavelli-against-the-slanderous-use-of-his-name/>

different from the virtues advocated by such philosophers as Plato and Aristotle; indeed, it was a blantant stab against Christianity and the Catholic church. (Cave) Until Machiavelli, there was no greater ambition than individual and social goodness; however, he alleged that politics was not the art of the good, but the art of the possible. (Kreeft) His influence upon this point became enormous, and most major succeeding political and social philosophers subsequently rejected the idea of " virtue" over that of reality and human nature. Machiavelli successfully argued that traditional Catholic morality was beautiful, yet unattainable. Humanity must procure its behavior from what man and societies actually do, not what they ought to do. An ideal is good only if it is practical. For example, one of The Prince's most criticized ideas is that " the end justifies the means" — any means that will work. However, to Machiavelli, the means even justify the end, yet only if the means are practical enough to engage the end. (Kreeft) In this way, Machiavelli seems to be a forefather of common sense and the bearer of reality. In The Prince, he abolished the accepted moral standards, and saw morality as a barrier to success; therefore, he wrote that " a prince who wants to keep his authority must learn how not to be good." (Machiavelli 42) Due to these brazen opinions, the critics of Machiavelli's time saw The Prince as evil, yet modern scholars are apt to believe that his views are drawn from a type of observational science. They believe that Machiavelli did not write about " denying morality," but rather about what " is," instead of what " ought to be." (Keeft)Machiavelli's disregard for a strict moral code has brought damaging nuances to the legacy of his name; conversely, it has also earned his praise from contemporary philosophers for his lack of hypocrisy.

They imply that moralism leads to hypocrisy, (Keeft) because morals are <https://assignbuster.com/in-defense-of-niccolo-machiavelli-against-the-slanderous-use-of-his-name/>

based upon the efforts of imperfect mankind, who is destined to always fall short of “ God’s glory”. (Wilch) In *The Prince*, Machiavelli advocated that it is necessary for a prince to “ be a great liar and hypocrite,” (Machiavelli 48), although he was never one himself. There is a common and modern misunderstanding that hypocrisy is “ not practicing what you preach,” meaning that all men are hypocrites unless they refrain from preaching. Machiavelli was able to overcome the human tendency toward hypocrisy by “ not by raising practice to the level of preaching but of lowering preaching to the level of practice.” (Keeft) He was able to conform to the ideal of reality, rather than attempt to change reality to coincide with an ideal. Machiavelli also understood that hypocrisy was a means of propaganda: men spoke of things they did not believe, in essence, preaching things they did not practice. Machiavelli hoped to “ convert the whole world through propaganda.” (Keeft) He was able to view his life as a war against the Catholic Church, and the propaganda it produced; in fact, he believed religion to be propaganda in itself, and advocated its use in *The Prince* as one of the “ admirable qualities” that princes should “ seem to have”. (Machiavelli 48) Machiavelli conceived two powerful weapons that were necessary to control the behavior and history of men: the pen — propaganda — and the sword. (Keeft) With these weapons, the minds and bodies of men could be dominated; however, one could not be useful without the other. He alleged that dependence upon personal energy was vital to making use of force, and that “ armed prophets always win and unarmed prophets lose.” (Machiavelli 17) With *The Prince*, Machiavelli had set out to conquer the imagination by means of intellectual arms and use of propaganda as his weapon. (Keeft) Many generations have been consequently appalled by what <https://assignbuster.com/in-defense-of-niccolo-machiavelli-against-the-slanderous-use-of-his-name/>

they perceive as ruthless brutality within the pages of *The Prince*; in spite of his crude blatancy and disregard for Christian morality, Machiavelli was above all a devoted republican and Italian patriot. When writing *The Prince* in 1513, Machiavelli focused solely on monarchies and principalities as a means of generating favor with the ruling family of Florence, the Medicis. Due to his republicanism, he had been tortured and exiled from his native city when the Spanish reinstated the Medicis to power earlier that year. Within *The Prince*, Machiavelli focused solely on monarchies in order to produce approval with the ruling Medicis, because he wanted to return to an influential position in Florentine politics. In the beginning of his book, he “set aside republics,” because it would not have been appropriate to examine republics when writing to gain favor with a monarch. (Machiavelli 4) While *The Prince* is Machiavelli’s best known work — and the one from which the connotation “Machiavellian” was derived — his other works, such as the *Discourses*, justify republicanism (Cave), and portray the most about him as a political philosopher. In true defense of the man behind Machiavellianism, he believed in the superiority of a democratic republic and the critical necessity of public approval. (Lerner 10) Machiavelli was a proud native Florentine from a republican family. He was very concerned with reinstating the Florentine republic, and worked to form a militia to protect it. However, within the pages of *The Prince*, Machiavelli represented himself in a distinctly different way — as a supporter of corrupt totalitarian rule — solely with the hope of reinstating himself in a government position to have influence within Florence. He had high aspirations for Italy, and longed for the day when Italy would reach its full potential. He understood the chaotic situations of the Italian city-states, and had observed the corruption and deceitfulness of <https://assignbuster.com/in-defense-of-niccolo-machiavelli-against-the-slanderous-use-of-his-name/>

politics. (Cave) Yet, he was the first to actually analyze the unpleasant means and methods of efficient dictators, and was able to understand the political and personal interactions that kept tyrants in power. By setting down his ideas in *The Prince*, Machiavelli hoped to help the Medicis rule more effectively, therefore assisting Italy in achieving greatness. (Fry) At the end of *The Prince*, he asks the prince to “ behold how [Italy] implores God to send someone to free her from the cruel insolence of the barbarians; see how ready and eager she is to follow a banner joyously, if only someone will raise it up.” (Machiavelli 70) Truly, Machiavelli never had great faith in morality, believing that the human condition hindered the idea of true goodness, both on an individual and as a society. This theory, which was one of the points by which he was most condemned, is useful to understand why a term like “ Machiavellian” could become so commonplace in a culture that lacks the knowledge and understanding of who the real Niccolo Machiavelli was. The ideas that derived the association of his name with negatives are also those which defend him from its use: humanity is imperfect, and measures must be taken to guard against that imperfection. He was not advocating corrupt, immoral totalitarian rule but a powerful ruler to give Italy stability and security. He did not believe in ideals but rather lived in reality. He was a man before his time, when his philosophies were too radical for his society. He dissected the functions of tyranny and exposed hypocrisy and propaganda, but he was not “ deceptive” or “ dishonest”. In truth, Machiavelli was not Machiavellian. He was simply a philosopher, whose ideas will serve as a vital resource in the political world for years to come.