WAR, POLITICS, AND HUMANISM
IN MACHIAVELLI'S *ART OF WAR*

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Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) was a Florentine historian, politician, military strategist, and humanist. Of his skill as a historian, Jacob Burkhardt noted that Machiavelli was the first of the "moderns" to present a city as a living organism that developed through a natural process.[1] Machiavelli is best known today, however, for his political treatise, *The Prince*. In it, he wrote about the ways an aspiring prince might build a principality and how an existing prince might maintain control. While perhaps a lesser-known work, his *Art of War* places Machiavelli among other well-known military theorists, such as Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz, whose writings about military theory and practice have many similarities with Machiavelli's. What sets *Art of War* apart is the noticeable influence of Renaissance humanism and the political and social forces at work in Florence, Italy and throughout Europe at the time. Machiavelli's *Art of War* is, therefore, more than merely a treatise on military strategy. It is a reflection of the complex interaction of war, politics, and humanism in Renaissance Europe, assessed alongside classical modes of warfare, statecraft, and civic virtue.

Art of War (*Dell'arte della Guerra*) was published in 1521, nearly a decade after the mercenary captain Fabrizio Colonna led troops backed by the Spanish house of Aragon to victory over Florence in 1512. Medici rule was restored, wresting power away from Machiavelli's political patron, Piero Soderini.[2] Machiavelli was subsequently tried for conspiracy, tortured, and imprisoned. In 1513, he wrote *The Prince*, which was dedicated to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici, grandson of the great arts patron, Lorenzo "the Magnificent" de' Medici.[3] Given the set of unfortunate events at the hands of the Medici that plagued Machiavelli

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[1] Jacob Burkhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 70.

[2] Marcia L. Colish, "Machiavelli's *Art of War*: A Reconsideration," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 1153, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2901963 (accessed February 22, 2016).

[3] Christopher S. Celenza, *Machiavelli: A Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 66.

during the previous year, his choice to dedicate *The Prince* to a member of the Medici house bears witness to Machiavelli's pragmatism and his astuteness in adapting to the changing political climate. After his imprisonment, Machiavelli joined a political discussion group that met in the Orti Oricellari, the Rucellai family gardens.[4] These gardens were an important meeting place for young Florentine humanists and patricians.[5] Cosimo Rucellai, a prominent character in *Art of War*, had long hosted the discussion group before his death in 1519.

Machiavelli set *Art of War* in the Rucellai gardens and likely patterned the book's style of dialogue after Rucellai's group. Exemplifying Machiavelli's adherence to humanism's affinity for the classics, Machiavelli may have tried to evoke the garden setting of Cicero's *De natura deorum* by setting *Art of War* in the Rucellai gardens.[6] In addition, Machiavelli used a classical-style literary device in which four young nobles took turns asking questions to a primary spokesman, who exercised the role of the wise master.[7] This functioned much like the discussions between Socrates and his students in Plato's *Republic* and Plato's other works. The four young interlocutors in *Art of War* were Cosimo Rucellai, Luigi Alamanni, Zanobi Buondelmonti, and Battista della Palla.[8] Machiavelli dedicated his *Discourses on Livy* to Cosimo Rucellai and Zanobi Buondelmonti, whom he called "friends."[9]

For the principle interlocutor, Machiavelli chose Fabrizio Colonna as the "wise master" to lead the dialogue. The choice of Fabrizio as the work's principal spokesman is somewhat puzzling given Fabrizio's conquest of Florence in 1512 and Machiavelli's resultant loss of status

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[4] Celenza, 122.
[5] Yves Winter, "The Prince and His Art of War: Machiavelli's Military Populism," *Social Research* 81, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 169, http://search.proquest.com/docview/1542032456?accountid=8289 (accessed February 22, 2016).
[6] Colish, 1151.
[7] Ibid., 1165.
[8] *Art of War* 1.11.
[9] *Discourses* Dedication.

and imprisonment. In addition, Fabrizio was a well-known *condottiere* (mercenary captain). One of the primary themes of *Art of War* is the preference for citizen-soldiers over mercenary troops. Machiavelli wrote dialogue for Fabrizio that expressed emphatic opposition to the use of mercenary troops and great disdain for foreign powers meddling in Italian affairs. According to Fabrizio's character in the Book I of *Art of War*, "So a well-ordered city ought to want this study of war to be used in times of peace for training and in times of war for necessity and for glory, and the public alone left to use it as an art, as Rome did. And any citizen who has another end in such a practice is not good; and any city governed otherwise is not well ordered."[10] One would not expect the real Fabrizio to condemn his own occupation as a *condottiere* in such a way.

Marcia Colish identifies numerous historiographical interpretations to help explain Machiavelli's decision to use Fabrizio as spokesman in *Art of War* given that the real Fabrizio did not believe or practice what Machiavelli's literary "Fabrizio" advised the other interlocutors. Some of the explanations include Fabrizio being used as a "caricature" of the real Fabrizio, Fabrizio used as a literary device to show contrast between theory and practice, Fabrizio used to curry favor in the event the real Fabrizio would become long-term master of Italy, and Fabrizio used to show disdain for the Medici family and the Medici-controlled papacy of Leo X (Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici).[11] Florentine politics was complex and fluid, and Machiavelli may have used Fabrizio to make certain political points in the wake of the Medici restoration and its implications for Florentine and papal politics.[12] Thus, Fabrizio may have been used as a shield, allowing Machiavelli to criticize the political reality in which he found himself while minimizing the associated risks.

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[10] *Art of War* 1.75-6.
[11] Colish, 1153.
[12] Ibid., 1156.

As a humanist, Machiavelli looked back to ancient sources, particularly from the Roman Republic, as a model or guide to understand his own time and to find effective strategies to manage or improve the military, political, and religious situation of Renaissance Florence. Machiavelli used the ancient sources to find what Christopher Celenza calls "fundamental continuities in human behavior and political balances of power."[13] *Art of War* is replete with such connections. In addition, the work follows a great tradition of classical military manuals, some of which Machiavelli read and used as background to write *Art of War*. He may have read Greco-Roman military manuals such as *On the Military Arrangements of the Greeks* by Aelian, *How to Survive Under Siege* by Aeneas Tacticus, and *Ars Tactica* by Arrian. Many points of advice Fabrizio offered bear striking resemblance to such military manuals. Based on Machiavelli's use of specific examples throughout *Art of War*, it is certain that he thoroughly analyzed *History of Rome* by Livy, *Stratagems* by Frontinus, *Gallic War* by Julius Caesar, and numerous works of Xenophon, Polybius, and others.

From all of these sources, and from his own experiences, Machiavelli derived that war is an art. It is a specialized type of knowledge and expertise that Machiavelli believed was vital.[14] In *The Prince*, Machiavelli recommended that a prince should make the art of war his principle art.[15] Politics is also an art. The prince's study of the art of war is thus a fusion of the two arts. In the preface of *Art of War*, Machiavelli made it perfectly clear that his primary aim in writing his military treatise was to show a link to both arts and their effect on civilian and military lives.[16] Considering the "ancient orders," found in Machiavelli's numerous examples from classical

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[13] Celenza, 45.
[14] Winter, 167.
[15] *The Prince* 14.
[16] *Art of War* Preface 1.

texts, "nothing would be found more united, more in conformity, and, of necessity, as much inclined toward one another as these."[17] The bulk of *Art of War* is Machiavelli's attempt to explain the link between war and politics.

One might say that Machiavelli's understanding of the interconnectedness of war and politics is a truth recognized across time and around the globe. Julius Caesar no doubt hoped to boost his political standing by writing his self-laudatory *Gallic Wars*. Hundreds of years earlier and halfway around the world, Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu noted five "constant factors" of warfare: Moral Law, Heaven, Earth, The Commander, and Method and Discipline.[18] For Sun Tzu, Moral Law related to the political and social arrangement between the ruler and his subjects, while Heaven and Earth dealt with uncontrollable phenomena with which an army must contend, as well as with geography and distance. The factors of The Commander and Method and Discipline related to the actors in warfare and their tactics.

Interestingly, Machiavelli's *Art of War* analyzes each of the same "constant factors," nearly in the same order. Like Sun Tzu's Moral Law, Books I-II of Machiavelli's *Art of War* describe the link between citizens and the military, civic virtue, a well-ordered principality or republic, and the raising and training of the troops. Like Heaven and Earth, Books III-V describe the spatial arrangement of a battle, including geography and logistics. Machiavelli accomplished this with a description of a mock battle in Book III. While Machiavelli discussed issues similar to Sun Tzu's The Commander in Books I-II, Method and Discipline are the key topics of Books VI-VII of Machiavelli's work, wherein he discussed encampment of troops, specific methods of attacking and defending fortifications, and general rules of warfare. While there is no conclusive evidence to show that Machiavelli read Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, the similarities are quite striking.

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[17] *Art of War* Preface 3.
[18] Sun Tzu 1.4.

Perhaps the similarities between Machiavelli's and Sun Tzu's treatises testify, at least in part, to the universality of warfare and the link between war and politics. Other military treatises, such as Arrian's *Ars Tactica*, contain similar information about the military and political nature of warfare, further testifying to the universality of the concepts of war and politics.[19] Nearly echoing Sun Tzu, Machiavelli wrote that one should seek "to honor and reward the virtues, …to esteem the modes and orders of military discipline, to constrain the citizens to love one another," and other such actions that made the ancients praiseworthy.[20] Like Sun Tzu, Machiavelli wrote about the qualities of a good ruler and the relationship between the ruler and his subjects in a republic or principality. *The Prince* was his most obvious attempt at this. Machiavelli compared Sparta's post-Peloponnesian War rule over Athens and Sparta to Rome's rule over Capua and Carthage. To these ancient examples, he drew a link to Florence's effort to subjugate Pisa in 1509.[21] Machiavelli commanded the Florentine army against Pisa, giving him first-hand experience in both war and politics, as well as with the relationship between ruler and subject. As if taking advice from Sun Tzu, Machiavelli used his well-trained infantry to checkmate the Pisans, winning as a result of military strategy and organization rather than a major battle.[22] It was a military victory and a political victory. Sun Tzu would have been proud, as he is famously known for stating, "supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."[23]

Machiavelli effectively used, and advocated through Fabrizio's dialogue, what we now call mobile infantry warfare. This mode of warfare successfully combined the tactics of the

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[19] For an excellent description of Arrian's *Ars Tactica*, see Philip A. Stadter, "The *Ars Tactica* of Arrian: Tradition and Originality." *Classical Philology* 73, no. 2 (April 1978): 118. http://www.jstor.org/stable/268990 (accessed February 27, 2016).
[20] *Art of War* 1.33.
[21] *The Prince* 5; see also *Art of War* 7.136-7.
[22] Celenza, 50.
[23] Sun Tzu 3.2.

Roman legions with the artillery available in the early-sixteenth century. In the mock battle in Book III of *Art of War*, Fabrizio arrayed his army in much the same way the Romans would have. However, Fabrizio took into account the light and heavy artillery, such as arquebuses (an early form of long-barreled personal gun) and cannons. Of the cavalry's method of dealing with an enemy that uses guns, Fabrizio stated, "The best remedy for [arquebuses] is to come to hands quickly; and if in the first assault some die, some always die. And a good captain and a good army do not have to fear."[24] Machiavelli employed infantry in coordination with artillery to take Pisa in 1509.

Two centuries after Machiavelli's death, Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz lauded Machiavelli as a "very sound judge of military matters."[25] He, like Machiavelli, wrote at length about the influence of the "political object" on the "military object," the relationship between war and politics. Clausewitz's famous axiom, "war is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse with an admixture of other means," expressed his understanding of the link between war and politics.[26] For Clausewitz, is was a "special profession" because it encourages a spirit of bravery, a particular intelligence, and a "higher nature" of its practitioners.[27] Furthermore, war is part of a collection of activities that have a great impact on the whole of society. These truths are evident throughout Machiavelli's *Art of War*, particularly in regard to citizen-soldiers and the perils of hiring foreign mercenaries. In *I Believe and Profess*, Clausewitz called foreign interference "the sick bed to which [the nation] was fastened by foreign chains."[28] Likewise, Machiavelli chafed at foreign interference, perhaps because it upset the relationship

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[24] *Art of War* 3.134.
[25] Christopher Lynch, Interpretive Essay on *Art of War*, by Niccolò Machiavelli (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 180.
[26] Karl von Clausewitz, *War, Politics, and Power: Selections from On War and I Believe and Profess*, trans. and ed. Edward M. Collins (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1997), 176.
[27] Ibid., 123.
[28] Ibid., 208.

between war and politics. Machiavelli's infantry in 1509 was largely made up of Florentine citizens rather than the foreign mercenaries other Italian city-states commonly used at the time. This likely made the real Fabrizio Colonna's conquest of Florence in 1512 difficult for Machiavelli to accept.

One of the most challenging political and military powers with which Machiavelli had to contend was the Church. Machiavelli blamed the increased use of mercenary troops in Italy on the Catholic Church's effort to make the papacy a temporal power. In *The Prince*, he explained, "Thus Italy having fallen almost entirely into the hands of the Church and a few republics, and the priests and other citizens not being accustomed to bear arms, they began to hire foreigners as soldiers."[29] The Church was an ever-present social and cultural force in Florence and throughout Europe as a consequence of the importance of religion in European society, but its temporal authority was great enough to make it a formidable military and political power as well. Rather than viewing the Church as only a spiritual force, Machiavelli included the Church in his military and political calculations. As mentioned above, the pope who reigned at the time *Art of War* was published was Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici, reigning as Leo X. The Medici family loomed large as a political, economic, and military force, with connections throughout Europe. Leo X granted indulgences to those who donated to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica, he extended the Spanish Inquisition into Portugal, and he excommunicated Martin Luther. From Machiavelli's perspective, Leo's papacy was more about politics and power than about religion.

The mixture of religion into the dynamic of war and politics was nothing new for Machiavelli. According to Colish, Machiavelli believed that the function of religion was "to serve politics, inspiring politically constructive attitudes and behavior, civic virtue, and military

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[29] *The Prince* 12.

valor."[30] Such a perspective on religion stood in stark contrast to that of another Renaissance humanist, Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus emphasized morality over political and military expediency. In one illustrative example, Erasmus wrote, "If you cannot defend your realm without violating justice, without wanton loss of human life, without great loss to religion, give up and yield to the importunities of the age! … It is far better to be a just man than an unjust prince."[31] Erasmus's exhortation to rule justly or not to rule at all seems to be a response to Machiavelli's advice in chapter 17 of *The Prince* to rule through cruelty, miserliness, and deception if necessary. Machiavelli stated that it is better for the prince to be feared than to be loved, when only one of them is possible, so long as the prince avoids being hated.[32] This advice was given to secular rulers as well as to ecclesiastical rulers. In chapter 11 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli wrote, "His holiness, Pope Leo X, therefore, has found the pontificate in a very powerful condition, from which it is hoped that as those Popes made it great by force of arms, so he through his goodness and infinite other virtues will make it both great and venerated."[33] According to Machiavelli, Leo X hoped to be loved and feared.

Machiavelli's jaded view of religion in relation to war and politics was no doubt created by the condition of Italy before and during his lifetime. In reference to the expansion of mercenary soldiers due to the pope's quest for a temporal kingdom, Christopher Lynch notes that Machiavelli felt that arms did not fit the pope as a man of religion.[34] Arms and religion joined forces under Roman Emperor Constantine after his victory at the Milvian Bridge in the year 312, so Leo's militancy was simply another phase in a long relationship between war, politics, and

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[30] Colish, 1158.
[31] Desiderius Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Lester K. Born, *Columbia Records of Civilization* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963), 155, http://www.stoics.com/erasmus_s_education_of_a_chris.html (accessed February 26, 2016).
[32] *The Prince* 17.
[33] *The Prince* 11.
[34] Lynch, 200.

religion. In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burkhardt noted several murders committed in or near a church. These include the assassination of Duke Giovan Maria Visconti at the church entrance in 1412, murders of the Chiavelli during mass in 1435, and the murder of Galeazzo Maria Sforza in 1476.[35] War and politics found their way into church, shaping Machiavelli's outlook still further.

The key events that shaped Machiavelli's life found their way into his analysis of the military and civilian spheres of life in *Art of War*. Experience taught him that the citizen-soldier was preferable to the mercenary as a means of mitigating the dangers to society posed by foreign interference. Classical texts, particularly from the Romans, provided examples that illustrated this lesson. The ancients also offered examples of civic virtue that were sorely lacking in Machiavelli's time. As a humanist, Machiavelli felt a connection to the classics, so he used them to make sense of his own time and to develop strategies to make the best of his situation. Just as the writings of Julius Caesar, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and others were unique to their particular historical era and geographic location, and best understood in that context, Machiavelli's *Art of War* is best understood in the context of Italy in the early-sixteenth century. *Art of War* represents Machiavelli's effort to make sense of his world, the complex interaction of war, politics, and humanism in Renaissance Europe, as well as his effort to use classical texts to encourage his readers to learn from the ancient examples and return to the classical modes of warfare, statecraft, and civic virtue.

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[35] Burkhardt, 54.

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