CHAPTER 17

Section 1

HISTORYMAKERS # Niccolò Machiavelli
Inventor of Political Science

"My intent being to write a useful work . . . it seemed to me more appropriate to pursue the actual truth of the matter than the imagination of it. Many have imagined republics and principalities which were never seen or known really to exist; because how one lives is so far removed from how one ought to live that he who abandons what one does for what one ought to do, learns rather his own ruin than his preservation."—Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince *(1513)*

Niccolò Machiavelli, an intellectual and some-time government official, nearly lived an anonymous life. He was an educated man who had written plays but remained an unknown citizen of Florence, Italy, well into middle age. It was not until the age of 44 that he single-handedly revolutionized the study of governments and politics.

Machiavelli was born in 1469 to a noble family in Florence, one of the intellectual centers of the Italian Renaissance. He received a solid education. During his twenties, he worked in Rome on behalf of a Florentine banker. Florence was experiencing political upheaval at the time. Lorenzo de' Medici, the great banker and patron of the arts, had ruled the city until his death in 1492. His son proved to be an incompetent heir and was banished from the city. A few years later, the people of Florence decided to form a republic.

Machiavelli became an official in the new government. He served the city-state on several diplomatic missions that allowed him close observation of some of the leading political figures of his time. He grew to respect those who knew how to gain and use power. He also took the role of organizing a citizen-army for Florence, which he modeled after the army of the ancient Roman Republic.

Machiavelli's militia did not have the fighting ability of Rome's famed legions, though. In 1512, the Spanish army defeated the Florentine troops, and the Medici family once again took power. Machiavelli was dismissed from the government and retired to his country estate to write.

Among Machiavelli's creations was *The Prince.* A devoted supporter of republican government, he nevertheless dedicated the work to the new Medici ruler of Florence. Machiavelli hoped *The Prince* would prove his intelligence so he could win a job in the new regime. He also hoped to spur the Medici family to unite northern Italy and insulate it from foreign interference.

Previous writers of political philosophy tried to describe perfect governments. Machiavelli had a different idea in mind. He wanted to understand how political leaders could best obtain and hold power. He thought that trickery was more effective in achieving these goals than honesty. He also thought that acquiring and maintaining power was more important to rulers than being a "good" leader. The chapter title "On Cruelty and [compassion], and Whether It Is Better To Be Loved or Feared" reveals the core of his view of government, which is based on his view of human nature:

> It will naturally be answered that it would be desirable to be both [loved] and [feared]; but as it is difficult to be both at the same time, it is much more safe to be feared than to be loved, when you have to choose between the two. For it may be said of men in general that they are ungrateful and fickle, dissemblers, avoiders of danger, and greedy of gain.

His name became an adjective—"Machiavellian" came to describe any leader who used deceit to impose his or her will.

Ironically, Machiavelli was ruined by his own ambitions. The Medici gave him diplomatic work. However, when they were overthrown and the republic restored again, Machiavelli was tainted by his association with the Medici. He was turned down for employment and died shortly thereafter.

Questions

1. **Drawing Conclusions** How did Machiavelli's ideas and actions reflect his respect for ancient Rome?
2. **Making Generalizations** Why is it appropriate to call Machiavelli's work political science?
3. **Making Inferences** What was Machiavelli's view of human nature?