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## DESTROY, DO NOT WOUND

MASTERING MACHIAVELLI

Here's one of Machiavelli's most controversial ideas, explained through the rise to power of two men — **Agathocles** and **Oliverotto da Fermo**.

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Machiavelli states that Princes can come into power by various different methods: by skill, by luck, or through being elected by their fellow citizens. But Princes can also gain power through criminal means and in *The Prince* he tells stories of two men who successfully achieved power by using wickedness.

### Syracuse, Sicily, 317 BC

Agathocles (361BC-289BC) was a poor, common man, born to the son of a potter. He joined the military and through a combination of wickedness, determination and ability rose through the ranks to the position of Praetor

of Syracuse. Not satisfied with this, he decided he wanted to become a Prince and called a supposedly crucial meeting of the Syracusan senate. Once everyone had assembled, he gave the signal to his soldiers, who executed all the senators and rich men of the state. This act of cunning and deception enabled Agathocles not only to become King of Syracuse, but to control the state without any serious threat to his absolute power. He even managed to withstand a Carthaginian siege on his city.

### **Fermo, Italy, 1501**

A more recent illustration of grabbing power by evil means is the case of Oliverotto da Fermo (1475-1502). Made an orphan as a child, he was raised by his uncle, before being sent to military school. He was intelligent, strong and fearless, which helped him become a prominent soldier. However, he too decided he wanted to be a commander, rather than being commanded and arranged with his allies to take over the city of Fermo.

Writing to his uncle telling him he wanted to visit, Oliverotto returned to Fermo bringing with him his loyal soldiers. As part of his homecoming, he arranged a banquet inviting many important nobles and local politicians in the town. After the banquet, Oliverotto spoke in praise of the ruler Pope Alexander VI and his son, but mid-conversation his soldiers came out of secret hiding places and killed all the guests, including his uncle. After the slaughter Oliverotto went on to besiege Fermo and seize power. He scared the people into forming a new government in which he was the Prince and continued to terrorise the city into obedience. Anybody that rebelled

against him was killed. It was only thanks to the superior political skill of the Pope's son, Cesare Borgia, that Oliverotto lost hold of his power and Borgia later had him executed.



Cesare Borgia leaving the Vatican by Giuseppe Lorenzo Gatteri

These two infamous rulers enhanced their power through the use of brutal, cruel and inhumane behaviour. Agathocles' courage and ability made him a prince (and commendable in Machiavelli's eyes), but his behaviour was not virtuous and his methods lacked honour. In other words, he got the power but not the glory and therefore didn't get Machiavelli's true respect and full admiration.

Machiavelli neither praises nor condemns the method of grabbing power through wickedness. He simply states that this tactic is criminal and dishonest, but ultimately works.

Ignoring morality and only concerned about efficiency, Machiavelli believed there are good and bad ways to be cruel and sometimes force or violence is needed to secure your position as a Prince. However, once that has been achieved you must stop and let the situation heal. A good act of cruelty has to be done all at once and then immediately end, without the need for any further crime. A bad cruelty is one that becomes a messy business by requiring repeated criminal behaviour. By continuing to inflict pain and suffering on the people, they will never support you.

*“So it should be noted that when he seizes a state the new ruler must determine all the injuries that he will need to inflict. He must inflict them once for all, and not have to renew them every day, and in that way he will be able to set men's minds at rest and win them over to him when he confreres benefits.*

*Whoever acts otherwise, either through timidity or bad advice, is always forced to have a knife ready to his hand and he can never depend on his subject because they, suffering fresh and continuous violence, can never feel secure with regard to him.”*

The long-term success and security of the state was Machiavelli's main concern. For this reason, despite using a similar method to gain power, he believed Agathocles' use of violence may have been justified, whereas Oliverotto's was not.

Agathocles ended his use of force soon after he took control, once he had established order and secured the state. As a result, the local population supported him and they helped save the state against attackers. Agathocles' evil acts saved the state and ultimately benefited the people. Therefore, for Machiavelli, the ends could justify the means.

Oliverotto on the other hand, continued to behave in a cruel and wicked manner. Because of this, the people of Fermo did not support him and did not defend the city against opposition. By being unable to save the state, Oliverotto's behaviour was not justified and the ends could not justify the means.

The ultimate goal for Agathocles was the greater good of the state. Oliverotto's only goal was to better himself.

Villains are able to hold power successfully, by exploiting their crimes well. Failure to act swiftly and decisively will mean you'll always have to be on your guard as someone can be plotting against you. Machiavelli's lesson for a Prince is this: commit all your cruelties at once. That way less overall offence is taken by the victims, as each separate crime or injury is felt less.

A swift, decisive strike is less painful than a thousand small cuts. Conversely, distribute benefits to people over time and in small amounts, ensuring they're appreciated more. By giving out too much at once, people will expect more later.

*“Violence must be inflicted once for all; people will then forget what it tastes like and so be less resentful. Benefits must be conferred gradually; and in that way they will taste better.”*

Modern politics contains many figures that came to power in ways that echo Machiavelli's examples. Many past and current national leaders have exploited people, committed atrocities and maintain their power through deception and killings. In today's world, cruelty and politics still often go hand in hand. Machiavelli's teachings can help you better evaluate today's politicians by analysing their cruel behaviour.

However, Machiavelli could not foresee modern technology and its influence on a totalitarian state. Cruelties can now be committed in the same way that Oliverotto did - continuously - using technology to easily control and repress the people, allowing tyrants to reign for a generation or more (eg. Stalin, Mao, Saddam & Assad).

## **Russia, 1917**

So how should a Prince conquer a new state? According to Machiavelli, he should eliminate the entire old ruling family. This will remove the greatest

threat to power. In the Russian revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin not only executed the Emperor of Russia, Nicholas II, but also executed Machiavelli's tactics by murdering his entire family.



Nicholas II of Russia with the family

## China, 1934-1949

If you inflict small or non-lethal injuries on your rivals, you run the risk of angering them but not removing the problem, which in turn could encourage and allow them to seek revenge. A prime example of this was the

battle in China between the nationalists and the communists. The nationalists had the smaller Red Army on the back foot. The Red Army began a military retreat known as The Long March (1934-35) to get away. They walked over mountains and tough terrain, with the majority of the men dying as a result.



Mao in 1938

After the Long March, the survivors set up a base and regrouped. Mao Zedong acted as a leader on the retreat and rose to power, plotting and planning revenge for the next decade. It ultimately led to the Chinese communist revolution of 1949 where Mao and his army took power and eliminated the nationalists completely, forcing them to withdraw to Taiwan.

*“One has to mention that men should either be well treated or crushed because although they can avenge themselves of lighter injuries of more serious ones they cannot. Therefore the harm that is done to a man should be so serious that one does not stand in fear of revenge.”*

This is ruthless advice from Machiavelli. It uses logical reasoning but lacks any consideration of ethics. His binary choice for leaders of treating people well or destroying them is cynical realism, as anything in between could create strong enemies.

However, I don't think it is always the correct course of action, even when taking into account the fact that his advice is specifically for leaders. Consider the Mytilenian Debate during the Peloponnesian War (427 BC).

### **Mytilene & Athens, 428-427 BC**

The Mytilenians were part of a group of Greek city-states led by Athens but they revolted against the Athenian empire, hoping to be supported by the Spartans. The help from Sparta did not arrive in time and the Mytilenians soon surrendered after being put under siege by the Athenians.

When considering how to handle the rebellious state, two prominent arguments were put forward in Athens in the Mytilenian Debate. Cleon, the general, was in favour of killing all the men from Mytilene and enslaving

the women and children, a ruthless, Machiavellian-esque tactic. Diodotus argued not to kill the men but to impose penalties and take money from the Mytilenians, as this was in the best interest of Athens. The votes were eventually cast in favour of Diodotus' view and their lives were spared. Athens imposed democracy on the rebellious land and gained financially from their decision.