Review of International Studies (2001), 27, 539–556 Copyright © British International Studies Association

Machiavelli: human nature, good faith, and diplomacy

G. R. BERRIDGE

Abstract. Machiavelli believed that diplomacy, unlike military service, was of no significance for civic virtue, and that in foreign policy it was no substitute for arms and money. Nevertheless, it enhanced the *virtù* of even the strongest prince. It was for this and other reasons that Machiavelli also believed that the good faith on which negotiation depends was *generally* observed. His view that promises need not outlast the conditions that produce them is an escape clause that is equally necessary. Machiavelli does not deserve the charge, laid at his door by Harold Nicolson, of corrupting the art of diplomacy.

Niccolò Machiavelli, who was born in the republic of Florence in 1469, is a towering figure in political thought but not known at all for his reflections on diplomacy. This is not surprising since, in a direct way, they were meagre. Nevertheless, he reached his maturity in the very years in which diplomacy was being transformed by the invention and spread of the resident embassy among the turbulent city states of Italy, and he died in 1527, by which time this most significant institution was well entrenched beyond the Alps. For such a man at such a time it would be rash indeed to overlook anything that he might have had to say, directly or indirectly, about diplomacy. In any case, Machiavelli was, as Meinecke reminds us, 'the first person to discover the real nature of *raison d'état*',[1] and on the face of it this doctrine had considerable implications for the methods of the ambassador. It is for this reason that, in his account of 'the Italian system' of diplomacy, Harold Nicolson lays particular emphasis on Machiavelli's writings, both for what they reveal and for the influence on diplomacy that they are alleged to have had.[2] It seems worth adding, too, that the uncompromising 'realism' that marked in his work such a break with classical political philosophy was the method imitated almost two centuries later by Abraham de Wicquefort, author of the greatest manual on diplomatic practice of the *ancien régime*. The Dutchman, like Machiavelli a 'minister of the second order', openly admired the Florentine and recommended his works despite the risk that 'people will perhaps be scandaliz'd'.[3] These, then, are the reasons for considering, with Nicolson's admonitions about his corrupting influence especially in mind, the contribution of Machiavelli to diplomatic theory.[4]

---

[1] Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'état and Its Place in Modern History*, first publ. 1924, trans. D. Scott (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 41.

[2] *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method* (London: Constable, 1954), pp. 31–3.

[3] *The Embassador and His Functions*, first publ. 1680/1, trans. J. Digby 1716, repr. with introduction by Maurice Keens-Soper (Leicester: Centre for the Study of Diplomacy, University of Leicester, 1997), pp. 52–3.

[4] On diplomatic theory generally, see G. R. Berridge, Maurice Keens-Soper, and T. G. Otte, *Diplomatic Theory from Machiavelli to Kissinger* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001). The present article is a slightly revised version of my chapter on Machiavelli in this book.

Machiavelli's diplomatic career

It was not only the circumstances of his time that gave Machiavelli a most remarkable opportunity to observe the conduct of diplomacy. He came of a family which, though in modest circumstances, had been important in the politics of Florence for more than two centuries[5] and in 1498, at the age of only 29, he was appointed second chancellor of the republic, despite apparently having no previous administrative experience.[6] The second chancery dealt mainly with correspondence about Florence's own territories but a month after assuming this office Machiavelli was also made secretary to the Ten of War. This was the influential sub-committee of the Florentine government—the *signoria*—charged with conducting its foreign affairs, and it was in its service that Machiavelli came to diplomacy, only four years after the French invasion had plunged the peninsular into turmoil.

The first chancellor, Marcello Adriani, was also a professor at the university and 'more interested in Greek poetry than Italian politics'.[7] As a result, Machiavelli played a more important role in the affairs of the Ten of War than his formal position might suggest. All of the correspondence passed over his table and he was required to write many papers, especially instructions to ambassadors.[8] After 1506 he was also virtually the republic's defence minister.[9] Of most interest for our purposes, however, Machiavelli was frequently required to travel abroad on behalf of the Ten, not only within Italy but as far afield as France and Germany. His biographer, Ridolfi, describes his various roles in this regard: 'Sometimes … they [secretaries or chancellors] were entrusted with commissions and even embassies, when to save expense or because of the nature of the business or for some other reason they [the *signoria*] did not wish to send a real ambassador. The chancellors sent on such missions were not called ambassadors or orators but envoys (*mandatari*). They were not sent to negotiate peace treaties or alliances but to observe and report, or to negotiate matters of moderate importance where speed was essential, or to prepare the way for duly elected ambassadors, or sometimes to accompany, assist, advise or supervise them.'[10] It is, however, Hale who draws the most significant conclusion, pointing out that, in contrast to the ambassadors, it was the *mandatari* 'who saw the seamy side of international relations most clearly'.[11]

Thus the 'Florentine Secretary' was for a significant part of his career actually a diplomat, even though for temperamental reasons he appears not to have reached the highest professional standards, either as observer or negotiator;[12] nor was he ever formally a resident. Machiavelli was employed on two diplomatic missions within Italy in the first half of 1499 but he did not undertake his first foreign mission until July 1500, when he went to the allied court of Louis XII of France, where he remained for almost half a year. In June 1502 Machiavelli provided 'discreet reinforcement'[13] to the Bishop of Volterra, Franceso Soderini, on a mission to Urbino, recently seized by Cesare Borgia, who had just been created duke of the Romagna by his father, Pope Alexander VI. The 'Duke Valentino', who was at this juncture at the height of his power, was attempting to carve out a territory for himself in this anarchic region bordering Florence, which he was clearly resolved to 'protect'. Machiavelli next visited the dangerous duke alone. He arrived at his court at Imola on 7 October 1502 and remained there for almost four months, prevaricating on the pretext of waiting for a sign from the French and watching him closely, not least when he took his savage revenge on the Vitelli and the Orsini.[14] Thereafter, Machiavelli was sent on important missions to Rome (October–December 1503, August–October 1506), to France (January–February 1504, June–October 1510), and Germany (1507–8). He undertook his last diplomatic missions prior to the collapse of the Florentine republic in September 1511.[15] He was sent to Milan and then back to France once more in order to petition Louis to suspend the convocation of the schismatic francophile cardinals who were so complicating Florence's relations with Rome.[16]

---

[5] G. Mattingly, 'Machiavelli', in J. H. Plumb (ed.), *Renaissance Profiles* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 21.

[6] Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 3–6, and generally R. Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. C. Grayson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), ch. 2.

[7] Mattingly, 'Machiavelli', p. 22; confirmed by Ridolfi, *The Life*, pp. 60, 75.

[8] J. R. Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 6–7.

[9] Mattingly, 'Machiavelli', pp. 27–8; Ridolfi, *The Life*, pp. 96–7.

[10] Ridolfi, *The Life*, p. 25.

[11] *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, p. 7; see also p. 36.

[12] Mattingly, 'Machiavelli', p. 29; Ridolfi, *The Life*, pp. 36, 39, 77, 100ff, 114–15, 119; Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, pp. 29, 42. Federico Chabod stands between the critics and defenders of Machiavelli the diplomat, and his analysis is persuasive. On the one hand he maintains that Machiavelli 'gradually accustoms himself to the difficult art of diplomacy, which is not quickly learned, and becomes an adept at it'. But on the other he argues that 'being a diplomat by chance and

Machiavelli remained in office until 1512, when the Florentine republic paid the price of not being on the winning side when the Spanish forces invited into Italy by the pope succeeded in driving out the French. The Medici returned to the city, the republic was dissolved, and on 7 November Machiavelli was dismissed and sent into internal exile. In the following year worse was to come. Accused of conspiring against the new regime, he was tortured and imprisoned but shortly afterwards released into obscure unemployment under a general amnesty declared to celebrate the election of a Medici pope.

The relevant texts

The only point in his writings at which Machiavelli gives direct and sustained attention to the manner, as opposed to the circumstances, in which diplomacy should be conducted is in the letter of 1522 subsequently entitled 'Advice to Raffaello Girolami when he went as Ambassador to the Emperor'.[17] It is true that there is a vast collection of his diplomatic papers, which are usually known as the

---

not by upbringing' as well as a man of outstanding political imagination, Machiavelli usually fails to conceal his feelings and is not as accurate, careful and even as acute as the Florentine and Venetian diplomats born to the art*, Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, trans. D. Moore (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1958), pp. 4–5, 60–2.

[13] Ridolfi, *The Life*, p. 48.

[14] Ibid., p. 58.

[15] Following a slow political rehabilitation, Machiavelli was used on a number of more or less minor missions in the 1520s.

[16] Ridolfi, *The Life*, p. 123.

[17] In A. Gilbert's *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others* (Durham, North Carolina, 1965), vol. I, pp. 116–19.

Legations though hereafter they will be styled the *Missions* since this is the title employed in the translation on which I have generally relied.[18] However, the *Missions* are only accessible with difficulty to the English reader and are not easy to distil for theoretical significance.[19] I shall certainly draw on them for this article but otherwise it is advisable to rely chiefly on *The Prince*[20] and, more especially, on the much longer and more important *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* (hereafter *The Discourses*).[21] His last great work, *The History of Florence*, is also very useful. These books, among others, were the fruits of the enforced leisure experienced by Machiavelli after his removal from office and tell us a great deal about his views on diplomacy.

Diplomacy, force, and republican expansion

Machiavelli's focus was the state—especially the republican state—and the requirements for its stability. However, this led him to consider the relations *between* states as well. After all, the external environment contained enemies who could extinguish the liberties of the state altogether, while the foreign policy that it adopted to cope with external threats had implications for its internal politics that were not much less momentous.

On the face of it, argued Machiavelli, it might be supposed that the best external posture for a state to adopt was to make itself sufficiently strong to deter any predatory attack but not so strong as to provoke a pre-emptive one. It might also be supposed, he suggested, that the last possibility would be further discouraged by constitutional avowal, supported by convincing practical demonstration, that it had no expansionist designs on its neighbours. Unfortunately, says Machiavelli of this 'middle way' between great weakness and great strength, in the real world where 'all human affairs are ever in a state of flux', this is not likely to work: 'necessity' will often lead states to follow policies of which 'reason' disapproves. Necessity may, for example, lead a state to expand—perhaps for 'defensive' reasons—even though it is not constituted for this policy, with consequences inevitably dire. On the other hand, if the middle course produces a prolonged peace this will in the end be no better, since it will 'either render it [the state] effeminate or give rise to factions'.[22]

In consequence of these considerations, Machiavelli concluded that 'one ought, in constituting a republic, to consider the possibility of its playing a more honourable role'. This required a state whose constitution divided power between nobles and people, armed and welcomed the expansion of the latter, and thus made a policy of imperialism realistic should this be required.[23] In the process, friction between nobles and people, though having its inconveniences, would stimulate 'legislation favourable to liberty',[24] while reliance on citizen soldiers rather than mercenaries would create better citizens as well as better soldiers.[25] His model, of course, was the ancient Roman republic and its great empire, an empire that was created via hegemony rather than by confederation or naked dominion.[26] Where did diplomacy[27] fit into this theory?

---

[18] Christian E. Detmold, *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli* (Boston, MA: James R. Osgood, 1882), 4 vols. The *Missions*, together with important miscellaneous papers, are to be found in volumes III and IV.

[19] Gilbert's *Chief Works* contains only a small selection from the *Legations/Missions*. On the general importance of the *Missions*, see Skinner, *Machiavelli*, p. 9.

[20] All references to *The Prince* are to the edition translated and introduced by Stephen J. Milner: Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and Other Political Writings* (London: Everyman, 1995).

[21] All references to *The Discourses* are to the translation by Leslie J. Walker, edited and introduced by Bernard Crick (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1970).

[22] *The Discourses*, I.6, pp. 122–3.

Machiavelli's fundamental assumption, as is well known, was actually that skill in the art of war was more important to the state than anything, including skill in diplomacy, because of his belief that 'sound laws' follow 'sound arms'.[28] Nevertheless, states did not always have sufficient military strength to achieve their aims, and it was out of this necessity that diplomacy was born. '[W]hat princes have to do at the outset of their careers,' Machiavelli tells us, 'republics also must do until such time as they become powerful and can rely on force alone'.[29] Whether republics or principalities, if they were as weak in arms and as ineptly led in the field as the average Italian state of the fifteenth century, it was unavoidable that they should place particular reliance on 'deceptions, … tricks and schemes'.[30] Notwithstanding the suggestion that states that grow to be great powers can rely on force alone, it is obvious that Machiavelli believed that diplomacy remained important for a prince who wishes 'to do great things' even after he has acquired large armies,[31] because prudence dictated the avoidance of military over-stretch. Thus, we are informed, 'the Romans never had two very big wars going on at the same time'; instead, it was their policy to select one military target at a time 'and industriously to foster tranquillity among the rest'.[32]

Human nature, good faith, and diplomacy

If Machiavelli urged the constant need for diplomacy, his professional experience and historical reading had led him to a second view which was, in the circumstances, an encouraging one: it was an activity to which men (and women)[33] were peculiarly amenable.[34] Observing how they really behaved rather than dwelling on how they ought to behave, he concluded that men were 'selfish, … cowardly, greedy, and, above all, gullible and stupid'.[35] In this connection it is instructive to recall Machiavelli's famous play, *Mandragola*. The 'glory' of this, as Lord Macaulay points out,[36] is Messer Nicia, the simpleton who despite his learned profession is gulled by a young gentleman, a devious hanger-on, and a venal friar into encouraging his beautiful wife to share her bed with the gentleman by whom she is so admired.[37]

---

[23] *The Discourses*, I.6, p. 123; see also J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ and London: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 198–9.

[24] *The Discourses*, I.4, p. 113; I.6, pp. 123–4.

[25] This theme is developed to its fullest in Machiavelli's *The Art of War*; for commentary, see Neil Wood's Introduction to the revised edition of the Ellis Farneworth trans. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. xlvii–liii; and Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 199ff.

[26] These are the terms used by Pocock to characterize the three possible methods of expansion analysed by Machiavelli in *The Discourses*, II.4, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 215.

[27] Although Father Walker grouped together chapters 11 to 15 of Book Two of *The Discourses* under the heading 'Diplomacy and War', Machiavelli himself did not use the word 'diplomacy'. This was for the good reason that it was nearly a further three hundred years before Edmund Burke invented it. Instead, and apart from simply referring to the employment of ambassadors, we find him using such phrases as 'peaceful methods', 'deceit', 'artifice' and—especially when it is contrasted with force—'prudence'. On 'prudence' in Machiavelli's thought, see Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 38–41.

[28] *The Prince*, pp. 77, 86.

[29] *The Discourses*, II.13, p. 311; see also pp. 297, 372–4, 391, 438–40.

[30] *The History of Florence*, 5/1, p. 1233.

[31] *The Discourses*, II.13, pp. 310–11; see also *The History of Florence*, 7/30, pp. 1374–5.

[32] *The Discourses*, II.1, pp. 271–2.

On the inter-state plane, the baseness and gullibility of the denizens of princely courts made them as vulnerable as Messer Nicia to the gilded tongue and full purse of a skilful diplomat. This was so whether it was his purpose to encourage them in a line of action congenial to the interests of his own prince or obtain sensitive information. In two despatches from the court of Louis XII in 1500, Machiavelli pointedly reminded the Florentine *signoria* of 'the importance of making some one here your friend, who from other motives than mere natural affection [money, of course] will watch your Lordships' interests here, and will occupy himself in your behalf, and of whose services those who may be here as your agents may avail themselves for your advantage … it is with just such weapons', the Florentine Secretary continued, 'that the Pisans defend themselves, and that the Lucchese attack you; and that the Venetians and King Frederick [of Naples], as well as all others who have any business to transact at this court, help themselves; and whoever does not do the same may be said to think of gaining a lawsuit without paying an attorney.'[38] Two years later we find Machiavelli imploring the *signoria* to persuade the merchants of Florence to pay bribes to the chancery clerks of the peripatetic court of the Duke Valentino. '[I]f I do not satisfy these clerks of the Chancery,' he insisted, 'I shall never more be able to expedite anything through them, and especially confidential matters'.[39]

So the diplomat could achieve influence at foreign courts and thereby advance his government's designs because men could be bribed, intimidated or deceived as to their true interests. This was the advantage to diplomacy of the human baseness persuasively alleged by Machiavelli. But such depravity also leads to duplicity and, seeing this, Machiavelli, in a particular application of his general principle that the end justifies the means,[40] tells the prince that he cannot avoid joining the game. Since men 'would not keep their word to you,' he insists, 'you do not have to keep yours to them'.[41] In perhaps the most notorious sentence in *The Prince*, Machiavelli says that 'A prudent ruler … cannot, and should not, keep his word when keeping it is to his disadvantage, and when the reasons that made him promise no longer exist.'[42] These reasons would usually have to do with power, as he had suggested in a despatch from the court of the Duke Valentino: 'alliances between princes are maintained only by arms, inasmuch as the power of arms alone could enforce their observance'.[43] Now, diplomacy is activated not least by the desire to negotiate agreements and this would be pointless if they were not, at least as a general rule, honoured. Is Machiavelli's '*Realpolitik*' consistent with the diplomatic reflex?

---

[33] His second mission was to Catharine Sforza, formidable ruler of Furli; see *Missions*, vol. 3, pp. 6–26.

[34] *The Discourses*, I.42, 'How easily Men may be Corrupted'.

[35] Mattingly, 'Machiavelli', p. 31; also Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, pp. 10–11. And, of course, *The Prince*, ch. 17, pp. 93–4.

[36] T. Babington Macaulay, 'Machiavelli', prefaced to the edition of Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, trans. by Stark Young (New York: Macaulay, 1927), p. 53.

[37] Nicia, whose wife is unable to bear the children he so desires, is persuaded that this can be rectified by administering to her a potion made from the herb, mandragola; but, that since the first man to lie with her afterwards will assuredly die within eight days, he must also, in order to save himself, permit an unwitting stranger to assume this fatal burden.

[38] *Missions*, vol. 3, pp. 100–1. It is clear from a second despatch in which Machiavelli raises this issue that he has in mind as the Florentine's corruptible French official the well disposed General Robertet, *Missions*, vol. 3, pp. 136–7; see also vol. 4, pp. 223–4.

[39] *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 251.

[40] *The Discourses*, I.9, p. 132; III.41, pp. 514–15. For a discussion of this point, see the Introduction to *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, 2 vols., trans. L. J. Walker (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), pp. 118–28.

If we read beyond Chapter 18 of *The Prince*, a book in which, as Butterfield reminds us, Machiavelli was concerned chiefly with emergency conditions and advising new princes how to become as safe as old ones,[44] we discover that his position is in fact more subtle. For one thing, not only did individual men vary in degrees of baseness; so did political regimes. For another, his awareness of the long-term drawbacks of faithlessness made Machiavelli's advice on this point cautious; while his urging of its advantages[45] reflected the shrewd insight that acceptance of faithlessness in some circumstances was, in a world of sovereign princes, a condition of extending faith in others. For both of these reasons, diplomacy was in serious danger neither from the real world as portrayed by Machiavelli nor from the behaviour of princes acting upon his advice.

In *The Discourses* it is notable, to begin with, how impressed is Machiavelli by the degree to which religious oaths sworn even at the point of a sword were honoured during the Roman republic.[46] This is significant for our argument since he would obviously have been aware of the diplomatic custom of his own time of reinforcing treaty signature and ratification with religious ceremonial.[47] Of course, he was also only too well aware that the modern Roman Church was corrupt and was thus no doubt in general sceptical of the current efficacy of this custom, at least in Italy, France and Spain, which he regarded as lands corrupt above all others.[48] Nevertheless, he also notes in *The Discourses* that even sophisticated city dwellers, as in his native Florence during the period of Friar Savonarola, could still be swayed by those who they were convinced had genuine 'converse with God'.[49] Thus, since 'men are born and live and die in an order which remains ever the same',[50] the potential usefulness of religion should never be ruled out and might—it seems permitted to infer about Machiavelli's thought—even now reinforce diplomacy itself in some parts of the world.[51] In any case, it also emerges in *The Discourses* that Machiavelli did not, as it happens, believe that men were often entirely bad.[52] In short, as among individual men religious belief varied in intensity and evil was not ubiquitous, so also was variable the inclination to bad faith.[53]

---

[41] *The Prince*, p. 97.

[42] Ibid; see also *Discourses*, Third Book, ch. 42.

[43] *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 202; see also *The History of Florence*, 8/22, p. 1413: 'Force and necessity … not writings and obligations, make princes keep their agreements.'

[44] Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London: Bell, 1960), p. 92.

[45] Though it must be admitted that, as Father Walker argues, Machiavelli assumes rather than proves that faithlessness is frequently advantageous to a prince, *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli* (1950), pp. 107–8 ('Introduction').

[46] *The Discourses*, I.II–15.

[47] M. S. Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy, 1450–1919* (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 15–16; Jocelyne G. Russell, *Peacemaking in the Renaissance* (London: Duckworth, 1986), pp. 81–2.

[48] *The Discourses*, I.55, pp. 244–5.

[49] *The Discourses* I.II, p. 142.

[50] *The Discourses*, I.II, p. 142.

[51] Among the German states, in particular, *The Discourses*, I.55, pp. 244–5.

Of particular importance in connection with Machiavelli's second belief in this context, that is, that faithlessness also varies between different kinds of political regime, is Chapter 59 of Book One of *The Discourses*. Here he considers 'which contracts are the more stable and on which ought more store to be set, on those made by a republic or on those made by a prince'.[54] In some situations he sees little difference between them. Both will be disinclined to honour an agreement imposed on them by force, and both will be as ready to break faith with a foreign ally if sticking to an agreement with him leads to fear 'for the safety of their estate'.[55] Nevertheless, says Machiavelli, even in the second of these circumstances a republic is likely to be more reliable. It is likely to be even more so in less extreme cases, that is, when keeping an agreement with another government has ceased to suit the state's interest but is still well short of being either humiliating or fatal to its security. 'Instances might be cited of treaties broken by princes for a very small advantage,' he maintains, 'and of treaties which have not been broken by a republic for a very great advantage'.[56] For this Machiavelli appears to offer at least four explanations, to locate which we must cast our net widely in *The Discourses*. The first is that republics have more moral virtue because their governments must needs be responsive to the people, who in their naivety assume that the rules which prevail in ordinary social relationships (for example, that promises should be kept) should also prevail in the intercourse between states.[57] The second, which is closely related to the first, is that they have more respect for law in general. The third is that their officials are of better quality. And the fourth is that their constitutions require the reconciliation of divergent views, which makes their decision-making simply much slower.[58] For all of these reasons, republics are less likely than princes to break their faith with other states.[59] This being Machiavelli's argument, it is striking that one of his longest examples in *The Prince* of a promise being kept to the disadvantage of the promise-maker is of one made not by a republic but by a prince: King Louis XII of France.[60]

If Machiavelli believed that some men and some states were more inclined to honour agreements than others, he also knew that the diplomatic impulse was further strengthened by the need of princes for a *reputation* for integrity in their foreign dealings. For one thing, a cavalier attitude to the 'law of nations', not least in regard to the immunity of diplomats themselves, could *needlessly* provoke hostility and imperil the prince's position.[61] More importantly, a reputation for faithlessness made it unlikely that anyone would make an agreement with him in the first place, while the opposite reputation would lead him to be courted even by recent enemies.[62] Thus, contrary to the interpretation of Meinecke,[63] even the unscrupulous prince had to keep most of his agreements since there was no other way—or at least no better way—in which to acquire a reputation for integrity.[64] It is precisely for this reason, says Machiavelli, that 'powerful states who have a certain respect both for treaties and for one another', and desire to make war on a traditional ally will typically try to provoke him to make the first move.[65] It is also noticeable that when Machiavelli discusses the question of integrity in the context of how the ambassador, as opposed to the prince, should behave, he places even more emphasis on it, suggesting at worst that the diplomat may need to conceal a fact.[66] Had Harold Nicolson read this it is difficult to see how he could have faulted it.

---

[52] *The Discourses*, I.27, p. 177: 'Very rarely do Men know how to be either Wholly Good or Wholly Bad'; I.30, p. 185; I.55, p. 244; I.55, pp. 252–3; Preface to Book II, pp. 266–7; III.29, p. 483; see also I.3, pp. 111–12, incl. Bernard Crick's footnote.

[53] As Father Walker points out, it was precisely because Machiavelli was aware of the existence of conscience among the peoples of his time that he emphasized the prudence of a prince preserving his reputation for integrity, *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli* (1950), p. 106 ('Introduction').

[54] p. 258; see also III.42, 'That Promises extracted by Force ought not to be kept'.

[55] p. 258.

[56] *The Discourses*, I.59, p. 259.

[57] Strauss brings this out well, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, pp. 263, 264–5.

[58] And less secretive, adds Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 257. This is a reasonable corollary but not in fact mentioned by Machiavelli.

[59] *The Discourses*, I.20, 29, 34 (p. 195), 58 and 59.

[60] *The Prince*, pp. 46–47.

A reputation for integrity was also particularly important for mercenary princes, the *condottieri* who made their living by supplying their armed retainers to other princes under a *condotta* (contract). It may be objected that, while being fairly clear, this is only implicit in Chapter 18 of *The Prince*. It is, however, explicit in the *Missions*, notably in the despatch of 11 April 1505 in which Machiavelli reported on his mission to Perugia. The purposes of this were to explore the real reasons for the announcement by Gianpaolo Baglioni of his intention to break his *condotta* to supply 135 men-at-arms to the Florentine Republic and try to persuade him to change his mind.

Gianpaolo, Machiavelli informed the *signoria*, maintained that his own state was in imminent peril, and that for this overriding reason he must remain at home and not be bound by his contract with Florence. Machiavelli had replied to Gianpaolo, he reported, that even if this were true, he would pay a heavy price for his action.

---

[61] *The Discourses*, II.27, pp. 364–5; II.28, pp. 367–8. On this point, see Anthony d'Amato, 'The relevance of Machiavelli to contemporary world politics', in Anthony Parel (ed.), *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli's Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 223.

[62] In *The History of Florence*, Machiavelli relates with obvious approval an episode in which the Florentine republic responded with 'great promptness and zeal' to a call for help against the pope from its ally, the King of Naples even though this seemed contrary to its interests. This faithfulness, he notes, so impressed the pope that he subsequently favoured the republic despite its recent hostility, 8/32 and 8/33, pp. 1426–8.

[63] Machiavellism, p. 40: 'With this [chapter 18 of *The Prince*] he helped to make any hypocritical scoundrel secure on a throne'. Meinecke seems only to arrive at this conclusion by forgetting his own advice, which was to look at Machiavelli's work as a whole and not just rely on *The Prince*, p. 41.

[64] This is the implication of *The Discourses*, III.40, p. 513, to which Bernard Crick rightly draws attention in a footnote. However, I am not sure that Crick is correct to suggest that what Machiavelli says here is inconsistent with what he has to say in chapter 18 of *The Prince*. This is because in III.40 he merely says that faithlessness does not bring glory; he does *not* say that it should always be avoided. Again, it seems clear, Machiavelli is repeating his claim that faithlessness may sometimes be unavoidable, though it carries its own price.

[65] *The Discourses*, II.9, p. 299. The omission of a comma after 'powerful states' in the Walker translation suggests that Machiavelli might here have had in mind only those powerful states who did in fact respect treaties, which would narrow its significance considerably. However, a recent translation has the following: 'This mode of setting off new wars has always been customary among the powerful, who have some respect both for faith and for each other', *Niccolò Machiavelli. Discourses on Livy*, trans. by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Turcov (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 146. On the general point here, see also *The History of Florence*, 6/25, p. 1317.

[66] 'Advice to Raffaello'. I am grateful to Dimitris Perdikis for drawing my attention to this important distinction. For further discussion, see 'The role of the ambassador' below.

This was because 'every one knew the obligation under which he was to your Lordships … and would regard him as a stumbling horse which nobody would ride for fear of getting his neck broken; … and that whoever attached any value to wearing armor, and desired to win honor by his arms, could lose nothing that was prized so much as the reputation for good faith'.[67]

Whether because of religious fear, moral virtue, republican inertia, or calculation of long-term advantage, good faith was still in Machiavelli's account a common reflex in inter-state dealings.[68] Had it not been, he would hardly have recommended a variety of circumstances in which weak states should make terms with stronger ones (see below). Furthermore, it was also precisely because good faith remained a common reflex that, as Machiavelli noted, even those who regularly broke their own promises were quite capable of assuming that others would honour their undertakings towards them, even when circumstances should have led them to doubt it. As Machiavelli tells us, such was the case with Cesare Borgia, who mistakenly relied on the promise of Julius II (who had been badly treated by the Borgias) to make him captain-general of the papal armies in return for his support in the election which had made him pope.[69]

If on closer inspection Machiavelli is seen to believe that, unless too severely tested, good faith between states remains common and thus an incentive to negotiation, he certainly did not believe, as we have already seen, that it is universal—even when not severely tested. But where uncertainty about good faith remains, this merely makes diplomacy more important for another reason: apart from spies, only diplomats are in a position to probe the intentions of the foreign prince (see below).

Machiavelli's prescription on good faith, his support for an order of morality for states quite different from that appropriate to individuals,[70] was strong meat for his times[71] but not for ours. It amounted to an acknowledgement of the reality that, since they had no other means of rectification, states would throw off treaties that no longer served their interests at the first opportunity. It was thus little more than a statement of the doctrine subsequently known to international lawyers as *rebus sic stantibus*: international obligations only endure as long as the conditions that generated them. Acceptance of this did not undermine diplomacy any more in Machiavelli's time than after it; indeed, because it acknowledged the realities of power, the flexibility that it permitted in inter-state relationships was a condition of diplomacy and, for that matter, of the emerging international law itself.[72]

---

[67] *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 449; see also Machiavelli's observations on the anxiety of Julius II to keep his reputation for good faith and his subsequent behaviour, 'Missions', vol. 3, pp. 307, 314, 350, 352.

[68] As a result, I cannot help but feel that Father Walker exaggerates when he says that 'Every breach of contract to some extent undermines that mutual confidence on which society rests, and, if breaches become the rule and not the exception, mutual confidence is destroyed. *This had happened in Machiavelli's own day and he admits that the result was deplorable* …' (emphasis added), *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli* (1950), p. 108 ('Introduction').

[69] '… the Duke meantime allows himself to be carried away by his sanguine confidence, believing that the word of others is more to be relied upon than his own', *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 300.

[70] On the ultimate but perhaps inevitable incoherence between these two moralities, see Bernard Crick's introduction to *The Discourses*, pp. 61–7; also Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, ch. 1.

[71] Though the doctrine that promises made under duress could be broken was, of course, already widely accepted, Russell, *Peacemaking in the Renaissance*, p. 82.

[72] On this subject generally, see the chapter on 'The Sanctity of Treaties' in E. H. Carr's, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1946). For a modern introduction to the law of treaties by an international lawyer, see M. N. Shaw, *International Law*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Grotius, 1991), ch. 15.

The role of the ambassador

Machiavelli's only dedicated analysis of the tasks of the ambassador[73] and the manner in which he should go about them is provided in the 'Advice to Raffaello' referred to above. What he has to say here is little more than a codification of the conventional wisdom of the age and, no doubt because of his own lack of experience as a full ambassador, somewhat one-dimensional. The analysis is typically terse and interesting nonetheless. It is possible, in any case, to add greatly to the views outlined here by working the rich veins of *The Discourses*, the *Missions*, and *The History of Florence*.

Looking at Machiavelli's writings as a whole, then, we find him suggesting that the resident diplomat has five main tasks. He must encourage the prince to whom he is accredited to pursue policies congenial to the interests of his own prince,[74] and refuse to contemplate policies hostile to them, which might well involve sabotaging the activities of diplomatic rivals. The diplomat must also submit advice on policy to his own prince, and at all costs defend his own prince's reputation.[75] He must, if his instructions require it, engage in formal negotiations, and be especially industrious in obtaining information and reporting it home; this includes the responsibility for predicting future developments, which is the most difficult of all. I shall say something more about Machiavelli's views on these last functions, and then consider what he had to say about the diplomat's general manner of proceeding.

Machiavelli gives special emphasis to information gathering and this is probably in large measure because of his own experience as a diplomat of the second order.[76] Nevertheless, it is also consistent with one of the most fundamental points of Machiavelli's political canon: his optimistic belief that, to employ the paraphrase of Bernard Crick, 'virtù, if it studies necessity, can combat fortune'.[77] In other words, the audacious and skilful prince, who understands the political requirements for preserving his state and is sufficiently in tune with his times, has a good prospect of bending to his interests the swirl of contingent events and drift of underlying social tendencies.[78] But this is impossible without knowledge of the world. Such knowledge, which includes information concerning successful techniques of statecraft, must be supplied in great part by the diplomat.

As for the business of negotiation, this may be undertaken with a view to securing agreement, which is the usual case, or it may not. In the last instance, states may require their ambassadors to go through the motions of negotiating with an enemy in order to demonstrate that necessity forced them to war;[79] or go through the same motions in different circumstances in order to play for time. Temporizing in this manner was a role that Machiavelli the diplomat had been much resigned to playing himself[80] and was also one in the performance of which he had greatly admired the virtuosity of the Duke Valentino.[81] States might instruct their diplomats to temporize for any number of reasons. It might be to make assumption of a war-footing seem less necessary to an emerging rival; to create the possibility that fortune might divert the storm elsewhere; to permit more forces to be gathered; or to enable a more propitious moment for the use of existing forces to be employed.[82]

---

[73] In the 'Advice to Raffaello' he is, of course, thinking chiefly of the *resident* ambassador, though the distinction between resident and special ambassadors is rarely in his mind. However for descriptions of the use of the latter by Milan and Florence when war seemed imminent, see *The History of Florence*, 4/4, p. 1190 and 6/26, p. 1318.

[74] For example, the encouragement to oppose the Venetians in Romagna (where they were regarded as threatening by Florence) given by Machiavelli to Julius II in November 1503: 'No efforts are spared here', Machiavelli reported to the signoria, 'to try and stir up his Holiness against the Venetians', *Missions*, vol. 3, pp. 303, 312.

[75] For example: 'Every day fresh rumours are set afloat here [at the court of Louis XII]; at one moment it is that you have sent ambassadors to the Turk, at another it is to the Emperor of Germany. We do our best to contradict these reports everywhere', *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 100.

[76] On this, see the especially interesting chapter in Wicquefort's *The Embassador and His Functions*: Book I, ch. V, 'Of the Ministers of the Second Order'.

[77] *The Discourses*, p. 60.

[78] *The Discourses*, pp. 53–60 [Crick's Introduction].

It is, however, one thing to use diplomacy in order to temporize in the face of superior force; it is quite another to make concessions, especially if the enemy is arrogant and unsupported by confederates. This, claims Machiavelli, will merely demoralize the state's allies and cause them to desert it, while at the same time feeding the appetite of the enemy. The result will be that the war which it had been hoped to avoid by appeasement will simply have to be fought in worse circumstances. In short, if concessions are to be made at all they should be made from positions of strength, not weakness.[83] (A special case is the prince who can get away with employing peaceful methods abroad because his state still enjoys the aura of a warlike predecessor.)[84] However, when a state is confronted by overwhelming force Machiavelli does not hesitate to say that it should recognize necessity and make concessions. He envisages three such circumstances. First, when the enemy is a powerful confederation, in which case 'the wiser course is to hand over some of your possessions to one of them so as to win him to your side even after war has been declared'.[85] Secondly, when the demands made are not a threat to the state's survival and can be met as if by free will.[86] The third and final circumstance in which concession should be made to necessity is when a much stronger enemy *himself* offers peace negotiations in the course of a war already under way. In such a case, says Machiavelli, 'the terms will never be so hard but that in them some benefit will accrue to those who accept them, so that in a way they will share in the victory'.[87] Thus Machiavell's generally convincing theory of negotiations, though it must be said that it is not clear why concessions to a more powerful enemy backed by confederates will be likely to win him over when a similar policy towards one lacking such support will merely feed an appetite for more.

In his 'Advice to Raffaello' Machiavelli maintains that the diplomat can discharge none of his functions properly unless he studies the prince and 'those who control him'—and gains their attention, if necessary by bribery. In addition, he must acquire a high reputation, especially for integrity: 'This matter is very important;' adds Machiavelli, 'I know men who, through being clever and two-faced, have so completely lost the trust of a prince that they have never afterward been able to negotiate with him.' Do not concentrate exclusively on the centre of power but also cultivate the 'different kinds of busybodies' found in all courts, advises Machiavelli. Give them 'banquets and entertainments' and pump them for information but, because 'the best means for getting information is to give it', ensure that your own government keeps you regularly informed of events elsewhere 'though they are remote from your business'.

---

[79] *The Discourses*, III.12, p. 442.

[80] Ridolfi, *The Life*, p. 92.

[81] See for example his 'Duke Valentino's Treacherous Betrayal of Vitellozzo Vitelli, Oliverotto da Fermo and Others', in *The Prince and Other Political Writings* (Milner ed), pp. 30–31.

[82] *The Discourses*, I.33, pp. 190–193; II.25, pp. 360–1.

[83] Ibid., II.14, pp. 312–13.

[84] Ibid., I.19, p. 166.

[85] Ibid., II.14, p. 313; and *The History of Florence*, 8/26, p. 1419.

[86] Ibid., I.38, pp. 205–6.

[87] Ibid., II.27, p. 365; see also II.20, p. 340.

In his 'Advice to Raffaello', Machiavelli gives close attention to the contents and tone of the reports that the diplomat must send home. This is natural since, as the length of the *Missions* testifies, in his own hectic career as a special envoy it was quite normal for him to write one a day,[88] though he only expected a resident ambassador such as Raffaello to write every two or three months. Machiavelli knew that diplomats were judged above all by their despatches: 'Great honor also comes to an ambassador from the reports he writes to those who send him'. They should cover three main subjects, says Machiavelli: matters decided; matters currently under discussion; and matters that are likely to arise.

In his reports home Machiavelli urges the diplomat to be cautious but not over-diffident. Much of the information that he obtains will be false and misleading, but he owes his own prince his judgement.[89] As a result, he must compare information from different sources, weigh it, and finally declare what he himself believes to be the truth. In his own despatches, however, Machiavelli customarily embellishes this method by providing the provenance of certain kinds of intelligence and cautioning the *signoria*, with its greater wisdom and more comprehensive picture of events throughout Italy, to place its own interpretation on what he has told them. When the diplomat has to use his own judgement and especially when this involves predicting the course of events at the court to which he is attached, he must be especially careful of princely sensibilities at home, says Machiavelli, in reference to the tradition of ambassadorial reticence then prevailing.[90] Thus '… because to put your judgment in your own mouth would be offensive', he tells Raffaello, you should pass, or at least share, the responsibility; 'use such words as these', he says: ' "Considering, then, everything about which I have written, prudent men here judge that the outcome will be such and such" '. Machiavelli had placed unusually heavy reliance on this method in his despatches from his mission to Pope Julius II in the second half of 1506, which, in light of the fluid situation at the time and volatility of the Pope, is hardly surprising.[91] A variant on this theme was Machiavelli's use of the views of a well-placed and shrewd friend who was nevertheless 'obviously fictitious'.[92]

In the 'Advice to Raffaello' Machiavelli appears to have in mind only the question of how the diplomat should present his opinions on facts and possible future developments. It is certain, however, that he was thinking of policy advice as well, which made modest and indirect presentation the more important since it was a tradition at this time that 'ambassadors were not encouraged to add personal comments or advice'.[93] Impressed with the advantages of resolute action by his close observation of the Duke Valentino[94] and constantly exasperated by the dithering of his own government, he had certainly not shirked this responsibility during his own diplomatic career. In 1510, to provide but one example, he urged upon the *signoria* the advantages of mediating a settlement between Louis XII and Julius II and the disadvantages, in the event that war should break out nevertheless, of seeking neutrality between them.[95]

---

[88] Such was the anxiety of the signoria for news from Machiavelli's temporary postings, that—couriers and weather permitting—he wrote even when there was no news in order to avoid keeping them in suspense; for example, *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 236.

[89] In *The Discourses*, too, and though he is thinking of senior officials in general, Machiavelli is strong on the duty of honest advice, despite its dangers, III.35, pp. 500–1.

[90] Mallett, 'Ambassadors and their Audiences in Renaissance Italy', p. 241.

[91] *Missions*, vol. 4, 'Second Mission to the Court of Rome', pp. 10–75.

[92] Gilbert, *The Chief Works*, vol. 1, p. 132, n.3.

This, then, was the role of the diplomat according to Machiavelli, and it is a role to which he attaches obvious importance in statecraft. But Machiavelli had no illusions about it: 'pure persuasion', even if the diplomat was sufficiently skilful to gain the attention of a prince, was rarely sufficient. For the successful pursuit of most of his functions, he needed before anything else to be backed by arms, money, and resolute government. However, whether because he thought this self-evident, or redundant, or because he did not wish to discourage him, he did not mention this in his 'Advice to Raffaello'. It is, however, a recurring theme in the *Missions*, and is especially prominent in the first mission to France, where Machiavelli and his colleague della Casa are brought face to face with the contempt in which a diplomat is held who can boast none of the above attributes. 'Mere words' are not enough, he kept telling the *signoria*; 'they … have consideration only for those who are either well armed, or who are prepared to pay. … They call you *Ser Nihilo* (Signor Nothing)'[96]—and their mission suffered accordingly.[97] In the same vein, we are told in *The Discourses* that 'Venice, having occupied a large part of Italy, most of it not by dint of arms, but of money and astute diplomacy, when its strength was put to the test, lost everything in a single battle'.[98] It is probable, therefore, that while Machiavelli would no doubt have agreed with his famous twentieth century follower, Hans Morgenthau, that first class diplomacy can magnify the material power of a state,[99] he would also have been quick to add some qualifications. In the first place, the magnification was never likely to be very great. In the second, that if the diplomatic means of magnification amounted to no more than unfulfilled promises then it would not suffice for long. In the third, that even over the short term the most brilliant diplomacy would not be able to create power out of thin air. Even splitting a hostile confederation meant being able to give something worthwhile to one of its members.

Nevertheless, allowing on the one hand for Machiavelli's penchant for overstatement and, on the other, for Morgenthau's interpretation of 'diplomacy' to include the formation as well execution of foreign policy,[100] the difference between them on this point is not great. Raymond Aron is more careful than either of them. With Machiavelli, he agrees that the relations of force that require a negotiation mean that, in marked contrast to a military engagement, its general results are usually a foregone conclusion.[101] With Morgenthau, he acknowledges that even among rival states negotiated agreements 'are not, in normal times, the pure and simple expression of relations of force'. Diplomatic skill thus usually has influence over the outcome, as does the authority of law.[102] Thus are reassured those modern governments, typically middle powers with long diplomatic traditions, who claim to be able to 'punch above their weight'. What none of these scholars consider, however, is the likelihood that the influence of diplomatic skill is likely to vary with circumstances, being the greater, perhaps, when both international issues and diplomatic procedures are more complex.

---

[93] Mallett, 'Ambassadors and their Audiences in Renaissance Italy', p. 241.

[94] Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, pp. 18–20.

[95] *Missions*, vol. 4, pp. 245–50. Machiavelli also attacks neutrality in general in *The Prince*, though his hostility to it is in the end heavily qualified, pp. 113–15.

[96] *Missions*, vol. 3, pp. 83–4; see also pp. 117, 120, 121–2, 351.

[97] See also Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, pp. 28–9, 38–40.

[98] I.6, p. 122.

[99] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th edn. (New York: Knopf, 1978), pp. 146–150; see also chs. 31 and 32.

[100] *Politics Among Nations*, p. 146, n. 9.

Permanent residence and 'express' communications

Machiavelli clearly believed that diplomacy must be a continuous rather than episodic activity; only thus could it be a full component of the *virtù* available to the prince.[103] A prince should keep at least one resident diplomat at all courts of interest to him and at important ones have a full ambassador selected from among the most distinguished citizens of the state.[104] 'Where are the new ambassadors?' was a question that became the increasingly urgent theme of his despatches to the dilatory and parsimonious *signoria* from the court of their chief ally, Louis XII, in late August 1500.[105] 'King Frederick [of Naples] constantly keeps ambassadors near his Majesty', noted Machiavelli approvingly.[106] So that they might not be thought mendicants and their princes either impoverished or mean, such ambassadors should also be provided with sufficient money from home to meet all of their living expenses. 'I recommend myself to your Lordships,' wrote Machiavelli from the court of the Duke Valentino in December 1502, 'and beg again that you will furnish me the means of support; I have here at my charge three servants and three horses, and cannot live upon promises. I began yesterday to run into debt … I might have my expenses paid by the court here, and may still have it done, but I do not wish that; and have not availed myself of that privilege hitherto, for it seemed to me for your Lordships' honor and my own not to do it'.[107] Money was also needed, as we have already seen, to bribe court officials.

Machiavelli was also the first to insist that having agents abroad is not in itself enough. He is adamant that the prince must also provide them with the means to keep in constant, rapid and secure communication with home. Ideally, this meant an ample provision of messengers in the prince's own employment who were capable of travelling 'express'. By virtue of being more secure, such a system was faster still because time would not necessarily have to be spent on ciphering and de-ciphering messages.[108] But, not surprisingly, another theme of the *Missions* is the inadequate provision made by the *signoria* for special messengers. We constantly read Machiavelli's complaints at having to send messages by merchants, other envoys, royal post (in France), and sometimes even 'at a venture', that is, with more or less anyone who happened to be travelling in the direction of Florence. By contrast, Machiavelli wrote to his employers from Imola in 1502, the Duke Valentino 'has spent since I have been here [two weeks] as much money for couriers and special messengers as anyone else would have spent in two years'.[109]

---

[101] *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, trans. by R. Howard and A. Baker Fox (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), p. 61.

[102] *Peace and War*, pp. 69–70.

[103] Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 162.

[104] *Missions*, vol. 3, pp. 60, 98–9, 245, 262.

[105] Ibid., vol. 3, p. 84ff.

[106] Ibid., vol. 3, p. 82.

[107] Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 250–1.

It is not difficult to grasp why Machiavelli, anticipating Richelieu by over a century, believed that continuous diplomacy was so vital. First, fortune was fickle and if the fleeting opportunities that it threw up were to be seized, the instruments for achieving this had to be in constant readiness; for one thing, today's apparent foe (the Duke Valentino) might be tomorrow's ally. Secondly, only permanent residence could provide the time required to gain knowledge and influence. On an objective appraisal, reported Machiavelli from Furli in 1499, its ruler, Catharine Sforza, was likely to accept a proposal that he had put to her on behalf of the Ten. 'On the other hand,' he lamented, 'I see near her Excellency the Duke of Milan's agent Messer Giovanni da Casale, who is very highly esteemed, and seems to rule everything here. This is of great importance, and may easily sway the undecided mind of the Countess to whatever side he pleases.'[110] Thirdly, the resident diplomat was also needed to consolidate any major agreement reached by special ambassadors sent by his own prince.[111] Fourthly, it is reasonable to infer that Machiavelli favoured permanent and widespread diplomatic representation since he was aware that, with some exceptions,[112] princes liked to have high-ranking ambassadors in attendance on them and that to withhold them was regarded as insulting. Only the despatch to France of new ambassadors, Machiavelli and della Casa informed the Ten in 1500, could 'remove the ill feeling and the umbrage given by the abrupt departure from here of the former ambassadors'.[113] And Machiavelli, in this regard the caricature of the professional diplomat, favoured giving offence to none. 'I hold it to be a sign of great prudence in men to refrain alike from threats and from the use of insulting language', he wrote in *The Discourses*, 'for neither of these things deprives the enemy of his power, but the first puts him more on his guard, while the other intensifies his hatred of you and makes him more industrious in devising means to harm you'.[114]

---

[108] *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 195. It was common at this time for diplomats enjoying 'secure courier systems' to dispense with ciphers 'even for quite confidential dispatches', Mallett, 'Ambassadors and their Audiences in Renaissance Italy', pp. 239–40.

[109] Machiavelli to the Ten, 20 October 1502, *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 171; see also Ridolfi, *The Life*, p. 57.

[110] *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 21.

[111] *The History of Florence*, 8/21, pp. 1411–12.

[112] '… the Emperor, unlike other princes, is averse to having the envoys of other sovereigns about him, and either dismisses those that come, or confines them to some special locality which he does not permit them to leave without his orders,' *Missions*, vol. 4, p. 218.

[113] *Missions*, vol. 3, p. 92.

[114] *The Discourses*, II.26, pp. 361–2.

Diplomacy: an 'honorable laziness'?

With the model of the Roman legions in clear view, Machiavelli believed that military service for the state fostered among citizens respect for law, authority, and religion; a love of peace and order; loyalty; a spirit of self-sacrifice; and exceptional personal courage. For these reasons military service was 'a decisive factor in the stability and grandeur of the republic'.[115] We can assume from his almost complete silence on this score, however, that it is unlikely that he was of the view that *diplomatic* service was of similar benefit to civic virtue, and probable that, if pushed, he would have admitted that it could be corrosive of it.

The nearest Machiavelli comes to saying anything at all on the subject is probably at the beginning of Book Five of *The History of Florence*. Here, having rehearsed his cyclical theory of human affairs, he says: '… after good and well disciplined armies have brought forth victory, and their victories quiet, the virtue of military courage cannot be corrupted with a more honorable laziness than that of letters; nor with a greater and more dangerous deception can this laziness enter into well regulated cities'. It was for this reason, he concludes, that Cato, having seen how enamoured were the young men of Rome by the philosophers sent as ambassadors from Athens, ruled that no more philosophers should be received in the city.[116] It may, of course, be objected that it was because the ambassadors were 'philosophers' and not because they were ambassadors as such that Machiavelli alleges this corruption; and that in any case the corruption was being inflicted on a foreign city. On the other hand, his notion of 'philosopher' was clearly a broad one, and on at least one other occasion in the same volume he juxtaposes 'letters and soldiers' in such a way as clearly to suggest the distinction between diplomacy in general and force.[117] Since he was also of the view that successful embassies enhanced public reputations at home[118] it is unlikely that he would have denied the possibility that, via this route, domestic corruption would have followed in the train of foreign corruption.

It would have been obvious to Machiavelli, as someone who knew both worlds, that diplomatic service did not foster discipline in the manner of the army. Diplomats, it is true, often functioned in groups—sometimes at hostile courts—and were well advised to present a united front to the prince to whom they were accredited. Diplomats of the second order (like Machiavelli himself) were obliged to follow the orders of the ambassador, and all were obliged to follow closely their 'instructions' from home. But the resemblance to an army ends here. Most importantly, no diplomat, as a rule, and certainly not in the Florentine service, was required to obey directives uncritically. The authority that their profession led them to respect was the authority of 'prudent' men—at home or abroad. Such, furthermore, was the impecunious plight in which diplomats were often left in foreign lands, that they were readily led into frustration with their own governments—even contempt for them if they were irresolute as well as parsimonious. Worst of all, there was the natural tendency on the part of the diplomat, noted by Machiavelli's friend

---

[115] Neal Wood, 'Introduction', *The Art of War*, p. 50.

[116] *The History of Florence*, 5/1, p. 1232.

[117] *The History of Florence*, 6/36, p. 1332.

[118] *The History of Florence*, 7/1, pp. 1336–7; 'Advice to Raffaello'.

Guicciardini,[119] if not by the Florentine Secretary himself, to develop a fondness for foreign ways and even to adopt the outlook of a foreign prince. In any case, in particularly marked contrast to military service, diplomatic employment was confined to a small minority among the nobility, and perhaps it was just as well.

Conclusion

On the evidence of a broad canvass of his thought, Machiavelli clearly believed that diplomacy was an indispensable instrument of the state, even the strong one. Though certainly no substitute for arms and money, it undoubtedly enhanced the *virtù* of the prince. He also believed that for this and other reasons, the general observance of good faith on which diplomacy depends was in fact more widespread than a reading of *The Prince* alone would suggest. Furthermore, to the extent that reason of state permitted breaches of faith when an agreement no longer served the state's interest, diplomacy was strengthened rather than—as suggested in Nicolson's elegant caricature of the 'Italian system'—undermined. This was because states contemplating negotiations needed an escape clause as much as they needed to believe that, in general, any promises made to them would be kept.

Machiavelli's account of diplomacy is tight and, as far as it goes, cogent. However, more than a century before Westphalia and with the customary law on diplomacy still in rudimentary form, it is hardly surprising that there is no inkling in his writing that its agents are a key institution in an emerging system of states. Machiavelli saw foreign policy in general as little more than a struggle to increase the power of the state, which, in consequence, was in a more or less permanent condition of war. In this order of things, diplomats were nothing more, nor less, than useful but essentially secondary servants of the state. We should not be surprised, therefore, that while Machiavelli expanded on what he had to say about warfare in *The Discourses* into a full length study in *The Art of War*, it appears never to have occurred to him to write an equivalent book on the art of diplomacy. Had he done so, it would probably have resembled, in its preoccupation with technique, the long chapter on conspiracies in Book Three of *The Discourses*.

---

[119] Berridge, et al., *Diplomatic Theory from Machiavelli to Kissinger*, p. 37.