**The Prince Study Guide**

In 1511, Machiavelli was a Florentine diplomat, respected and secure in his position. He was an agent of Piero Soderini, often sent abroad to represent Florence, and highly esteemed as both a scholar and a political mind. Then came 1512, and the fall of the Florentine Republic. Despite Machiavelli’s objections, the Florentine government relied heavily on its French allies; when the French jumped ship, Florence was left to face the papacy, brimming with strength due to its alliance with Spain. The Spanish infantry crushed the Florentine armies, and the government collapsed. The Medicis, a powerful family who had earlier ruled the city, returned. Machiavelli was implicated in a conspiracy and thrown in prison, where he was tortured and threatened with execution for a period of time. Then tempers changed, and he was released as an exile. He retreated to the country, and there wrote The Prince.

The book is prefaced as a plea to the Medicis; it is offered as a gift to Lorenzo. It did not wind up having the desired effect, and Machiavelli never again regained the position in politics he had earlier enjoyed. The book itself was not published until after his death, in 1532. Since then, however, it has grown exponentially in stature, and is today regarded as one of the most important political treatises ever written.

The Prince establishes politics, in sharp contrast to the prevailing Christian view, as a realm of its own. Though it would be nice to find in a political leader all of those qualities to which Christians aspire, Machiavelli argues that "human conditions do not permit it" (62). What we ought to do, in a moral or abstract sense, is not nearly as effectual as what men actually do. Indeed, in a society dominated by evil deeds, virtue means letting go of what should be done for what is done in order to triumph. Indeed, Machiavelli's virtue is essentially control over one's fortune and destiny, regardless of the means.

Machiavelli outlines his strategic study of history, asserting that informed choices will lead to desired ends. His is a calculus of causes and effects - a study of political necessity in order to make successful decisions in a variety of circumstances. Machiavelli focuses on attaining power, security, and honor. Though the path to this position of control, constancy, and credibility is filled with obstacles and dangers, leaders "must overcome them with virtue" (25).

For Machiavelli, human nature dictates political reality and necessity. What Machiavelli views as "necessary" in any given situation turns out to be the means to political stability and power. Since men are naturally evil, effective governance often requires harsh measures. By equating virtue and power and justifying cruelty as a necessary means to political stability and power, Machiavelli establishes a new system of morality. Actions and intentions are no longer inherently good or bad, but are judged according to their usefulness in attaining certain ends. Machiavelli seeks to redefine what we ought to consider acceptable.

Machiavelli's skillful redefinition of principles represents a shift from the classical notion of virtue taught by religion to a system of self-interest justified by secularism. In this conception, ideals are judged according to their utility. Indeed, in his acceptance of all effectual means to political power, Machiavelli grants a certain kind of approval for what were previously held to be evil acts. It is for this reason that Machiavelli is perhaps the most famous as well as the most infamous of political philosophers.

Despite its widespread popularity and touchstone status in the collective consciousness, The Prince remains a controversial book. Some view it as a cold-hearted realpolitik manifesto; others see in it a glorious expression of humanism; still other scholars read it as a highly personal account, imbued with the pains of torture, imprisonment, and exile, a first-person piece of writing. The word “Machiavellian” has entered the dictionary; particularly incendiary passages (such as those involving the use of cruelty) continue to turn heads. Yet the book is a more mysterious object than these glib associations suggest. It is short, simple, its arguments clearly articulated...and yet somehow there is an undeniable sense of untouched depths, levels that exist beneath the surface schematics. We have not finished teasing the myriad meanings out of Machiavelli’s crystalline prose, and he continues to instruct, to entertain, and, perhaps most importantly, to puzzle.

**The Prince Summary**

The Prince begins with an address to Lorenzo de Medici, in which Machiavelli explains that he is seeking favor with the prince by offering him some of his knowledge. He then proceeds to classify the various kinds of states: republics, hereditary princedoms, brand-new princedoms, and mixed principalities. New states are his primary focus, for those are the hardest to deal with. A conquered state whose original prince was its sole ruler is difficult to conquer, but easy to maintain; a conquered state in which the prince shared power with the barons is easy to conquer, but difficult to maintain.

When possible, a prince should strive to rise to power on his own merits and with his own arms. Relying on friends, good luck, or other people’s arms may make the rise easier, but holding onto his newfound power will prove a difficult task. Machiavelli devotes almost an entire chapter to Cesare Borgia, who rose to prominence largely through connections and his father’s help, but was crafty enough to carve out his own niche – though he wound up failing in the end. Princes who rise to the throne through crime are another matter altogether: Machiavelli condemns them as wicked, and yet his words betray his admiration for their cleverness. Cruelty, when well-used, can be justified.

According to Machiavelli, reliance on mercenaries and auxiliaries for troops is a grave mistake. A prince must lay strong foundations – good laws and good arms – and if the latter is lacking, the former is rendered irrelevant. A state needs both to survive. Mercenaries are disloyal and divided; foreign auxiliaries come already united under another master, and so are in a way even more dangerous. The prince himself should be a student of war and an avid reader of military history.

Reputation is another important element to consider. The front princes put on to appeal to the populace is often a lie, as Machiavelli notes; the better the liar, the better the prince. That said, giving out money when it is fiscally irresponsible, just to appear generous, is a mistake; displaying excessive mercy in order to garner affection can prove fatal. Better safe than sorry; better to be feared than to be loved.

Machiavelli closes The Prince with a meditation on luck and its role in human affairs, and a call to unite Italy. He addresses much of this last argument to Lorenzo de Medici, thereby imposing some semblance of symmetry on his book’s structure and honing his theoretical musings into a direct exhortation.