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## Apropos of Machiavelli

BY DR. C. W. COLBY

THE PRESIDENT:—Gentlemen, our guest of today is no stranger to the Canadian Club of Toronto, having spoken to this club on two occasions. Dr. Colby is a very versatile person, a gentleman with very wide interests, a professor and writer of history, and withal a very successful man of business. He has chosen from a very wide repertoire of speeches to speak on high politics. At first glance Machiavelli suggests the remote past of the Italian Renaissance. Second thoughts suggest it is a subject of very great importance in a world which is trying to get away from the power and the causes of nationalism and to try to think in terms of international co-operation and world peace. Dr. Colby.

DR. COLBY:—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I appreciate highly the privilege of being permitted to address you for the third time and I have chosen a subject which interests me a great deal. Do not infer from my somewhat cryptic title that I have it in mind to satirize any contemporary statesman. That is far from my purpose. That is what Wells did in his novel, "The New Machiavelli," in which he managed to get even with a number of his former associates in the ranks of the Fabian Socialists. I have no intention to speak unkindly or disparagingly about any living statesman. The fact is that for several years past I, like the rest of the world, have been meditating upon the fundamentals of international relationships. Whether the results of such meditation are an idea or only a glimpse it is impossible for me to determine. I have discussed this matter in Toronto with Sir Joseph Flavelle, in Montreal with Eugene Lafleur, and in Washington with J. F. Jamieson, the historian of the Carnegie institution; but this

is the first time I have ever been so bold as to discuss it before an audience.

Speaking internationally the great business of statecraft is to preserve peace. There are those indeed who maintain that war at judicious intervals is a biological necessity. Others, including the late president Roosevelt, seem to feel that the self-sacrifice and heroism evoked by a just war is preferable to the slavish slackness of slothful peace. You can have academic debates on peace and war as long as you like. John Bright used to say that the only good thing about war was that it made people study geography. On the other hand just on the eve of the great war, Treitschke and Bernhardi were singing hymns of battle. For practical purposes the situation is this, absolute pacifists are few. Almost everyone is ready to agree that there are certain conceivable conditions to which no self-respecting community can accede. On the other hand at no time in the past have the horrors of war ever seemed so appalling, never have the scars of war seemed so terrible, never before has there been such a sincere desire to avert the misapprehensions and the clashes of interests which produced these international evolutions. Under such circumstances I would ask, is there any chance, any remote chance, that statecraft, the expression of mankind in this regard, will ever emancipate itself from subjection to the axioms of Machiavelli? I do not ask this question out of idle curiosity. It is one which clamors for a hearing at a time when new conditions have been thrust upon all governments by the recent progress of invention.

What are the axioms of Machiavelli, and by what process have they become the basis of a tradition which is still a factor of the utmost importance over the world at large, Machiavelli wrote a history of Florence; he wrote on the Roman historian Livy; several plays; numerous state papers which he drafted as secretary for the Florentine republic during the last days of its existence at the beginning of the 16th century. But that which has given him his fame and importance is a little treatise, one might very well say almost a tract, entitled, *The Prince*. In this tract or treatise he sets forth certain principles or he outlines certain principles which appealed at once to rulers and their prime Ministers

and students of politics at large. The other books of Machiavelli the world at large did not read. Individuals read them, to be sure, but not the world. It might have been better, in fact I think distinctly it would have been better, for Machiavelli's reputation if his discussions on Livy had been read and *The Prince* had not been read. The point, however, is that in *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises and advocates a line of conduct which has been universally decried as bad morals and almost universally followed as good politics. The influence of Machiavelli throughout the past four hundred years has been illustrated and made very clear by two eminent Englishmen of recent times, Lord Acton and Lord Morley. Lord Acton, who had common sense, was the most learned historian of his generation in England. Lord Acton gave his opinion on this subject in the long and masterly introduction which he wrote for the Oxford edition of *The Prince*. Lord Morley added his in the lecture on Machiavelli which he delivered before the University of Oxford. Both Lord Acton and Lord Morley are in the record as completely supporting the view that Machiavelli is, on contemporary affairs, of the utmost consequence, and that he should not be considered as a remote historical phenomenon, as a representative figure of the Italian Renaissance, but as a permanent, abiding, persuasive and the most dangerous force if you like, certainly the most important force, in modern statecraft, particularly in the field of modern relations.

In *The Prince* Machiavelli counsels the ruler to have a clear cut policy and aim at the extension of his power. It is not enough to maintain an inherited power at the point where it has been received. An energetic ruler seeks naturally and normally to enlarge his power and in the pursuit of this purpose he is not to consider the means at all. He can use any means that seem to him advantageous. For instance, it may be expedient for him to make pious and Christian professions and to act otherwise, very completely otherwise. The extension of power is the only reasonable objective as Machiavelli looks over the field of politics in giving counsel to the Prince. Views of this character, it is needless to say, had been held by many people before Machiavelli. Or I will put it in this form: ever since the

Stone Age there have been Machiavellis and Machiavellis before Machiavelli. This always had been the practice of the strong and unscrupulous. If you like, it is the law of the jungle. However, Machiavelli made one important contribution to the literature of politics: by crystalizing this point of view and by giving it a literary impress he furnished it with a theoretical or philosophical basis, and that, it seems to me, is the critically important thing that Machiavelli contributed. Long before his time there had been theoretical discussion of the large questions of politics, I mean chiefly in the incursion and the continuation of the regime of peace, order and justice. For example in the eleventh century Hildebrand, Pope Gregory VII, had maintained peace, order and justice could best be inaugurated under the auspices of the papacy. Dante in the fourteenth century said peace, order and justice could best be inaugurated and maintained under the auspices of the Holy Roman Emperor, who for Dante was Henry VII of Luxemburg, a German. A century before Machiavelli, Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, said it could best be maintained under the auspices of a general council of the church. Machiavelli speaks of these discussions. He considers them to be a mere rigmarole of words. What the Prince has to look to is the maintenance and extension of his power, by whatever means. The basis of power is the army. A prince should have a strong army. He should get his results from direct action. Such is the doctrine of realism in politics first preached by a man whose name has never since been forgotten.

I have mentioned the fact that Lords Acton and Morley called Machiavelli a contemporary force and it is very easy to see how this should be so. It is quite true that the type of ruler to whom he addresses his counsels, I mean the despot of a small Italian State, exists no longer. That type of ruler has disappeared almost as completely as the Hapsburgs and the Hohenzollerns. But all you have to do in order to make Machiavelli strictly contemporary is to translate the word Prince into the word State. If you do that it will make the doctrine completely contemporary. That is all you have to do. Machiavelli was the first to preach in politics in an important way the doctrine or

gospel that the end justifies the means. Now referring to what Lord Acton says in his introduction to the Oxford edition, which he wrote in the year 1891, he said he had seen the course of history diverted twenty-five times by actual or attempted crime. Let us now glance for a moment at the development of the Machiavelli tradition. Here is the germ. How doth this germ become the basis of a tradition which lasts for centuries? Some doctrines are slow to germinate. Some ideas are slow to take root. But this was not the case with Machiavelli and his preachings. What he said was plain to the commonest intelligence. If you read Dante on Monarchy you have to know something about mediaeval philosophy, and his various other metaphorical expressions that the man in the street knows nothing about. What Machiavelli preached is plain to the commonest intelligence and it can be summed up very concisely in that cynicism of David Harum, "Do to the other fellow what he would do to you; only do it first." Now to many politicians and public men this seemed to be eminently practical, eminently logical, eminently sensible, and that is what Machiavelli is always laying stress upon, "Do it and do it first." In the field of morals selfishness is the line of least resistance and Machiavelli vindicates selfishness. Always he is suggesting that human nature throughout the ages, not in one generation, but always, is on the same low plane. And to that extent he always encourages the tendency to level down and discourages the tendency to level up. It is quite plain that a doctrine of this kind is the more dangerous the larger the scale of operation. For instance the ruler of a small Italian State could run amuck without doing a great deal of damage. It is far otherwise when a modern democracy, or modern state, let us say whether democratic or not, with a population of from forty to eighty million people decides to throw off the shackles of decency.

There is an old saying of Cavour which has been quoted often. "If we did for ourselves the things that we do every day for Italy, we should be justly called scoundrels." Could there be a plainer statement that when the national interest requires it, even the patriotic statesman must turn crook?

The most dangerous form which the Machiavelli touch can assume is this. In the first place you translate the word "prince" into the word "state" and, as I have pointed out, the term state may mean a community under modern conditions of from twenty-five to one hundred million people. Then, in the second place the state and the power of the state falls into the hands of a group of extremists, often or not improbably a small group of extremists, extremists whose opinion it is that it is for them to make over the world on short notice, just as they like and without regard to the status or rights of others. As examples I would refer to the Jacobins of 1793, to the Pan-Germans of 1914 and to the Bolsheviks of the present moment, the supporters of the third international and other extremists of this type. Ordinary restrictions count for nothing. Good feeling counts for nothing. Humanity counts for nothing. All that counts is a dogma to be ruthlessly enforced, pursuant to the principles of direct action as outlined by Machiavelli. You will remember our old friend Clausewitz. I go back to the time of 1814. You will remember he was Chief of the Prussian Staff. This was before the creation of the modern German Empire. He was Chief of Staff in the Prussian Army during the period immediately following the battle of Waterloo. He died of cholera in 1832. Now his principles, or his principal dogma, the ground work of the theory of the Prussian General Staff, were accepted as *a b c* by the Prussian general staff in the time of Bismarck down to 1913, down to the eve of the Great War, and the doctrine of this man is the doctrine of frightfulness, of striking the whole of the civil population. Now there is nothing in his theory that is not a straight derivative from Machiavelli. So much in general for what seem to me at any rate to be the principles which Machiavelli set forth in *The Prince*. You hear nothing about them in his other books but I pause to accentuate the fact that there is a distinction between Machiavelli the man and the Machiavelli doctrine. It is only with the Machiavelli doctrine we are concerned. So much for the views of *The Prince* and the tradition of which they are the basis.

Now let us turn to certain things which have happened in the world within recent memory. During the past

twenty-five years the whole basis of international relations and of statecraft has been revolutionized by two things. First, by the development of death-dealing agencies to a point far beyond all previous experience. Second, by the development of communications to a point equally beyond all previous experience. It may seem idle to pause to illustrate what is so well known, but one or two illustrations may be picturesque. When Nelson and Collingwood went into the battle of Trafalgar the French began firing at the Victory at a range of a mile and one-eighth, but they did her so little damage that Nelson was able to hold his fire until he came within forty feet. He then gave the Decentaur a full broadside from his upper guns, killing several hundred in one volley, and the recoil of the smoke was almost asphyxiating. Take the battle of Waterloo ten years later. The first and strongest impression which I got from going to that battlefield was that the art of artillery had made very little progress from the Battle of Cressy in 1346 to 1815. When the two armies lined up for action there was only an interval of thirteen hundred yards between the forces. It should have been possible for Wellington and Napoleon to recognize each other standing on a slight eminence even without the help of a field glass. They were less than three-quarters of a mile apart. Contrast this with the Easter Friday of 1918 when a shell fired from the "Mystery Gun" in the forest twenty-five miles from Paris killed one hundred people worshipping in a church on that day. Gentlemen, we are just entering a period which is marked off from all preceding ages by the fact that nowadays people can be killed *en masse*. In the field of domestic politics the parliamentary regime is threatened by the machine gun. In the field of international politics the world at large is threatened with a cataclysm with direct possible results, something that one may call a cataclysm, if the industrialized nations become over resentful, if they become thoroughly impatient with each other, having in their possession such lethal instruments. From these truisms it becomes very clear that the precepts of Machiavelli are far more dangerous than they could have been in a period when large masses of men could not be killed quickly. It is not necessary to go beyond the two propositions, first, that

the state is conscienceless and second that it is bound to act with a view to its own interests. What are the interests of the state except the policy of the individual or the party in power? You can do your best to make it abstract by printing the word with a capital letter, but after all its policy is controlled by a small group, who can be crooks collectively as well as individually. That is the main proposition which I wish to set forth. So much depends upon the point of view, and it is now necessary to register our point of view.

Take the era of applied science. The dawn of the era of applied science was held back, if that is not an improper figure, for many hundreds of years by reason of the fact that the best minds concentrated their attention so exclusively upon abstract subjects. But Sir Francis Bacon set the new method, and the world was moved to the new triumphs of applied science with which we are familiar. Take the intellectual life of the world from Alexander to Bacon, the best minds of these centuries from the fifth or sixth century B.C. down to the seventeenth century, the best minds were just as able as now. But the point of view was different. Stevenson in one of his essays says he talked with all sorts of people from atheists to Jesuits, and it often seemed to him that they were standing back to back in a vast circle looking upon different horizons and different stars. It is apparent that with modern world conditions fixed by applied science the principles of international relationship are altogether other than those of Machiavelli, and I can perhaps best express what I mean by way of this illustration.

In the closing period of the Middle Ages, in the period of the Trade Guilds, it was believed, and this was an essential part of the whole economic theory, that whenever two men entered into a business relationship the one profited and the other lost, and the legislation of the Trade Guilds was so drafted as to endeavor to protect, in some measure at any rate, the man who certainly would be stung. Under the present conception of a contract there is no such thing as a good contract which is not advantageous to both parties.

Not only is the Machiavelli tradition conscienceless but

it is out of step with modern conditions. Applied science has gone far already toward making the world or the inhabitants of the world one family. Henceforth general war will have its repercussions and effects in Timbuctoo no less than Toronto and Tokio, London and Buenos Aires. Everywhere, if the general spirit becomes resentful there are causes of war everywhere. It need no longer be Constantinople or the Balkans or the Suez or the Panama. On the one hand the instinct of self-preservation tends to withhold the nations from letting loose the developments of scientific warfare. On the other hand there are innumerable causes of warfare, if only the nations lose their heads or become swept by jingoism which mistakes itself for patriotism.

Obviously the first duty of a state is to effect its security. No foreign state secretary can ever be the friend of every country but his own. But where under modern conditions is security to be found? It is to be sought in these leagues and alliances, or the balance of power theory with which the world has been familiar so long? The invariable marks of these alliances and leagues is suspicion, trade and armament races, the burden of taxation, the crisis, the war, the peace of exhaustion, and the whole vicious circle over again. Let it be granted that the policy of the state must be selfish, for to a Government is entrusted the security and the safety of the people and the conditions which make for their happiness. But is it not conceivable that there can be a broader gesture; cannot there be a patriotism which is not bound up with the tradition of Machiavelli? I am not so absurd as to believe that the Machiavelli tradition can be rooted out of foreign offices quickly, and to take one outstanding example, I sympathize very much with the French in their present desire to effect security. Anyone who is at all familiar with the history of France, whether you go back to Clovis or Capet, anyone familiar with the history of what has happened during fifteen hundred years, knows that from Gaul and Roman days the integrity of the territory is at the very base of French consciousness. I for one feel that it is almost inevitable that the French should seek to fortify their situation by alliances no less than by guns and trenches. Clemenceau, as reported by General Morgan

in his book on Lord Morley, said in his early days he had been an idealist but the older he grew the more convinced he became that it is only force that counts. And Morgan himself said of the Covenant of the League of Nations, he felt it was not worth the paper it was written on. Then, he continued, to the end of time it will be "my head or thy head."

Now over against this statement must be set the fact that, under the physical conditions fixed by science, the boundaries are narrowing in range day by day. More and more it becomes clear that we must have co-operation in good faith by the ablest men of good will throughout the world, or else we shall have something beside which the last war will appear to be small. In business we have learned to take our competitors by the hand instead of by the throat and unless this idea percolates through the political world, we shall have a very hard time of it. It is so easy for human nature to be selfish. Well, it is the same old human nature after all that doesn't make any progress and cannot be expected to make any considerable progress. But at times when many combustibles are lying around loose, while the engines of destruction have been so highly developed, it is no longer enough to be a defeatist, and one is a defeatist who throws up his hands and says there is nothing better than the vicious circle of the armament craze. It ought to be remembered that the measure of greatness of any given age is to be sought and found in what it succeeds in redeeming from the void of the impossible. I have no wish to advocate a line of policy or action which on the face of it is purely Quixotic. I do not say let us all vote to do away with selfishness, to expel it from the policy of sovereign states. That would be absurd. That would be childish. Obviously there must be selfishness. But let it no longer be a narrow selfishness which holds you cannot be safe unless you cut your neighbor's throat or load him with chains. That line is no longer sane in an age when vast democratic communities can be swept suddenly by gusts of herd consciousness. Steadily the alternatives are being indicated. Steadily this narrow selfishness is being crowded out and we are being driven to that broader selfishness which implies a more equitable outlook. The progress of

invention has left only two alternatives, broadly speaking, between fairness and sympathy on the one hand and on the other hand suspicion leading to utter destruction.

In conclusion let me summon three witnesses in my arguments against Machiavelli and company. The first is Francis Bacon, the father of applied science, the man who gave the new outlook, whether for good or ill, who diverted the attention of mankind from what Maccaulay was pleased to call the philosophy of words to the philosophy of works. If ever there was a forward-looking man it was Bacon. And it is not conceivable he should have been blind to the dangers of the method which he suggested. In the *New Atlantis*, his Utopian pictures, he gives his real and clear vision. He sets forth the picture of a community working under a scheme of earnest co-operation, where the best minds work disinterestedly for the common good. And then there is Edmund Burke, the greatest of all our philosophic statesmen, who in his noblest oration, that on conciliation with America said "magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom and a great Empire and little minds go ill together."

And third, Lincoln, who, at a time when the south was on its back in 1865, went to the Hampton Roads conference and stated to the delegates of the Confederacy he would urge his cabinet and Congress to make the appropriation of \$100,000,000 to indemnify the Southern States for their losses through the emancipation of the slaves and to aid them in the work of reconstruction. That he could find no support in his cabinet was not his fault. He did the best he could and he disclosed the difference between narrow selfishness and that wisdom which rests upon the fair, even the generous, outlook. It may be that mankind will not succeed in extricating itself from the Machiavelli bond. But under the conditions which have been fixed by science for living upon this planet, it must either do so or put itself in line for some very severe experiences. Common sense is good but it is not everything. There is also room and need for uncommon sympathy.