Niccolò Machiavelli

Niccolò Machiavelli was a scholar and diplomat from the Italian city of Florence. He published his most famous work, The Prince, in 1513. In it, he described in practical, realistic terms how leaders can gain and hold on to power.

1. Who was Niccolo Machiavelli?

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2. What is described in Machiavelli’s book, "The Prince"?

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Italian city-states were undergoing a period of great political turmoil in the late 1400s and early 1500s, when Niccolò Machiavelli was living and writing. Machiavelli’s home town of Florence was among the cities that suffered the most. When Machiavelli was in his mid-20s, Florence was a democratic republic, established by a radical priest named Girolama Savonarola. Within four years of the republic’s establishment, the French invaded Florence and helped put the priest out of power.

3. What was happening in Florence while Machiavelli was in his mid-20's?

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Florence remained a republic, and Machiavelli served the government in several important capacities for many years. However, there were numerous invasions by and against other city-states and by foreign powers as well. When Machiavelli was 43, an old, powerful family — the Medicis — regained political control of Florence. The Medici rulers fired Machiavelli from his government position. Machiavelli ended up retiring to his country estate, where he eked out a living by writing about politics. The Prince was one of the books he wrote during this time.

4. Why was Machiavelli removed from power?

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5. What did Machiavelli do after retiring?

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Machiavelli had strong ideals about what made for good government. He favored a republic rather than an aristocracy or an oligarchy. He wanted to see a united Italy under a national government; he felt this would help prevent foreign invasion, as well as armed conflicts between Italian city-states. He favored having an army composed of the citizenry rather than of foreign mercenaries. He presented most of these ideas in The Prince, which he addressed to Lorenzo dé Medici, hoping to convince him to work toward the unification of Italy. In this dream, Machiavelli was ahead of his time. Italy was not united for more than 300 years.

6. Identify from the text the ideals that Machiavelli felt made for good government?

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7. Why did Machiavelli present his ideas in the book, "The Prince" to Lorenzo de Medici?

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Extra Credit: Read page R52 the excerpt from "The Prince" and answer the document-based questions on the back of this paper.