

## **MACHIAVELLI MEETS KUKLICK: THE POWER OF APPEARANCE IN POLITICS**

*Author's Preface:* The following paper was the product of a one month NEH seminar that I participated in during the summer of 1994 at St. John's University under the direction of Dr. Gene Garver. The focus of the seminar was Machiavelli's The Prince. This paper was a modest attempt at an interdisciplinary project combining American history, European history, and Political Science. Though I focused on the Kennedy years in this research, I must say that the powerful and effective imagery of the Reagan years, particularly the masterful ads used by the candidate in the 1980 and 1984 campaigns, was on my mind as I was writing. Reagan's prior career as "actor" seems metaphorical in light of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Machiavellian precepts concerning imagery in politics. Furthermore, since I wrote the paper in 1994, we have witnessed the amazing events of the Clinton and Bush years. Though we are too close to these events to see them in any sort of historical perspective, it has been fascinating to observe Clinton's high popularity ratings in the face of being the first elected president in our history to be impeached. If anything, these events only more firmly establish my sense that Machiavelli was right all along.

-- Paul S Rykken/ 2002

### **INTRODUCTION**

Few political philosophers in the modern era have elicited as much reaction to their work, both positive and negative, as Niccolo Machiavelli. His political writings, largely embodied in two works, The Prince and The Discourses, offer insights into the tangled mess of late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian politics and the desire by Machiavelli and others to build a strong and unified Italy based on the model of the Roman Republic. While Machiavelli's work can be read on a number of different levels, the focus of this analysis will be on what he had to say concerning the nature of political psychology, particularly regarding the nature of popularity and the perceived success or failure of leaders. Of special interest is what Machiavelli had to say about the importance of "appearance" (or what we may call "imagery") over reality when it came to ruling. Can this 16<sup>th</sup> century Florentine's insights concerning the nature of leadership be applied to the American political world of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? To uncover a partial answer to that challenge, the following course will be pursued. First of all, a brief overview of The Prince will be offered with a special emphasis on several passages in which Machiavelli stressed the importance of "appearance"; second, a short summary of how American Presidents are assessed as to success or failure in the modern era will be presented with a focus on Bruce Kuklick's book The Good Ruler which offers an unconventional view of assessment; third, points of intersection between the Machiavellian precepts concerning appearance and the Kuklick thesis will be analyzed through an examination of the presidency of John F. Kennedy especially regarding the public's perception of Kennedy (then and now); and finally, a short commentary on the implications of this research will be presented.

### **MACHIAVELLI AND "IMAGE" POLITICS**

A man who had been a witness to and participant in Italian political machinations for a number of years wrote the Prince in 1513. In his "Dedicatory Letter" to the book, Machiavelli addressed Lorenzo de'Medici with the following words:

*Wishing myself to offer Your Magnificence some token  
of my devotion to you, I have not found among my belongings  
anything that I hold more dear or valuable than my knowledge of the  
conduct of great men, learned through long experience of modern  
affairs and continual study of ancient history . . .  
(Skinner and Price, 3).*

Machiavelli then proceeded in his twenty-six-chapter work to impart his practical knowledge to the reader. Apart from the Dedication, one can discern five distinct sections in the book. The first section (chapters 1-11) is devoted to the classification of principalities by their nature or how they are acquired. The most noteworthy chapter in section one is number eight which is devoted to the career of Caesar Borgia, Machiavelli's "model" prince. In the second section of the book (chapters 7-14), Machiavelli wrote with great intensity concerning military matters and how the essence of any leader's power is rooted in military force. Section three (chapters 15-18) is perhaps the most compelling portion of The Prince. It was here that Machiavelli established his central point that politics must be divorced from ethics if a leader is to survive. In section four (chapters 19-24) the prince is instructed to avoid contempt and hatred and on how to become popular and acquire a good reputation. The last section (chapter 26) contains Machiavelli's exhortations to the Medici family concerning the establishment of their authority and the unification of Italy.

This seemingly obscure piece of literature that was actually "composed for, dedicated to, and intended for the exclusive perusal of the Medicean tyrant who had overthrown the Florentine Republic the year before" (Hearnshaw, 108), has become one of the most influential books in the western canon. F.J.C. Hearnshaw points out that those who read The Prince need to realize that they were not meant to do so. It was a paper of confidential instructions prepared for a particular individual, and not meant as a general dissertation on the science of government (Hearnshaw, 108). Nevertheless, it has endured for the ages. Donald J. Wilcox in his book In Search of God and Self, suggests that Machiavelli's lasting influence can be attributed to the following: first his picture of a secular state whose structure could be analyzed formed the basis for modern European political theory; secondly, he evaluated all social institutions by probing their psychological significance because he believed that the basic realities of the state were, in fact, psychological; and finally, Machiavelli showed his successors how to use history as an effective means of inquiry which coincided with the Renaissance Humanist's search for a usable past (Wilcox, 170-71). To further the analysis of the initial question of this research (can we apply Machiavelli's insights to the American political world of the late 90s), that second assertion must be specified through examples and applied to a perspective on public perceptions of American presidents.

When Machiavelli spoke of the "Prince" he was focusing on monarchical forms of government. Nevertheless, he did portray a strong belief in republicanism throughout his work (Wilcox, 159), and his pervasive cynicism concerning politics in general was balanced to an extent by his belief in the people (Hearnshaw, 107). Therefore, it was important for Machiavelli that the Prince possess qualities that endeared him to the people of the state. The following examples will serve to illustrate this point. In chapter fifteen, Machiavelli identified several qualities that a leader should either possess or appear to possess that will bring favor with the

people: generosity, mercy, loyalty, moderation, uprightness, and devotion (among others) (Skinner and Price, 55). In chapter eighteen the author stated that the ruler. . ." . . need not actually possess all the above-mentioned qualities, but he must certainly seem to" (62). He emphasized this theme of "appearance v. reality" again when he stated, "Everyone can see what you appear to be, whereas few have direct experience of what you really are; and those few will not dare to challenge the popular view, sustained as it is by the majesty of the ruler's position" (63). For Machiavelli, the reality of the state resided "in the attitudes and desires of the people who inhabit it" (Wilcox, 166). It follows that the Prince was only as powerful as he seemed to be in the mind of his subjects -- the perception of power WAS power.

Additionally, the Prince should "avoid anything that will make him either hated or despised" (Skinner and Price, 63). As he stated in chapter nineteen, "What will make him despised is being considered inconstant, frivolous, effeminate, pusillanimous and irresolute: a ruler must avoid contempt as if it were a reef" (64). Again, the leader's power base will be enhanced if he can convince the people of his strength and goodness. "A ruler who succeeds in creating such an image of himself will enjoy a fine reputation; and it will be difficult to plot against or to attack him (provided that he is known to be very able, and greatly respected and feared by his subjects)" (64). To Machiavelli, it is clear that actions were not nearly as important for WHAT THEY WERE, but rather for WHAT THEY WOULD DO to enhance the reputation of the leader. In chapter nineteen we read that "Nothing enables a ruler to gain more prestige than undertaking great campaigns and performing unusual deeds . . . Above all, a ruler must contrive to achieve through all his actions the reputation of being a great man of outstanding intelligence (76-77). In summary then, Machiavelli asserted the following: leaders must either possess qualities of greatness or APPEAR to possess them; leaders must avoid doing things that would make them hated by the people; and finally, reputation was essential for maintaining one's base of power. Machiavelli may not have said it outright, but he certainly would have agreed with that popular modern phrase: IMAGE IS EVERYTHING!

## **ASSESSING PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESS OR FAILURE**

*First a president must help himself. Then, if he is to succeed, he must get the public to help him. The public's initial role is to judge. Based on that judgment the public can then become the president's most potent ally or his most formidable enemy.*

*-- Robert Shogan*

How do we judge a President's success? The person who occupies the Office of the Presidency, of course, faces continual assessment concerning job performance from both formal and informal evaluators. The history of the more formal assessments that have been done, particularly since the Second World War, is far too comprehensive a subject to be dealt with in an analysis of this length. What follows is merely a brief introduction and overview.

Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., carried out the first formal poll done by historians concerning the presidential ratings game in 1948. The results of the survey indicated to Schlesinger that truly great presidents such as Lincoln, Washington, FDR, Jefferson, Wilson and Jackson could only emerge under conditions of crisis. Additionally, the "exercise of moral leadership" was an important indicator to Schlesinger who connected that concept with liberal political ideology. Nearly all the "truly great" presidents had taken the side of progressivism and reform as it was understood in their day (Riccio, 567-68). Schlesinger administered a second poll in 1962, this time

with more specific questions for consideration. Once again, the results indicated that the historians favored presidents regarded as "liberal". Schlesinger's thesis was that all GREAT presidents took the side of liberalism against the status quo (568).

Political Scientist Tom Kynerd and diplomatic historian Thomas Bailey were critical of the Schlesinger polls charging that they were pro-Democrat, pro-liberal, and markedly northeastern in their bias (Ricchio, 569). Indeed, an "activism" ethos seemed to be present in these assessments and the "bench-mark" for modern presidents was Franklin Roosevelt (Kuklick, 26). The heroes of these inventories tended to be the committed problem solvers and architects of the modern welfare state (i.e. Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy). Those charges of bias illustrate the singular difficulty with presidential performance assessment in the modern era. As Kynerd stated, "It should be abundantly clear at this point that the 'game' of ranking or rating Presidents has no systematic, objective, or scientific base" (Ricchio, 579). Bailey, in his 1966 classic entitled Presidential Greatness, attacked the shortcomings of the rating system. He felt that the issue of "context" was critical to understanding each president. No two incumbents were "ever dealt the same hand" thereby making set criteria arbitrary and unworkable (579).

Historians Robert Murray and Tim Blessing did a more recent and well-known survey concerning presidential ranking in 1983. In one respect, the Murray-Blessing poll was a reaction to the criticisms of earlier surveys since it was considered more thorough and systematic, and thereby more objective (Ricchio, 573). Their research indicated that the "single most critical personality trait for the historians was neither intelligence nor character, but decisiveness" (576). Along with that, they found that presidents who had been best able to convey a sense of "national purpose were going to be considered successful (577). Using those criteria, for example, Carter emerged as a failure while Reagan seemed to be a resounding success (578). This posed problem for historians because if they applauded Reagan for his activism and effectiveness, they would be running against their traditional liberalism. The idea that liberalism and activism were intertwined, as suggested by earlier assessments, perhaps was incorrect after all (578).

In a sense, presidential performance assessments by historians, at some point, become nothing more than colorful academic debates. The question may be asked, are they useful exercises? (Ricchio, 579-580) The polls that historians take suggest that there is, in fact, a consensus among historians -- and, of course, there is not. On the contrary, the results of the Murray-Blessing survey indicate that historians and other academics are actually very divided when it comes to assessment (582). It should be no surprise that historians, like everyone else, have differing opinions on what actually defines success in this powerful political office. As Bruce Kuklick points out, "No one has constructed an objective measure of beneficial social change or figured out how to determine whether leaders were the causal agents of such supposed change" (Kuklick, 170). Furthermore, much of what previous presidents are judged on has more to do with "would have" assertions than with actual substantive performance (171). The question remains, then, how do we judge the effectiveness (success) of our presidents both historically and in the present day?

In The Good Ruler, Bruce Kuklick outlines a way of understanding political history and contemporary politics that gets away from conventional appraisals of achievement. His central thesis is that "from the Depression to Watergate, leadership succeeded with the citizenry when it evoked a positive emotive response; it failed when that response was negative" (Kuklick, 169). He operates from the

following premises: first, that the resolution of substantive problems is not central to politics; second, what makes leaders effective is their ability to convey to Americans that the world makes sense and that the state has moral authority; third, that successful statesmanship provides hope and the appearance of order that legitimizes effort; fourth, that presidents need to generate strong beliefs about the meaningfulness of collective life in the United States; fifth, that the semblance of accomplishment is more important than substantive achievements; and sixth, that the main problem of leadership is to inculcate a positive temper in the electorate, not to gain specific ends (28-29). His guiding assumption, in short, is that presidential achievements are not tangibly "out there" but rather in our heads. Presidential effectiveness, therefore, can be detected better by taking the pulse of the electorate than by listening to the mixed voices of academia (Ricchio, 580). What matters in politics, according to Kuklick, is not what a leader actually does, but rather what the public perceives that the leader is doing (Kuklick, 30). That is what will determine the success or failure of the leader.

This assertion by Kuklick, it seems, runs counter to conventional political wisdom and "textbook" versions of the electorate's relationship to the president. Should style and image be considered more important than actual positions on issues? What about the concept of an informed electorate making assessments (and choices) based on knowledge of the issues? Political Scientist Doris Graber rejects the conventional position, thereby supporting Kuklick, by suggesting that people ". . . are unable to judge the merits of most issue positions because the issues are highly complex and totally beyond the experience of the average person. . . election choices based on personal qualification are both natural and sound. People in general are comparatively well trained and able to assess personalities" (Graber, 267). Author Dan Nimmo in his book Popular Images of Politics offers another perspective that lends support to the Kuklick thesis. We are living, argues Nimmo, in a time of "celebrity politics" when image posturing has become standard operating procedure. In fact, if one views the presidency in a dramaturgical context, the leader is actually a performer who "manages impressions people have of him by playing various roles" (Orman, 97). Leaders must try to project truthfulness, honesty, competency, credibility, composure, warmth, toughness against perceived enemies, compassion for the underprivileged and other presidential qualities (99).

## **MACHIAVELLI MEETS KUKLICK**

*Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country, and no other single force can withstand him, no combination of forces will easily overpower him.*

*-- Woodrow Wilson*

The question remains, can Machiavelli's insights be applied to the American political world of the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century? Is there a link between what Machiavelli said concerning leadership in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Kuklick thesis related to the modern American presidency? Do leaders in fact succeed only when they are able to evoke a positive emotive response from the public? Further, should leaders be more concerned with "appearance" than with actual substantive policy? While several modern presidents might provide fertile ground for exploring those questions through example, this research will briefly focus on the presidency of John Kennedy.

For many Americans the Kennedy years (1961-63) meant youth, purpose, talent, and energy. And even though the image of Kennedy has been tarnished by an ongoing barrage of revisionism, the mystique has not dissipated as evidenced by recent polls that rank Kennedy very highly in the public's mind (Kuklick, 131). (As an aside, it is worth noting as evidence of the power of the Kennedy image the oft-repeated film clip used by the Clinton campaigns of the young Bill Clinton meeting the President in 1962). His assassination in 1963, of course, colored the first-wave assessments of his presidency and, like the Lincoln death, presented particular problems for the historians. One year after Kennedy's assassination, for example, 65% of the electorate claimed to have voted for him in 1960, even though he actually received only 49.7% of the vote and barely nudged his opponent Richard Nixon. A halo had descended on this fallen leader. Nevertheless, he was a popular president while in office and consistently had high public approval ratings, sometimes soaring above the 80% mark (117). The pertinent and highly debated question here is whether or not his popularity was based on a substantive analysis of JFK's policies OR simply his appealing public persona?

Kuklick would accept the latter. He argues that Kennedy was extremely concerned with public appearance and that the "presentation of his self was indistinguishable from the state of his office" (Kuklick, 125). Kennedy, to be sure, had much going for him in this regard. His attractive family, his appeal to Roman Catholics, his World War II record, his association with intellectuals and elites, his combination of brains and practicality, his sense of style and wit – all of these attributes made him an exceedingly compelling figure. Though he did not exude charm merely to manipulate, it certainly aided him in his pursuit of particular policies. He clearly believed that appearance contributed to reality and was, in fact, central to politics (121-122). Consequently, the measure of his success as president was how well he "came across" to the people and therefore the mastery of appearance was crucial (125). Three examples will illustrate this point more fully.

As part of the mid-century and FDR-shaped Democratic Party, Kennedy had to be an activist pursuing an ambitious legislative agenda (Brace and Hinckley, 122). Nevertheless, a close reading of issue statements from the 1960 campaign indicate that Kennedy and Nixon were NOT ideologically that far apart. In fact, one of the criticisms of the young Senator from Massachusetts was that he did not possess strong convictions about issues. His Senate legislative record indicated a moderate and even cautious pragmatism that left him open to attacks from both right and left. Viewed in this context, his Catholicism became an asset for Kennedy and not just because of the support it attracted from Catholic voters. The "religious issue" gave his candidacy a special identity and provided a vital difference from his opponent. Further, as suggested by Robert Shogun, his Catholicism was a surrogate for the ideological distinction that Kennedy had not established politically. Those who were critical of Kennedy for his alleged "lack of conviction" politically were impressed by his religious stance (Shogun, 78). In short, he was able to take a traditionally politically debilitating factor and use it in his favor.

In the area of foreign policy, Kennedy faced a number of rallying points in which he was able to show the public a certain toughness or "machismo" (Kuklick, 124-125). The most notable example was his response to the Soviet Union during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. As the world watched this young leader maneuver his way through this potential nuclear confrontation, it was evident that he was able to make America's Cold War foe "back down" in a game of high-stakes brinkmanship. His display of decisiveness and courage in the face of great danger enhanced his

image as the “gladiator-scholar” (121). Further, his soaring popularity in the wake of the crisis provided a tremendous political boost for congressional Democrats in the mid-term elections of that year (124-125). Ted Sorenson, one of Kennedy’s close personal advisors, later acknowledged that the global balance of power would not have been substantively altered by the presence of the missiles in Cuba. Nevertheless, “that balance would have been altered in appearance, and in matters of national will and world leadership, as the president later said, such appearances contribute to reality” (Shogun, 89).

Finally, as president, Kennedy attempted to project a sharp image of personal leadership that was attractive, younger, and more vigorous than the leadership of the past (Brace and Hinckley, 35). Playing off the perceived complacency of the late Eisenhower years, Kennedy infused an electric energy into the political atmosphere of the early 1960s. Nevertheless, as those who were close to the president knew, he lived most of his adult life fighting varying levels of pain and illness, which, in fact, required him to be on heavy medication and to spend portions of his working day lying down (122). In part because of this reality, the IMPRESSION of vigor and energy in the White House was all the more important. Kennedy consciously sought to project the “picture of health” in spite of nagging physical problems (123).

Are we to surmise from the preceding examples that Kennedy placed image ahead of substantive policies when dealing with his relationship to the public? Kuklick most likely would respond with a hearty YES to that question. Kennedy was successful in the “public mind” and that’s where political success is largely measured. Further, one can imagine that Machiavelli would applaud Kennedy for his attention to appearance. The merit and extent of Kennedy’s substantive policies for the nation will be forever debated among the academics who can reach no consensus on such matters. What seems less debatable, however, is the fact that Kennedy crafted a reputation which led to tremendous popularity even prior to his tragic death. His popularity convinced a high percentage of Americans “that all was in capable hands . . . After his death; the populace felt that had he lived, the world would have continued to be intelligible and stable” (Kuklick, 127). It follows that assessments of Kennedy have probably been clouded in more “what ifs” than any other American president in history.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTARY**

*It is only when you take your ethics for granted that all problems emerge as problems of technique. . . It is only when you take your political philosophy for granted that presidential worth is seen largely as a matter of technique.*

*-- Louis Hartz*

The initial focus of this research was on what Machiavelli had to say about the nature of political psychology as it relates to the popularity and perceived effectiveness of leaders. It is clear that Machiavelli and Kuklick would have agreed on several assertions: first, that the “basic realities of the state are psychological” (Wilcox, 170-171); second, that the belief that policy counts more than appearance is an illusion (Kuklick, 179); and third, that in the political world perception is reality. If we accept the premise that human nature has not changed over the centuries even though circumstances have, then Machiavelli’s assertions in The Prince are relevant

to the latter 20<sup>th</sup> Century. And even though such assertions may seem obvious to observers of the political world, they raise two troubling questions.

First of all, why are people so easily persuaded as to be enamored with a President's image over actual substantive achievements? Is it simply because average people cannot comprehend the complexities of the issues at hand, nor reach any consensus on workable solutions? The answer may be partially found in the realm of political psychology. Political Scientist Fred Greenstein suggests that presidents actually fulfill at least four basic psychological functions for the electorate: first, they stand as a symbol of the nation; second, they serve as an outlet for affect – that is to say, a way of feeling good about one's country; third, they are a cognitive aid in that they help the public reduce the complexity of government to one identifiable individual; and fourth, they provide a means of vicarious participation through which average people can identify with the government and feel more a part of the events happening around them (Brace and Hinckley, 22). This symbolic function has always been present, but as Sanford Schram asserts it has been greatly intensified in recent years due in part to the presidency of Ronald Reagan (Schram, 211). Certainly the atmosphere has changed dramatically since the 1950s and the advent of television which seems to elevate (or denigrate?) politicians to the level of video stars (Orman, 93). Additionally, the proliferation of public opinion polling in recent years complicates the situation even further. And while it would be overly cynical and even erroneous to suggest that most political leaders are cynically engaged in manipulating the emotions of the public at the expense of substantive policy decisions, they are certainly encouraged to do so by the overly pervasive media attention they receive (Brace and Hinckley, 3). John Orman decries this "trivialization" of the office of the presidency (i.e. every action and word being scrutinized daily) and refers to the present time as the era of the "talk-show" presidency (Orman, 99). If Greenstein's assertions are correct concerning the psychological function of the president, is it any surprise that in an increasingly complex world, people tend to have an increasingly idealized image of the presidency? And further, does this idealized image of the office pave the way for disillusionment and cynicism when presidents fail to "live up to" the unrealistic expectations placed upon them? (Graber, 17)

A second question raised by the Machiavelli/Kuklick assertions is this: can the public, in fact, separate image from substance? The further I progressed into this research, the more difficult this question became. It would seem that image is, at least initially, a product of ACTIONS TAKEN. Therefore, can a leader have a "good" or positive image without having taken good and positive actions? Machiavelli would answer, I suppose, by suggesting that appearance is the key and that appearance can be manipulated and that is really all that counts in the final analysis. If that is the case, then does it follow that popularity becomes the basis for decision-making? Are positions concerning matters of war and peace, social justice, and other important issues chosen not on their merits but on their predicted poll impact? (Brace and Hinckley, 2). Further, are ethical considerations secondary to "problems of technique" for modern presidents? (Riccio, 581) Hopefully, we have not reached that point of cynicism in American politics. Presidents, it would seem, need to strike a balance here: on the one hand they must pay attention to public opinion and questions of appearance; on the other hand, they must maintain enough integrity and independence from public opinion to tackle the truly pressing issues of the day which often may require unpopular stands (Brace and Hinckley, 3). The public must maintain a balance as well. Leaders need to be held accountable for their actions, but we would do well to have a more realistic perspective on what presidents actually



can and cannot do. We would be wise to be realistic in our appraisals and not get caught up in the "image" game. An effective electorate must be sophisticated enough to understand that substantive policies are important and that philosophical and ideological positions do matter. *Image is not everything.*

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