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REVIEW ESSAY

THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR PRUDENCE

Vickie B. Sullivan

Lord, Carnes. *The Modern Prince: What Leaders Need to Know Now*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2003. 304pp. \$26

In introducing his treatise to its princely addressee, Niccolò Machiavelli describes its contents as deriving both from his “long experience with modern things” (he had served the Florentine republic as an advisor and diplomat) and “a continuous reading of ancient ones” (he is the author of an extensive commentary on Roman history, *Discourses on Livy*, and *The Prince*). What Machiavelli says of himself in *The Prince*, originally published in the sixteenth century, can justly be applied to Carnes Lord, author of an immensely astute modern guidebook to executive power. Like Machiavelli, Lord has extensive experience with modern affairs, having served in two presidential administrations, first as an adviser to the National Security Council under President Ronald Reagan

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and then as an assistant to the vice president for national security affairs under President George H. W. Bush. He also possesses a rare knowledge of political philosophy—both ancient and modern. Holding doctorates in both the classics and political science, Lord is an eminent translator of, and a commentator on, the political work of Aristotle. He brings his vast knowledge and extensive experience to bear on this book.

The echoes of Machiavelli's classic far surpass that of its evocative title. Like *The Prince*, this work consists of twenty-six chapters; it is relatively short, the better to be digested by busy princes, and it occasionally refers to

potential readers as “princes.” Moreover, in educating today’s leaders, Lord makes liberal use of such Machiavellian maxims as “all states need good arms and good laws” and that “elites” are “more dangerous to the well being of political leaders than are the people at large.”

Lord’s appeal to Machiavelli is justified, as he explains, because the Florentine played the pivotal role in defining our modern conception of executive power. Machiavelli declared the necessity of a strong ruler not only when states are founded but also at times of danger, an ever-present threat in the chaotic world of international politics. The English philosopher John Locke helped to make Machiavelli’s powerful executive compatible with a mixed constitutional government by balancing it with the legislative powers of Parliament. Even within a liberal government, with its circumscribed ability to act, Locke retains a powerful executive by endowing it with “prerogative,” the ability to act without law—even against the law—when the public good demands it. This Machiavellian executive, transformed but still recognizable in its contact with the thought of Locke, comes to full republican fruition in the explication provided by Alexander Hamilton in the *Federalist Papers*. Hamilton justifies the need for an energetic executive by showing that a powerful, single leader is needed even in a republic to act decisively not only in foreign affairs but also in domestic ones when strong leadership is needed to manage “national elites and popular passions in the interests of the long-term health and safety of the regime.”

In this way, Lord illustrates the tensions at play within contemporary liberal constitutional democracy. Whereas democracy at its most extreme posits the untrammled will of the majority as sovereign, liberal constitutionalism maintains the necessity to control and circumscribe political action. Moreover, executive power, able to act quickly and decisively, is often at odds with both democracy and liberal constitutionalism and is sometimes able to override the mechanisms of both. Nevertheless, the prince of a liberal republic is, at other times, at their command. In homage to the work of Harvey C. Mansfield of Harvard University, Lord calls these rather paradoxical facts the “ambivalence of executive power,” explaining that because the American presidency is formally subordinated “to the people and the legislative power, it is seen fundamentally as an instrument of others or as not fully responsible for its actions and therefore can disarm to a degree the resentments of those adversely affected by them.” The executive can sometimes find strength even in this weakness.

Despite these theoretical resources available to the executive, Lord examines the current challenges to effective leadership and shows how they might be turned into instruments for effective and beneficial rule. Among the challenges and potential instruments that Lord analyzes are state bureaucracy, legislation, education and culture, economics, diplomacy, the military, intelligence,

communication, and strategy. It is in this part of the book that Lord's judgment, a result of his own experiences in political life, is brought to bear in an especially fascinating manner. For instance, his treatment of intelligence generally, and his criticisms of the CIA particularly, give the reader the sense that Lord knows of what he speaks. He wishes to see, for example, intelligence agencies concern themselves less with general information and more with secrets that are "operationally useful to leaders."

Although Lord can be said to be something of a Machiavellian in showing the continuing need, even in a modern liberal republic, for a single powerful leader, ultimately it is neither a Machiavellian understanding nor even a modern sensibility that informs Lord's approach to politics—either its practice or its goals. Machiavelli, of course, is famous for his definition of a *virtù* that is able to act against conventional morality informed by classical philosophical or Christian traditions. Aiming too high, intoned Machiavelli, can result in one's "ruin" rather than one's "preservation." As a result, Machiavelli maintains that "it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity" (*The Prince*, p. 61). Indeed, Lord acknowledges in perhaps the most Machiavellian of his chapters, "Modern Founders," that "it is not necessary to go to the end of [the] road with" Machiavelli in supporting the use of "unscrupulous thugs" to achieve the greatest political results.

This particular parting of the ways with Machiavelli reveals a more fundamental departure that plants Lord even more firmly with the classics against the moderns and the contemporary approach to politics. He uses the term "statecraft" to describe the type of educated, thoughtful leadership he envisions. What guides the statesman is prudence, very much akin to Aristotle's *phronesis*—the ability of a leader of outstanding moral character to evaluate practical situations and make wise decisions: "Perhaps the fundamental lesson of all this is that at the end of the day there is no substitute for prudence in political leaders. Inseparable from prudence in the sense we have been using that term are both substantive understanding of the principles of statecraft and good moral character." By advocating prudence as the fundamental characteristic of leaders, Lord eschews social science, modeled on modern natural science, that seeks to formulate universal and precise theories to explain political phenomena. Instead, he advocates an approach to political science that is "practically useful rather than scientifically exact."

Lord uses recent history, particularly the deeds of great leaders, and philosophy to inform his reader's judgment. Reading Lord's *The Modern Prince* is an important step in an education that fosters political prudence.