The Art of War

The Art of War



By

Niccolò Machiavelli

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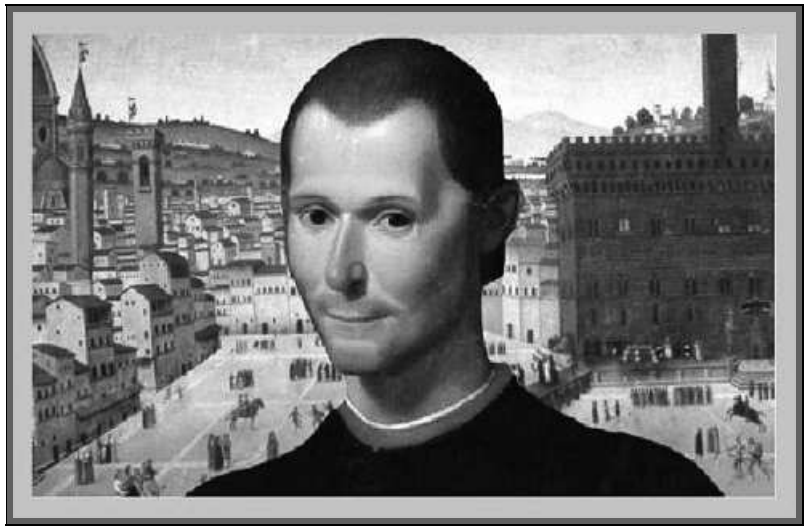
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About the Book & Author:



Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (May 3, 1469 – June 21, 1527) was an Italian political philosopher, musician, poet, and romantic comedic playwright. He is a figure of the Italian Renaissance and a central figure of its political component, most widely known for his treatises on realist political theory (The Prince) on the one hand and republicanism (Discourses on Livy) on the other.

The Art of War (Dell'arte della guerra), is one of the lesser-read works of Florentine statesman and political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli.

The format of 'The Art of War' was in socratic dialogue. The purpose, declared by Fabrizio (Machiavelli's persona) at the outset, "To honor and reward virtù, not to have contempt for poverty, to esteem the modes and orders of military discipline, to constrain citizens to love one another, to live without factions, to esteem less the private than the public good." To these ends, Machiavelli notes in his preface, the military is like the roof of a palazzo protecting the contents.

Written between 1519 and 1520 and published the following year, it was the only historical or political work printed during Machiavelli's lifetime, though he was appointed official historian of Florence in 1520 and entrusted with minor civil duties.

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Preface

§

Many, Lorenzo, have held and still hold the opinion, that there is nothing which has less in common with another, and that is so dissimilar, as civilian life is from the military. Whence it is often observed, if anyone designs to avail himself of an enlistment in the army, that he soon changes, not only his clothes, but also his customs, his habits, his voice, and in the presence of any civilian custom, he goes to pieces; for I do not believe that any man can dress in civilian clothes who wants to be quick and ready for any violence; nor can that man have civilian customs and habits, who judges those customs to be effeminate and those habits not conducive to his actions; nor does it seem right to him to maintain his ordinary appearance and voice who, with his beard and cursing, wants to make other men afraid: which makes such an opinion in these times to be very true. But if they should consider the ancient institutions, they would not find matter more united, more in conformity, and which, of necessity, should be like to each other as much as these (civilian and military); for in all the arts that are established in a society for the sake of the common good of men, all those institutions created to (make people) live in fear of the laws and of God would be in vain, if their defense had not been provided for and which, if well arranged, will maintain not only these, but also those that are not well established. And so (on the contrary), good institutions without the help of the

military are not much differently disordered than the habitation of a superb and regal palace, which, even though adorned with jewels and gold, if it is not roofed over will not have anything to protect it from the rain. And, if in any other institutions of a City and of a Republic every diligence is employed in keeping men loyal, peaceful, and full of the fear of God, it is doubled in the military; for in what man ought the country look for greater loyalty than in that man who has to promise to die for her? In whom ought there to be a greater love of peace, than in him who can only be injured by war? In whom ought there to be a greater fear of God than in him who, undergoing infinite dangers every day, has more need for His aid? If these necessities in forming the life of the soldier are well considered, they are found to be praised by those who gave the laws to the Commanders and by those who were put in charge of military training, and followed and imitated with all diligence by others.

But because military institutions have become completely corrupt and far removed from the ancient ways, these sinister opinions have arisen which make the military hated and intercourse with those who train them avoided. And I, judging, by what I have seen and read, that it is not impossible to restore its ancient ways and return some form of past virtue to it, have decided not to let this leisure time of mine pass without doing something, to write what I know of the art of war, to the satisfaction of those who are lovers of the ancient deeds. And although it requires courage to treat of those matters of which others have made a profession, nonetheless, I do not believe that it is a mistake to occupy a position with words, which may, with greater presumption, have been occupied with deeds; for the errors which I should make in writing can be corrected without injury to anyone,

but those which are made with deeds cannot be found out except by the ruin of the Commanders.

You, Lorenzo, will therefore consider the quality of these efforts of mine, and will give in your judgement of them that censure or praise which will appear to you to be merited. I send you these, as much as to show myself grateful for all the benefits I have received from you, although I will not include in them the (review) of this work of mine, as well as also, because being accustomed to honor similar works of those who shine because of their nobility, wealth, genius, and liberality, I know you do not have many equals in wealth and nobility, few in ingenuity, and no one in liberality.

Part 1

§

As I believe that it is possible for one to praise, without concern, any man after he is dead since every reason and supervision for adulation is lacking, I am not apprehensive in praising our own Cosimo Ruccelai, whose name is never remembered by me without tears, as I have recognized in him those parts which can be desired in a good friend among friends and in a citizen of his country. For I do not know what pertained to him more than to spend himself willingly, not excepting that courage of his, for his friends, and I do not know of any enterprise that dismayed him when he knew it was for the good of his country. And I confess freely not to have met among so many men whom I have known and worked with, a man in whom there was a mind more fired with great and magnificent things. Nor does one grieve with the friends of another of his death, except for his having been born to die young unhonored within his own home, without having been able to benefit anyone with that mind of his, for one would know that no one could speak of him, except (to say) that a good friend had died. It does not remain for us, however, or for anyone else who, like us, knew him, to be able because of this to keep the faith (since deeds do not seem to) to his laudable qualities. It is true however, that fortune was not so unfriendly to him that it did not leave some brief memory of the dexterity of his genius, as was demonstrated by some of his writings and compositions of amorous verses,

in which (as he was not in love) he (employed as an) exercise in order not to use his time uselessly in his juvenile years, in order that fortune might lead him to higher thoughts. Here, it can be clearly comprehended, that if his objective was exercise, how very happily he described his ideas, and how much he was honored in his poetry. Fortune, however, having deprived us of the use of so great a friend, it appears to me it is not possible to find any other better remedy than for us to seek to benefit from his memory, and recover from it any matter that was either keenly observed or wisely discussed. And as there is nothing of his more recent than the discussions which the Lord Fabrizio Colonna had with him in his gardens, where matters pertaining to war were discussed at length by that Lord, with (questions) keenly and prudently asked by Cosimo, it seemed proper to me having been present with other friends of ours, to recall him to memory, so that reading it, the friends of Cosimo who met there will renew in their minds the memory of his virtue, and another part grieving for not having been there, will learn in part of many things discussed wisely by a most sagacious man useful not only to the military way of life, but to the civilian as well. I will relate, therefore, how Fabrizio Colonna, when he returned from Lombardy where he had fought a long time gloriously for the Catholic King, decided to pass through Florence to rest several days in that City in order to visit His Excellency the Duke, and see again several gentlemen with whom he had been familiar in the past. Whence it appeared proper to Cosimo to invite him to a banquet in his gardens, not so much to show his generosity as to have reason to talk to him at length, and to learn and understand several things from him, according as one can hope to from such a man, for it appeared to him to give him

an opportunity to spend a day discussing such matters as would satisfy his mind.

Fabrizio, therefore, came as planned, and was received by Cosimo together with several other loyal friends of his, among whom were Zanobi Buondelmonti, Battista Della Palla, and Luigi Alamanni, young men most ardent in the same studies and loved by him, whose good qualities, because they were also praised daily by himself, we will omit. Fabrizio, therefore, was honored according to the times and the place, with all the highest honors they could give him. As soon as the convivial pleasures were past and the table cleared and every arrangement of feasting finished, which, in the presence of great men and those who have their minds turned to honorable thoughts is soon accomplished, and because the day was long and the heat intense, Cosimo, in order to satisfy their desire better, judged it would be well to take the opportunity to escape the heat by leading them to the more secret and shadowy part of his garden: when they arrived there and chairs brought out, some sat on the grass which was most fresh in the place, some sat on chairs placed in those parts under the shadow of very high trees; Fabrizio praised the place as most delightful, and looking especially at the trees, he did not recognize one of them, and looked puzzled. Cosimo, becoming aware of this said: Perhaps you have no knowledge of some of these trees, but do not wonder about them, because here are some which were more widely known by the ancients than are those commonly seen today. And giving him the name of some and telling him that Bernardo, his grandfather, had worked hard in their culture, Fabrizio replied: I was thinking that it was what you said I was, and this place and this study make me remember several Princes of the Kingdom, who delighted in their ancient

culture and the shadow they cast. And stopping speaking of this, and somewhat upon himself as though in suspense, he added: If I did not think I would offend you, I would give you my opinion: but I do not believe in talking and discussing things with friends in this manner that I insult them. How much better would they have done (it is said with peace to everyone) to seek to imitate the ancients in the strong and rugged things, not in the soft and delicate, and in the things they did under the sun, not in the shadows, to adopt the honest and perfect ways of antiquity, not the false and corrupt; for while these practices were pleasing to my Romans, my country (without them) was ruined. To which Cosimo replied (but to avoid the necessity of having to repeat so many times who is speaking, and what the other adds, only the names of those speaking will be noted, without repeating the others). Cosimo, therefore, said: You have opened the way for a discussion which I desired, and I pray you to speak without regard, for I will question you without regard; and if, in questioning or in replying, I accuse or excuse anyone, it will not be for accusing or excusing, but to understand the truth from you.

FABRIZIO

And I will be much content to tell you what I know of all that you ask me; whether it be true or not, I will leave to your judgement. And I will be grateful if you ask me, for I am about to learn as much from what you ask me, as you will from me replying to you, because many times a wise questioner causes one to consider many things and understand many others which, without having been asked, would never have been understood.

COSIMO

I want to return to what you first were saying, that my grandfather and those of yours had more wisely imitated the ancients in rugged things than in delicate ones, and I want to excuse my side because I will let you excuse the other (your side). I do not believe that in your time there was a man who disliked living as softly as he, and that he was so much a lover of that rugged life which you praise: nonetheless he recognized he could not practice it in his personal life, nor in that of his sons, having been born in so corrupted an age, where anyone who wanted to depart from the common usage would be deformed and despised by everyone. For if anyone in a naked state should thrash upon the sand under the highest sun, or upon the snow in the most icy months of winter, as did Diogenes, he would be considered mad. If anyone (like the Spartan) should raise his children on a farm, make them sleep in the open, go with head and feet bare, bathe in cold water in order to harden them to endure vicissitudes, so that they then might love life less and fear death less, he would be praised by few and followed by none. So that dismayed at these ways of living, he presently leaves the ways of the ancients, and in imitating antiquity, does only that which he can with little wonderment.

FABRIZIO

You have excused him strongly in this part, and certainly you speak the truth: but I did not speak so much of these rugged ways of living, as of those other more human ways which have a greater conformity to the ways of living today, which I do not believe should have been difficult to introduce by one who is numbered among the Princes of a City. I will never forego my examples of my Romans. If their way of

living should be examined, and the institutions in their Republic, there will be observed in her many things not impossible to introduce in a Society where there yet might be something of good.

COSIMO

What are those things similar to the ancients that you would introduce?

FABRIZIO

To honor and reward virtu, not to have contempt for poverty, to esteem the modes and orders of military discipline, to constrain citizens to love one another, to live without factions, to esteem less the private than the public good, and other such things which could easily be added in these times. It is not difficult to persuade (people) to these ways, when one considers these at length and approaches them in the usual manner, for the truth will appear in such (examinations) that every common talent is capable of undertaking them. Anyone can arrange these things; (for example), one plants trees under the shadow of which he lives more happily and merrily than if he had not (planted them).

COSIMO

I do not want to reply to anything of what you have spoken, but I do want leave to give a judgment on these, which can be easily judged, and I shall address myself to you who accuse those who in serious and important actions are not imitators of the ancients, thinking that in this way I can more easily carry out my intentions. I should want, therefore, to know from you whence it arises that, on the one hand you condemn those who do not imitate the ancients in their

actions, on the other hand, in matters of war which is your profession and in which you are judged to be excellent, it is not observed that you have employed any of the ancient methods, or those which have some similarity.

FABRIZIO

You have come to the point where I expected you to, for what I said did not merit any other question, nor did I wish for any other. And although I am able to save myself with a simple excuse, nonetheless I want, for your greater satisfaction and mine, since the season (weather) allows it, to enter into a much longer discussion. Men who want to do something, ought first to prepare themselves with all industry, in order ((when the opportunity is seen)) to be prepared to achieve that which they have proposed. And whenever the preparations are undertaken cautiously, unknown to anyone, no none can be accused of negligence unless he is first discovered by the occasion; in which if it is not then successful, it is seen that either he has not sufficiently prepared himself, or that he has not in some part given thought to it. And as the opportunity has not come to me to be able to show the preparations I would make to bring the military to your ancient organization, and it I have not done so, I cannot be blamed either by you or by others. I believe this excuse is enough to respond to your accusation.

COSIMO

It would be enough if I was certain that the opportunity did not present itself.

FABRIZIO

But because I know you could doubt whether this opportunity had come about or not, I want to discuss at

length ((if you will listen to me with patience)) which preparations are necessary to be made first, what occasion needs to arise, what difficulty impedes the preparations from becoming beneficial and the occasion from arriving, and that this is ((which appears a paradox)) most difficult and most easy to do.

COSIMO

You cannot do anything more pleasing for me and for the others than this. But if it is not painful for you to speak, it will never be painful for us to listen. But at this discussion may be long, I want help from these, my friends, and with your permission, and they and I pray you one thing, that you do not become annoyed if we sometimes interrupt you with some opportune question.

FABRIZIO

I am most content that you, Cosimo, with these other young people here, should question me, for I believe that young men will become more familiar with military matters, and will more easily understand what I have to say. The others, whose hair (head) is white and whose blood is icy, in part are enemies of war and in part incorrigible, as those who believe that the times and not the evil ways constrain men to live in such a fashion. So ask anything of me, with assurance and without regard; I desire this, as much because it will afford me a little rest, as because it will give me pleasure not to leave any doubts in your minds. I want to begin from your words, where you said to me that in war ((which is my profession)) I have not employed any of the ancient methods. Upon this I say, that this being a profession by which men of every time were not able to live honestly, it cannot be employed as a profession except by a Republic or a

Kingdom; and both of these, if well established, will never allow any of their citizens or subjects to employ it as a profession: for he who practices it will never be judged to be good, as to gain some usefulness from it at any time he must be rapacious, deceitful, violent, and have many qualities, which of necessity, do not make him good: nor can men who employ this as a profession, the great as well as the least, be made otherwise, for this profession does not provide for them in peace. Whence they are obliged, either to hope that there will be no peace or to gain so much for themselves in times of war, that they can provide for themselves in times of peace. And wherever one of these two thoughts exists, it does not occur in a good man; for, from the desire to provide for oneself in every circumstance, robberies, violence and assassinations result, which such soldiers do to friends as well as to enemies: and from not desiring peace, there arises those deceptions which Captains perpetrate upon those whom they lead, because war hardens them: and even if peace occurs frequently, it happens that the leaders, being deprived of their stipends and of their licentious mode of living, raise a flag of piracy, and without any mercy sack a province.

Do you not have within the memory of events of your time, many soldiers in Italy, finding themselves without employment because of the termination of wars, gathered themselves into very troublesome gangs, calling themselves companies, and went about levying tribute on the towns and sacking the country, without there being any remedy able to be applied? Have you not read how the Carthaginian soldiers, when the first war they engaged in with the Romans under Matus and Spendius was ended, tumultuously chose two leaders, and waged a more dangerous war against the Carthaginians than that which they had just concluded with

the Romans? And in the time of our fathers, Francesco Sforza, in order to be able to live honorably (comfortably) in times of peace, not only deceived the Milanese, in whose pay he was, but took away their liberty and became their Prince. All the other soldiers of Italy, who have employed the military as their particular profession, have been like this man; and if, through their malignity, they have not become Dukes of Milan, so much more do they merit to be censured; for without such a return ((if their lives were to be examined)), they all have the same cares. Sforza, father of Francesco, constrained Queen Giovanna to throw herself into the arms of the King of Aragon, having abandoned her suddenly, and left her disarmed amid her enemies, only in order to satisfy his ambition of either levying tribute or taking the Kingdom. Braccio, with the same industry, sought to occupy the Kingdom of Naples, and would have succeeded, had he not been routed and killed at Aquilla. Such evils do not result from anything else other than the existence of men who employ the practice of soldiering as their own profession. Do you not have a proverb which strengthens my argument, which says: War makes robbers, and peace hangs them? For those who do not know how to live by another practice, and not finding any one who will support them in that, and not having so much virtu that they know how to come and live together honorably, are forced by necessity to roam the streets, and justice is forced to extinguish them.

COSIMO

You have made me turn this profession (art) of soldiering back almost to nothing, and I had supposed it to be the most excellent and most honorable of any: so that if you do not clarify this better, I will not be satisfied; for if it is as you say,

I do not know whence arises the glory of Caesar, Pompey, Scipio, Marcellus, and of so many Roman Captains who are celebrated for their fame as the Gods.

FABRIZIO

I have not yet finished discussing all that I proposed, which included two things: the one, that a good man was not able to undertake this practice because of his profession: the other, that a well established Republic or Kingdom would never permit its subjects or citizens to employ it for their profession. Concerning the first, I have spoken as much as has occurred to me: it remains for me to talk of the second, where I shall reply to this last question of yours, and I say that Pompey and Caesar, and almost all those Captains who were in Rome after the last Carthaginian war, acquired fame as valiant men, not as good men: but those who had lived before them acquired glory as valiant and good men: which results from the fact that these latter did not take up the practice of war as their profession; and those whom I named first as those who employed it as their profession. And while the Republic lived immaculately, no great citizen ever presumed by means of such a practice to enrich himself during (periods of) peace by breaking laws, despoiling the provinces, usurping and tyrannizing the country, and imposing himself in every way; nor did anyone of the lowest fortune think of violating the sacred agreement, adhere himself to any private individual, not fearing the Senate, or to perform any disgraceful act of tyranny in order to live at all times by the profession of war. But those who were Captains, being content with the triumph, returned with a desire for the private life; and those who were members (of the army) returned with a desire to lay down the arms they had taken up; and everyone returned

to the art (trade or profession) by which they ordinarily lived; nor was there ever anyone who hoped to provide for himself by plunder and by means of these arts. A clear and evident example of this as it applies to great citizens can be found in the Regent Attilio, who, when he was captain of the Roman armies in Africa, and having almost defeated the Carthaginians, asked the Senate for permission to return to his house to look after his farms which were being spoiled by his laborers. Whence it is clearer than the sun, that if that man had practiced war as his profession, and by means of it thought to obtain some advantage for himself, having so many provinces which (he could) plunder, he would not have asked permission to return to take care of his fields, as each day he could have obtained more than the value of all his possessions. But as these good men, who do not practice war as their profession, do not expect to gain anything from it except hard work, danger, and glory, as soon as they are sufficiently glorious, desire to return to their homes and live from the practice of their own profession. As to men of lower status and gregarious soldiers, it is also true that every one voluntarily withdrew from such a practice, for when he was not fighting would have desired to fight, but when he was fighting wanted to be dismissed. Which illustrates the many ways, and especially in seeing that it was among the first privileges, that the Roman people gave to one of its Citizens, that he should not be constrained unwillingly to fight. Rome, therefore, while she was well organized ((which it was up to the time of the Gracchi)) did not have one soldier who had to take up this practice as a profession, and therefore had few bad ones, and these were severely punished. A well ordered City, therefore, ought to desire that this training for war ought to be employed in times of peace as an exercise, and in

times of war as a necessity and for glory, and allow the public only to use it as a profession, as Rome did. And any citizen who has other aims in (using) such exercises is not good, and any City which governs itself otherwise, is not well ordered.

COSIMO

I am very much content and satisfied with what you have said up to now, and this conclusion which you have made pleases me greatly: and I believe it will be true when expected from a Republic, but as to Kings, I do not yet know why I should believe that a King would not want particularly to have around him those who take up such a practice as their profession.

FABRIZIO

A well ordered Kingdom ought so much the more avoid such artifices, for these only are the things which corrupt the King and all the Ministers in a Tyranny. And do not, on the other side, tell me of some present Kingdom, for I will not admit them to be all well ordered Kingdoms; for Kingdoms that are well ordered do not give absolute (power to) Rule to their Kings, except in the armies, for only there is a quick decision necessary, and, therefore, he who (rules) there must have this unique power: in other matters, he cannot do anything without counsel, and those who counsel him have to fear those whom he may have near him who, in times of peace, desire war because they are unable to live without it. But I want to dwell a little longer on this subject, and look for a Kingdom totally good, but similar to those that exist today, where those who take up the profession of war for themselves still ought to be feared by the King, for the sinews of armies without any doubt are the infantry. So that if a King does not organize himself in such a way that his infantry in time of