American Empire and the Legacy of Machiavelli

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Niccolo Machiavelli once said that, "It has always been as dangerous to propose new ways of thinking and new institutions as it is to seek unknown oceans and undiscovered continents." ¹ The fear of and contempt for radically restructuring international relations, based upon principles of nonviolence and cooperation, has rested at the base of realist apologies for persistent violence in international conflicts. National leaders fear that nonviolent responses to international conflicts will relegate them to a position of inferiority in the global power game. It is under this framework of the power game that many Americans have defended their leaders' aggressive behavior in the international arena. U.S. citizens and leaders have articulated innocent justifications such as 'the protection of national security,' as well as 'the spread of democracy and prosperity throughout the world,' rather than the imperial aspirations for obtaining wealth and power that have come to define the motivations of the Bush administration's "War on Terror." Despite such apologies, a more sweeping, institutional critique of U.S. actions is still necessary in order to better understand the system of power politics under which U.S. foreign policy thrives.

Most Americans do not associate the foreign policy of the United States with Machiavellian power politics. 'America' and 'Empire,' as they are portrayed in American mainstream culture, appear to mix about as well as oil and water. An in-depth analysis of American ideology and actions throughout the globe, however, seriously contradicts conventional dogmas regarding alleged American altruism and philanthropy. The sheer magnitude, as well as the nature of American influence and control of world affairs raises serious questions about the widely held assumption of American benevolence. A critical and historical study of U.S. policies, specifically in the Middle

East, reveals a consistent and institutional pattern involving the pursuit of U.S. power and dominance, necessarily at the expense of human rights and democracy. In many ways, whether through direct military interventions, such as the invasion of Iraq, or in the U.S. government's written record, as demonstrated over the last twenty years, U.S. foreign policy has come to mirror Machiavelli's prescription for the of supremacy of realpolitik in global relations.

The Ideology of Dominance

Machiavelli argued that, "You cannot escape wars. And when you put them off, only your opponents benefit." ² It is difficult to deny that such a view is not widely accepted by American political leaders, especially regarding the persistence of U.S. dominance in the Arab World. American leaders have displayed a pattern of contempt for national determination throughout the region and a disregard for national ownership of natural resources – instead justifying American regional hegemony as the legitimate and 'practical' solution to perceived threats to their 'national security.' The supposed threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, as well as Iraq's potential challenges to American economic and political power, stand at the forefront of justifications for the imposition of Machiavellian style realist foreign policy in the Middle East.

In order to effectively portray the American Empire, it is necessary to chronicle American expansionist motives throughout multiple periods of U.S. history. Imperial motivation clearly transcends the "War on Terror," as it is also represented as major policy concern during the Cold War period. Although American leaders continually

focused upon U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War as a response to Soviet aggression and evil, the reality was, and still is, dramatically different. The U.S. government, through a number of government reports, has indicated that it views domination of the Middle East, and more generally domination of the world, as one of its primary goals. Such an aspiration was demonstrated recently in a White House report sent to Congress in 1990, which declared that the new major threat to U.S. power, after the fall of the Soviet Union, was "the growing technological sophistication of Third World conflict," ³ or, in other words, the threat of third world nationalism and the possibility of challenges to U.S. regional and global supremacy.

Machiavelli also emphasized that, for any strong state, "The prime reason for losing power is neglect of military matters." ⁴ After examining various U.S. National Security Strategies, it is apparent that such an assertion has been a main concern of U.S. political leaders. The U.S. National Security Strategy of 1990 reiterated the concerns presented in the 1990 White House report, and even expanded upon them. The National Security Strategy recommended the implementation of actions designed "to reinforce our units forward deployed," (already existing areas of American influence) "or to project power into areas where we have no permanent presence," specifically into the Arab World, due to "the free world's reliance on energy supplies from this pivotal region." ⁵

While Machiavelli argued that "a ruler" should be "even more concerned with military matters in time of peace than in time of war," ⁶ he could have never conceptualized the full extent to which a power like the United States would take his prescription. Both the White House Memo and the National Security Strategy are crucial in this respect, since they were authored during the fall, rather than during the height of

the Soviet Union's power. If the Cold War was designed to defend against Soviet aggression, then why continue military affairs throughout the world after the Soviet Union's fall. The timing of the documents above indicates that U.S. leaders were/are not only concerned with protecting U.S. national security, but also equally, or perhaps even more occupied with maintaining a hegemony that transcends the Cold War period.

Both the White House report and the National Security Strategy would require either retaining then current levels of military spending or increasing spending for the indefinite future. ⁷ These documents draw heavily from Machiavelli's formula for the combination of propaganda (portraying the Third World as a threat to the U.S.) with the need for violence and domination in order to stay atop of the global power hierarchy. As I will discuss in the latter part of this essay, Machiavelli's propaganda prescription has been the necessary medium through which U.S. political leaders have convinced the American public of the veracity and necessity of their imperial actions.

this time advocated by the Pentagon and the second Bush Administration. An important Pentagon draft revealed the U.S. plan for preventing the emergence of any rival powers in the Third World after the end of the Cold War. The document elaborated that, "In the Middle East and Southwest Asia, our (U.S.) overall objective is to remain the predominant power in the region and preserve U.S. and western access to the region's oil...as demonstrated by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, it remains fundamentally important to prevent a hegemony or alignment of powers from dominating the region." Shortly after the beginning of the U.S. war against Iraq in 2003, the Bush administration reinforced American imperial aspirations in the Arab World, as they expanded upon the planned

'new influence in the region,' or more specifically, plans that will "never allow American military supremacy to be challenged" today "the way it was during the Cold War." ⁹

If such clear terms were not enough to remove doubt of American empire, George H. W. Bush himself, in classified National Security Directive 26, presented U.S. control of Middle Eastern oil, in Iraq specifically, as a step necessary in protecting U.S. "national security." The Directive finished by stressing the importance of U.S. corporate exploitation of Iraq's oil reserves. National Security Directive 26 is a crucial document because it provides the evidence needed to show that issues of "national security" are often comprised from imperial objectives.

Fear and Power Politics

Machiavelli understood perfectly well that in the international power game, "it is much safer to be feared than loved." ¹¹ Fear is the necessary consequence, as well as medium of the projection of power. Without fear, national leaders cannot coerce others into complying in the face of imperial demands. As Machiavelli elaborated, "Fear restrains men because they are afraid of punishment, and this fear never leaves them." ¹² It is under these circumstances that U.S. leaders have authored many intimidating foreign policy documents. Perhaps the document most reflective of this mindset is the report produced by the U.S. Strategic Command (the 'command and control center' presiding over U.S. nuclear weapons), entitled "Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence." The study emphasized that, "because of the value that comes from the ambiguity of what the U.S. may do to an adversary if the acts we seek to deter are carried out, it hurts to portray

ourselves (the U.S.) as too fully rational and cool-headed. The fact that some elements may potentially appear to be 'out of control' can be beneficial to creating and reinforcing fears and doubts within the adversaries decision makers. That the U.S. may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be a part of the national persona we project to all adversaries." ¹³ Although the Strategic Command study represents the most extreme attempt to drive fear into the hearts of "adversaries," military intervention, or even the threat of such intervention is often enough in many instances to evoke the desired submission or acquiescence.

To inspire fear, though, would mean that a powerful leader could not possibly hold him-herself accountable to the standards imposed upon others. Machiavelli explained that, "Because you cannot always win if you respect the rules, you must be prepared to break them." In essence, this means that a leader must "know how to be a clever counterfeit and hypocrite." ¹⁴

After examining the 2003 National Security Strategy, as well as the highly controversial Nuclear Posture Review, it is apparent that Machiavelli's analysis holds true today. The National Security Strategy, released by the Bush administration in December of 2001, reiterates the U.S. government's commitment to "pre-emptive strikes," meaning attacks against any government that U.S. leaders *may* consider to be a threat to the safety of the United States. ¹⁵ Pre-emptive strikes have inspired fear throughout many countries, as many national leaders are realizing that the only way to prevent a U.S. invasion of their countries is to develop their own biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons. The Bush administration has been condemned throughout the

world for its hypocrisy regarding its prioritization of pre-emption, while at the same time refusing to dismantle its own massive stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.

The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, a declassified Pentagon study, was aimed at creating fear through the threat of nuclear first-strike scenarios against Iran, Iraq, Syria, China, and Russia. The review came off particularly dangerous and hypocritical considering that China and Russia are already nuclear powers. One can only speculate on how U.S. leaders would react to similar Russian or Chinese threats to use nuclear weapons on American soil. It would also be hard to argue that a 'Rogue State' like Iraq could release a study like the Nuclear Posture Review without arousing deep hostility from the West.

Whether one wants to call the United States a superpower, a hegemony, or an empire, the U.S. gets away with nuclear extortion because of its worldwide nuclear deterrent capabilities. Such extortion has been deemed necessary though, at least according to Machiavelli. Since "the armed man" always "has contempt for the man without weapons," ¹⁷ a decline in American dominance would simply be replaced by another rising empire's dominance. In this sense, Machiavelli would likely argue that the United States is as good of a choice for a ruler as any other powerful nation.

Machiavelli and U.S. Empire in Practice

Machiavelli was one of the first political thinkers to label imperial aggression as a natural extension of human nature. Machiavelli argued, "it is perfectly natural and normal to want to acquire new territory, and whenever men do what will succeed towards

this end, they will be praised." ¹⁸ Machiavelli's argument is accurate in many ways today, as the nation-state system lays the necessary foundations for imperialism based on nationalistic pride. Whether American, British, Chinese or Russian, nationalism has been used to portray the expansion of influence and control of other states as a natural phenomenon. Identifying American ideological dispositions towards empire is not enough in itself to identify U.S. Empire and realpolitik though. Concrete examples demonstrating the application of U.S. foreign policy are necessary. Such examples help identify the unprecedented reach and power of U.S. Empire that make it unique in the history of world conflict.

Machiavelli strongly believed that it is not reasonable to expect "someone who is armed should cheerfully obey someone who is defenseless." ¹⁹ This statement has become a reality in many ways, especially within the realist paradigm of international conflict. In the international realm, the United States uses military force in order to implement its political, economic, and military objectives. No other state, or many groups of states for that matter, can seriously compete with U.S. military capabilities. The magnitude of spending involved with the U.S. military, as well as the scope of its interventions clearly indicates a disposition toward imperial expansion and domination. The United States has spent more money on its military over the last fifty years than most other powerful nations combined. After the fall of the Soviet Union, military spending reached as high as \$1.2 trillion during George H.W. Bush's four years in office (\$300 billion a year), and continued at similar levels during the Clinton administration. ²⁰ In 2001, the U.S. spent \$310 billion on its military, more than 22 times that of China, Libya, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Russia combined. ²¹ George W. Bush presented military

budgets of \$379 billion for 2003, ²² and \$399 billion for 2004, ²³ translating into 27 and 28 times more than all the countries mentioned above. Such astronomical spending buys substantial influence and power throughout the world. Recent statistics indicate that the U.S. currently runs at least 725 different military bases throughout 38 countries. ²⁴ As if that were not enough, the U.S. retains at least some form of direct military presence in 153 out of the 192 nations in the world. ²⁵ In other words, the U.S. retains substantial military influence over 80 percent of the countries that exist today, a percentage in which only a worldwide empire is capable.

U.S. military involvement within foreign states has not been for benevolent purposes either. From 1945 to the beginning of the 21st century, the United States has been responsible for the attempted overthrow of over 40 governments, and for the destruction of over thirty populist-nationalist movements fighting against dictatorial regimes. ²⁶ The U.S. has subverted over two-dozen elections, directly bombed or indirectly supported the bombing of over thirty nations – an average of one every two years – and used or supported the use of chemical weapons in about a dozen countries. ²⁷

U.S. Empire in Practice: The Case of Iraq

Machiavelli specifically addressed the subjugation of foreign states when he argued, "you always have to give offense to those over whom you acquire power when you become a new ruler, both by imposing troops upon them, and by countless other injuries that follow as necessary consequences of the acquisition of power." ²⁸ Few countries have fallen under more assault by the U.S. than Iraq. In fact, many argue that

one of the most effective uses of Machiavelli's realpolitik has been the siege-style assault on Iraq over the last dozen years. Machiavelli prescribed two methods that are still effective today in the elimination of resistance to foreign assault and occupation: 1) "lay waste to them," and 2) "let them continue to live under their own laws, make them pay you, and create there an administrative and political elite who will remain loyal to you."

²⁹ Concerning Iraq, both solutions have become rather popular with American policymakers.

Machiavelli stated, "there is no reliable way of holding on to a city and the territory around it, short of demolishing the city itself." ³⁰ When applied to the state of Iraq, U.S. actions bear a strong resemblance to Machiavelli's thinking. U.S. leaders were responsible for the deaths of over one hundred thousand Iraqis during the first Gulf War; ³¹ they intentionally destroyed Iraqi electricity generators in urban areas necessary for water sanitization and power output, knowing full well that it could lead to the deaths of Iragis in massive numbers; ³² they imposed sanctions on Irag that prevented Iragis from importing necessary health supplies, drugs and equipment, as well as the importation of chlorine and other components needed to rebuild Iraq's power plants and water systems; ³³ they contributed to the death of over 500,000 Iraqi children, ³⁴ and up to 1.5 million Iraqis overall due to the sanctions; 35 they started another war, that again destroyed Iraqi electric generators and water systems; ³⁶ during "Operation Iraqi Freedom," they caused a massive humanitarian disaster from cutting off U.N. food shortages to Iraq, which contributed to the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis; ³⁷ they used weapons of mass destruction with impunity, including depleted uranium, napalm, cluster bombs, fuel-to-air explosives, and a massive amount of conventional bombing; ³⁸ they

caused the deaths of at least 10,000 civilians, ³⁹ and may have killed tens of thousands more civilians, ⁴⁰ as well as drafted Iraqi soldiers; ⁴¹ and they even refuse to acknowledge any of the deaths, civilian or military related. ⁴² Such a record of destruction is not easy to come by, even under today's violent standards of international relations.

Machiavelli's second option mandated an indefinite control over the conquered state, "by imposing troops upon them, and by countless other injuries that follow as necessary consequences of the acquisition of power." ⁴³ In Iraq, "countless other injuries" included the creation of an indefinite Iraqi dependency on the United States via the implementation of various neocolonial policies. American leaders have taken a variety of efforts to ensure the permanent subjugation of the Iraqi government and people.

Machiavelli retained a valuable insight in regards to the creation of the neocolonial system. He explained, "he who is the cause of someone else's becoming powerful is the agent of his own destruction, for he makes his protégé powerful either through his own skill or through his own strength, and either of these must provoke his protégé's mistrust once he has become powerful." ⁴⁴ U.S. actions subsequent to the invasion of Iraq suddenly become much clearer when analyzed under the motivation of subjugating the Iraqi state. Besides refusing demands for immediate referendum and democratic election of Iraqi political candidates, the Bush administration has also decided to privatize Iraq's national infrastructure (without asking the Iraqi people), as well as privatize its oil industry, effectively ensuring that profits from such ventures will remain out of the hands of Iraq's impoverished masses. ⁴⁵ In addition, the United States will take the necessary steps to ensure that the Shiite majority, which constitutes sixty percent of the Iraqi population, is never allowed to develop any ties with the Iranian government or

allowed to implement it's own variation of Islamic government – even if that choice were made democratically through the electoral process. ⁴⁶ Finally, the U.S. has announced that it will be building permanent U.S. military bases throughout Iraq in order to ensure the shift towards U.S. dependency. ⁴⁷ Such policies constitute the necessary components for ensuring an Iraqi "administrative and political elite that will remain loyal" to U.S. interests.

Machiavelli and Propaganda in the "War on Terror"

In a country where citizens pride themselves in democratic freedom, it is unlikely that most Americans would support a foreign policy based upon greedy or power-hungry principles. Propaganda, on the other hand, provides the necessary rhetoric that is needed to the mask imperial objectives that drove the war against Iraq. Machiavelli understood the value of propaganda. He claimed that, as a leader, "you should seem to be compassionate, trustworthy, sympathetic, honest, religious...but at the same time be constantly prepared, so that, if these become liabilities, you are trained and ready to become their opposites." ⁴⁸ In modern society, especially in the United States, government leaders and the corporate media have become the major peddlers of propaganda. These lies, according to Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, two of the United States' leading political critics, are designed, "to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and state." ⁴⁹

In the war against Iraq, the Bush administration mastered the art of propaganda.

Justifications for the war ranged from helping "the Iraqi people establish a peaceful and

democratic country in the heart of the Middle East," and assisting in "rebuild(ing) their economy and create(ing) the institutions of liberty in a unified Iraq at peace with our neighbors," to "punishing Saddam Hussein for his "utter contempt for the United Nations, and for the opinion of the world." ⁵⁰ Despite the effectiveness of this propaganda, such assertions were absurd after considering the long U.S. record of supporting totalitarian governments, as well as U.S. leaders' own record of repression. Ironically, the sanctions and two wars against Iraq were the main reasons for the degradation of the Iraqi economy - although one would never know by listening the George W. Bush's speeches.

Bush's propaganda, while appearing "to those who listened to him and watched him, entirely pious, truthful, reliable, sympathetic, and religious," ⁵¹ served an important purpose: indoctrination. Four hundred and seventy years ago, Machiavelli stated, "Experience shows individual sovereigns and republics that arm the masses are capable of making vast conquests." ⁵² Today, his explanation is still accurate. U.S. soldiers, convinced of the axiom of U.S. humanitarianism, have risked, and continue to risk, their lives in order to pacify Iraq. Their actions reinforce the power that ideology plays in provoking and resolving international conflicts.

Challenging Machiavelli's Realist Paradigm

American leaders have learned very well from Machiavelli's lesson in the effective use of propaganda: 'support just principles of compassion, honesty, and justice in theory, but be prepared to use deception and lies to mask your true goals in order to increase your own wealth and power.' However, as citizens who believe in democratic

government and principles, it is the duty of Americans to become more aware of the nature of their government's relationship with the rest of the world.

As someone who agrees with the principles of democracy and universal human rights in more than just theory, I believe that U.S. foreign policy should support and further freedom and justice throughout the world. I think that most Americans would agree with me. If these beliefs are widely shared, then this means that the majority of Americans are diluting themselves to the nature of American foreign policy. Such delusion and ignorance means that the comparison of U.S. foreign policy with Machiavelli's realpolitik is necessary in order to identify the strong, but also largely derivative, relationship between Machiavelli's theories and American imperialism.

While U.S. actions are largely derived from Machiavelli's principles of power politics, increased education throughout high schools, colleges and universities, and through various other activist venues may begin to have some success in eroding the myth of American benevolence and selflessness in world affairs. Education about the negative consequences of U.S. actions, then, constitutes the first step in the process of changing American institutional values and actions. Americans need to learn more about nonviolent alternatives to conflicts that are ignored and denied in the war obsessed, Machiavellian mainstream culture of the United States. The anti-war movement is instrumental in this respect. The anti-war movement, at its base, is comprised of grassroots organizations and activists, of elements outside the established institutions of violence. The growth of the anti-war movement in recent years, especially before and during the U.S. war against Iraq, has come to symbolize a countervailing force – a viable alternative to Machiavelli's assumption that nonviolence is not a realistic alternative to

commonly held realists 'truths.' With the extraordinary growth of the anti-war movement throughout the U.S. and the world in the last two years, it may be reasonable to assume that, with enough pressure, U.S. political leaders will become more susceptible to nonviolent persuasion and pressure, and may begin to move toward utilizing nonviolent alternatives in international conflicts. In this sense, it could be argued that anti-war activists may be standing at the beginning of the gradual shift towards transforming nonviolence and cooperation between states into a global reality.

Machiavelli believed that "men almost always walk along the beaten path" – that "men do not truly believe in new things until they have had practical experience of them." ⁵³ Anti-war protestors throughout the world, however, have struggled to confront American Empire, and are stronger today than ever before. Anti-war activist numbers have grown dramatically over the last three decades, especially in the United States. As a result of this trend, many people, throughout a wide number of countries, have begun to espouse peaceful cooperation rather than violent conflict as the desired medium for conducting international relations. Anti-Iraq war protestors may be in the midst of creating a new paradigm that could actually help many people gain a better understanding of the importance of nonviolence. One thing is for sure – nonviolent protests have been successful in preventing many national leaders from supporting the U.S. war against Iraq. Perhaps in the near future the world may see the development of a "beaten path" of nonviolence where "practical experience" demands progressive alternatives to violent conflict.

End Notes

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²⁵ Ibid.

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