The Impact of Niccolò Machiavelli

“It is much safer to be feared than loved.” This quotation is an example of the tough and practical political commentary of Niccolò Machiavelli—philosopher, statesman, and patriot. The son of a poor lawyer, Niccolò spent many hours educating himself in his father’s library. In 1498, he began a political career in Florence, Italy that would lead him to write one of the most important books in history—The Prince (1513). Machiavelli was not a great artist or religious leader, but he had the greatest influence on history of any single individual of the Renaissance or Reformation.

Machiavelli was a man of action. In 1498, at age 29, he accepted an important position in the government of Florence. He was entrusted with diplomatic missions to local Italian and other European courts. These missions required great diplomacy and a sophisticated understanding of European politics. But Machiavelli could also handle more direct action. In 1509, Machiavelli established the Florentine militia and even led the troops himself to recapture the rebellious town of Pisa.

Clearly a Renaissance man, Machiavelli showed his greatest skill and made his most lasting mark on history as a writer. He wrote histories, short stories, and even plays. The Prince, however, was Machiavelli’s most influential work. It was an examination of how a leader could gain power and stay in power. Machiavelli described how to run a principality without regard for traditional ideas about right and wrong. He wrote it with the hopes of gaining favor with the politically powerful Medici family.

Machiavelli did gain power in Florence, but when the leadership of Florence changed he lost his political influence. However, The Prince has become one of the best examinations of how politics actually works and is studied by political thinkers to this day. Francis Bacon, British statesman and philosopher, wrote that “We are much beholden to Machiavelli and others, that write what men do, and not what they ought to do.” In other words, Machiavelli wrote about political reality rather than theory. It is that fact that makes The Prince such an important historical work, and Machiavelli the most important historical figure of the Renaissance or Reformation.
Some people may argue that one of the great Renaissance artists, such as Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci, had a greater influence on history than Machiavelli. Yet, a piece of art, no matter how great the artist, is still just a piece of art. Art can be admired, it can be inspiring, and it can become a valuable economic and cultural asset. Artists, however, cannot have the same influence on history as individuals—such as Machiavelli—who examine and explain the manner in which human society functions. In the introduction to a 1950 edition of *The Prince*, political scientist Max Lerner wrote that what Machiavelli did was to recognize the existence of power politics and “subject it to scientific study.” It is this continued recognition of the importance of *The Prince* that makes Machiavelli more historically influential than any Renaissance artist.

Others may argue that one of the great religious leaders of the Reformation, such as Martin Luther or John Calvin, had a greater influence on history than Machiavelli. This position is much stronger than the case for Renaissance artists’ greater influence, but it still comes up short. Martin Luther is the only religious leader of the Reformation era—Protestant or Roman Catholic—whose historical influence is worth comparing to Machiavelli. Protestant John Calvin’s influence, even in his own time, was not as great as Martin Luther’s, and Catholic leaders spent the Reformation era mainly reacting to Luther. Even Luther’s historical influence, however, does not equal Machiavelli’s. Luther’s influence was confined to Christianity, which has become less and less influential in the political and financial operation of the modern world. Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, however, still influences the political and financial operation of the modern world. Economist Albert O. Hirschman said in 1980 that “Modern political science owes a great deal to Machiavelli’s shocking claim that ordinary notions of moral behavior for individuals may not be suitable as rules of conduct for states.”

Machiavelli was an innovative thinker who was not afraid to put his ideas into action or write them out for all to examine. *The Prince* influenced political thought from his time to the present and is as relevant to politics today as it was in 1513. His work and ideas have endured for centuries. It is for this reason that Machiavelli had the biggest influence on history of any individual of the Renaissance or Reformation.
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Organization

A persuasive essay has three basic parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. The introduction creates interest and states a position. The body provides the argument for your recommendation. It contains facts and examples as supporting evidence for your position. The conclusion summarizes the information and makes a strong appeal.

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**Supporting Evidence**

Persuasive essays include supporting evidence for an opinion or position. In this essay, examples of Machiavelli’s historical importance are supported by **facts** from his life and **examples** of his lasting influence. What supporting evidence will you use in your essay?

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Counterarguments try to show why arguments against your position are not valid. In this assignment, your counterarguments should show why other historical figures of the Renaissance and Reformation did not have as great an historical impact as your subject. What counterarguments will you include in your essay?

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