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John Adams's Machiavellian Moment

C. Bradley Thompson

John Adams was unique among the Founding Fathers in that he actually read and took seriously Machiavelli's ideas. In his *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*, Adams quoted extensively from Machiavelli and he openly acknowledged an intellectual debt to the Florentine statesman. Adams praised Machiavelli for having been "the first" to have "revived the ancient politics," and he insisted that the "world" was much indebted to Machiavelli for "the revival of reason in matters of government." What could Adams have meant by these extraordinary statements? The following article examines the Machiavellian ideas and principles Adams incorporated into his political thought as well as those that he rejected. Drawing upon evidence found in an unpublished fragment, Part one argues that the political epistemology that Adams employed in the *Defence* can be traced to Machiavelli's new modes and orders. Part two presents Adams's critique of Machiavelli's constitutionalism.

Historians and political scientists have debated for many years the role that Machiavelli's ideas may or may not have played in the Founding of the United States. Some argue that Machiavelli resurrected a lost tradition of classical republican theory and practice which was then transmitted to America via the so-called Commonwealthmen of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English politics.¹ Others credit Machiavelli with having initiated a revolution in political thought that paved the way for the modern natural-rights teaching of Hobbes, Locke and the American Revolution.² And, of course, some deny that Machiavelli had any influence whatsoever in America.

The author wishes to thank Brendan McConville, Peter Schramm, Sidney Taylor and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

1. Zera S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans: An Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England*, 2nd ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1962); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 21-91.

2. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 9-55; Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago:

Those who argue for an explicit Machiavellian connection are confronted by one massive problem. There is simply no tangible evidence to suggest that Machiavelli positively influenced any of the American founders. One searches in vain for a direct and recognizable link to Machiavelli in the writings of Jefferson, Madison, or Hamilton. In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* and *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, for instance, there are virtually no index citations to Machiavelli. Indeed, the Founding generation treated Machiavelli with disapprobation and opprobrium. Thus, much of the work on this question has attempted to show how certain Machiavellian ideas were distilled and culturally transmitted to America. In other words, we are led to believe that eighteenth-century Americans were Machiavellians without knowing it.

John Adams was the exception. He was unique among the Founding Fathers in that he actually read and took seriously Machiavelli's ideas. Adams quoted extensively from Machiavelli, and he openly acknowledged an intellectual debt to the Florentine statesman. Adams even claimed to have been a "student of Machiavelli."³

Adams's political writings are replete with references to Machiavelli and his writings. In the first volume of his great opus *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, he classified Machiavelli, along with Sidney and Montesquieu, as a philosophic defender of mixed government. To that end he transcribes in its entirety Machiavelli's chapter on "The Different Kinds of Republics, and of What Kind the Roman Republic Was" from the *Discourses on Livy*. In the second volume of the *Defence* he copied over one-hundred pages from the *Florentine Histories*, and he reprinted Machiavelli's *Discourse upon the Proper Ways and Means of reforming the Government of Florence*, which he re-titled "Machiavelli's Plan for a Perfect Commonwealth." Scattered throughout the *Defence* are several shorter

University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 41-128; Paul Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 231-782.

3. John Adams to Francis Adrian Vanderkemp, 9 August 1813, *The Papers of John Adams*, 8 vols. to date, ed. Robert J. Taylor et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977-), Microfilm Reel 95.

quotations from Machiavelli that Adams cites approvingly and disapprovingly.⁴

Adams freely admitted that he was often uncertain as to when Machiavelli spoke the truth and when he dissimulated, "whether he was in jest or in earnest." He also seems to have known that there were two Machiavellis: Machiavelli the restorer of ancient republican institutions and Machiavelli the teacher of evil. Years later he would say of the Florentine that his "writings contain a good deal of wisdom, though it is unfortunately mixed with too much wickedness."⁵ Adams took from Machiavelli what he needed, and he rejected much.

It is no exaggeration to suggest, then, that Machiavelli cast a long shadow over one of America's most serious students of the political sciences. But even the most thoughtful reader of the *Defence* is hardly prepared when Adams advances on behalf of the Florentine a series of stunning claims. At one point, Adams refers to Machiavelli as "the great restorer of true politics." Elsewhere in the *Defence*, he insisted that the "world" was much indebted to Machiavelli for "the revival of reason in matters of government." He also praised Machiavelli for having been "the first" to have "revived the ancient politics."⁶

What could Adams have meant by these extraordinary statements? What were the "true politics" that Adams thought Machiavelli had restored and how had this Florentine statesman resurrected "reason" in the affairs of political life? And what specific tradition of the "ancient politics" did Adams think Machiavelli had revived? By examining these interesting questions, this article hopes to open new avenues of scholarship on the question of Machiavelli and the American Founding.

John Adams's intellectual debt to Niccolo Machiavelli was unique and rather different from the intellectual tradition that the Florentine is alleged to have deposited in America. In what follows, we examine the direct intellectual confrontation between

4. *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 10 vols., ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1850-56), 4: 408, 410, 559; 5: 95; 6: 4, 394, 396.

5. John Adams to Francis Van der Kemp, 9 August 1813; Adams to Francis Van der Kemp, 19 March 1813, *Adams Papers*, Reel 95.

6. Adams, *Works*, 6: 4; 5: 95; 4: 559.

Adams and Machiavelli. Our task is therefore a limited one: to examine how Adams understood, and then used and rejected many of Machiavelli's ideas and methods, forms and formalities, modes and orders. Readers must determine for themselves if Adams understood the true Machiavelli.

"Reason in Matters of Government"

In 1784, Dr. Richard Price, the English dissenting minister, published as an appendix to his *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* a letter he had received from the famous French *philosophe*, the Baron Anne-Robert Turgot. The letter criticizes America's Revolutionary constitutions for slavishly imitating the checks and balances of England's mixed constitution. Adams understood Turgot's letter to be a celebration of Pennsylvania's unicameral constitution and a condemnation of his own Massachusetts constitution, as well as all other state constitutions with bicameral legislatures. Adams wrote his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, Against the Attack of M. Turgot* to repel the advance of a French virus onto American shores.

The first and most influential volume of the *Defence* is divided into three large sections. The first section studies twenty-five democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical republics of the modern world. The second section examines the opinions and philosophies of Swift, Franklin, Price, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Harrington, Polybius, Dionysius Halicarnassensis and Plato. The last third studies seventeen democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical republics of the ancient world. The second volume and part of the third "contain three long Courses of Experiments in Political Philosophy," a trilogy of case studies that examine the Italian republics of the Middle Ages.⁷ The last half of the third volume is an analysis and critique of Marchamont Nedham's essay on *The Excellency of a Free State, or the Right Constitution of a Commonwealth*, published in 1656.

7. John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 25 August 1787, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed. Lester J. Cappon, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 1: 192.

The fourth volume of the *Defence*, the *Discourses on Davila*,⁸ consists of thirty-two essays, eighteen of which are straight translations from the Italian historian Enrico Caterino Davila's *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia* (1630). The *Discourses* recount the battles, intrigues, factions and assassinations during forty years of French civil war in the late sixteenth century. Davila's historical narrative is interrupted after the first discourse, however, by fourteen essays of "useful reflections" that discuss the "constitution of human nature," drawn in part from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Historians have been puzzled over the years as to *why* Adams would write such a "strange" and difficult text.⁹ Any serious study of the *Defence* must, sooner or later, confront the almost universal scholarly opinion that the work lacks order, coherence and a unifying plan.¹⁰ As it stands, the *Defence* is cumbersome and uninviting; indeed, it is seemingly without method. Why did John Adams feel compelled to respond to Turgot's letter criticizing the American constitutions with a mammoth three-volume treatise? More to the point: Who did he think would read such a tome and what did he think his audience would do with the information once read?

8. For the purpose of the present study, I am treating Adams's *Discourses on Davila: A Series of Papers on Political History, By an American Citizen* (1790-91) as the "fourth volume" of the *Defence*. Adams often referred to the *Defence* and the *Davila* essays as his four volumes on government and it was his intention that they be read as a single, unified work. That Adams intended the *Defence* and *Davila* to be read as a whole, see *Works*, 6: 482; 10: 96, and *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2: 356, 357.

9. Adams himself referred to the *Defence* as a "strange" book. See John Adams to Richard Cranch, 15 January 1787, *Works*, 1: 432.

10. Gordon Wood has described the *Defence* as a "bulky, disordered, conglomeration of political glosses on a single theme." *Creation of the American Republic* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), p. 568; Peter Shaw found the book absent in "form," "repetitious," inconsistent, and "disordered," *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), p. 207; and J. G. A. Pocock has described the book as "the product of an obsession with disorder so pervasive that it becomes disorderly itself," so much so that Pocock thought Adams "scarcely in control of his materials" ("The Book Most Misunderstood Since the Bible": John Adams and the Confusion about Aristocracy" [Paper presented at the Instituto di Studi Nordamericani - Firenze Capitale Europea della Cultura, Florence, Italy, 28-30 November 1787], p. 13).

Buried among his unpublished papers is a set of rough notes from which Adams pieced together much of the *Defence*. Included in this material is an extraordinary fragment that permits the historian to access a new way of viewing this "strange" book.¹¹ Never published as part of the *Defence*, this note provides a key to decoding the mystery of a book that seems at first sight to be merely a "disordered conglomeration" of uncontrollable material. The fragment reveals in dramatic fashion the scientific tradition from which Adams developed his theory of political architecture, and it helps the reader to unlock a new entrance into the organization, purpose and meaning of this obscure treatise.¹²

The stated purpose of this fragment is to first illuminate "the true method of pursuing the Study of the Arts and Sciences," and second, to enumerate "the great Men to whom We are indebted for the ancient discovery and modern revival of it." Adams's negative purpose is to counter "some celebrated Academicians" who had lately advanced the thesis that "experience and examples" have nothing to do with one of the most important of the sciences, "that of Government." In all likelihood, Adams is here referring to Turgot, Condorcet and others among the French *philosophes* and encyclopedists. Adams clearly identifies two opposed traditions of scientific reasoning in the fragment: one advocating an empirical, *a posteriori*, inductive mode of reasoning and another advancing a rationalist, *a priori*, deductive method. By challenging what he considers bad science and by developing a "right method of philosophizing," Adams hopes to lay the methodological groundwork for a science of politics that could distinguish between "attainable and unattainable knowledge."¹³ In other words, he is challenging the deductive method of hypothesis and system-building with the inductive method of fact and experience.

Interestingly, Adams argues that the revolution in modern science usually associated with Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton had actually originated in the ancient world. "It is not true," he

11. "Literary Drafts and Notes," *Adams Papers*, Reel 188.

12. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between this fragment and the organization of the *Defence*, see C. Bradley Thompson, "John Adams and the Science of Politics" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1993).

13. *Adams Papers*, Reel 188.

says, "to say that the right use of Reason and the right conduct of the Understanding in the Investigation of Truth, and the Acquisition of knowledge is a late discovery." He identifies Hippocrates and Democritus and "some of the Writings of Aristotle" as having first comprehended "that Observation and Experience were the only means of acquiring a knowledge of Nature." Adams prefers the "experimental Philosophy" of Aristotle's *History of Animals* to the "Conjecture," the "fictions of Imagination, and the Spirit of System" found in his *Physics*.¹⁴ And when a new generation of men in the modern era had "little by little, introduced a new science" and seemingly smashed all that had gone before it, Adams finds they had really "only revived a Method which had been practiced in Antiquity."¹⁵

Adams credits "Chancellor Bacon" with initiating a revolution in modern science, a revolution grounded on resurrected modes of reasoning that had laid dormant for over a millennium. Adams considers Bacon the "first among the moderns" to have "abandoned a vague and obscure Philosophy." It was Bacon who had left "words for things" and who "sought in the observation of Nature, a real knowledge, founded in fact." It was Bacon who first "opened a wider field" and who perceived the "general Principles which ought to be fundamental in the study of Nature." And it was Bacon who "dared to form the design of rebuilding Science from the foundations which he had laid on the rock of Nature." Adams thinks this last achievement to have been Bacon's

14. Aristotle, though a great empiricist, is generally not regarded as having employed an experimental method. Indeed, his views on final causation suggest that he was an anti-experimentalist. Some scholars have suggested that Aristotle could not have avoided using some kind of experimental method, particularly in his work in biology and anatomy. It is in this sense, I suspect, that Adams could write that Aristotle shared with Democritus a "taste" for dissecting animals, "in order to discover the Seat of Sensation and the origin of Motion" (*Adams Papers*, Reel 188). See Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science* (Toronto: Clark, Irwin and Co., 1977), pp. 80-83.

15. *Adams Papers*, Reel 188. It should be recalled at this point that Adams said of Machiavelli that he was the first to have "revived the ancient politics" and that the world was much indebted to him for "the revival of reason in matters of government." For a pithy but excellent account of Bacon's scientific method and its relationship to that of the pre-Socratics, see Robert K. Faulkner, *Francis Bacon and the Project of Progress* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1993), pp. 8-9, 265-72.

greatest. Though his Lord Verulam "hinted at a great number of discoveries which have since been made," it was his reconstruction of science on the basis of a new method that marked his true greatness.¹⁶

Descartes followed Bacon and is credited by Adams for opening "some courses in experimental Philosophy." But Adams is suspicious of Descartes for having admitted of "certain inward Sentiments of Evidence which it is not easy to comprehend and which may misguide Us in the conduct of the Understanding." He sees in Descartes the beginning of the hypothetico-deductive method. Adams does credit Descartes, though, with discovering certain principles in "Geometry and Algebra," if only because they "pointed out the path to Newton."

For Adams, as for almost every educated person of the eighteenth century, the development of modern science reached its zenith in the work of Sir Isaac Newton. Adams, however, is much less impressed with Newton's actual scientific discoveries than he is with Newton's formulation of a new conception of science, of its methods and modes of analysis. The Newtonian revolution was based, according to Adams, on "the Art of introducing Geometry and Algebra into natural Philosophy and by combining Experiment with Calculation." Adams maintains that Bacon rediscovered the method of induction but that Newton had subsequently applied the theory in brilliant fashion to astronomy and optics, thereby validating and extending its methodological premises. What Bacon had only suggested in the way of an experimental method, Adams sees as having been brought to fruition by Newton.

The last philosopher considered by Adams to have contributed to the development of this empirical science of nature is "Mr. Locke, whose Writings demonstrated that all materials, the elements and Principles of human knowledge, are derived only from Experience and Analogy." Those who attempt to read this "enlightened Phylosopher," Adams notes,

are Conducted through a Course of experimental Phylosophy, and are Shown that every Sensation and every Reflection is an Experiment. There is a continual appeal to his own Apprehensions Judgements,

16. *Adams Papers*, Reel 188.

Reasonings and Arrangements, and to his own Reflections on his own Intellectual operations. He is perpetually [. . . .] to analyze his own Ideas and Notions, to compare them with the nature of Things, to be accurate in his definitions and steady and sincere in the use of words.¹⁷

But how could the methods and the modes of reasoning peculiar to the natural sciences be applied to things political? What sort of political epistemology should lawgivers use and employ when designing constitutions? These are the central questions for Adams.

In the very same way that Adams sees two methods of reasoning in the natural sciences, he also thinks that there are two modes of reasoning in the political sciences. On the one hand, there is a tradition of political epistemology—a tradition he often identifies with Plato, Rousseau, Paine and Condorcet—that builds political systems on the basis of “Imagination, Hypothesis [and] Conjecture.”¹⁸ The tradition of political science that Adams feels the greatest kinship with, however, is best seen in an 1814 letter to John Taylor, where he explicitly states that he had fortified himself in the *Defence* behind the writings of “Aristotle, Livy, Sidney, Harrington, Dr. Price, Machiavel, Montesquieu, Swift, &c.”¹⁹ To that list he might well have added Cicero, Polybius and David Hume, all of whom he mentions on separate occasions as having influenced his theory of political architecture.²⁰

The pivotal figure here is Machiavelli. In the same way that Adams credits Bacon with having recovered a methodological tradition in the natural sciences reaching back to classical antiquity, he also claims that the “world” was “much indebted” to Machiavelli “for the revival of *reason* in matters of government.” Machiavelli is for Adams a kind of missing link, an important

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.* See John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 28 June 1812, and Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 16 July 1814, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2: 308-311, 434-439. See also, Adams to Benjamin Rush, 19 September 1806, in *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813*, ed. John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1966), pp. 65-66. Cf. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 174.

19. John Adams to John Taylor, 15 April, 1814, *Works*, 6: 492.

20. See *ibid.* 4: 294-96, 435-45; John Adams to Samuel Adams, 18 October 1790, 6: 415.

bridge between the political science of the ancient world and the empirical political tradition of the modern age.²¹ Adams thinks Machiavelli the central figure in the resurrection of an empirico-inductive tradition of political science. It is no small coincidence and should be kept in mind that Bacon—the man Adams describes as having “introduced a new science” based on a “revived Method which had been practiced in Antiquity”—thought the best method for the political sciences was “that which Machiavel chose wisely and aptly for government; namely, *discourse upon histories or examples.*”²²

But Machiavelli—certainly the Machiavelli of the *Prince*—would seem to be an odd candidate, at least from the perspective of a revolutionary republican, for the honor of being crowned the “restorer of true politics.” What did Adams mean by this? At the very least, he probably meant to say that Machiavelli had resurrected in his *Discourses on Livy* the constitutional tradition of mixed government associated with Sparta, Carthage and Rome. That he describes Machiavelli as having restored “*reason*” in the matters of government suggests that he meant something more. In all likelihood, it was the Florentine statesman’s methodological approach to the political sciences that so impressed Adams.

Machiavelli begins the *Discourses* by identifying his audience and by describing his purpose in writing. His book is intended to guide a certain kind of man (*i.e.*, young men of merit worthy of governing) toward the knowledge necessary to found, perpetuate, or reform civic institutions. He plans to share with this audience his “long experience and assiduous research” into the course of human affairs. In particular, he will provide his readers with a “real knowledge of history.”²³ A certain kind of reasoning about political things would seem then to be an important element in Machiavelli’s political philosophy and reform project.

21. *Ibid.*, 5: 95 (Italics added).

22. Francis Bacon, “The Advancement of Learning,” in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, 12 vols. ed. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1863), 6: 359.

23. Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius in The Prince and the Discourses*, ed. Max Lerner (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), Greeting; 1. Introduction; 3. xliii.

The *Discourses* are written in the form of a commentary on Livy's history of ancient Rome: it empirically observes and analyzes the policies and actions of Rome's rulers and citizens between 753 and 293 B.C. Machiavelli recounts the events, persons and processes by which Rome was formed and brought to greatness, and he charts the causes for its decline. To that end, he examines the evolution of Rome's constitution, its political institutions and military organization, its internal dissensions and external growth, and the virtues and vices of its greatest statesmen and soldiers. In this way, Machiavelli's modes of reasoning are very different, for instance, from those found in Plato's *Republic*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, or Rousseau's *Social Contract*. The *Discourses*, the *Florentine Histories*, and even *The Prince* employ a method that seems much closer to that of Aristotle, the classical historians, and to Polybius in particular.²⁴ Adams credits Machiavelli's political science, like Bacon's natural science, with initiating a revolution by resurrecting a certain kind of classical political reasoning.

At the heart of Machiavelli's political science is a methodological approach that encouraged the political scientist to study man as he really *is* rather than as he *ought* to be, and the best way to examine man as he is, is through history.²⁵ Metaphysical and religious considerations are to be disregarded by this "scienza nuova." Armed with this rule of procedure, Machiavelli claims to have discovered and introduced "new principles and systems as dangerous almost as the exploration of unknown seas and continents." He claims to have opened "a new route, which has not yet been followed by any one."²⁶

But how does the explorer find his way in uncharted seas? In the very same way that developments in the navigational sciences permitted Columbus to explore unknown seas and continents and advances in the optical sciences magnified Galileo's sight, so it was Machiavelli's development and application of a new political science, a new constitutional compass, that permitted the constitutional pilot to chart new seas and to discover lost and forgotten worlds. Machiavelli's political science examines the

24. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 2. i; Polybius, *Histories*, 1. i, xxxvi.

25. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *The Prince and the Discourses*, chap. 15.

26. *Discourses*, Introduction.

histories of states, ancient and modern. These political bodies or social organisms he calls "mixed bodies" which, like "all the things of this world have a limit to their existence." Feigning a kind of decayed Aristotelianism, Machiavelli says of these "mixed bodies" that they have a natural course, a telos, "ordained for them by Heaven." But the history of most regimes demonstrates that their lives had been unusually short. Very few republics had run their entire course and fulfilled their natural end. This is because most republics throughout history had allowed their constitutional forms and structures to become "disorganized." Indeed, "all human institutions," Machiavelli says, "contain some inherent evil that gives rise to unforeseen accidents."²⁷

Much in the same way that Newton established certain "Regulae Philosophandi," Machiavelli prescribes certain "regola generale" for rulers, legislators and students of political science. After studying how men really do live, the fundamental axiom on which Machiavelli builds his science of politics is the premise that human nature has always been and is everywhere the same. Man was the same in pagan Greece as he is in Christian Florence. In the thirty-ninth chapter of the first book of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli establishes the primary "regola generale" that guides his approach to politics:

Whoever considers the past and the present will readily observe that all cities and all peoples are and ever have been animated by the same desires and the same passions; so that it is easy, by diligent study of the past, to foresee what is likely to happen in the future in any republic, and to apply those remedies that were used by the ancients, or, not finding any that were employed by them, to devise new ones from the similarity of the events. But as such considerations are neglected or not understood by most of those who read, or, if understood by these, are unknown by those who govern, it follows that the same troubles generally recur in all republics.

The historical observation of all states, Machiavelli argues, demonstrates that governments, not unlike "heaven, the sun, the elements, and men" do not change "their motions and power."²⁸ Thus the natural state of human affairs, according to Machiavelli,

27. *Discourses*, 3. i, xi.

28. *Ibid.*, 1. xxxix.

is one of instability and “perpetual movement,” and that movement is in one of two directions: states are either healthy and ascending or they are cancerous and declining. Countries may differ entirely from one another in their manners and mores, but they are all rising or falling according to the same laws of nature.²⁹ What is most obvious to Machiavelli, even from a superficial examination of world history and the events of his own day, is that states seem to follow a regular pattern of relative health and growth, followed by internal decay and eventual decline.

Because of the uniformity and constancy of human nature, history can provide the political scientist with a kind of laboratory in which to observe and compare the nature, origin, and course of all governments. The world of ancient Rome provided Machiavelli with an experimental field for the verification of phenomena observed in his own time. If social and political phenomena could be reduced to a few basic elements and if their constituent parts do not substantially change over time, the student of politics should be able to discern certain patterns in the history of government that are fundamental and repeating. It would be possible, therefore, for the political scientist to establish from an observation of certain political phenomena rules intrinsic to the nature of political development.

By collecting and collating a wide variety of observable political phenomena and by analyzing the way consequences proceed from certain causes in political life and human nature, Machiavelli thought he had found the key to establishing a universally valid political science. History for Machiavelli—and for the entire empirical tradition—is not progressing toward some ideal state of perfection. Despite all of the changes and upheaval known in human history, the rise and fall of states follow a familiar and recurring order. Machiavelli thinks the lessons of the past are therefore applicable to the present and the future. On this view of human nature and history, he is able to claim for political science the ability to draw valid generalizations or rules for governing and constitution-making and the power to

29. *Ibid.*, 2. Introduction.

predict the future of most governments.³⁰ By taking human nature as always and everywhere the same and by studying history as the social phenomena of the political scientists' empirical observations, Machiavelli laid the basic groundwork for a style of historical writing and a mode of political science that would develop over the course of the next three centuries.³¹

Among the modern students of the Machiavellian political science was Bolingbroke.³² In his *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1738), Bolingbroke develops and extends the insights of Machiavelli's empirical political science. Bolingbroke self-consciously attempts to develop a science or philosophy of history that will uncover the underlying rules and principles that exemplify "the invariable nature of things." Such principles are discoverable by induction from historical example. "He who studies history as he would philosophy," Bolingbroke writes, "will soon distinguish and collect them, and by doing so will soon form to himself a general system of ethics and politics on the surest foundations, on the trial of these principles and rules in all ages, and on the confirmation of them by universal experience."³³

30. "Wise men say, and not without reason, that whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who have been, and ever will be, animated by the same passions, and thus they must necessarily have the same results" (*Discourses*, 3. xliiii).

31. On the development of the historical sciences as a part of the empirical study of politics, see Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951); Herbert Davis, "The Augustan Conception of History," in *Reason and Imagination: Studies in the History of Ideas, 1600-1800*, ed. J. A. Mazzeo (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 213-29; George H. Nadel, "Philosophy of History Before Historicism," in *The Critical Approach to Science and Philosophy*, ed. Mario Bunge (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp. 445-70; R. N. Stromberg, "History in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951): 295-304.

32. For an interesting discussion of Machiavelli's influence on Bolingbroke's historical methodology, see Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 135-65.

33. Henry Saint-John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke, "Letters on the Study and Use of History," in *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1841), pp. 193-94.

The science of history called for by Bolingbroke extended and deepened the empirical approach to politics. The statesman's study of history, Bolingbroke argues, must encompass the experience of as wide a variety of actors and events as is possible: "History, therefore, of all kinds, of civilised and uncivilised, of ancient and modern nations, in short, all history that descends to a sufficient detail of human actions and characters, is useful to bring us acquainted with our species, nay, with ourselves." Historical study provides man with a "map of the country," by which "to guide ourselves." According to Bolingbroke, history provides men with an empirical basis for moral and political action. By history, though, Bolingbroke does not mean the antiquarian collection of facts, nor does he mean the recitation of events and heroic deeds for imitation. The ultimate goal of history is to dig beneath the surface for the "immediate and remote causes" of events. Here, at the level of cause and effect, history becomes "philosophy teaching by examples." The ultimate goal of history, then, is to "reduce all the abstract speculations of ethics, and all the general rules of human policy, to their first principles."³⁴ This was a philosophy of history that John Adams could take hold of and apply to his science of politics.³⁵

On the title page of his personal set of Enrico Caterino Davila's *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia*, Adams copied from Bolingbroke's fifth letter *On the Study and Use of History* a passage describing one of the principal purposes to which history could be used by philosophers and statesmen:

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 229-30, 223, 191, 222.

35. That Adams was greatly influenced by Bolingbroke can be little doubted. In his *Autobiography* Adams mentions that when he went to Worcester in 1756 to begin teaching Latin at the local public school, he carried with him "Lord Bolingbroke's Study and Use of History, and his Patriot King." The young Adams then lent his volumes to his teacher, James Putnam, who "was so well pleased with them he Added Bolingbrokes Works to his List, which gave men an Opportunity of reading the Posthumous Works of that Writer in five Volumes. Mr. Burke once asked, who ever read him through? I can answer that I read him through, before the Year 1758 and that I have read him through at least twice since that time" (Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3: 264). Adams's *Diary* is full of references to Bolingbroke (See Adams, *Diary*, 1: 11, 12, 35, 36, 38, 40, 73, 176, 200; 2: 386; 3: 272). See also, Adams to Jefferson, 25 December 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2: 410. The influence is unmistakable.

Man is the subject of every history; and to know him well, we must see him and consider him, as history alone can present him to us, in every age, in every country, in every state, in life and in death. History, therefore, of all kinds, of civilised and uncivilised, of ancient and modern nations, in short, all history that descends to a sufficient detail of human actions and characters, is useful to bring us acquainted with our species, nay, with ourselves.³⁶

This entry provides an important clue as to the nature and purpose of Adams's own *Discourses on Davila*. At the end of the first discourse, Adams interrupts Davila's historical narrative to turn his readers thoughts "for a few moments to the constitution of the human mind."³⁷ He then follows with a lengthy discussion of human nature over the next eleven chapters.

Historians have often wondered why Adams chose the writings of an obscure Italian historian as the basis of a political treatise published for an American audience in the 1790s. What was his point in using Davila's *History*? Were Adams's *Discourses* on Davila's *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia* written in self-conscious imitation of Machiavelli's *Discourses* or Livy's *History of Rome*? The answers to these questions are found in Bolingbroke.

Adams, like Bolingbroke, did not study history randomly; he did not think all histories or chronicles equally good, nor did he simply study the events of history for their imitative value. History for Adams and Bolingbroke meant something much more. We can only surmise what Adams learned from his reading of Bolingbroke, but it does seem likely that he was shaken from his historical slumbers when he read the famous fifth letter from *The Study and Use of History*. For it was here that Bolingbroke would have taught Adams that "Naked facts, without the causes that produced them, and the circumstances that accompanied them, are not sufficient to characterise actions and councils." It was important, therefore, for statesmen to examine and compare the works of different historians. Some obviously would be preferable to others in that they illuminated a deeper level of the human experience. The one historian recommended by Bolingbroke, the one who had achieved this higher purpose, was the "noble

36. Bolingbroke, "Letters on the Study and Use of History," 2: 229-30. See Alfred Iacuzzi, *John Adams, Scholar* (New York: S. F. Vanni, 1952), p. 150.

37. Adams, *Works*, 6: 232.

historian" Enrico Caterino Davila. Our plot thickens when we learn that Bolingbroke thought Davila's work "equal in many respects to Livy."³⁸

There can be little doubt that Bolingbroke's recommendation of the Italian historian influenced Adams. According to Bolingbroke, Davila had been suspected "of too much refinement and subtlety." He had been accused of penetrating "the secret motives of actions," and "in laying the causes of events too deep."³⁹ But it was precisely this quality that recommended Davila to Bolingbroke and Adams, and it was this quality that linked Davila with his near contemporary Machiavelli in the mind of John Adams. In his commentary on Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* in the second volume of the *Defence*, Adams quotes Machiavelli to the effect that, "The most useful erudition for republicans is that which exposes the causes of discord; by which they may learn wisdom and unanimity from the examples of others."⁴⁰ Adams was most interested in historians like Machiavelli and Davila—that is, those who sought to find the remote causes of events, causes that were "too deep" for most historians to see. Adams chose historical narratives like Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* and Davila's *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia* precisely because they sought to "unravel the secret springs" that govern the political life of all nations. In fact, all the historians and philosophers that Adams uses in the *Defence*—Polybius, Dionysius Halicarnassus, and even Plato⁴¹—could be said to have fulfilled to a greater or lesser degree this

38. Bolingbroke, "Letters on the Study and Use of History," 2: 228-29.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-29; John E. Paynter, "The Ethics of John Adams: Prolegomenon to a Science of Politics" (Ph.D dissertation, University of Chicago, 1974), pp. 97-101.

40. Adams, *Works*, 5: 11.

41. Given this methodological standard—the heavy emphasis on experience and history as opposed to rationalism and philosophy—some may wonder why Adams would quote in the *Defence* so approvingly from Plato's *Republic*. The vast bulk of Adams's quotations from Plato are drawn from the eighth and ninth books. It is here that Plato describes the rise and fall of all pure forms of government into their corrupt forms. What impressed Adams was not Plato's unique, non-cyclical theory of regime change, but rather his account of the reasons, the underlying causes of this change: "Plato has given us the most accurate detail of the natural vicissitudes of manners and principles, the usual progress of the passions in society, and revolutions of governments into one another" (Adams, *Works*, 4: 448).

necessary historical criterion. Indeed, their selection for inclusion in the *Defence* is intimately linked with their ability to get beneath the surface of social phenomena.⁴² In contrast to the theories of *philosophes* like Condorcet, Adams describes the *Defence* as “an attempt to place Government upon the only Philosophy which can ever support it, the real constitution of human nature, not upon any wild Visions of its perfectibility.” Thus, paraphrasing Bolingbroke, Adams writes that “History is philosophy and policy teaching by example—every history must be founded in philosophy and some policy.”⁴³

Reviving the “Ancient Politics”

Not only did Machiavelli revive and apply certain ancient modes of reasoning to political questions but he was also the first, according to Adams, to have “revived the ancient politics.”⁴⁴ After centuries of the canon and feudal systems, Machiavelli initiated a revolution in the political sciences to first restore and then improve upon the republican political institutions of the ancient world. In particular, Machiavelli resurrected the theory of the mixed constitution which subsequently enjoyed a renewed intellectual and political respectability in English political theory and practice.

There were, according to Adams, three periods in English history when “the principles of government” had been intensively studied. The first period, that of the Reformation, began with Machiavelli’s restoration of what Adams called the “true politics” or the political theory of the mixed regime. The Florentine’s prescriptions for mixed government were imported into England via John Poynt’s “Short Treatise of Politicke Power,” published in 1556. The second period, that of the Interregnum between 1640 and 1660, saw the publication of Harrington’s *Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). The third period, that of the Glorious Revolution, produced Sidney, Locke, Hoadley, Trenchard and Gordon, and Plato Redivivus.⁴⁵

42. Adams, *Works*, 6: 365; 5: 11.

43. John Adams to Rev. De Walter, October, 1797, *Adams Papers*, Reel 119; Adams to Francis Adrian Vanderkemp, 20 April 1812, *Adams Papers*, Reel 118.

44. Adams, *Works*, 4: 559.

45. *Ibid.*, 6: 3-4.

With the revolution in political philosophy that attended these three periods came a restored appreciation for "the essential principles of liberty" and the theory of mixed government. There was no doubt in Adams's mind that it was Machiavelli who had "revived the ancient politics," thereby provoking the modern revolution in political thought. Milton, Harrington and Sidney, according to Adams, "were intimately acquainted with the ancients and with Machiavel." John Locke is identified by Adams as a student of the Machiavellian tradition, and "Montesquieu," Adams charges, "borrowed the best part of his book from Machiavel, without acknowledging the quotation."⁴⁶

Adams begins the second volume of the *Defence* with a running commentary on books two through seven of Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*. The general purpose of this commentary is to demonstrate to Americans how governments resembling Turgot's democratic theory of "All Authority in one Centre" had actually worked in history. More to the point, Adams's Machiavellian commentary will teach future constitution-makers and statesmen how to study history in order to uncover the true causes of political conflict. Machiavelli's history, like Davila's history of the French civil wars, provided Adams with an experimental laboratory in which to see the cause and effect relationship between constitutional organization and human action. As we have already seen, Adams recommends Machiavelli's political science to potential constitution-makers because it exposed "'the causes of discord.'" The *Florentine Histories*, according to Adams, are "full of lessons of wisdom, extremely to our purpose." That purpose being to demonstrate "that the predominant passion of all men in power, whether kings, nobles, or plebeians, is the same; that tyranny will be the effect, whoever are the governors, whether the one, the few, or the many." As a counterfactual, Adams will also demonstrate how a constitutional order that institutionalized "equal laws, made by common consent, and supported, protected, and enforced by three different orders of men *in equilibrio*" could have ended the continual revolutions between "tyranny and anarchy" that characterized the government of Florence in the years between 1215 and 1492.⁴⁷

46. *Ibid.*, 6: 4; 4: 559.

47. *Ibid.*, 5: 5, 11, 9-10, 5.

Thus begins Adams's subtle and important criticism or revision of Machiavelli.

The Florence chronicled by Machiavelli is in a state of constant civil disorder. The internecine battles between noble families, followed by the never-ending conflicts between the nobles and commons and then commons and plebeians, had left Florence in a state of constant political *stasis*. Machiavelli's history was useful for Adams's purposes because it clearly demonstrated to Americans that "it may be seen and considered that human nature is the same in a mob as upon a throne, and that unbridled passions are at least as brutal and diabolical, and unlimited power as tyrannical, in a mob, as in a monarch or senate." Indeed, Adams warns, "they are worse, for there is always a number among them who are under less restraints of shame and decency." Adams is in complete agreement with Machiavelli that the human passions most relevant to political life—aristocratic ambition and democratic envy—can be studied and "carefully traced" in order to observe their operation in political affairs.⁴⁸ But Adams breaks with Machiavelli at this point.

According to Adams, Machiavelli had "an accurate idea of the evil" that bedeviled Florence, but he was thoroughly "confused" as to how to "remedy" the problem. Adams and Machiavelli seem to agree that human nature is "utterly incapable" of contentment and moderation, and both agreed that it "is action, not rest, that constitutes our pleasure." They both understand that faction was the cancer that ruined Florence. Equally important, Adams credits the Florentine with knowing something of the remedy to the problems of Florence, that is, Adams knew that Machiavelli was as "clear and full for a mixed government as any writer." And yet Adams thought there a "mist" before Machiavelli's eyes—"eyes so piercing, so capable of looking far through the hearts and deeds of men."⁴⁹

Machiavelli, according to Adams, did not fully understand or explain the causes that kept Florence in a state of perpetual revolution. Throughout the *Histories* Machiavelli attempted to explain why certain uprisings occurred at a particular time. Every

48. *Ibid.*, 5: 11, 19.

49. *Ibid.*, 5: 66, 39-40, 44. See also *Discourses*, 2. Introduction.

factional conflict seemed unrelated to the previous one because new characters were fighting for new prizes. Machiavelli therefore blames one conflict on the "the restless ambition" of the nobleman Corso Donati. In comparing how the factional feuding of Florence differed from that of ancient Rome, Machiavelli attributes his city's problems to her destiny or to *fortuna*. At another place, he blames the battles in Florence on the "iniquity of the times."⁵⁰ In other words, it was the ceaseless ambition or envy of certain individuals or factions in ever-changing social contexts that metabolized or unleashed a destructive solvent common to all regimes because inherent in human nature. Despite his great admiration for Machiavelli and the *Florentine Histories*, Adams criticizes Machiavelli in the end for reducing the civil dissensions of Florence simply to the inconstancy and insatiability of the human passions operating in a world of *fortuna*.

Adams found Machiavelli's analysis of the destruction of Florence shallow and incomplete. Corso, or any other quarrelsome or ambitious individual, should not be blamed for the problems of Florence. "If Corso had not existed," Adams retorts, "the people would have found some other leader and confidant." There will always be men like Corso and there will always be times when the people will "seek of Cassius, Maelius, Manlius, or Corso" aid and protection against the "oppressions of nobles." Likewise, the destiny or problems that Machiavelli claimed "peculiar" to Florence were, from Adams's vantage, "common to every city, nation, village, and club." The political scientist should not, according to Adams, blame *fortuna* or the inconstancy of human nature for the peculiar problems that bedeviled Florence. "Why should the people be deceived with insinuations that those evils arose from the destiny of a particular city," asks Adams, "when we know that destiny is common to all mankind."⁵¹

The critical moment in Machiavelli's history, according to Adams, occurred sometime around 1282 when, after the failure of two still-born constitutions (the so-called *Anziani* and *Buoni Homini* constitutions), the Florentines constructed a third which was the primary cause of the city's never-ending fluctuation

50. Adams, *Works*, 5: 29-30, 42-45, 48.

51. *Ibid.*, 5: 29, 45.

between tyranny and anarchy. This new constitution, later to be called the *signori*, "huddled together" in one general body the one (*buoni Homini*), the few (*credenza*) and the many (great council) with a balancing counterweight in the form of a second assembly confirming the laws of the first. The problem with this constitution was that "the aristocratical and democratical parts of the community were mixed in each" of the two bodies. The result, according to Adams, was that there could never be "harmony in either, both being naturally split into two factions." But the greatest defect in the Florentine constitution was to give the executive power (the power of disposing of public honors and offices) to the mongrelized great council. It was an inevitable consequence, observes Adams, that the two councils would immediately divide into factions for "loaves and fishes." In the end, however, it would be the nobility, because of their superior electoral influence, that would dominate and control the entire government. But their control of the government could never be hegemonic or uniform. Two mixed assemblies controlled by the nobility would soon turn into a "mere football continually kicked from one side to another by three or four principal families." From this moment forward, Adams tells his readers, "Unhappy Florence" would be destined "to never-ending factions, seditions, and civil wars!"⁵² And so she was. The remainder of Machiavelli's history recorded by Adams walks the reader through more than two hundred years of perpetual civil war.

The ultimate cause, then, of Florence's instability was intimately connected to her flawed constitutional design. Mankind's ambitious and envious nature is a given, according to Adams, but should not be blamed solely for a state of recurring political and social conflict. Adams thinks that Machiavelli should have "laid the blame upon the constitution" rather than on the restless spirit of the nobility or on the shoulders of a particular individual. Adams notes over and over again throughout his commentary on the *Histories* that "It is the defect in the government and the wants of the people, that excite and inspirit the ambition of private men." And the temper of the people is the "natural and necessary effect" of an improperly framed constitution. In his

52. *Ibid.*, 5: 17-18, 26, 18.

strongest statement on this question, Adams corrects Machiavelli's "essential mistakes." Only properly designed constitutions can restrain the ambition and envy common to all people everywhere. Without such a restraint,

ambition cannot be prevented; nature has planted it in every heart. The factions of their ancestors ought not to have been imputed to the iniquity of the times, for all times and places are so iniquitous. Those factions grew out of the nature of men under such forms of government; and the new form ought to have been so contrived as to produce a remedy for the evil. This might have been done; for there is a way of making laws more powerful than any particular persons or families.⁵³

At one place we find Adams heartily agreeing with Machiavelli that "All republics, especially such as are not well constituted, undergo frequent changes in their laws and manner of government." But he considers inadequate Machiavelli's explanation that the cause of these frequent constitutional changes was due to "downright oppression on one hand, or unbridled licentiousness on the other." On one level, Adams agrees with Machiavelli that oppression and license are the known or obvious causes of political instability and constitutional degeneration. But for Adams there are deeper causes standing behind oppression and license. In fact, what are causes for Machiavelli turn out to be effects for Adams. The true cause of faction and party violence is a flawed or ill-designed constitution that serves as a host body for those passions destructive of civil society. Conversely, a well-designed constitution will serve as a filter through which the malignancies that destroy constitutions will be controlled and even directed toward the public good. Machiavelli would have come much closer to the truth had he "imputed all these evils to their true cause," namely, "an imperfect and unbalanced constitution of government."⁵⁴

Machiavelli's mistake from Adams's perspective was that he did not have a clear enough idea of the institutional arrange-

53. *Ibid.*, 5: 29-30, 48-49. Adams's interpretation of the *Florentine Histories* should be read in the light of what Machiavelli says in the *Discourses* of the cause and effect relationship between the Roman constitution and that city's good laws, good education, and good examples. See *Discourses on Livy*, 1. iv.

54. Adams, *Works*, 5: 66, 82.

ments necessary to establish good government. The modern constitutional principles devised by the English and perfected by the Americans—representations, instead of collections of the people; a total separation of the executive from the legislative power, and of the judicial from both; and a balance in the legislature, by three independent, equal branches—were thought by Adams the necessary if not the sufficient conditions by which to permanently arrest constitutional revolutions.⁵⁵ Indeed, he thinks it possible to channel the passions in such a way that they could be exploited to serve the public good.

When the three natural orders in society, the high, middle, and the low, are all represented in the government, and constitutionally placed to watch each other, and restrain each other mutually by the laws, it is then only, that an emulation takes place for the public good, and divisions turn to the advantage of the nation.⁵⁶

Although Machiavelli was an advocate of mixed government and was the catalyst for its revival in modern times, he did not understand, according to Adams, what later came to be the modern invention of a “separate executive, with power to defend itself” as the means of remedying the “fatal effects of dissensions between nobles and commons.” Ironically, Adams criticizes Machiavelli for not understanding the nature and importance of a single executive with a legislative veto. Such an idea, Adams says, “seems never to have entered his thoughts.”⁵⁷

At one point in the *Histories*, Adams thinks Machiavelli was about to stumble on the solution of an independent executive, armed with the whole executive power and a legislative veto, as a sufficient means by which “to mediate, at all times, between the nobles and the commons.” The Florentine had said what Adams thought to be “near the truth,” namely, that the separate interests of the few and the many must be harmonized by the “spirit and fortune of one man alone.” But this was insufficient to the hyper-legal mind of this New England constitutionalist. Machiavelli would have come closer to the truth of the matter had he said

55. *Ibid.*, 4: 284.

56. *Ibid.*, 5: 90.

57. *Ibid.*, 5: 45, 44.

that "parties must be upheld together by the constitutional, legal authority of one man alone." In its legislative capacity, an independent executive intervening between the few and the many could help to foster or direct partisan or partial claims toward the common good and the pursuit of fully just laws. In its executive capacity, a well-armed single magistrate could "preserve the energy of the laws" which is absolutely necessary to retain the loyalty and attachment of the regime's best citizens. As long as the people's representatives retain control of the purse, the making of laws, and "the inquest of grievances, abuses, and state crimes," Adams thinks that the passions peculiar to those who sit in executive power could likewise be tamed and directed toward the public good.⁵⁸

Adams applauds Machiavelli for having been a defender (albeit a flawed one) of the mixed form of government. The Florentine statesman's great failing, however, was that he had been an insufficient advocate of a "fixed" constitution.⁵⁹ As Adams knew from his reading of the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli preferred Romulus' incomplete or evolutionary founding of Rome to the perfect or complete Lycurgan founding of Sparta. Machiavelli believes that the great success of the Roman constitution was a consequence of its having institutionalized and tamed over time the conflict between the few and the many. As a mixed government, the Roman republic was better able to withstand the forces that spark and perpetuate the cycle of revolution common to all regimes. The tension between nobles and plebeians was the lifeblood that fueled both the internal health and external growth of the republic. In the end, however, Machiavelli's Roman constitution relied on supraconstitutional (e.g., the dictator) or extraordinary political means (e.g., the terror inspired by periodic refoundings) to prevent decay and degeneration. Because Machiavelli thought it "impossible" for any "legislator or founder of a republic entirely to prevent feuds and animosities in it, it ought to be his chief care to provide

58. *Ibid.*, 5: 67-68.

59. See, for instance, *Discourses*, 1. xlix: "The progress of the Roman republic demonstrates how difficult it is in the constitution of a republic to provide necessary laws for the maintenance of liberty."

against their growing into factions."⁶⁰ This Rome did by institutionalizing a variety of political devices or safety valves, such as public accusations. For Machiavelli, there was not and could not be a founding moment that permanently and unalterably fixed a nation's constitutional order. Civic health almost always meant a periodic return to the insecurity and original terror associated with first foundings. But only the form (the primeval state of necessity) and never the substance (the constitution) of the founding can be restored. One of the principal purposes of *The Prince*, therefore, was to instruct present and future rulers on how and when to induce, recreate, or respond to a state of crisis or fear. At the same time, of course, Machiavelli was rearming his reforming provocateurs with new modes and orders, training them in the proper use of violence and coercion.⁶¹

Adams, on the other hand, thought it possible and best to establish a perpetual or nearly perfect constitution at one founding moment. He would have learned from Aristotle, Plutarch, Harrington, and even from Rousseau, that building a new regime required a deliberate founding at a special point in time. Adams therefore calls on the Americans to "begin right"⁶² their experiment in revolutionary constitution-making. This meant, of course, that he put a much higher premium on the ability of a single lawgiver or a special constitutional convention to design a "fixed" or written constitution that would, at one moment in time, mix and balance *in equilibrio* the one, the few, and the many. Quoting Jonathan Swift, Adams writes in the *Defence* that "some physicians have thought, that if it were practicable to keep several humors of the body in an exact *balance* of each with its opposite, it might be immortal; and so perhaps would a political body, if the *balance of power* could be always held exactly even."⁶³

The difficult question for Adams and America's revolutionary founders was how to make this fundamental law higher law—that is, how to distinguish it from statutory law or the arbitrary

60. Adams, *Works*, 5: 89.

61. See *Discourses*, 3. i, xxii, xxx. Cf. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), pp. 44, 165, 167, 247-52.

62. Adams, *Works*, 4: 298, 587.

63. *Ibid.*, 4: 384-85. Adams was quoting from Swift's *A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and Commons of Athens and Rome*.

rule of a Machiavellian prince. Their answer was to develop procedures and institutions—for example, special constituting and ratifying conventions—that would separate and elevate constitutions above ordinary acts of legislation. On this crucial question of first foundings, Machiavelli's model lawgiver was Romulus whose founding act was shrouded under the veil of divine fraud and the immoral violence of fratricide, while for Adams, America's founding moment was impressive for its having rejected force and fraud in the name of reflection and choice.⁶⁴

Conclusion

John Adams's Machiavellian moment was a crucial event in the development of his political theory. Adams learned from and thought Machiavelli's teachings important and useful for American constitution-makers, but they were also valuable as a negative example of insufficient or flawed reasoning. Adams's commentary on Machiavelli was intended to revive but ultimately to surpass Machiavelli's new modes and orders.

The study of history provided for both a kind of laboratory in which certain laws of nature or human action could be discovered. Adams and Machiavelli agreed that history demonstrated human nature to be unchanging and everywhere the same, and that it is driven by powerful passions—aristocratic pride and democratic envy being the two most important. On that basis, they also agreed that the history of all societies is roughly the same, that all societies fall into repeating patterns of growth and decay. Latent in all societies because latent in human nature are forces of dissension that set in motion certain recurring processes of degeneration and decline.

Adams and Machiavelli parted company, however, over the important question of how to prevent or withstand the natural forces of social conflict. As John Adams read Machiavelli, the Florentine statesman's solution to this problem was inadequate. Machiavelli understood and appreciated the need for mixed government but his teaching on that subject was incomplete. From

64. Cf. *Discourses*, 1. ix and Adams, *Works*, 4: 291-94.

Adams's perspective, the Florentine did not fully know what would come to be the modern teaching of the separation of powers and he did not understand the need to mix and balance in the legislative branch the one, the few and the many.

Machiavelli was much more pessimistic or fatalistic than Adams as to whether the cycle of revolution could be arrested.⁶⁵ And because Machiavelli thought *fortuna* an omnipresent force in human affairs, his solution was *political*. Machiavelli therefore wrote for those who govern, those who conduct the affairs of state—princes, administrators, and diplomats. His are maxims, derived from experience and history, for rule. Machiavellian *virtù* would provide temporary embankments and dikes against the unpredictable and uncontrollable forces of human nature.⁶⁶ His books would everywhere and forever be relevant and useful to those who govern.

John Adams, however, did think it possible to end the cycle. Permanent embankments and dikes could be established to withhold and diffuse nature's fury, even channeling it toward the public good. Adams's solution was therefore *constitutional*.⁶⁷ That is why he put a much greater emphasis than did Machiavelli on the idea and importance of a "founding." To that end, Adams wrote for a much smaller audience: he wrote the *Defence* as a guidebook for lawgivers or constitution-makers. The principal purpose of the *Defence* is the education of the lawgiver. When

65. Cf. *Discourses*, 1. xlix and 3. xxxix.

66. At one point in *The Prince*, Machiavelli even suggests that human nature might be conquered by a new kind of ruler: "And in examining their life and deeds it will be seen that they owed nothing to fortune but the opportunity which gave them matter to be shaped into what form they thought fit; and without that opportunity their powers would have been wasted, and without their powers the opportunity would have come in vain. . . . These opportunities, therefore, gave these men their chance, and their own great qualities enabled them to profit by them, so as to ennoble their country and augment its fortunes" (*The Prince*, chap. 6).

67. One possible source for Adams's critique of Machiavelli's political science and his emphasis on the notion of a constitutional founding is James Harrington. In his *Oceana*, Harrington attempted to construct a "perfect and (for ought that in human prudence can be foreseen) an immortal Commonwealth." James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* and *A System of Politics* ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 71. See Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, pp. 409–40.

viewed in this light, the *Defence* becomes something more than just the anomalous, antirepublican tract of a disordered mind described by modern historians; it may be seen now as a new and positive contribution to a trans-Atlantic debate over the science of politics in revolutionary societies.