

Security vs. Glory or Security via Glory: Republican Discord and Harmony in
Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*

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In *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli proposes Rome as an example of republican perfection, pointing particularly to the famous republic's glorious military virtue as well as to its long life, thus implying that the goals of any republic should be both glory and security to match the Roman standard. Since glory is generally attained through war and conquest, whereas security is associated with peace and quiet, glory and security as simultaneous aspirations would seem to be fundamentally opposed. This opposition suggests a tension at the very foundation of the Machiavellian ideal republic. From the anecdotes Machiavelli provides throughout the text, we gain an impression of Rome as a state of constant unrest, fraught with conflicts both within its borders ("the tumults between the nobles and the plebs," I.4.1), and outside its borders (Rome's empire-building campaigns against other states). In fact, from Machiavelli's descriptions, it seems unlikely that such a warlike and "tumultuous republic" could possibly be a model of security (I.4.1), and it is hard to imagine how it lasted a full five centuries. However, rather than condemning Rome's warlike nature, Machiavelli praises it, suggesting that the tension between the aristocrats and the plebeians secured and balanced Rome from within, while conquest and the pursuit of glory secured Rome against outside forces. In suggesting that Rome was made secure by means of war both within and outside its borders, Machiavelli indicates that glory and security are not as opposed as we might initially assume; by straddling those tensions inevitable in all human communities, Rome found harmony through discord and balance through chaos.

The first tension any republic must overcome is the conflict within its borders, involving the opposing interests or “diverse humors” of the great versus the many (I.4.1). Between these two groups, Machiavelli explains, “one will see great desire to dominate in the former, and in the latter only desire not to be dominated” (I.5.2); in other words, the great are ambitious to oppress, while the ordinary people wish merely to be left alone. Without laws in place to limit their power, he writes, the great will inevitably “spit out that poison against the plebs” (I.3.2). As a consequence, the many, without legally sanctioned “ordinary modes” through which to accuse the great and voice their own desires, will resort to “extraordinary ones” (I.7.1), such as those he describes in chapter four: “the people together crying out against the Senate, the Senate against the people, running tumultuously through the streets, closing shops, the whole plebs leaving Rome” (I.4.1). Ultimately, Machiavelli suggests, the nobility and the plebeians can never be reconciled except through law, since “Men never work any good unless through necessity, but where choice abounds and one can make use of license, at once everything is full of confusion and disorder” (I.3.2). He makes a similar argument in *The Prince*, in which he writes, “From these two diverse appetites [to dominate and to be left alone] one of three effects occurs in cities: principality or liberty or license” (IX). Clearly, then, this tumultuous dynamic between the great and the many is not restricted to the republic but exists in any sort of state, including the principality. Therefore, if governments do not find a way to balance them, the great and the many seem destined to tear one another apart, to the detriment of the state as a whole. In *The Prince*, of course, Machiavelli turns to the mighty and often tyrannical prince as a cure for this license, but in *Discourses* he writes of liberty.

In fact, it seems that Rome achieved its liberty through this conflict between the great and the many, despite the cruelty and chaos that arose in Rome from their quarrel; in fact, it was because of these tumults that Rome saw fit to create the tribunes and to give a voice for popular administration. Acting as an intermediary between the Senate and the plebeians, the tribunes kept in check the “insolence of the nobles” (I.3.2), served as a “guard of Roman freedom” (I.5.2), and added a third power to the governmental structure, which until then had been divided between the consuls and the senate. Machiavelli attributes much of Rome’s ultimate perfection to this new division of powers, as it ensured that neither the prince nor the aristocracy nor the many had full authority, but that each had enough so that their ambitions and desires would be met. In this way, the virtue of the republic was not limited to the lifespan of one man as in a principality (thus avoiding the issues surrounding hereditary succession), nor did it take “away all authority from kingly qualities so as to give authority to the aristocrats, nor did it diminish the authority of the aristocrats altogether so as to give it to the people. But remaining mixed, it made a perfect republic” (I.2.7). The mixed republic of Rome was therefore in an ideal position to last for many years and perhaps even to escape the supposedly eternal cycle of government’s rise and fall. Hence, Machiavelli titles the fourth chapter of *Discourses*, “That the Disunion of the Plebs and the Roman Senate Made That Republic Free and Powerful” (I.4); from discord, conflict, and essentially warlike behavior within the state itself, Rome achieved the stability and balance of a mixed government, which ensured the state’s security and guarded its freedom. Therefore, rather than condemn the tumultuous conduct of Rome’s citizens, Machiavelli commends it and writes of the upheaval with “highest praise” (I.5.2), demonstrating that Rome’s internal security resulted from internal conflict.

Ever the realist, Machiavelli accepts that there will always be opposition and conflict between citizens in a republic; however, he advises governments to use inner conflicts to their advantage and suggests instating systems of accusation and appeal. All republics, he argues, should have a mode by which citizens may accuse other citizens in front of magistrates or councils (1.7.1). In fact, republics should encourage their subjects to hold their neighbors and superiors accountable to state laws. The benefits of such a system are, as he writes, twofold:

The first is that for fear of being accused citizens do not attempt things against the state; and when attempting them, they are crushed instantly and without respect.

The other is that an outlet is given by which to vent, in some mode against some citizen, those humors that grow up in cities. (1.7.1)

Machiavelli acknowledges that there will always be opposition and dissent in the republic, but he also demonstrates that the role of government is to find methods to channel “those alternating humors that agitate” toward the good of the state. By establishing systems for accusation, a government both gives citizens an outlet by which to vent their otherwise destructive anger, and generates enough fear so that citizens avoid acting against the state, seeing that those who do are readily caught and punished. Thus, the mixed republic takes the natural discord of a community and from it produces order and security.

At this point, we can see that Rome’s internal conflict led to the creation of the tribunes, gave the many a voice, and secured the freedom of the republic; the appointment of the many as guards for this freedom not only secured Rome, but also gave it the capacity to be warlike and to pursue glory, in a way that states such as Sparta and Venice, where the nobles guarded the freedom, could not. In chapters five and six, Machiavelli advises that any state “that wishes

to make an empire” must order itself like Rome, and that any quiet and un-ambitious state “for whom it is enough to maintain itself,” must necessarily order itself in the mode of Sparta and Venice (I.5.3). He argues that in order to expand, a state will need a large and armed citizen population, but that any large and armed population, through its strength and numbers, will inevitably possess “infinite opportunities for tumult.” Therefore, the people must be appeased with modes, such as the tribunes, by which their desires may be met, so that they will not, being dangerously armed, turn against the state (I.6.3). Alternatively, if a state attempts to weaken its citizen base, it removes the powerful foundation by which the state acquires and maintains what it has acquired. Therefore, as Machiavelli points out, “if Rome wished to remove the causes of tumults, it removed too the causes of expansion” (I.6.3). In this way, the conflicts between the great and the many that led to the tribunes were responsible not only for Rome’s security and freedom but also for Rome’s ascent to empire and thus to glory.

Although it is logical that a state such as Rome would be capable of dominating other states, Machiavelli’s argument nonetheless seems incongruent with what he has told us of the nature of the great compared to the nature of the many: that the great desire to oppress and that the many desire freedom against this oppression (I.5.2). Why, then, was Rome, in which the people acted as “a guard for freedom” (I.5.1), apt to oppress and conquer, whereas Sparta, in which the ambitious great guarded freedom, was quiet and secluded? Would the many not have preferred the security of peace to the unrest of war, and would the great not have preferred the acquisition of empire to the pursuit of peace? While it makes sense that a state such as Rome should more easily conquer other states while necessarily appeasing its powerful citizens, it is less clear why the people, who love security, should desire to fight for glory and

empire in the first place. Here once again Machiavelli reveals the tense nature of the relationship between the great and the many in a republic, and hence between glory and security.

To resolve this apparent tension, Machiavelli suggests that just as conflict and tumult within the republic result in security, conquest and war directed outside the republic similarly result in security, both from the oppression of other states and from division within the republic itself. A republic that expands, he argues, arms its people so that it has the ability to defend itself from other states that wish to dominate it, and thus avoids becoming a slave to necessity (I.6.4). A republic that expands also does not run the risk of becoming “effeminate or divided” from within, two weaknesses Machiavelli attributes to non-empires (I.6.4). In fact, he has trouble imagining how any state might stay secure without expanding, explaining that such a state would have to be extremely careful to stay within its limits, to demonstrate no ambition, and to prohibit all immigration. He even goes so far as to denounce this fine balance required for a peaceful state as utterly unlikely if not impossible and declares instead, “all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady” (I.6.4). This statement is to some extent unconvincing, given that Machiavelli has at various earlier points in the text referenced Sparta, a state that seems to have managed this balance quite well and that, by placing the guard for freedom in the great and by avoiding expansion, lasted for eight hundred years (significantly longer than Rome). Regardless of this potential inconsistency, Machiavelli remains resolute, firmly claiming, “I believe that it is necessary to follow the Roman order and not that of other republics—for I do not believe one can find a mode between one and the other” (I.6.4). Therefore, all republics should become empires for their own security.

It becomes clear now that Machiavelli's Rome was a republic founded principally on the spirit of war, and that its glory, as well as its security, resulted from conflict, both between citizens and against other states. According to Machiavelli, the enmity between the nobles and the plebeians, and the chaotic tumults that ensued from this enmity, are at the root of Rome's greatness, as they led to the creation of the tribunes. The tribunes, along with the modes for accusation, provided security and maintained freedom within the republic by limiting the cruelty of the nobles and by providing outlets for the wrath of the plebeians. With the multitude so appeased, Rome was able to arm its citizens, and without fearing their wrath, dominate, expand, and defend — not only for glory, but also for security. Thus, looking back to the enmity between the great and the many and on the chain of accidents this enmity initiated, we can see their conflict as “an inconvenience necessary to arrive at Roman greatness” (I.6.4). We can thereby conclude that Rome could not have attained glory or security without tension, tumult, and ultimately war.

It is of course possible to complain, as Machiavelli suggests some contemporary historians did, that “Rome was a tumultuous republic and full of such confusion that if good fortune and military virtue had not made up for its defects, it would have been inferior to every other republic” (I.4.1): its greatness came at the cost of internal discord and external hostilities, one might argue, and without good luck and a powerful army, it would have come quickly to ruin. In response to these condemnations, Machiavelli makes no effort to deny that Rome was blessed with good fortune, for he has in fact acknowledged the republic's luck throughout *Discourses* by describing Rome's ascent to greatness as a series of “accidents” (I.2.2). Beyond good fortune, however, Machiavelli insists that Rome's glory and military prestige were

reflective of impressive order and security within its borders, claiming, “Where the military is good there must be good order” (I.4.1). In this statement, by identifying a republic’s military virtue as representative of its interior order, Machiavelli clearly points to a union between war and security. This concept of warlike governing is not unique to *Discourses* but echoes his argument in *The Prince*, in which he claims that “a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but that of war and its orders and discipline; for that is the only art which is of concern to one who commands” (XIV). To be secure, therefore, a state must be like a Prince, always ready for war, always eager for glory.

By praising Rome as the perfect republic and then immediately describing Rome’s perfection as having arisen from so much discord, Machiavelli draws our attention to the essential instability of this republic and therefore of all republics, and the susceptibility of government to the rise and fall of fortune. We can sense this instability even in Machiavelli’s writing style, which relies heavily on historical anecdotes. He does not extricate from these anecdotes any sort of universal standard to guide the hopeful republic, and he does not reveal a straight path toward perfect glory and security. Since all government is contextual and ultimately at the mercy of fortune, Machiavelli’s examples and suggestions can merely guide the hopeful republic in the direction of success and steer it to avoid modes that have failed in the past. Good government finds balance in the inevitable chaos of human community; it involves properly harnessing fortune to the advantage of the state instead of becoming a slave to necessity. “In every decision of ours,” Machiavelli maintains, “we should consider where are the fewer inconveniences and take that for the best policy, because nothing entirely clean and without suspicion is ever found” (I.6.3). He has no absolute answers, no firm instructions; the

modern republic can only weigh its options, compare its context to the past, and strive to make its own movement toward glory and security.

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