

## Publications

### **Machiavelli and the Lack of Virtù In the United States and the European Union**

**by Manfred Henningsen**

The year 2005 will be remembered as the year in which the neoconservative vision of America became refocused by the force of Hurricane Katrina. In 1513 Niccolò Machiavelli provided a paradigmatic commentary on such political constellations when he wrote in his *Prince* about rulers whose charisma, or virtù, as he called it, is measured by their ability to master unexpected challenges. He used the image of “those dangerous rivers that, when they become enraged, flood the plains, destroy trees and buildings, move earth from one place and deposit it in another. Everyone flees before it; everyone gives way to the thrust, without being able to halt it in any way. But this does not mean that, when the river is not in flood, men are unable to take precautions, by means of dykes and dams, so that when it rises next time, it will either not overflow its banks or, if it does, its force will not be so uncontrolled or damaging.” Machiavelli knew “that many have thought, and many still think, that the affairs of the world are so ruled by fortuna and by God that the ability of men cannot control them. Rather, they think that we have no remedy at all; and therefore it could be concluded that it is useless to sweat much over things, but let them be governed by fate.” Although he sometimes gave in to this fatalistic thinking, he insisted, “Nevertheless, so as not to eliminate human freedom, I am disposed to hold that fortuna is the arbiter of half of our actions, but that it lets us control roughly the other half.”<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli’s five-hundred-year-old reflections on political leadership suggest that President Bush and his administration failed fortuna’s test and became punished by a steep decline in the polls for their inability to actualize the freedom of human agency.

Certainly, other features of American political culture were involved in this paralysis of power in human agency; Peter Wagner talks about the different notions of welfare in Europe and the United States. Color, and the unwillingness to recognize it, plays an important role in these different notions of welfare. The overwhelming black face of poverty in New Orleans revealed an image of American society that is all too familiar to the world. The disbelief with which most Europeans reacted to the TV coverage was caused by impressions that Richard Bernstein summarized well in a *New York Times* report from Berlin: “[T]he particular circumstances of New Orleans and Biloxi, Miss., have tended to confirm the worst image of America that prevails in Europe, the vision of a country of staggering inequalities, indifference to the general welfare . . . and lacking in what Europeans call ‘solidarity.’ ” (4 September 2005). He quoted a letter to the British newspaper *The Guardian* to capture a widespread feeling in Europe: “Why should hundreds die, mostly African-Americans, in a predicted disaster in the richest nation on earth?” The total lack of preparedness of America’s political class at the federal, state, and municipal levels in the first few days of the aftermath of Katrina and the resulting dimensions of a third-world catastrophe management have underscored the perception of a widening gap between the U.S. and continental Europe’s understanding of the possibilities of politics. Katrina’s impact will survive the Bush administration and feed the lingering fears that the European Union is becoming politically emasculated by an Anglo-American notion of the minimum state as the weak regulatory supervisor of an unhinged capitalist market economy. This impact may even help to convince the “new Europe,” with its bad state socialist memories, that the “old Europe,” with its quasi-social democratic virtues, is, after all,

better than the picture American neoconservatives want to paint of the lazy, tired, and decadent Old World

One of the ironies in the paralysis of the political class after Katrina was the argument that arose in defense of the temporary inaction of the military in rescue operations. A discussion ensued about the need of changing the so-called Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which, as Nicholas Lemann wrote in *The New Yorker*, eviscerated the Insurrection Act of 1807 and terminated the presence of federal troops in the South, largely prohibiting the U.S. military from acting as a domestic police force.<sup>2</sup> The withdrawal of the troops, which was the price for the vote of Southern members of the Electoral College for Rutherford Hayes to become president in 1876, despite his lack of a popular majority, was also the beginning of the Jim Crow apartheid regime in the South. This Jim Crow regime was the major historical reason for the conditions that became visible during Katrina in New Orleans, namely, that 84 percent of the 24 percent of the people living in that city in poverty were black.<sup>3</sup> The ironies of the black face of poverty in New Orleans and elsewhere in Louisiana, however, do not end there but may change the future of politics in that area. As a story in the *Washington Post* indicated: "The massive population shift caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita holds seismic political implications for Louisiana, which faces a near-certain reduction of its congressional delegation and likely loss in black-voter clout that could severely affect the state's elected Democrats."<sup>4</sup> Maybe there was more to Bush's inaction than was initially understood. He may have taken advice from a neoconservative Machiavellian who knew what the president was doing when he was doing nothing.

The failure of the European leaders to get the draft of the EU constitution ratified by all twenty-five member states demonstrates the European equivalent of a Machiavellian charisma deficit. To be sure, the leaders of both France and the Netherlands who dared (with disastrous consequences) their electorates to approve the draft in a referendum did so because they wanted to counter a widespread sentiment that the EU suffers from a democracy deficit. The European leaders, however — who, for all kinds of obvious reasons, do not have much respect for current policymakers in the U.S. — could have learned a lot from the generation of founders. The philosophically and historically educated founders of the U.S. never would have made the mistake to present the Philadelphia draft of their Constitution to the people. They knew that the people they were referring to in the Preamble of the Constitution were an imaginary entity that would only slowly come into historical being through the framework of the Constitution itself. The fewer than forty men who had drafted the text, therefore, submitted it to especially established constitutional conventions in the thirteen states. In these thirteen conventions, 1,649 men voted; 1,073 voted for the Constitution, 576 against. In light of the fact that this text was approved by just over one thousand men, having created a democratically constituted republic that has lasted for nearly 220 years, one can only marvel about the political wisdom and foresight of the founders.

The admiration for the founders' accomplishment grows immensely when one compares it with the memory of the other great liberal revolution of that time, namely, the French one. The French Revolution stole the symbolic thunder from the American Revolution, because the overthrow of the monarchical regime inspired people all over Europe and, later, the rest of the world. But the Revolution itself didn't produce a lasting constitutional regime. After temporarily indulging in terror, it was

cashiered on 18 Brumaire (9 November 1799) by Napoleon. While the American founders created something that is still alive today, 216 years later, the French produced, in the same time period, altogether five constitutional republics, two empires, two dynastically legitimated monarchies, and an assortment of authoritarian regimes, including the collaborationist Vichy regime during World War II. Why the EU relied on the wisdom of a member of the French political class, the former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, to guide the deliberations of the constitutional process remains unclear. His performance and that of the current president, Jacques Chirac — namely, to ask for a referendum — confirm the French inability to make the decisions Machiavelli would have considered genuine responses to the challenge of fortuna. The EU probably would have fared much better had they asked Helmut Schmidt, the former chancellor of West Germany, to facilitate the drafting and ratification process of the constitution. Schmidt gained his national reputation as a charismatic doer by successfully managing the flood catastrophe in the city of Hamburg in the wake of a hurricane-like storm in the North Sea in February 1962. He would have helped to draft an elegant and readable document and avoided the capitulation before the democratic deficit argument. He would have understood what kept the American founders from submitting their constitutional draft to a not yet existing American people. He would have followed their wisdom and proposed that the draft for an EU constitution be presented to the popularly legitimated parliaments of the twenty-five member states.

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## **Notes**

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press 1988), 85.
2. Nicholas Lemann, "Insurrection," *The New Yorker* (26 September 2005): 68.
3. Jason DeParle, "What Happens to a Race Deferred?" *The New York Times*, 4 September 2005.
4. Michael A. Fletcher and Spencer S. Hsu, "Storms Alter Louisiana Politics," *Washington Post*, 14 October 2005.