

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Harvey Mansfield, Professor of Government, Harvard University

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Table of Contents

I: Tocqueville's Machiavellianism 0:15 – 36:10

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to be joined today by Harvey Mansfield, a Harvard government professor, frequent guest on CONVERSATIONS. And we're going to discuss [Alexis de Tocqueville](#), whom we've discussed before, and it's very much worth watching that *Conversation* and, of course, reading your translation of [Democracy in America](#) and the introduction to that and other writings on Tocqueville.

But, I was so struck by a recent article of yours on Tocqueville's Machiavellianism, and then one or two subsequent articles, that I thought very much worth discussing. So perhaps we can discuss Tocqueville's Machiavellianism.

MANSFIELD: What I find in this article is a connection between Tocqueville and [Machiavelli](#). It isn't just I, it's my late wife, [Delba Winthrop](#), who left some notes. In a box of her writings I found the beginnings or the outline of an article. So I finished it up and decided that it was a joint product, and so we put it out together.

KRISTOL: She was more of a perfectionist than you and, therefore, was hesitant to publish it?

MANSFIELD: Yeah. I have less hesitation in that way. That's right.

So it finds a connection between Tocqueville and Machiavelli. You might say "anything is possible" – and if this is possible, that's the proof of the proposition. But I do think that there is a connection, but you have to see it in the esoteric message of Tocqueville, together with that of Machiavelli.

You have to first convince yourself that philosophers wrote esoterically. Some philosophers, some of the greatest of them, wrote partly for their own time – for normal people, for political people, for general consumption – but also for other philosophers. And they managed to do it in the same writing, so that part of it is for the general audience, as publishers like to say, and the other part is for philosophers.

And if you want to convince yourself, you would have to read Arthur Melzer's book [Philosophy Between the Lines](#). I'll put in a plug for that book as a demonstration that philosophers used to do this kind of double writing or writing with a double meaning.

Now, looking at Tocqueville and Machiavelli, they were in a similar situation. Each of them lived in a time when a general philosophy or religion or belief was harmful, according to them. So Machiavelli lived in a time when he thought that people's general thinking and philosophers' general principles were too spiritual. People were too interested in imaginary truth. Imaginary truth, Machiavelli thought, gets you into trouble. In his famous Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, You come to ruin if you try to base your life on the way things ought to be as you would imagine them to be, as opposed to the way things really are and the way in which you really have to act, which is you have to anticipate the evil of someone else and get to him before he gets to you. So that was his general solution for a general problem.

Now Tocqueville also lived in a time when he thought that the general trend of philosophy and of thinking was harmful. But he thought it went in the other direction: He thought that the philosophy of the early 19th century was too materialistic. The dominant new government, which is going to be democracy, is very favorable to materialism and easily corrupted by it. And, strangely enough, he thought that this materialism had its origin in the philosophy of Machiavelli.

Machiavelli seems like a pretty spirited fellow. He's full of animus – as he called it *animo* – and he has a notion of virtue or *virtù* that prompts people to take daring and bold actions in order to promote themselves. And he's in favor of that kind of virtue. But still, he *led* to a kind of materialism.

When he referred to “the effectual truth” of things in that same Chapter 15 of *The Prince*: You must judge people not by what they say, but by what they do, or by what the effect of a thing is. Tocqueville, judging Machiavelli by that standard, so that the *effect* of Machiavelli was to make people look at results or effects, and those are always *material* results or effects, material consequences. So the result of Machiavelli's activism, you might say, is a certain passivism. That keeps people from thinking that they can control their lives but rather that their lives are controlled for them by large and impersonal forces.

And this is a general belief characteristic of democratic ages. Democracies don't like to believe in great figures or great men, but they prefer to think that we're all of us cowering under the force of powers that are too strong for us. And the only thing that we can do is kind of surrender to the trend of things.

Now, so then, how did Tocqueville indicate that he had this belief about Machiavelli? Well, he quotes Machiavelli just once in all of *Democracy in America*. And that's in Chapter 26 of the third part of the Second Volume: 26. To an adept of Machiavelli, the number 26 shines like a blinking red light, which cannot be ignored. Twenty-six is Machiavelli's number. You can find this from [Leo Strauss](#)' book [Thoughts on Machiavelli](#), a discussion, a couple of pages on the number 26 and the way Machiavelli plays with 26 and multiples of 13 in the arrangements of his books and number of chapters. So, 26 is Machiavelli's number. It's twice 13. Thirteen stands for chance. Today it stands for evil chance, but Machiavelli sort of adopted it for himself because he wanted to *control* chance and to erase it from human consideration. Well, maybe not erase it but at least control it, overcome it and its influence. So, his objection to imaginary republics or imaginary principles is that it leaves you open to chance. If you believe in such things, you have to count on the chance that the other person will be nice to you. So number 26. And this is the only reference to Machiavelli; that cannot be by accident. That's the beginning of this.

And so – and then you look at what he says about Machiavelli and it's a quotation from *The Prince*, Chapter Four, saying how difficult it is for a prince to subjugate his people. Now, we have to understand *prince* a little bit better. In Machiavelli, he uses the term “prince” – of course that's the title of his most famous book.

KRISTOL: With 26 chapters.

MANSFIELD: Twenty-six chapters, yes. And he uses the notion of prince to refer to ordinary political princes, but he says those ordinary political princes usually operate in an atmosphere or a climate of opinion. And the trouble with the prince in Machiavelli's time was the Christian climate of opinion, which

makes things difficult for the prince. Climate of opinion plus the organization – the church – that reflected the universalism of Christianity, and which therefore gave the church the right and the practice of interfering with the secular doings of princes.

So, in order to combat this chancy imposition, Machiavelli extended the meaning of prince to include prophet. A prince can't be a full prince unless he can also rule over the opinion of the society in which he finds himself. So he has to become a prophet in order to change that.

And so, how should he be a prophet and what kind of prophet? For that it turns out you need philosophy. From this chain of reasoning you get to the meaning of prince as philosopher, in addition to the ordinary. So this is kind of a secret or hidden meaning of prince according to Machiavelli.

And Tocqueville fell in with this. He came in a democratic age that was afflicted by materialist principles; pantheism he refers to – the view that the universe consists of one great principle that includes everything, including human beings. So human beings have no special place. Or just plain materialism, which says that human beings have no soul; they have no free will; they have no capacity to govern themselves.

Tocqueville wants to teach us how to govern ourselves. And he takes us to America because America has been a kind of success in self-government. So his interpretation of America is to show it to Europe, to the rest of the civilized world, as an example of self-government and good government.

So – but democracy has these certain ills. And the section of *Democracy in America* in which the reference to Machiavelli occurs is in Part Three of Volume Two. And in that part he speaks of mores, or *mœurs*: the customs, habits that especially a democratic people have. And democracy especially has to deal with inequalities. It seems that nature hasn't just made us all equal, as the Declaration of Independence says, but also – that's true, but the opposite is also true; that we're naturally unequal. And there seems to be certain natural inequalities. For example, those of the family. The father and parents seem to be unequal to the children. So how does democracy deal with this?

And so that's the kind of question that he takes up in this Part Three of *Democracy in America*. And in general his point is that democracy is mild. It's *mœurs* are *douces, doux*: sweet. So that the relationship between a democratic father and his children is much more natural, in the sense of spontaneously loving, than in an aristocracy, where the father is kind of harsh and severe and authoritarian.

But the trouble with the mildness of democracy is that it can lead to a mild despotism. So that mildness, this good thing, this advantage of democracy turns out to have a considerable disadvantage. And mild despotism is discussed in the last part of *Democracy in America*, and it seems to culminate his discussion of democratic self-government.

KRISTOL: I think you point out in the essay that Part Three begins with seeming praise for the mildness of democracy.

MANSFIELD: Yes.

KRISTOL: And ends with the worrying specter of mild despotism.

MANSFIELD: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. And part of the mildness is a lack of concern with honor or pride. And so this gradually becomes the subject of Part Three, and he takes up American women, for example. "American women have a manly pride." So that's where we get our manliness from, you might say, because the men are sort of occupied in business and making money. And making money, it's not an occupation that makes you feel honorable. So, in commerce everything has a price, and honor is about the things that have no price, or that you stand up for regardless.

So that honor turns out to be connected to the military. Democracies are peace loving. But, nonetheless, they still need armies. And so in the army there's two kinds of sort of officer. There's a commissioned officer, and those people live a difficult life because there aren't very many wars. They come into their own when there is a war, but, for the most part, they're just sitting there thinking about what Machiavelli would call their "ambitious idleness."

But there are the noncommissioned officers, and those are the ones to watch out for. They don't have a career in a settled place, but they're ready to rise. Napoleon was a corporal. I think Hitler was, too.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MANSFIELD: And so I think Tocqueville conceives of himself as a noncommissioned officer. This is connected to another point in Machiavelli where he says – in Part Three of *Discourses on Livy*, he discusses the army that his philosopher prince runs and manages. It consists of captains. These will be philosophers who succeed Machiavelli and who develop and elaborate his doctrine in such a way that he does not do, because he simply adumbrates the kind of philosophy devoted to the effectual truth. But someone else will need to write the actual books of philosophy, people like Descartes and [Hobbes](#). And he gives instructions to these captains of armies.

And just to introduce this, at the end of Part Two of *Discourses on Livy*, in Book Two, Chapter 33, which is the last, there he speaks of the way in which a commissioned officer, when he comes to a strange and dangerous territory that nothing is known of, he still is under the authority of the Senate back in Rome. This is a Roman captain, but he'll have to improvise and act for the best as he sees fit. So I think this is Machiavelli's way of indicating to the people that he's taking into what we now call modernity, that these new captains will have to take general directions from Machiavelli, but they won't follow him out religiously as if he were the sole or single authority.

And Tocqueville, I think, conceives of himself as a noncommissioned officer who's rebellious in Machiavelli's army, and wants to turn it around and take it in a different direction. In discussing the army, he begins to discuss revolution, Tocqueville does, towards the end of Part Three. And when he discusses revolution, he begins to discuss not just revolution politically but revolutions in *ideas*. And this is getting closer and closer to both Machiavelli – And who is his example of the leader of a great revolution in ideas? Luther. Of course, he doesn't say Machiavelli; that would be too dangerous. But Luther is, of course, a great prince you could say, a contemporary of Machiavelli, and who changed the thinking of all of Europe in the Reformation.

So this notion of a single leader who creates a revolution in ideas is introduced, and that's, of course, just what Machiavelli was doing and what I think Tocqueville wanted to do as well. So he imitates Machiavelli in just adumbrating this, just indicating that this is something to be done. In the introduction to *Democracy in America*, he speaks of the need for a new political science for the new world, but he never tells you what that is.

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: You have to gather it; collect it; put it together yourself. And so this is, I think, his way of showing you what the new political science will have to be now for democracy. It has sort of the opposite direction of Machiavelli's: Instead of looking at the effects of things, and the way in which what is imaginary is fearful and harmful and misleading, Tocqueville's will be a position *against* materialism.

And the most important feature of this is a soul. So Tocqueville calls himself, in one of his letters, "a new kind of liberal." And perhaps the most important way in which he's a new kind of liberal is that he gives you liberalism *with soul*.

In the Introduction, again, he refers to the possibility or the actuality of “degraded souls,” not in America but in Europe. And Europe doesn’t know how to handle democracy. America does, so Europe needs America in this.

And so, souls – and souls can be degraded. And the main teaching of materialism is then that you don’t have a soul. A soul is what gives you an opportunity to reflect on what you’ve done and therefore not to be a victim of large, impersonal forces if you can think about it and reflect on how they affect you. Or a soul also gives you the possibility of action on your own. So how can you have self-government if people aren’t free to act on their own? And how can they be free to act on their own if they don’t have a soul that gives them the power to initiate action? And so, you’re not determined by everything that’s outside you; so you’re not a kind of automaton. But you have the power to govern yourself.

So this is a kind of “new” political science that Tocqueville wants to use to replace the materialism that grew out of Machiavelli, and it comes from his engagement, you could say, with Machiavelli. Here he was at the age of 35 – 30, 35 when he was writing *Democracy in America*, but he had the perception, incredible perception to see this, to read Machiavelli with the eye of a hawk and to conceive this way of dealing with it. So this makes him and Machiavelli philosophers of the highest order and sort of much more interesting and impressive and also a little awesome than the usual interpretations which leave them as political and moral essayists essentially.

KRISTOL: Or sociologists, very shrewd sociologists in Tocqueville’s sense.

MANSFIELD: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Now it does seem to me that, while there are, of course, many layers of Machiavelli, to say the least, there’s a kind of directness in Machiavelli’s project, though – the assault on otherworldliness and Christianity and imaginary republics, which doesn’t seem to be the case in Tocqueville. That is, if Tocqueville is proposing a redirection from Machiavelli’s project, he doesn’t confront Machiavelli directly, of course, or even–

MANSFIELD: That’s right.

KRISTOL: –even modern materialism? I mean, he raises concerns about it. So why – am I right?

MANSFIELD: He did. Yes.

KRISTOL: There’s a greater indirection in Tocqueville and why–

MANSFIELD: I think that’s right. He doesn’t. Well, it’s also the kind of indirection that you get in Machiavelli. Machiavelli, too, doesn’t discuss philosophers directly.

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: He only discusses the consequences or the effects of philosophers. And I think Tocqueville does the same, and he doesn’t try to refute Hobbes and Locke and so on. But, although, he does discuss the philosophers of the French Revolution in his other book, [*On the Ancient Regime*](#).

KRISTOL: And I guess Machiavelli presents his thought, at least in one of the two great books, as a commentary, as it were, an ancient writer. And Tocqueville presents his thought as a commentary–

MANSFIELD: Yeah, commentary on America.

KRISTOL: –on America, so there’s that similar indirection, I guess.

MANSFIELD: Yeah. That's right. Yeah. And each of them sort of uses the facts that he presents to do it.

Tocqueville's indirection also shows itself in this way: You say in Machiavelli the main enemy is the gentleman: the person who claims to be or claims to show a certain nobility of spirit, who was above vile calculation and doesn't allow himself to be determined by the effects of this action but takes a risk. You take a risk. You do the right thing, and, in doing so, you take a risk that this won't bring you to ruin.

So that kind of noble risk is just what Machiavelli tries to destroy. In one of his chapters in the *Discourses on Livy* he speaks of the cities in Germany have this great advantage: they eliminated all the gentlemen. This is what a republic needs in order to survive, is to eliminate the gentlemen or the nobles. So, that's a touch of Machiavelli's ferocity, which you don't get in Tocqueville at all.

So – but then, Tocqueville doesn't directly defend the noble or the gentleman. In fact, he puts the noble or gentleman in this other form of government – the great alternative to democracy, which is aristocracy. And aristocracy, he definitely says, is obsolete. It doesn't conform to the democratic age, and people don't believe in it anymore. It also came with a certain oppressiveness: the common people were oppressed by the nobles. However elevated their own way of life and their own view of virtue, still the common fellow had a rough time in aristocracy.

And so you can say Tocqueville cast his lot with democracy. And here he does believe in great forces. What the great force of providence imposes on us is some kind of democracy, but we get a choice as to whether it's liberal or free democracy or slave-servitude democracy. Still, one way or the other, it's democracy.

So I think he tries, rather instead of promoting the gentlemen or the aristocrats, which is not possible in his day, he tries to democratize aristocracy and fit it into democracy. And one of the ways in which he does this is in his discussion in Part Three of the mores. The women – American women – they're sort of aristocratic. Religion, which he makes a great point of, in America is a precious gift from aristocracy. The idea of rights that we all believe in doesn't come from John Locke or Thomas Hobbes, the liberal philosophers of the state of nature who sort of democratized rights by saying everybody has an equal right. But it comes from the history of England, especially, things like the Magna Carta that we still celebrate. That was the nobles or the gentlemen standing up for liberty against the king. And he says that was the greatest part, the greatest feature or virtue of the medieval monarchies in France as well as in England. So there are all these aristocratic features which are brought into democracy that Tocqueville wants to sustain.

KRISTOL: I suppose Tocqueville presents himself, I think, more than Machiavelli as an observer or interpreter, not so much of an advisor to action and submitting to providence and submitting to these forces beyond him, which is not really Machiavelli's style, quite. But I suppose, in a way, that's consistent with his teaching or his intention, is that right? I think it's precisely what Tocqueville's trying to curb is a kind of Machiavellian arrogance about overcoming fortune.

MANSFIELD: Right, yeah. Machiavelli wants you to overcome, but then you could say he's contradictory. Because what happens when you overcome? You become a victim of the very principle that you used to overcome, and that principle is necessity.

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: You must live according to necessity, Machiavelli says. And that means you must do what the situation requires in order to save yourself or promote yourself or survive, as that might be – survival, sort of a Darwinian view of that. So you start off trying to make yourself free from Christianity, and you ended up making yourself the slave of material necessity. I think that was Tocqueville's general –

So the appearance of free activity in Machiavelli is delusive. It isn't really there, and there's a kind of surrender at the end of it.

And, of course, Tocqueville worries about that in *Democracy*, that mild despotism is a surrender to big government. It seems to be necessary. There's nothing you can do.

KRISTOL: Tocqueville himself seems to submit or surrender almost.

MANSFIELD: Yes, he does that.

KRISTOL: In order, though – I mean, it's the opposite, right, in a certain way?

MANSFIELD: Yes.

KRISTOL: He submits in order to–

MANSFIELD: In order to maintain democracy with honor.

KRISTOL: Yes, in order to change or–

MANSFIELD: Honor and dignity. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Or stoops to conquer or whatever.

MANSFIELD: That's right. At the end of *Democracy in America* he speaks of the "true friends of freedom and human greatness." True friends of freedom and human greatness. So freedom and greatness go together. This is again the aristocratic spirit. You can't defend liberty without a desire for greatness – a theme very strong in [The Federalist](#).

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: In America – right at the beginning of *The Federalist*, of course too. America isn't America unless there's something great about it. We get that in our politics, and today is no exception.

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: Yeah. So, of course, greatness must be understood with honor and dignity. So *true* greatness, not just mere power or mere winning. That's more of the Machiavellian view.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MANSFIELD: So Tocqueville does submit – yes, he submits to the power of the democratic age, but honorably and nobly because he still exercises his ability and shows the rest of us how to do so. And in fact, he shows Americans that they *already* do so: namely, with honor and in a dignified manner that pays attention to their capacity for freedom.

KRISTOL: We'll have to return, in another conversation, to the distinction between *true* greatness and *fake* greatness. But you can explain that at some other point. But this has been a terrific conversation on Machiavelli and Tocqueville, and I think really bringing to light the true ambition of Tocqueville, which I don't believe has been seen until you and Delba Winthrop saw it. So, thank you so much for taking the time for this conversation.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]