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Machiavelli's the Art of War

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ABSTRACT: The Art of War (Italian: Dell'arte della guerra) is a treatise by the Italian Renaissance political philosopher and historian Niccolò Machiavelli. The format of The Art of War is a Socratic dialogue. The purpose, declared by Lord Fabrizio Colonna (perhaps Machiavelli's persona) at the outset, "To honor and reward virtù, not to have contempt for poverty, to esteem the modes and orders of military discipline, to constrain citizens to love one another, to live without factions, to esteem less the private than the public good." To these ends, Machiavelli notes in his preface, the military is like the roof of a palazzo protecting the contents. Written between 1519 and 1520 and published the following year, it was Machiavelli's only historical or political work printed during his lifetime, though he was appointed official historian of Florence in 1520 and entrusted with minor civil duties.

The Art of War is divided into a preface (proemio) and seven books (chapters), which take the form of a series of dialogues that take place in the Orti Oricellari, the gardens built in a classical style by Bernardo Rucellai in the 1490s for Florentine aristocrats and humanists to engage in discussion, between Cosimo Rucellai and "Lord Fabrizio Colonna" (many feel Colonna is a veiled disguise for Machiavelli himself, but this view has been challenged by scholars such as Mansfield), with other patrizi and captains of the recent Florentine republic: Zanobi Buondelmonti, Battista della Palla and Luigi Alamanni. The work is dedicated to Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi, patrizio fiorentino in a preface which ostentatiously pronounces Machiavelli's authorship. After repeated uses of the first person singular to introduce the dialogue, Machiavelli retreats from the work, serving as neither narrator nor interlocutor. Fabrizio is enamored with the Roman Legions of the early to mid Roman Republic and strongly advocates adapting them to the contemporary situation of Renaissance Florence. Fabrizio dominates the discussions with his knowledge, wisdom and insights. The other characters, for the most part, simply yield to his superior knowledge and merely bring up topics, ask him questions or for clarification. These dialogues, then, often become monologues with Fabrizio detailing how an army should be raised, trained, organized, deployed and employed.

KEYWORDS: Machiavelli, war, art, book, military, Italian, renaissance, political, philosopher

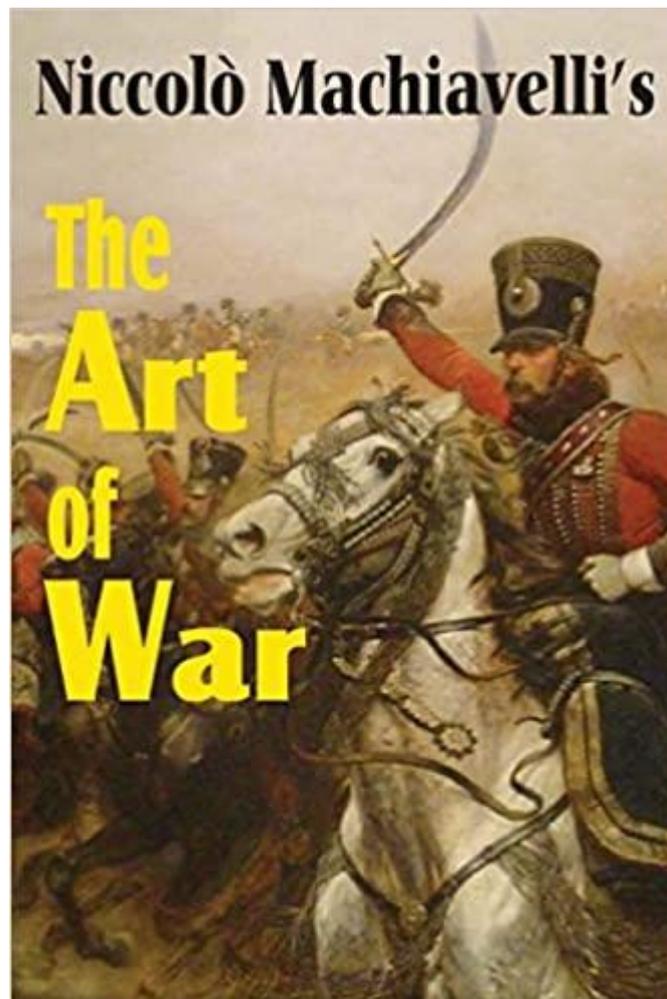
I. INTRODUCTION

Machiavelli's Art of War echoes many themes, issues, ideas and proposals from his earlier, more widely read works, The Prince and The Discourses. To the contemporary reader, Machiavelli's dialogue may seem impractical and to under-rate the effectiveness of both firearms and cavalry.[1] However, his theories were not merely based on a thorough study and analysis of classical and contemporary military practices. Machiavelli had served for fourteen years as secretary to the Chancery of Florence and "personally observed and reported back to his government on the size, composition, weaponry, morale, and logistical capabilities of the most effective militaries of his day."

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However, the native fighting force he assiduously oversaw was struck a catastrophic defeat in Prato in 1512 which led to the downfall of the Florentine republican government. Machiavelli wrote that war must be expressly defined. He developed the philosophy of "limited warfare"—that is, when diplomacy fails, war is an extension of politics. Art of War also emphasizes the necessity of a state militia and promotes the concept of armed citizenry. He believed that all society, religion, science, and art rested on the security provided by the military.[2,3]

However at the time he was writing, firearms, both technologically and tactically, were in their infancy and the overwhelming of enemy missile-armed troops, of artillery even, between salvos, by a charge of pikes and sword and shield men would have been a viable tactic. In addition Machiavelli was not writing in a vacuum; Art of War was written as a practical proposition to the rulers of Florence as an alternative to the unreliable condottieri mercenaries upon which all the Italian city states were reliant. A standing army of the prosperous and pampered citizens that would have formed the cavalry would have been little better. Machiavelli therefore "talks up" the advantages of a militia of those arms that Florence could realistically muster and equip from her own resources.

However, his basic notion of emulating Roman practices was slowly and pragmatically adapted by many later rulers and commanders, most notably Maurice of Nassau and Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden.

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WHAT IS THE 'ART' OF 'WAR'?

- ART: THE CONSCIOUS USE OF SKILL AND IMAGINATION IN THE PRODUCTION OF A CULTURAL ARTIFACT, INCLUDE IMAGES, SYMBOLS, AND IDEAS.
- WAR: A CONDITION OF HOSTILITY, CONFLICT, OR ANTAGONISM BETWEEN TWO OR MORE OPPOSING GROUPS.
- SO, THE 'ART' OF 'WAR' IS...? WHY IS THIS NEEDED?
- FOR SUN TZU, AN "ART OF WAR" RESOLVES A PERENNIAL PROBLEM OF ALL REGIMES:
DURABILITY
- VICTORY IS NECESSARY, BUT NOT SUFFICIENT, TO ACHIEVE DURABILITY

They would lay the foundations for the system of linear tactics which would dominate the warfare of Europe and the world until after the Napoleonic Wars. While Machiavelli's influence as a military theorist is often given a back seat to his writings as a political philosopher, that he considered Dell'arte della guerra to be his most important work is clear from his discussions of the military science and soldiery in other works. For example, in *The Prince* he declares that "a prince should have no other object, no any other thought, nor take anything 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." [4,5]

In the course of the sixteenth century twenty-one editions appeared and it was translated into French, English, German, and Latin. Montaigne named Machiavelli next to Caesar, Polybius, and Comynnes as an authority on military affairs. Although in the seventeenth century changing military methods brought other writers to the fore, Machiavelli was still frequently quoted. In the eighteenth century, the Marshal de Saxe leaned heavily on him when he composed his *Reveries upon the Art of War* (1757), and Algarotti—though without much basis—saw in Machiavelli the master who has taught Frederick the Great the tactics by which he astounded Europe. Like most people concerned with military matters, Jefferson had Machiavelli's *Art of War* in his library, and when the War of 1812 increased American interest in problems of war, *The Art of War* was brought out in a special American edition."

This continued interest in Machiavelli as a military thinker was not only caused by the fame of his name; some of the recommendations made in the *Art of War*—those on training, discipline, and classification, for instance—gained increasing practical importance in early modern Europe when armies came to be composed of professionals coming from the most different social strata. This does not mean that the progress of military art in the sixteenth century—in drilling, in dividing an army into distinct units, in planning and organizing campaigns—was due to the influence of Machiavelli. Instead, the military innovators of the time were pleased to find a work in which aspects of their practice were explained and justified. Moreover, in the sixteenth century, with its wide knowledge of ancient literature and its deep respect for classical wisdom, it was commonly held that the Romans owed their military triumphs to their emphasis on discipline and training. Machiavelli's attempt to present Roman military organization as the model for the armies of his time was therefore not regarded as extravagant. At the end of the sixteenth century, for instance, Justus Lipsius, in his influential writings on military affairs, also treated the Roman military order as a permanently valid model. [6,7]

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Where the
willingness is
great,
the difficulties
cannot be great.

- The Prince

Niccolò Machiavelli

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The content and format of *The Art of War* are strangely at odds. In the opening pages, after Cosimo has described his grandfather's inspiration for gardens in which the conversations are set, Fabrizio declaims that we should imitate ancient warfare rather than ancient art forms. However, the *Art of War* is a dialogue in the humanist tradition of imitating classical forms. Machiavelli himself appears to have fallen into the trap for which Fabrizio criticizes Bernardo Rucellai. Despite this inherent contradiction, the book lacks much of the cynical tone and humour that is so characteristic of Machiavelli's other works.[8]

II. DISCUSSION

Machiavelli taught Europe the art of war; it had long been practiced, without being known." For Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), war was war, and victory the supreme aim to which all other considerations must be subordinated. *The Art of War* is far from an anachronism—its pages outline fundamental questions that theorists of war continue to examine today, making it essential reading for any student of military history, strategy, or theory. Machiavelli believed *The Art of War* to be his most important work.[9,10]

Niccolo Machiavelli is best known for *The Prince*, his guidebook on ruling an Italian city-state. But for a long time after his death, Machiavelli's *Art of War* was better known and more influential (alongside his *Discourses on Livy*, both of which were written after *The Prince* but published before).(As an aside, the more famous *Art of War* is Sun Tzu's but that text was not actually called *Art of War* and may not have been written by Sun Tzu – another matter for another time.)

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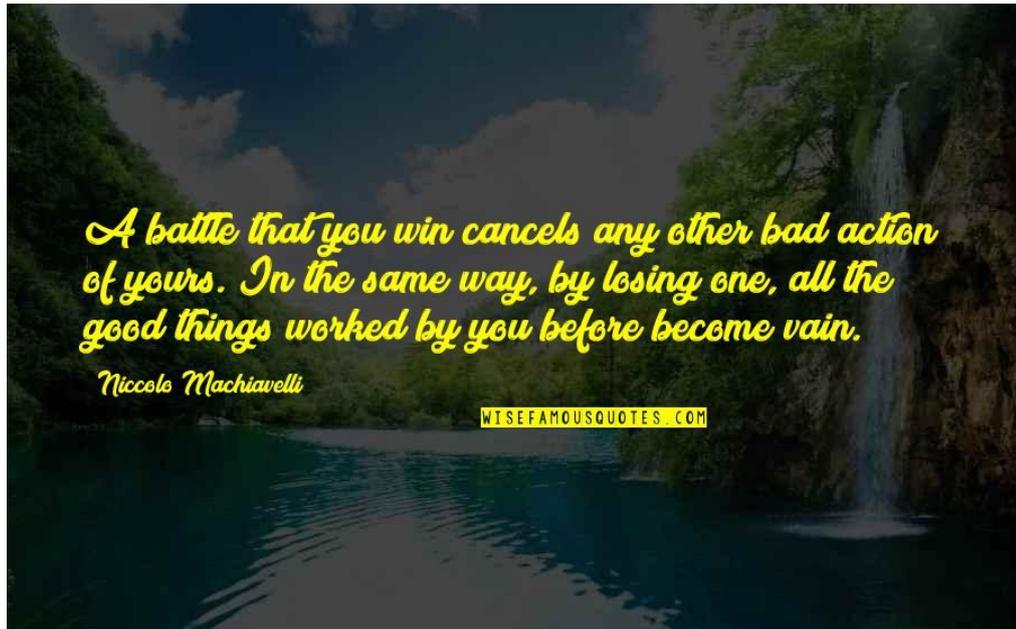
Machiavelli's *Art of War* takes the form of Socratic dialogue between the warrior Lord Fabrizio Colonna and Florentine nobles. Fabrizio was a real person, but his character in this book has been interpreted as a stand-in for Machiavelli himself. In *Art of War*, the dialogue explains and predicts changes in European warfare and military affairs as a consequence of larger social, economic, and technological evolutions. The text is wide-ranging. At the end of the dialogue, in Book Seven, Machiavelli's Fabrizio offers 27 "general rules" of war, which are listed here:

1. What benefits the enemy, harms you; and what benefits you, harm the enemy.
2. Whoever is more vigilant in observing the designs of the enemy in war, and endures much hardship in training his army, will incur fewer dangers, and can have greater hope for victory.[11,12]
3. Never lead your soldiers into an engagement unless you are assured of their courage, know they are without fear, and are organized, and never make an attempt unless you see they hope for victory.
4. It is better to defeat the enemy by hunger than with steel; in such victory fortune counts more than virtue.
5. No proceeding is better than that which you have concealed from the enemy until the time you have executed it.
6. To know how to recognize an opportunity in war, and take it, benefits you more than anything else.
7. Nature creates few men brave, industry and training makes many.
8. Discipline in war counts more than fury.
9. If some on the side of the enemy desert to come to your service, if they be loyal, they will always make you a great acquisition; for the forces of the adversary diminish more with the loss of those who flee, than with those who are killed, even though the name of the fugitives is suspect to the new friends, and odious to the old.

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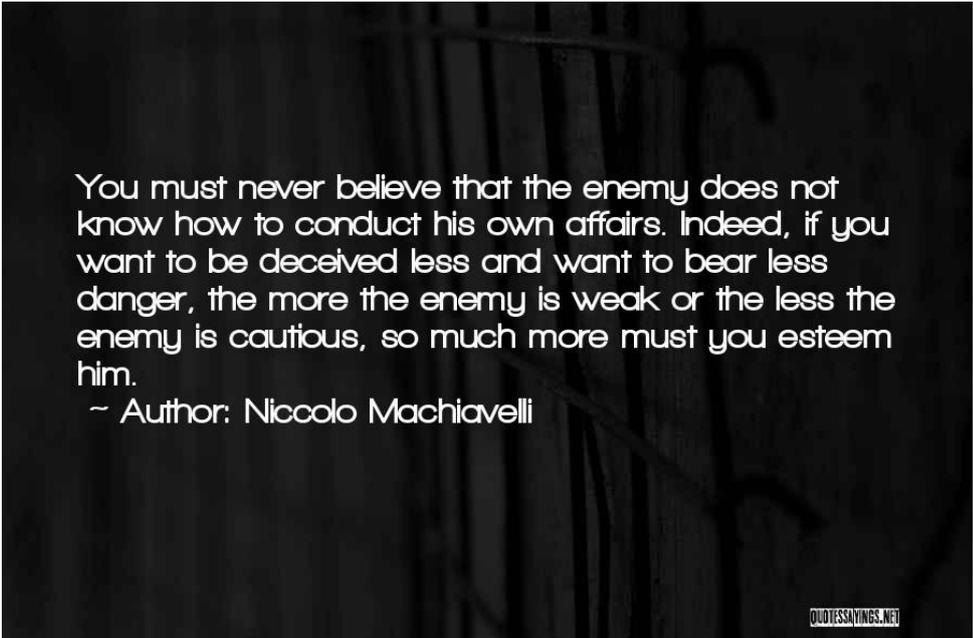


10. It is better in organizing an engagement to reserve great aid behind the front line, than to spread out your soldiers to make a greater front.
11. He is overcome with difficulty, who knows how to recognize his forces and those of the enemy.
12. The virtue of the soldiers is worth more than a multitude, and the site is often of more benefit than virtue.
13. New and speedy things frighten armies, while the customary and slow things are esteemed little by them: you will therefore make your army experienced, and learn (the strength) of a new enemy by skirmishes, before you come to an engagement with him.
14. Whoever pursues a routed enemy in a disorganized manner, does nothing but become vanquished from having been a victor.
15. Whoever does not make provisions necessary to live (eat), is overcome without steel.
16. Whoever trusts more in cavalry than in infantry, or more in infantry than in cavalry, must settle for the location.
17. If you want to see whether any spy has come into the camp during the day, have no one go to his quarters.
18. Change your proceeding when you become aware that the enemy has foreseen it.
19. Counsel with many on the things you ought to do, and confer with few on what you do afterwards.
20. When soldiers are confined to their quarters, they are kept there by fear or punishment; then when they are led by war, (they are led) by hope and reward.
21. Good Captains never come to an engagement unless necessity compels them, or the opportunity calls them.

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You must never believe that the enemy does not know how to conduct his own affairs. Indeed, if you want to be deceived less and want to bear less danger, the more the enemy is weak or the less the enemy is cautious, so much more must you esteem him.

~ Author: Niccolo Machiavelli

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22. Act so your enemies do not know how you want to organize your army for battle, and in whatever way you organize them, arrange it so that the first line can be received by the second and by the third.
23. In a battle, never use a company for some other purpose than what you have assigned it to, unless you want to cause disorder.
24. Accidents are remedied with difficulty, unless you quickly take the facility of thinking.
25. Men, steel, money, and bread, are the sinews of war; but of these four, the first two are more necessary, for men and steel find money and bread, but money and bread do not find men and steel.
26. The unarmed rich man is the prize of the poor soldier.
27. Accustom your soldiers to despise delicate living and luxurious clothing.[13,14]

III. RESULTS

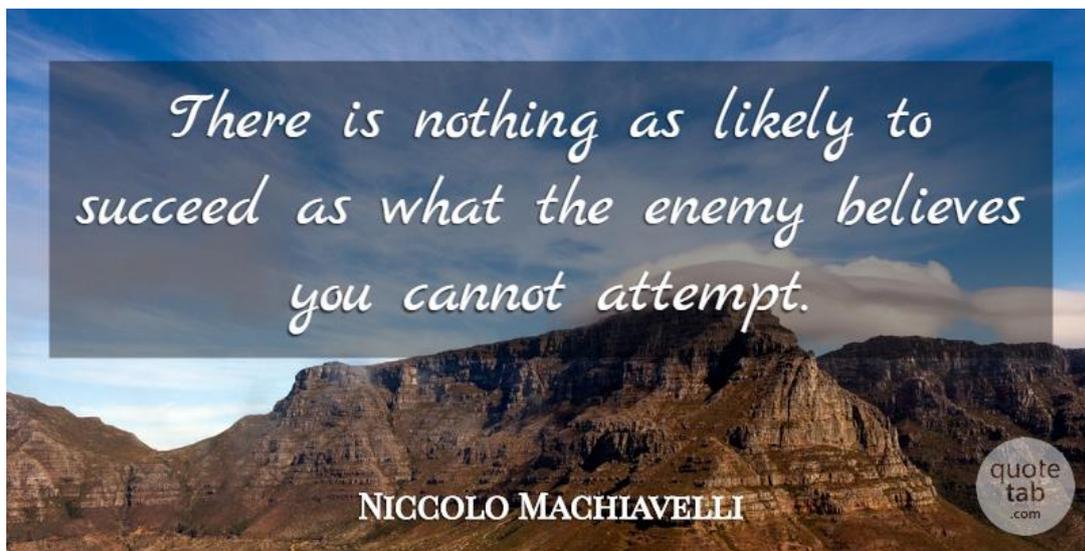
Machiavelli gives straightforward advice on organizing and conducting military operations. *The Art of War's* clear, and concise style is diametrically opposed to that of *The Prince*. The book is wholly practical, considers contrasting arguments, and even includes illustrative diagrams. Its format is that of a conversation between a military expert and interested citizens. Although the expert, Fabrizio, is obviously Machiavelli himself, the format provides at least an arguable degree of separation between Machiavelli and his advice.[15,16]

The modern reader may be put off by how closely the discussion tracks the weapons and tactics of a time when gunpowder was just beginning to affect Western warfare.

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What attention, after all, should we pay to comparisons between short and long swords and spears? Readers interested in warfare's timeless principles, however, will be rewarded by spending time with a first-rate mind as it considers them.

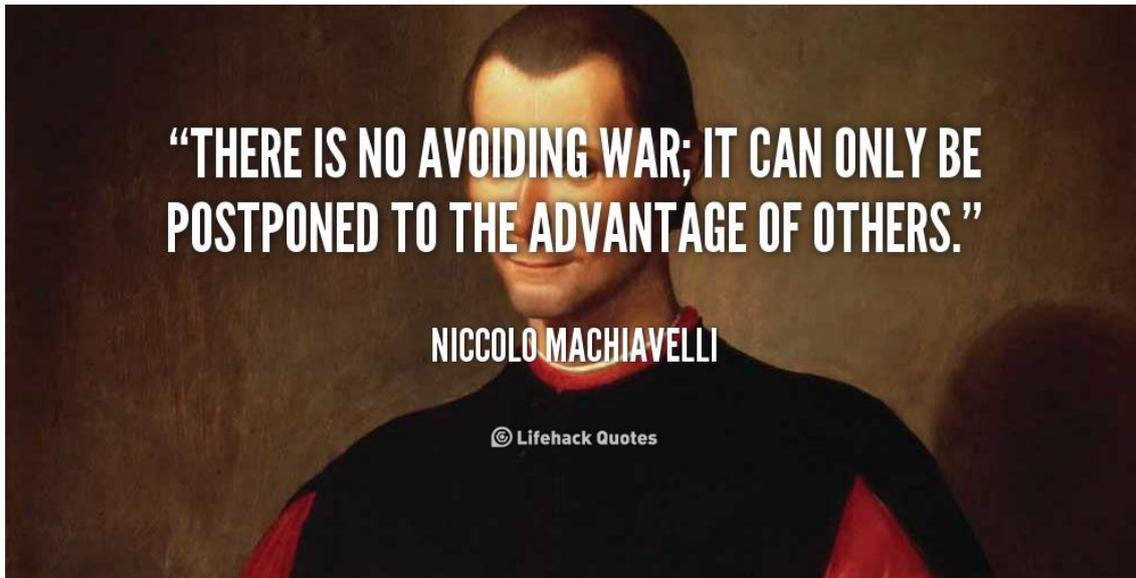
What place should the "art" of war have in any polity? Here, the word "art" means "profession." Machiavelli's conclusion is what, in our time, we call "civilian supremacy" over military affairs, lest the military interests divert the polity from its ordinary objectives. But only when ordinary citizens are conversant with the principles of war can they use warriors and not be used by them. Because any army's allegiance is the foremost indicator of how well it will fight and for whom, recruiting armed forces among one's own citizens—and on the broadest possible basis—is of paramount importance. As for training, nothing will ever replace the Spartan/Roman practice of making the training harder than any battle imaginable. Citizens committed and hardened to their country's defense are worth more than any other factor in military affairs.[17,18]

Machiavelli's genius is most visible in his discussion of artillery. He intuits that such a potent force is most profitably used to safeguard one's own side from the enemy's use of it. Hence, rather than being used to slaughter enemy troops, artillery should be targeted first to disarm the enemy, in what today we call a "counterforce" mode. Machiavelli's discussion of elastic defense, of logistics, and of the advantages and perils of various kinds of terrain, while not revolutionary—how could they be?—are more concise versions than one finds in manuals such as Hamley's *Operations of War*. The reader is not surprised that the book's most passionate and lengthy passages catalogue various stratagems for producing surprise through deception.[19,20]

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IV. CONCLUSION

Machiavelli's Art of War contains an unexplored and unexplained paradox: the dialogue's chief interlocutor is Fabrizio Colonna, a condottiere in the employ of Ferdinand of Aragon, who played a critical role in the Spanish conquest of northern Italy and in the collapse of the Florentine republic led by Piero Soderini, in which Machiavelli worked as a civil servant. Yet, Machiavelli chooses Fabrizio to defend the superiority of the citizen militia, which he associates with republican civic virtue, over mercenary troops. This paradox has remained unaccounted for because literary scholars have ignored the historical background underlying the text's assorted political subtexts, while historians have ignored the nature of Quattrocento dialogue, as a literary genre, in contextualizing the work. Once these historical and literary dimensions of the Art of War are brought together, it can be seen why Fabrizio Colonna would have been perceived, by Machiavelli and his audience, as the ideal representative of a military position which he espoused neither in theory or in practice.[21,22]



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