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## How To Defend Freedom Like A Machiavellian

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Scary headline number one: “How the coronavirus could trigger a backslide on freedom around the world”—[The Washington Post](#), March 16. Scary headline number two: “Coronavirus is being used to suppress press freedoms globally”—[Axios](#), March 31. Scary headline number three: “A New Viral Infection: Leaders Seizing Power, Police Bullying Citizens”—here at [TAC](#), April 2.

The basic dynamic here is obvious: We’re fighting a war against Covid-19, and in a war, the imperative is discipline and regimentation. These are martial and patriotic values, and they will likely prove effective against the virus, and yet at the same time, they are distinctly illiberal values—or, if one prefers, un-libertarian values.

And the fear, of course, is that when this virus crisis is over, the new statist controls will not be over. Maybe they will have ratcheted up a notch. Indeed, we might make an obvious point: In the wake of this epidemic, They will know everything about you.

So who is “They”? For starters, “They” is the U.S. government, which even before the crisis held abundant data on everyone. And now it will have a lot more, because we’re all going to be tracked for contagion—and in his dire moment, not many people will complain.

“They” also includes the phone companies, as well as the tech titans. Yes, whenever those nice people from Silicon Valley offer to build a website to keep us abreast of this or that aspect of the crisis, it’s a given that there’s a big data receptacle at the back end. As [this author](#) noted recently, this is the sort of emergency that gives rise to a Hobbesian Leviathan.

Of course, it’s likely that the Leviathan will be popular, at least at first, because in addition to wanting to be healthy, people also want money. Under the provisions of the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act](#)—which passed the Senate unanimously and sailed through the House on a voice vote, signed into law by President Trump on March 27—Uncle Sam plans to spend \$2 trillion, and just about every American stands to be on the receiving end. Of course, along the way, the feds will get to know each of us even better. It’s a safe bet that even more relief bills are on the way, perhaps including a Universal Basic Income.

In addition, beyond this health crisis, some will have the bright idea of using the same personalized data to monitor carbon dioxide emissions, and to monitor anything else that our leaders think needs monitoring. In other words, now that so many privacy taboos have been broken, it will be hard to put them back together.

To be sure, a re-liberalized America might yet roll back these surveillance systems in the future. But will China go along—especially if it continues to make so much of our electronic equipment? And what about all the other countries, corporations, and organizations that wish to

keep tabs on us? Will they be inspired to change their snoopier ways by the blandishments of the American Civil Liberties Union, or the Cato Institute?

In the meantime, some will respond to all this omniscience by seeking to hide. They might, for instance, go incognito or crypto. And plutocrats might seek to hide themselves in mountaintop compounds, or on faraway islands, or on permanently oceangoing yachts, or in elaborate underground bunkers. And maybe someday soon, they'll be in spaceships or lunar pleasure domes. Yet it's not so obvious that they'll be able to truly disappear from view; after all, they would have to bring with them their servants, staffs, soldiers, and supplies—and all those make for plenty of traceable connections back to a Hobbesian Earth.

Meanwhile, on the other end of the financial spectrum, perhaps a few hermits will brave severe privation for the sake of going off the grid completely, living as subsistence farmers or hunter-gatherers—and yet even they can be spotted easily by drones and satellites.

Yes, this is a small planet. By now, the 197 million square miles of the globe, including the oceans, have been well mapped—and can be easily watched. And any inch of the earth can be easily zapped by someone's cruise missile. So far as we know, no billionaire's bolthole has been built to survive an assault from a nation-state's military.

So are we all destined to be scrutinized like a goldfish in a bowl? Naked and exposed in the public square under the unblinking gaze of some panopticon? Probably. In the words of Greg Piccionelli, a Los Angeles-based inventor, "We've crossed the Rubicon on technology. Unless and until someone figures out how to go completely virtual—as with, say, untraceable avatars—our corporeal selves will be easy to spot."

However, there's another, more hopeful, way of thinking about the dilemma. That is, rather than trying to roll back inexorable trends of technology and proximity, maybe the answer is to get better organized. Organized, that is, to fight fire with fire. As in, if you use tech to see me, I'll use tech to see you, and so let's call it even. In other words, tech deterrence.

That's an argument that can be teased out of a 1943 book by James Burnham, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom*. Burnham (1905-1987) was a communist-turned conservative; in his later decades, he was a stalwart writer at *National Review*. Indeed, in 1983, Ronald Reagan honored him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Yet Burnham is best remembered for one of his earliest works, *The Managerial Revolution*. In that 1941 volume, Burnham suggested that the future belonged to hulking bureaucracies organized into continent-spanning superstates. Indeed, *The Managerial Revolution*, a huge best-seller in its day, was deeply influential on George Orwell as he penned 1984.

As we can gather, Burnham well understood the potential of governments to throttle freedom. It was in that same era, after all, that Winston Churchill had warned that the world could "sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science." In other words, long before anyone had ever heard of the internet or artificial intelligence, it was possible to imagine that the Gestapo, the NKVD, and Big Brother would be capable of stomping freedom, forever.

So why, then, did Burnham publish a book with the sub-title "Defenders of Freedom"? And what does Niccolò Machiavelli have to do with it?

Burnham's book starts with a reinterpretation of the 16th century Florentine. Contrary to the stereotype of Machiavelli as the ultra-cynical bard of power-grabbers and backstabbers, Burnham argued that his oeuvre—far larger than just *The Prince*—should be seen as a manual for defending freedom. Defending freedom, that is, in the only way possible: through the careful juxtaposition of power against power.

“As protectors of liberty,” Burnham wrote, “Machiavelli has no confidence in individual men as such; driven by unlimited ambition, deceiving even themselves, they are always corrupted by power.” And yet, Burnham continued, it's possible to stymie individual ambition with collective protection, through an “established framework of wise laws.”

Needless to say, Machiavelli was not optimistic about the natural willingness of men to live according to wise laws; much of his work, after all, is a chronicle of the various usurpations and tyrannies that afflicted not only his native Florence, but also the unfolding of history as he knew it. As Burnham explained, citing his hero, the only way to protect the rule of law was to make sure it was “guaranteed by force.”

And that's the crux of Machiavelli's argument: To survive within a society, each group had to be strong enough to protect itself against tyrants. If it was a given that men were not angels, then at least they should be well armed so as to be able to defend themselves. As Burnham put it, “Only out of the continuing clash of opposing groups can liberty flow.”

In addition, each polity must be strong enough to defend itself against foreign conquerors. Thus Machiavelli was a champion of what he called “freedom through strength.” Back in 1943, when Burnham published his take on Machiavelli (as well as other thinkers in the Machiavellian tradition), freedom-through-strength must have seemed like a sound argument: after all, pacifistic ideals weren't going to defend freedom against Hitler; instead, we needed militaristic realism.

These days, Burnham's thinking is subsumed under the name of pluralism. And in 1952, the political economist John Kenneth Galbraith coined the ancillary phrase, “countervailing power,” to describe the play of force against force. More recently, in his 2020 book *The New Class War*, Michael Lind has revived pluralistic thinking, arguing that a good society needs little platoons—and big platoons—vying against each other.

The composite Machiavelli/Burnham/Galbraith/Lind vision is a strategy guide for freedom, but it begins with the canny realization that in an age of big bureaucracies and bigger data, it's not realistic to think that individual liberty can be shielded by abstractions such as natural law and constitutional principle. Instead, the individual needs the power of modern institutions—including, Lind emphasizes, labor unions—to defend rights. Only in that continuing pluralistic clash can people find shelter from the storm.

And at a time when Big Virus seems to presage a return of Big Brother, that's a comforting thought.