Clarendon saw Cromwell as Machiavelli's Prince in action, regarding him with a mixture of repulsion and admiration. 'Cromwell, though the greatest dissembler living, always made his hypocrisy of singular use and benefit to him, and never did anything, how ungracious or imprudent soever it seemed to be, but what was necessary to the design.'

The Earl of Clarendon was not Oliver Cromwell's most enthusiastic supporter, but, as Christopher Hill suggests, there may be more to this comment than simply an expression of aversion. Hill's comparison of Cromwell with the sixteenth century Italian thinker, Machiavelli, is worth examining closer. In his treatise *The Prince*, Machiavelli argued that rulers should pursue all courses of action 'necessary to the design' of keeping power. This humanist and realist view of staying in power made *The Prince* a shocking book for contemporaries. Machiavelli's overall message, and the predicate of many of his ideas, is that if a ruler wants to keep undisputed control of his kingdom then he should choose logic over morality and practicality over benevolence. He must appear to embody virtues and morality, but ignore them when necessary. Cromwell actively exercised power, often crushing his opponents and taking ruthless steps to secure power. This is in itself Machiavellian, and it seems fitting to compare Cromwell's actions to what Machiavelli recommends for a ruler.

It is important to note that there is no evidence that Cromwell had read *The Prince* and it is extremely doubtful that Cromwell was directly influenced by Machiavelli. *The Prince* would not have been Cromwell's handbook on power, like it was for Hitler or other major modern figures, and in the seventeenth century Machiavelli's writings had come to be seen as works of evil - especially to a religious man like Cromwell. Therefore, there is little point in attempting to show a direct influence when neither the evidence nor the likelihood is there, given Cromwell's stance on religious values. However, one can analyse the way in which Cromwell governed, instead of joining the debate about what his position was. Perhaps it is more relevant to study what a government does than what it is - after all, we base our opinions on people predominantly from their actions. This article will consider key aspects of Cromwell's career, to see if he was, however unconsciously, a Machiavellian.
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Cromwell's invasion of Ireland in 1649 appears to be very Machiavellian. This begins with the reasons for invading. Machiavelli talks of setting up colonies which are 'the keys to the country'. Christopher Hill agrees, stating that the 'international situation... demanded that the back door be swiftly slammed and bolted'. Ireland was the ideal stepping stone for Charles II, and Cromwell was strategically justified in his decision to invade. Machiavelli would almost definitely agree with this decision. Another factor which affected the invasion was English ethnic, intellectual and social superiority over the Irish. Hill notes that even people like John Milton 'shared the view that the Irish were culturally so inferior that their subordination was natural and necessary'. In fact, in a conversation with Edmund Ludlow, Cromwell had described Ireland as 'a clean paper', which, following the victory of the New Model Army, could be remodelled in the interests of England. Machiavelli notes in The Prince that often the best thing to do, when having taken a foreign land, is to crush it and rebuild again. This view is both rational and immoral: two words that might be used to describe the Irish invasion of 1649.

Above all other reasons for invasion, though, was Cromwell's yearning for revenge after the 1641 Irish rebellion. This and his hatred of Catholicism is summed up perfectly in his infamous ferocious Declaration to the Irish Catholic clergy of January 1650. In his first speech to his soldiers in Ireland, August 1649, Cromwell called the Irish 'barbarous and bloodthirsty'. What ensued would reflect this hatred, with actions for which history has forever condemned him. Machiavelli stated that 'the injury therefore that you do to a man should be such that you need not fear for his revenge'. Certainly, this was how it would be when Cromwell laid siege to Drogheda and established a 'reputation for cruelty and savagery'. Michéal O Sióchru calls it 'a war of extermination'. No prisoners were taken and no mercy given. Perhaps this is because Cromwell did not want to get bogged down and make the war even more costly than it was. In the same way, after Wexford, Cromwell stated that the English 'put all to the sword that came in their way'. This part of the campaign was conducted according to Machiavellian principles.

Machiavelli stated that 'a prince should be a fox, to know the traps and snares; and a lion, to be able to frighten the wolves'. During the invasion, Cromwell introduced elements of 'fox' as he stepped up efforts for
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intelligence, and also used elements of a ‘lion’ as he crushed opposition and consequently scared opposing soldiers into joining forces. Cromwell also had to be cunning in order to get parliament to fund his soldiers: Machiavelli said a leader must be good to the people ‘to enable him to increase the pay of the soldiers’.\textsuperscript{11} The Italian also stated that ‘a prince should endeavour to invest all his actions with a character of grandeur and excellence’.\textsuperscript{12} Cromwell’s triumphal return to England in 1650 exudes this: he was already intent on looking grand and excellent in the public eye. Machiavelli also notes that having a good knowledge of ‘the art of war and the organisation and discipline of his [a leader’s] army’\textsuperscript{13} is essential. At this stage, though his political rise to power was not completely accomplished, Cromwell’s military ability had gone from strength to strength.

The land settlement imposed on Ireland from 1653 saw Cromwell at the forefront of decisions that would cause centuries of Irish bitterness. Though maybe not in complete control of Irish policy, he took an active part, and they were principally his decisions. Machiavelli states that one should ‘abstain from taking people’s property, for men will sooner forget the death of their fathers than the loss of their patrimony’.\textsuperscript{14} This shows that Cromwell in Ireland was not always in agreement with Machiavelli. Machiavelli would have been pleased with the way that Cromwell had crushed the Irish force, but not with the way in which he created issues for the country by meddling with their religion and taking their land.

Despite the obvious differences over religion and the land settlement, many pieces of Machiavelli’s advice about invasion, strategic defence, etc. were followed by Cromwell in Ireland. It is one episode amongst many in Cromwell’s political and military career where we see his actions exhibit the essence of Machiavellian ideas.

II

In July 1653, when the Barebone’s Parliament convened, an impassioned Cromwell made the opening speech ‘with tears (at times) rolling down his cheeks and with the enthusiastic style of a revivalist evangelical preacher’.\textsuperscript{15} At this point our Machiavellian comparison does not look so convincing, but we are concentrating on Cromwell’s actions and not his beliefs. The parliament certainly had some success, but for various reasons Cromwell became disillusioned with it. At this stage he had an idea of the ‘Godly Reformation’, in which religious liberty was of major importance.
Parliament threatened it, as well as showing 'anti-army sentiments'. On 12 December the moderates in the parliament presented their resignation and thus power to the lord general. Within days a new constitution had been written, giving Cromwell the title of lord protector.

Machiavelli himself naturally favoured a republic. Despite the fact that his most famous work looked at autocratic monarchs, he was inclined to the idea that citizens themselves could work out what's best for a country. However, Machiavelli admitted that a leader with complete power can be the best way to achieve things and can often be justifiable. By the end of the Barebone's Parliament, and indeed before it, Cromwell began to realise that the only way to achieve changes could be to take power himself. In light of the failures of the Rump parliament, in 1652 Cromwell had asked a political ally 'what if a man should take upon him to be king?' The parallel political thinking is clear.

A major factor in the dissolution of both the Rump and Barebones Parliaments was the politicians' hostility towards the army. Being Lord General and a man who had based his success, reputation and political position on the military, Cromwell felt threatened. In many ways he had to choose between his political and military sides. In a chapter mainly regarding Roman Emperors, Machiavelli noted that they had the 'difficulty of satisfying both the soldiers and the people'. Despite deducing that a balance was needed, Machiavelli prioritised by saying that 'they should by all means endeavour to avoid being hated by the more powerful', in other words, the army. Thus, as Cromwell was already bound to the army, he had to make the decision to lose some popularity with the people in order to maintain his power.

According to Barry Coward, the protectorate was 'a regime which owed its establishment and continuation, not to constitutional legitimacy, but it owed it to the power of the army'. This point cannot be emphasised enough: of major importance for Machiavelli was 'having to bear with the cruelty and cupidity of the soldiers'. Throughout his military and political career we see Cromwell trying to defend the army from governmental hostility towards them. This was especially difficult during Cromwell's search for a settlement with the king, notably the Putney Debates in 1647. Coward seems to suggest that Cromwell may have done things subsequently to this
that look distinctly Machiavellian including his ‘leading role in quashing an army mutiny [the Levellers] at one of the three rendezvous at Ware, in Hertfordshire’.

In the same incident, Cromwell allegedly stated that the mutineers’ execution “was ‘absolutely necessary to keep things from falling into confusion; which must have ensued upon that division if it had not been timely prevented’. This sounds remarkably like Machiavelli’s statement that ‘a few displays of severity will really be more merciful than to allow, by an excess of clemency, disorders to occur’.

This may seem natural for any leader, and perhaps not directly linked to Machiavelli at all. The interesting thing, though, is how a man so close to God and so keen on a peaceful settlement would crush his old compatriots so savagely, even with their radical agitator views – as Machiavelli put it, ‘the injury therefore that you do to a man should be such that you need not fear his revenge’.

During the protectorate, Cromwell and his council held overall power over the parliaments, though they were a part of his yearning for constitutional respectability. He also made sure that the army would be untouchable. Machiavelli would certainly agree that upsetting the army would mean the end of Cromwell’s power. He stated that a Roman Emperor, a title Cromwell is frequently likened to, could often be a man of the people brought to the helm by people or the army. Therefore, unlike a king, Cromwell felt bound to the soldiers who had elevated him to that position.

One would expect that his relationship with his old allies, the political Independents, would also be one to work hard to keep – however hard he tried. However, Cromwell had to choose his military side in order to stay in power and many of his old political friends naturally felt betrayed as a result. With military backing, Cromwell could afford to be disliked by politicians – apparently agreeing with Machiavelli that ‘it is much more safe to be feared than to be loved’. It was no longer the parliamentarians who counted, but the professional and pragmatic New Model Army. In this sense, Cromwell had to choose his military side in order to stay in power and many of his old political friends naturally felt betrayed as a result.

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As Machiavelli stated, ‘a prince who causes another to become powerful thereby works his own ruin’.

There is, however, strong opposing evidence to the comparison with Machiavelli on this subject. Power in England wasn’t as simple as protector and council: articles in the constitution stated that it was ‘illegal for parliaments be dissolved without their own consent until each session had
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lasted at least five months’ and ‘if the protector failed to call the parliament’ then the commissioner of the great seal would automatically call elections. Despite ceding power to the council, the parliament did hold some power. Coward states that the limitations were ‘remarkably un-dictatorial’, and this seems very un-Machiavellian – incomplete power is certainly not related to ideas in The Prince. Another weakness of the comparison is the way in which Cromwell worked hard to try and bring people onto his side. For example, in later 1654 and early 1655 he had long discussions and persuasion in order to bring critics over to the regime, even with radicals like the Quaker, George Fox. However, one has to be careful not to pigeonhole Machiavelli’s ideas as including only things ruthless and dictatorial. In fact, one of his most important points is that ‘a prince will always have need of the good will of the inhabitants, if he wishes to enter into firm possession of the country’. He clearly emphasised that one should avoid being hated, and one cannot do this by forcing a regime on citizens without any attempt to gain their consent.

Cromwell’s authoritarian approach to governing took shape explicitly in the ‘major-generals’ scheme. This can be seen in the proclamation sent to William Boteler on October 11th 1655, which made him:

Major-General, and commander in chief within the said countries of Northampton, Huntingdon, Rutland, and Bedford ... doe by this give you full power, and authoritie unto you to take unto your charge, and to traine ... and to deepen good discipline the land militia forces, and such others as shalbe raised, or assigned to you within the said counties ... lead them against all, and singular enemies, Rebels, traitors, and other offenders, and their adherents against us, and this commonwealth ... put to execution by death by all waies and means, according to your good discretion.

Although this letter doesn’t explain all the reasons for installing major-generals, the extract puts great emphasis on security. There is a clear intention to crush any enemies in a Machiavellian way, and also a sense of putting a lot of trust into the hands of the individual major-generals. Though it was not purely Cromwell’s decision (the council had a part to play), it could be suggested that he picked Boteler due to the fact that he was in the cavalry in the Midlands and would probably have fought under Cromwell. As a major-general, he ‘was zealous and uncompromising in his
hostility to his religious and political enemies, emerging as a severe persecutor of Catholics and Quakers in his region, and had also been important in the crushing of the Levellers before the Protectorate Parliament. These are all enemies that Cromwell despised, and who needed to be defeated completely.

The rule of the major generals shows Cromwell moving towards an increasingly military influence over Britain. Machiavelli stated that ‘when a prince is at the head of his army, with a multitude of soldiers under his command, then it is above all things necessary for him to disregard the reputation of cruelty’. Pragmatic and oppressive military control was a step which was unpopular, and it seems distinctly Machiavellian in its nature. It shows a level of army organisation and state power which is well ahead of Machiavelli’s time, though something he would be in awe of. Military districts in which men would be trained and organised, though unsuccessful, arguably demonstrates forethought of a kind of structure and organisation of modern corps systems. For Cromwell, perhaps the military influence went too far – especially given that by 1656 any MP unpopular with the army was turned away from the second Protectorate Parliament by the military-dominated council.

Machiavelli also stated that ‘having recovered such revolted provinces, it is easier to keep them in subjection; for the prince will avail himself of the occasion of the rebellion to secure himself, with less consideration for the people, by punishing the guilty, watching the suspected, and strengthening himself at all the weak points of the province’. This is directly comparable to the major generals scheme. The danger from the ‘revolted provinces’ had been seen as the royalist strongholds during the second Civil War of 1648 and the Penruddock rebellion of 1655, and the best way of keeping them in subjection would be to create military districts. Barry Coward identified it as ‘what we’d now call anti-terrorist measures’. He also stated, though, that whilst being unpopular, the major generals often worked very well with the local governments and that the importance of their rule is overstated. On the other hand, the military influence in Cromwell’s government in general cannot be understated.

**IV**

Machiavelli stated that when inheriting a new kingdom, things should not be changed, because a prince ‘has for enemies all those who derived advantages
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from the old order of things’. This advice was not followed by Cromwell’s regime, especially when it came to the suppression of opposition. However, given that it was a revolutionary government following a Civil War, the political situation meant that Cromwell was unlikely to be able to uphold the law in every respect. In fact, Cromwell would often ignore justice in favour of necessity. This is much more Machiavellian. An integral idea for Machiavelli was that conventional moral standards would have to be ignored if necessary. In the same way as the modern ‘war on terror’, Cromwell would ignore justice in order to suppress ‘terrorism’. Cromwell famously explained that ‘if anything should be done but what is according to the law, the throat of the nation may be cut ‘til we send for some to make a law’. It is interesting that a man as principled as Cromwell was rejecting these principles of ‘honesty and clemency’ in order to ‘establish undisputed control’ – a very Machiavellian idea. Though not as rigorous as that of Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany, John Thurloe’s intelligence network would also undermine another moral standard – freedom of speech. Cromwell was sacrificing yet another moral principle in order to protect his power.

Having said that, Cromwell’s ‘Godly Reformation’ looks distinctly non-Machiavellian. It is hard to discern exactly what Cromwell meant by the Godly Reformation, but we can take the rough definition of social change involving more liberty of conscience and a crackdown on immoral behaviour. Machiavelli says little about social issues in The Prince but he does state that ‘a prince should also show himself a lover of virtue, and should honour all who excel in any one of the arts, and should encourage his citizens quietly to pursue their vocations’. This represents a major difference between Cromwell’s and Machiavelli’s philosophies. Cromwell wanted to change England because of his deep moral beliefs, whilst Machiavelli argued that a prince should just ‘show himself’ to be virtuous, in order to keep the people happy.

Other important aspects of the Godly Reformation were liberty of conscience and encouragement of education. For the latter, Machiavelli has nothing to say in The Prince. The former consisted mainly of Cromwell’s mission for religious liberty: he allowed all non-radical Protestant Churches to worship freely and even let Jews enter Britain, showing that he was well ahead of his time. Relative freedom of belief is not something one would expect Machiavelli to give much thought, given his opinion that ‘it is the vulgar mass that constitutes the world’. Realpolitik, often linked to
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Machiavelli, gives no room to religious freedom. Here, again, there is a clear dissimilarity between the two.

V

In relation to Cromwell’s policy at sea, Christopher Hill stated that ‘English use of sea power in the 1650s was even more powerful and systematic’ than in other areas. These words seem to suggest a very Machiavellian naval strategy and organisation. Cromwell finally made peace with the Netherlands in 1654, with the intention of improving England’s strategic position. Was this Machiavellian diplomacy achieving results? The Western Design of 1655, on the other hand, was a monumental failure. However, part of the reason for this was that Cromwell selected discontented commanders. It can be argued that he sent them away deliberately so that they wouldn’t damage his undisputed power back home – another action ‘necessary to the design’. Also important is the fact that there was a ‘victory of commercial over religious considerations in foreign policy’. A major weakness in our comparison is the fact that Cromwell’s decisions were based on religious views, but even Hill admits here that necessity and economic advances were more important in his foreign policy. Machiavelli was a political philosopher well ahead of his time, and perhaps Cromwell was too in aiding the modern process of imperialism in England.

Machiavelli’s ‘fox and lion’ idea is extremely relevant to Cromwell’s foreign policy. Given the power of the English navy and often its aggression, especially regarding the Anglo-Spanish War from 1655, it is fair to say that the English lion under Cromwell was more feared than any other power. In the same way, Cromwell was probably more feared than loved by foreigners, but that is the best way round. As regards being cunning and sly as a fox, Cromwell’s protectorate kept up high levels of intelligence concerning foreign policy. There are records of countless letters on foreign intelligence especially from Thurloe, the protectorate’s spymaster. For example, in a letter in May 1657 he wrote to Cromwell informing him that ‘our letters from the Hague assure us that the difference between France & Holland is unfounded, for that now we are in expectation here, what Holland will do with their great fleet’. Despite a lack of complete consistency in evidence, this small extract alone seems more like a piece of twentieth century intelligence than a letter over 350 years old.
Our comparison’s downfall, yet again, is the religious references included in these letters. Religion suggests a different motive for action than simply out of necessity, which is what Machiavelli stood for. In the aforementioned letter, Thurloe spoke of the ‘work evil goe on’, and in another that something ‘hath pleased God’. This letter shows the impact clearly:

mention one particular, find written from France, which is, that not only protestants of Piedmont, but then those in France are in worse condition than ever; that those in France have almost lost all their privileges, their monopolies are banished and otherwise deprived, their Churches pulled downe and common justice denied them.

This intelligence seems aimed against Roman Catholicism and what it continued to do in Europe, demonstrating the large impact of Cromwell’s religious stance on foreign policy. Cromwell would have felt a duty to protect those who shared his beliefs. There is evidence of Franco-English cooperation, though. Ordered by the king of France, a French envoy spoke at Westminster in 1653: ‘de l’assurer de son amyte, sur la confiance qu’il a d’y trouver une mutuelle correspandance a les bonnes intentions... correspondance entre les doux’. Despite his religious prejudices, Cromwell did not just irrationally condemn all Catholic countries.

VI

It is clear that there are many similarities between Cromwell and Machiavelli in the exercise of power. A crucial part of Cromwell’s career, though, is the impact of his beliefs on his actions. In the end, one cannot simply separate the man’s philosophy from what he does. As we know, a major part of one’s actions are the intentions involved, and Cromwell’s strong relationship with God and belief in predestination cannot be ignored when comparing him to Machiavelli. Nearing the end of The Prince, Machiavelli states that ‘as our free will is not entirely destroyed, I judge that it may be assumed as true that fortune to the extent of one half is the arbiter of our actions, but that she permits us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less, ourselves’. He also says that fortune ‘allows herself to be more easily vanquished by the rash and violent’. Thus, he does seem to believe in a fate of sorts but from a humanist position, and one that can be altered. The Calvinist Cromwell, on the other hand, saw every victory in the Civil Wars and in the protectorate as God’s will on earth.
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Cromwell's rejection of the crown was also due to his relationship with God. This major topic has not yet been mentioned because of the one underlying reason for the decision - God's providence. He thought that, after the execution of Charles I, 'truly the providence of God has laid the title of monarch aside providentially ... he hath blasted the title ... I would not seek to set up that that providence has destroyed and laid in the dust. I would not build Jericho again'. If it was the powerful army that had been the imposing influence on the decision to reject the crown, then our Machiavelli comparison would be the better for it. In the end, though, Cromwell feared God's omnipotence and wouldn't be able to 'vanquish' providence.

Another problem is raised because it is hard to argue that Cromwell was a man purely obsessed with power. Hill believed that Cromwell was a 'disillusioned man who struggled on under the burden of the protectorate, knowing that without him worse would befall'. It is clear that he became disheartened by the regime: on his deathbed Cromwell became depressed thinking of the insufficient number of real changes he'd made to Britain. This doesn't sound like the attitude of an ideal Machiavellian prince holding on to leadership. Cromwell's legacy is often said to be religious non-conformism and, despite his own failures, the guarantee that parliaments would hold more power in the future. These feelings of democracy and liberty feel very different from Machiavelli's prince, but not to the man who had republican feelings. Machiavelli's legacy is a very different one. The philosopher is frequently accredited to the rise of realpolitik and authoritarianism, not those of republicanism and equality. Perhaps this label is unfair, but one thing is for sure - Machiavelli's legacy hasn't included God.

In the end, the exercise of power by Cromwell encompasses many Machiavellian ideas and certainly demonstrates parallel thinking. However, it is in the intentions for these actions that the men's philosophies are so different. Cromwell wanted to obey God's providence and to bring about a 'Godly Reformation'. In The Prince there is no such motive or meaning but only the reality of holding on to power. To conclude, Machiavelli was man's realist, while Cromwell was God's Englishman.
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5 O Sióchru, *God's Executioner* p. 79.
6 *The Prince* p. 9.
7 O‘Sióchru, p. 82.
8 O‘Sióchru, p. 85.
9 O‘Sióchru, p. 97.
10 *The Prince* p. 67.
11 *The Prince* p. 73.
12 *The Prince* p. 85.
13 *The Prince* p. 56.
14 *The Prince* p. 65.
16 Coward, p. 99.
17 Hill, p. 129.
18 *The Prince* p. 73.
19 *The Prince* p. 74.
20 [http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm](http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm) Prof Barry Coward Was the Cromwellian Protectorate a military dictatorship? (National Archives Lecture)
21 *The Prince* p. 73.
22 Coward, p. 57.
23 Coward, p. 57.
24 *The Prince* p. 64.
25 *The Prince* p. 9.
26 *The Prince* p. 65.
28 [http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm](http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm)
29 [http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm](http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm)
30 [http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm](http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm)
31 *The Prince* p. 7.
32 Letter from Oliver Cromwell to William Boteler Oct 11 1655.
33 [http://www.british-civil-wars.co.uk/biog/boteler.htm](http://www.british-civil-wars.co.uk/biog/boteler.htm) 12/09/10
34 *The Prince* p. 65
35 *The Prince* p. 8.
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36 http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm
37 The Prince p. 21.
38 http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm
39 The Prince p. XIII.
40 The Prince p. 87.
41 The Prince p. 69.
42 Hill, p. 151.
43 Hill, p. 158.
44 Letter from John Thurloe to ‘My Lord’, May 21/31 1657.
45 Letter from John Thurloe to ‘My Lord’, May 21/31 1657.
46 Letter from John Thurloe to ‘My Lord’, May 28 1657.
47 Where over 200 protestants were murdered in May 1655, an event having a major effect on Cromwell.
48 Letter from John Thurloe to ‘My Lord’, Aug 17/27.
49 French envoy speech at Westminster April 19 1653.
50 The Prince p. 94.
51 The Prince p. 97.
52 http://origin.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/cromwellian.htm
53 Hill, p. 266

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