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CONSIGLIERE PARLAMENTARE
PROVE SCRITTE - TRACCE ESTRATTE**

PROVE SCRITTE LUNEDÌ 3 NOVEMBRE 2025

INDIRIZZO GIURIDICO: DIRITTO COSTITUZIONALE, ANCHE CON RIFERIMENTO AL DIRITTO E ALLA PROCEDURA PARLAMENTARE

L'inviolabilità delle conversazioni, delle comunicazioni e della corrispondenza del parlamentare.

INDIRIZZO ECONOMICO: ECONOMIA POLITICA E POLITICA ECONOMICA

Le determinanti della crescita economica: perché alcuni Paesi crescono più di altri?

PROVE SCRITTE MARTEDÌ 4 NOVEMBRE 2025

INDIRIZZO GIURIDICO: STORIA D'ITALIA DAL 1848 AI GIORNI NOSTRI, ANCHE CON RIFERIMENTO ALLA STORIA COSTITUZIONALE E DELLE ISTITUZIONI, AL PROCESSO DI INTEGRAZIONE EUROPEA E ALLE RELAZIONI INTERNAZIONALI

La politica estera di Crispi e Giolitti con riferimento ai profili di politica interna.

INDIRIZZO ECONOMICO: DIRITTO COSTITUZIONALE, ANCHE CON RIFERIMENTO AL DIRITTO E ALLA PROCEDURA PARLAMENTARE

Il principio dell'equilibrio di bilancio tra fasi favorevoli e fasi avverse del ciclo economico: profili costituzionali e parlamentari.

PROVE SCRITTE MERCOLEDÌ 5 NOVEMBRE 2025

INDIRIZZO GIURIDICO: DIRITTO CIVILE

Il danno non patrimoniale tra teoria e prassi: linee evolutive.

INDIRIZZO ECONOMICO: STATISTICA METODOLOGICA ED ECONOMICA, ANCHE CON RIFERIMENTO ALL'ECONOMETRIA E ALL'ANALISI E ALLA VALUTAZIONE DELLE POLITICHE PUBBLICHE

Indicatori sintetici per la misurazione e il monitoraggio di fenomeni socio-economici complessi: come possono supportare la programmazione delle politiche pubbliche.

PROVE SCRITTE GIOVEDÌ 6 NOVEMBRE 2025

INDIRIZZO GIURIDICO: DIRITTO AMMINISTRATIVO O, A SCELTA DEL CANDIDATO, DIRITTO DELL'UNIONE EUROPEA

Il principio di proporzionalità nell'esercizio del potere amministrativo e nel controllo del giudice.

La tutela dei diritti fondamentali nell'ordinamento dell'Unione Europea.

INDIRIZZO ECONOMICO: SCIENZA DELLE FINANZE O, A SCELTA DEL CANDIDATO, ECONOMIA MONETARIA ED ECONOMIA INTERNAZIONALE

Implicazioni delle nuove regole di *governance* fiscale europea per la sostenibilità del debito pubblico e per l'autonomia delle politiche nazionali.

Globalizzazione, protezionismo e attualità del ruolo delle istituzioni multilaterali.

PROVA SCRITTA VENERDÌ 7 NOVEMBRE 2025

LINGUA INGLESE

Henry Kissinger, *The Thirty Years' War: What is Legitimacy?* (adapted from *World Order*, 2014)

A century of intermittent wars attended the rise and spread of the Protestant critique of Church supremacy: the Habsburg Empire and the papacy both sought to stamp out the challenge to their authority, and Protestants resisted in defense of their new faith. The period labeled by posterity as the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) brought this turmoil to a climax. With an imperial succession looming and the Catholic King of Bohemia, the Habsburg Ferdinand, emerging as the most plausible candidate, the Protestant Bohemian nobility attempted an act of “regime change,” offering their crown—and its decisive electoral vote—to a Protestant German prince. This outcome would have meant that the Holy Roman Empire ceased to be a Catholic institution.

Imperial forces moved to crush the Bohemian rebellion and then pressed their advantage against Protestantism generally, triggering a war that devastated Central Europe. (The Protestant princes were generally located in the north of Germany, including the then relatively insignificant Prussia; the Catholic heartland was the south of Germany and Austria.) In theory, the Emperor's fellow Catholic sovereigns were obliged to unite in opposition to the new heresies. Yet, faced with a choice between spiritual unity and strategic advantage, many chose the latter. Foremost among them was France. In a period of general upheaval, a country that maintains domestic authority is well positioned to exploit chaos in neighboring states for larger international objectives. A small number of sophisticated and ruthless French ministers saw their opportunity and moved decisively. The Kingdom of France began the process by giving itself a new governance.

In feudal systems, authority was personal; governance reflected the ruler's will but was circumscribed by tradition, limiting the resources available for a country's national or international actions. France's chief minister from 1624 to 1642, Armand-Jean du Plessis, Cardinal de Richelieu, was the first statesman to overcome these limitations. A man of the cloth steeped in court intrigue, Richelieu was well adapted to a period of religious upheaval and crumbling established structures. As the youngest of three sons from a minor noble family, he embarked on a military career but then switched to theology after his brother's unexpected resignation from the bishopric of Luçon, considered a family birthright.

Richelieu completed his religious studies so swiftly that he was below the normal minimum age for a clerical appointment; he resolved this obstacle by traveling to Rome and personally lying to the Pope about his age. His credentials obtained, he launched himself into factional politics at the French royal court, becoming first a close aide to the queen mother, Marie de' Medici, and then a trusted advisor to her chief political rival, her minor son King Louis XIII. Both evinced a strong distrust of Richelieu, but, wracked by internal conflicts with France's Huguenot Protestants, they could not bring themselves to forgo his

political and administrative genius. The young cleric's mediation between these contending royals won him a recommendation to Rome for a cardinal's hat; when given it, he became the highest-ranking member of the King's privy council. Maintaining the role for nearly two decades, the "red eminence" (so called because of his flowing red cardinal's robes) became France's chief minister, the power behind the throne, and the charting genius of a new concept of centralized statecraft and foreign policy based on the balance of power. When Richelieu conducted the policies of his country, Machiavelli's treatises on statesmanship circulated. It is not known whether Richelieu was familiar with these texts on the politics of power, but he surely practiced their essential principles.

Richelieu developed a radical approach to international order. He invented the idea that the state was an abstract and permanent entity existing in its own right. Its requirements were not determined by the ruler's personality, family interests, or the universal demands of religion. Its lodestar was the national interest following calculable principles—what later came to be known as *raison d'état*. Hence, the state should be the basic unit of international relations. Richelieu commandeered the incipient state as an instrument of high policy. He centralized authority in Paris, created so-called intendants or professional stewards to project the government's authority into every district of the kingdom, brought efficiency to the gathering of taxes, and decisively challenged traditional local authorities of the old nobility. Royal power would continue to be exercised by the King as the symbol of the sovereign state and an expression of the national interest.

Richelieu saw the turmoil in Central Europe not as a call to arms to defend the Church, but as a means to check imperial Habsburg preeminence. Though France's King had been styled as the Rex Catholicissimus, or the "Most Catholic King," since the fourteenth century, France moved—at first unobtrusively, then openly—to support the Protestant coalition (of Sweden, Prussia, and the North German princes) on the basis of cold national-interest calculation. To outraged complaints that, as a cardinal, he owed a duty to the universal and eternal Catholic Church—which would imply an alignment against the rebellious Protestant princes of Northern and Central Europe—Richelieu cited his duties as a minister to a temporal, yet vulnerable, political entity. "Salvation might be his personal objective, but as a statesman he was responsible for a political entity that did not have an eternal soul to be redeemed. Man is immortal, his salvation is hereafter," he said, "The state has no immortality, its salvation is now or never."

The fragmentation of Central Europe was perceived by Richelieu as a political and military necessity. The basic threat to France was strategic, not metaphysical or religious: a united Central Europe would be in a position to dominate the rest of the Continent. Hence, it was in France's national interest to prevent the consolidation of Central Europe. France, by supporting a plethora of small states in Central Europe and weakening Austria, achieved its strategic objective. Richelieu's design would endure through vast upheavals. For two and a half centuries—from the emergence of Richelieu in 1624 to Bismarck's proclamation of the German Empire in 1871—the aim of keeping Central Europe (more or less the territory of contemporary Germany, Austria, and northern Italy) divided remained the guiding principle of French foreign policy. For as long as this concept served as the essence of the European

order, France was preeminent on the Continent. When it collapsed, so did France's dominant role.

Three conclusions emerge from Richelieu's career. First, the indispensable element of a successful foreign policy is a long-term strategic concept based on a careful analysis of all relevant factors. Second, the statesman must distill that vision by analyzing and shaping an array of ambiguous, often conflicting pressures into a coherent and purposeful direction. He (or she) must know where this strategy is leading and why. And, third, he must act at the outer edge of the possible, bridging the gap between his society's experiences and its aspirations. Because repetition of the familiar leads to stagnation, no little daring is required.