From Charlottesville to the Nobel: Political Leaders and the Morality of Political Honors*

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Political honors are ubiquitous in public life, whether in the form of public monuments, street names, or national holidays. Yet such honors have received scant attention from normative political theorists. Tackling this gap, I begin by criticizing a desert-based approach to political honors. I then argue that morally appropriate honors are best understood as marking and reinforcing the moral commitments of the collective in whose name they are being awarded. I show how this thesis clarifies and organizes core intuitions regarding a variety of honors, from those commemorating slave-owning founders of the United States to the Nobel Peace Prize.

In February 2017, the city council of Charlottesville, Virginia, voted to remove the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee from a local public park bearing his name. In June 2017, the council voted to change the park's name from Lee Park to Emancipation Park. Two months later, several

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hundred white nationalists and white supremacists protested these council initiatives, by marching with Hitler Youth–style torches through Charlottesville's University of Virginia, chanting "Blood and soil!" "You will not replace us!" and "Jews will not replace us!" The marchers' skirmishes with counterprotesters left one person dead and dozens injured. The *Washington Post* described the early stages of the violence as follows:

> The group marched past the iconic halls of the university founded by Thomas Jefferson, paraded down the middle of the hallowed Lawn, climbed to the rotunda and converged on a statue of Jefferson himself. There they met their enemy. A group of about 30 U-Va. students—students of color and white students—had locked arms around the base of the statue to face down the hundreds of torchbearers. The marchers circled the statue. Some made monkey noises at the black counterprotesters. Then they began chanting, "White lives matter!" Within moments, there was chaos. Shoves. Punches. Both groups sprayed chemical irritants. Many marchers threw their torches toward the statue and the students.[1]

The violence received extensive media attention throughout the United States and abroad. A key part of the media coverage, in turn, concerned President Trump's response to the events in Charlottesville. As the violence erupted, the president laid fault on "many sides." The president's failure to single out white supremacists triggered the ire of numerous critics, to such an extent that he had to backtrack two days later.[2]

At that point, when even certain White House aides considered resigning in protest,[3] it seemed unthinkable that President Trump would himself be touted by any of his critics as a plausible recipient of political honors. But that was precisely what happened less than a year later: in May 2018, former president Jimmy Carter, notwithstanding his many critiques of Trump's character, argued that Trump "ought to be considered" for the Nobel Peace Prize if he manages to achieve a peace treaty between North and South Korea.[4]

My opening assumption in this article is that these political honors—both past and present—are morally fraught. Whether the Nobel Peace Prize committee should bestow any honors on the current American

1. Joe Heim, "Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence and Death," *Washington Post*, August 14, 2017.

2. See, e.g., "Trump's First Response to Charlottesville Was Tepid and Mealy Mouthed. His Second Was Too Late," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2017.

3. See, e.g., Kate Kelly and Maggie Haberman, "Gary Cohn, Trump's Adviser, Said to Have Drafted Resignation Letter after Charlottesville," *New York Times*, August 25, 2017.

4. Maegan Vazquez, "Jimmy Carter Says Trump Could Snag the Nobel Prize," CNN, May 22, 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/22/politics/jimmy-carter-north-korea-donald-trump-nobel-prize/index.html.

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president is a morally loaded question. Similarly, it is a morally loaded question which past honors accorded to Robert E. Lee (if any) should be preserved—or even, for that matter, which past honors accorded to Thomas Jefferson (or to any other slave-owning founder of the United States) should be preserved. Moreover, such questions, as well as the controversies they trigger, obviously extend far beyond American public figures. Should South African society, for example, rethink any of the honors bestowed on Nelson Mandela in light of changing perceptions of his legacy?[5] Should Indian society rethink any of its numerous honors to Mahatma Gandhi, given various accounts of Gandhi's highly problematic attitudes toward women, or toward Africans?[6]

My main aim here is to elaborate a conception of the morality of political honors that can help us tackle such questions. Understood broadly, we can take "political honors" to refer to any form of special symbolic recognition accorded by political entities to individuals, to particular social groups, or to particular social causes. The relevant political entities are many (from municipalities, through regional government bodies, to intergovernmental organizations), as are the forms of honoring. Thus, for example, naming streets, erecting statues, and formally designating a given day of the year as a day celebrating a certain social cause are all core instances of political honors. Yet smaller-scale forms of special symbolic tributes—especially by political actors representing major institutions—can also be seen as political honors. Thus, for instance, an elected president who, in the manner of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, pays any kind of official tribute to individuals who perpetrated torture on behalf of a dictatorship is clearly conferring a profoundly wrongful political honor on such criminals—simply in virtue of the special symbolic power that is inherent in his office.[7]

Once we note the sheer range of political honors, the challenge of offering a moral account of such honors may seem daunting. Add to this the acute scarcity of philosophical work on the subject, and the challenge becomes harder still.[8] So in order to make it more tractable, I shall

5. See, e.g., Norimitsu Onishi and Selam Gebrekidan, "'They Eat Money': How Mandela's Political Heirs Grow Rich off Corruption," *New York Times*, April 16, 2018.

6. See, e.g., Michael Safi, "Statue of 'Racist' Gandhi Removed from University of Ghana," *Guardian*, December 14, 2018. I discuss Gandhi's attitudes toward women below.

7. As congressman, Bolsonaro publicly dedicated his vote to impeach then-president Rousseff—who was tortured by Brazil's military dictatorship—to the head of the military torture center. See, e.g., Jonathan Watts, "Dilma Rousseff Taunt Opens Old Wounds of Dictatorship Era's Torture in Brazil," *Guardian*, April 19, 2016.

8. With one notable exception, discussed at length below, normative theorists (as far as I am aware) have offered no extended account of the morality of political honors. "State speech" is one adjacent topic that has garnered attention, although primarily in the context of debates on freedom of expression and state neutrality; see, e.g., Corey Brettschneider, *When the State Speaks, What Should It Say? How Democracies Can Protect Expression*

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(until the final section) limit the scope of my analysis, in two ways. First, I shall focus on honors accorded by (national) state institutions on behalf of "the people." Second, I shall be especially interested in honors awarded in the name of the people to political leaders—those individuals who are or were at the apex of power.

I will argue that state honors decisions ought to mark and reinforce appropriate moral commitments on the part of the people, as the collective in whose name the state is awarding (or withdrawing) honors. Alongside this general thesis, I shall also defend a more specific thesis: that honors decisions regarding political leaders ought not give any independent weight to assessments of individual desert.

I develop these theses as follows. In Section I, I offer general critiques of Michael Walzer's arguments in favor of a desert-based view of state honors. Most importantly, I contend that desert-based claims to state honors are either false or ultimately grounded in something other than preinstitutional desert—paradigmatically, in institutional entitlement. In Section II, I show that a desert-based view of state honors suffers from special weaknesses when applied to political leaders. These weaknesses derive partly from the serious moral failures that are bound to be present in the record of anyone who has held ultimate political power and that cannot be "cordoned off" from their morally important achievements.

With these lessons in mind, I turn to developing my collectivist alternative, via a parallel structure—first outlining the general contours of this alternative (Sec. III), and then examining its application to state honors awarded to political leaders (Sec. IV). Here I argue that we can better ground various powerful intuitions, once we put aside individual desert, and view state honors as meant solely to mark and reinforce morally appropriate collective commitments. I also argue that these philosophical benefits do not carry costs of their own, because honors cases which initially seem to point in the direction of individual desert can actually be explained on collectivist grounds. In Section V, I try to show

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and Promote Equality (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). A still-closer topic is the normativity of memory; see, e.g., Mihaela Mihai, "When the State Says 'Sorry': State Apologies as Exemplary Political Judgments," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21 (2013): 200–220; Cecile Fabre, *Cosmopolitan Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 10; Zofia Stemplowska, "Remembering War: Fabre on Remembrance," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 36 (2019): 382–90; Johannes Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall? The Significance of Commemoration in the Struggle for Relations of Respect," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 27 (2019): 166–86. But a compelling account of the morality of political honors, while attuned to historical memory, should also inform our thinking about present-oriented honors, where memory of the past as such plays at most a limited role (think again of the Nobel, which is supposed to be based on the laureate's activities in the year immediately preceding its award, or, to take a different sort of example, of the illumination of the Obama White House with "rainbow" colors, in celebration of the Supreme Court's 2015 decision to legalize gay marriage).

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that similar conclusions apply not only to the awarding of state honors but also to the withdrawal of such honors.

The next two sections pursue two further extensions of the argument. In Section VI, I contend that the collectivist approach can handle circumstances featuring intense disagreement as to which collective commitments ought to be adopted by "the people." In Section VII, I return to the case of the Nobel Peace Prize, in order to illustrate how the collectivist framework might advance our thinking, even when the relevant collective whose commitments are ultimately at issue is not "the people" but rather humanity writ large.

I. STATE HONORS AND INDIVIDUAL DESERT: GENERAL DOUBTS

Political philosophy has been remarkably silent on political honors. In fact, as far as I am aware, only one normative political theorist has given anything like sustained attention to the topic.[9] This is Michael Walzer, who has defended a desert-based approach to state honors. We can delve into the substance of our inquiry by examining Walzer's account in some detail.

According to Walzer, it is quite obvious that "the crucial standard for public honor is desert."[10] Part of the reason why this is obvious is that public honor "literally cannot exist as a good unless there are deserving men and women. This is the unique place where desert has to count if there is to be any distribution at all or any value in what gets distributed."[11] Walzer does not deny that instrumental considerations also play a role in state honors, but he clearly believes that this role is secondary and that desert must take center stage. Otherwise, the danger that honors will be abused looms large. Thus, Walzer writes,

> We could, of course, give out public honors for utilitarian reasons, so as to encourage politically or socially useful performances. Such reasons will always play a part in the practice of honoring, but I don't see how they can stand alone. *How will we know whom to honor unless we are committed to attend to personal desert?* Anyone will do, so long as the encouragement turns out to be effective. Indeed, the authorities might well think it best to invent a performance and to "frame" an appropriate performer so as to make sure that they

9. Other disciplines—not just social and intellectual history but also law, English, and art—have given more attention to relevant themes, although here, too, the overwhelming focus has been on historical memory. See, e.g., Naomi Loraux, *The Invention of Athens* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

10. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic, 1983), 259.

11. Ibid, 261.

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> are encouraging exactly what they want to encourage. This possibility . . . suggests that there are good reasons for sticking to the common understanding of individual desert. Otherwise, honor is simply available for tyrannical use. Because I have power, I shall honor so and so. It doesn't matter whom I choose, because no one really deserves to be honored. And it doesn't matter what the occasion is, for I don't recognize any intrinsic (social) connection between honor and some particular set of performances.[12]

"In the absence of a theory of desert," Walzer concludes, any honor will be "not a recognition but an incentive, a goad, one of those offers that turns very easily into a threat."[13]

These claims are vulnerable in at least three ways. Consider, first, Walzer's claim that instrumental considerations cannot "stand alone" when it comes to state honors. Walzer does not distinguish between importantly different ways in which instrumental considerations can "stand alone." Such considerations can "stand alone" insofar as no other considerations are thought to be relevant in any way to the granting of honors. When that is the case, the danger of "tyrannical use" of honors does indeed loom large. But there is also a much more modest sense in which instrumental considerations can "stand alone." Here the thought is that instrumental considerations provide the only positive grounds for awarding certain honors, but that this instrumental reasoning must be constrained by independent moral standards. There is nothing incoherent in saying that the only positive reason we have to award state honors is to "encourage politically or socially useful performances," but that this encouragement cannot be based, for example, on lies, nor can it proceed through any form of intimidation. Simply by insisting on these constraints—by invoking, respectively, the basic moral norms of truth telling and minimal civility—we can avoid the "tyrannical" dangers of which Walzer warns. And we can do so without admitting that desert provides any positive grounds (let alone any significant positive grounds) for awarding state honors.[14]

12. Ibid, 261–62. All italics are mine unless noted otherwise.

13. Ibid, 263.

14. I take the constraint against deceitful representations of honorees to derive from the more general (and fundamental) conviction that it is wrong of the state to systematically deceive its citizens. As John Rawls says in *Political Liberalism* (2nd ed. [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005], 68), in "public political life, nothing need be hidden." See also Seana Shiffrin, *Speech Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), esp. chap. 6. Normally, the state ought not to misrepresent the record of those it honors, simply because it normally ought not to misrepresent any information bearing on any aspect of public policy. Certainly, tragic circumstances may arise where such deception is necessary—war being a paradigmatic example. But, for one thing, even here there is the firm sense that, ex post, the deceivers will owe the deceived an explanation. Furthermore, in

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Second, it is problematic to assert, as Walzer does, that we will not know "whom to honor" unless we focus on personal desert. At least, this assertion is problematic if we interpret it to mean that we ought to design the institution of state honors on the basis of preinstitutional desert judgments.[15] This implication is difficult to accept, since it is simply not true that anyone has a preinstitutional moral claim to be honored in any special way.

To see this point, imagine, for example, a society that refuses to bestow any special political honor on any citizen. In the spirit of the American Constitution, this society may choose, for example, to prohibit its citizens from accepting titles of nobility, and it may even go further by refusing to single out any particular individual in any official way: no individual will have, for instance, streets, schools, or monuments named after them or in any way dedicated to them. In such a society no individual, no matter how exceptional his or her deeds have been, would have an unmet desert claim to any state honor. No individual would be warranted in saying (or thinking), "I deserve to receive special symbolic recognition from the state, to be elevated in some way above my compatriots."

Now, to be sure, if the practice of honoring certain kinds of individual performance has been set up, with an eye toward its instrumental benefits, and if the practice has been operative for a while, then prospective honorees will have grounds for moral complaint, in case they satisfy the relevant performance criteria but do not receive the honor in question. But the moral complaint here will be best understood in terms of institutional entitlement, rather than preinstitutional desert. Therefore, desert as such will not be playing any independent moral role, let alone any "crucial" moral role of the sort that Walzer claims for it.[16]

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such "supreme emergencies," as Walzer calls them elsewhere, both a desert-based constraint and a truth-based constraint will give way to consequentialist arithmetic. Suppose, for example, that during the Second World War someone could have shown that an American or British choice to honor Stalin in some special way would ultimately help to defeat the Nazis more quickly and/or help save numerous lives. If that were true, surely Walzer would agree that the relevant honor ought to be accorded, even if Stalin does not deserve it. And I would similarly agree that, under these circumstances, Stalin ought to be honored, even if the honor involves a deceptive representation of the tyrant as an innocuous "Uncle Joe." For the notion of "supreme emergencies," see Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic, 2000).

15. Admittedly, it is not entirely clear whether Walzer sees himself as committed to a preinstitutional conception of desert. But the coherence of his position depends on such a conception: if one admits that institutions fully specify what it means to "deserve" any state honor, there is no reason to think that desert itself can provide any independent moral guidance. I say more about this in a moment.

16. Recall Rawls's complaint: "For a society to organize itself with the aim of rewarding moral desert as a first principle would be like having the institution of property in order to punish thieves . . . robbery and theft . . . presuppose the institution of property which is established for prior and independent social ends." John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 275.

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Another way to observe the same point is to note that if any state honors were to be abolished for compelling moral reasons, then there will be no individual with an "unmet desert" claim. Take, by way of illustration, honors bestowed by the British monarch. The Queen has knighted many Britons in the past as a symbolic acknowledgment of particular services that they have rendered to the United Kingdom. Therefore, other Britons who have performed the same services could appeal to institutional entitlement—and ultimately, perhaps, to equality and fairness—to explain why they too ought to be awarded a knighthood. But suppose that at some future point the social institution of honors bestowed by the monarch (or even the monarchy itself) were to be abolished, because its social costs came to be seen as outweighing its benefits. If that were to happen, no Briton would be in a position to say, "I deserve a knighthood, and so the abolition of the social practice of conferring knighthoods wrongs me." No individual, in other words, would be able to make a "natural," preinstitutional moral claim to state honors. But, to reiterate, once this kind of claim is taken out of the picture, it is not clear what independent function is left for desert.

With these observations in mind, we can note a final difficulty with Walzer's position. Walzer's claim, that without desert we will not know whom to honor, ignores honors regarding which the attribution of individual desert is fundamentally out of place. Monuments to service dogs killed in wartime,[17] for instance, may very well be morally appropriate for a variety of reasons, but none of these reasons plausibly have to do with what the dogs "deserve": after all, moral desert, as Walzer emphasizes, presupposes moral responsibility,[18] but we do not attribute moral responsibility to dogs. To take a different sort of example, it seems quite hard to explain the moral significance of monuments revolving around the anonymous through reference to individual desert: when there are no particular, reasonably identifiable individuals marked out by a political honor, invocations of individual desert as the grounds for the honor seem fundamentally ill fitting. Finally, even more clearly, the moral significance of monuments commemorating abstract values and their loss cannot be captured through reference to individual desert. Thus, for example, public monuments centered on self-inflicted loss of knowledge and literary inspiration, as well as the acute moral dangers associated with such loss, clearly have considerable moral value (think, e.g., of the monument, in the center of Berlin's Bebelplatz, to books burned by the Nazis). But no compelling explanation of this value would appeal to individual desert considerations.

17. See, e.g., Steven Johnston, *American Dionysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), chap. 3.

18. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 261.

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II. STATE HONORS AND INDIVIDUAL DESERT: THE CASE OF POLITICAL LEADERS

The previous section raised general doubts about a desert-based view of state honors. I now want to further dampen our enthusiasm for this view, more specifically as a guide for thinking about honors centered on political leaders.

My first and most important claim with regard to this category is the following: when it comes to political leaders, we have especially strong reasons not to hinge our moral assessment of official honors on individual desert. The key problem here has to do with what we may call "total desert"—that is, the assessment of whether the morally positive deeds of the relevant leader "outweigh" his or her morally negative deeds, to such an extent as to warrant special symbolic recognition.[19]

The most obvious fact about this assessment is that it is extraordinarily difficult to carry out. This is true even when looking exclusively at the honoree's record as a leader (Is a given prime minister's success as a military leader sufficient to "outweigh" a dismal record with regard to socioeconomic policies? Does a president's contribution to healing religious divides in a society "outweigh" environmentally dangerous policies that he or she pursued?). But the assessment of "total desert" becomes even more complicated when we incorporate other key issues into the equation.

One extremely thorny issue here has to do with the ascent of our most senior politicians. Consider a not uncommon case, where we have ample reason to accuse a politician of criminal misdeeds on the way to the top, going far beyond the customary breaking of promises and speaking half-truths. Suppose, just to give a few painfully real examples, that we have ample reason to accuse a leader of partaking in bribery, or of systematically cooperating with criminals, or of extreme forms of incitement against his opponents. Should we be willing to say that morally important policies enacted by this politician once he climbed to the top vindicate him retroactively and make him deserving of honors "overall"? Or should we say that because this politician obtained office illicitly, he does not "deserve" any significant honors for how he performed once in office? Moreover, should our judgment be sensitive to whether this politician's opponents have been guilty of similar dirty deeds?

19. Ethicists have, of course, long recognized that moral reasons can interact in ways that go beyond simple aggregation—for example, that some such reasons can entirely silence the force of others; see, e.g., Shelly Kagan, "The Additive Fallacy," *Ethics* 99 (1988): 5–31. But the more we emphasize such "silencing," the harder it is for a desert-based view to even get off the ground when it comes to honoring political leaders, given the gravity of their inevitable moral transgressions (about which more in a moment). My reference at this point to a simple "outweighing" model is therefore only meant to be dialectically charitable.

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Another complicated issue has to do with the exact motives underlying the most senior politicians' pursuit of their "signature" public policies. Suppose that we have strong reasons to suspect that an extremely morally valuable policy was pursued by a senior politician primarily in order to divert public and media attention away from credible charges that he and his inner circle have engaged in seriously corrupt behavior.[20] Does this suspicion reduce our reasons to honor this politician for the relevant policy?

Such questions, I believe, are controversial to an extent that dooms any attempt to ground honors to political leaders in desert. Yet, in fact, even the very attempt to assess whether the morally negative deeds of a prospective honoree are "outweighed" by their positive deeds can be seen as morally problematic. This, at the very least, is the case if we follow the many nonconsequentialist philosophers who have argued that harms imposed on some typically cannot be justified by simply appealing to the benefits generated for others. Many contemporary political philosophers follow Rawls in thinking that society's economic institutions, for example, cannot be justified "on the grounds that the hardships of some are offset by a greater good in the aggregate." But if that is true with regard to the politics of economic distribution—if "it is not just that some should have less in order that others may prosper"[21]—then the same seems true for the politics of symbolic honors. It is at the very least worth considering whether, for example, distinct minorities in society can reasonably reject the awarding of honors to leaders who have seriously wronged them through certain policies, notwithstanding many benefits that these policies (or other policies pursued by the same leaders) have secured for other members of society.[22]

To illustrate, consider the case of Abraham Lincoln and Native Americans. In 2013, Sherry Salway Black, a Native American member of President Obama's Advisory Council on Financial Capability for Young Americans and director of the Partnership for Tribal Governance at the National Congress of American Indians, pointed out that although Lincoln may be widely celebrated as the greatest hero of American political history, he is "no hero to Native Americans." Black observed,

> Abraham Lincoln is not seen as much of a hero at all among many American Indian tribes and Native peoples of the United States, as the majority of his policies proved to be detrimental to them. For instance, the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act of 1862

20. To take only one example, Ariel Sharon, Israel's prime minister in the early 2000s, faced such allegations regarding his commitment to the evacuation of Jewish settlements from Gaza. See, e.g., Chris McGreal, "Sharon's Son Charged in Corruption Case," *Guardian*, February 18, 2005.

21. This and the preceding quote come from Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 13.

22. In invoking "reasonable rejection" I am consciously echoing T. M Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

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> helped precipitate the construction of the transcontinental railroad, which led to the significant loss of land and natural resources, as well as the loss of lifestyle and culture, for many tribal people. In addition, rampant corruption in the Indian Office, the precursor of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, continued unabated throughout Lincoln's term and well beyond. In many cases, government-appointed Indian agents outright stole resources that were supposed to go to the tribes. In other cases, the Lincoln administration simply continued to implement discriminatory and damaging policies, like placing Indians on reservations. Beginning in 1863, the Lincoln administration oversaw the removal of the Navajos and the Mescalero Apaches from the New Mexico Territory, forcing the Navajo to march 450 miles to Bosque Redondo—a brutal journey. Eventually, more than 2,000 died before a treaty was signed.[23]

Now, suppose that in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War the US government would have tried to justify to Native Americans the special honors it bestowed on Lincoln by appealing to Lincoln's "overall deservingness."[24] Suppose that the government had said to Native Americans, "The wrongs that you have suffered at the hands of Lincoln's administration are outweighed by Lincoln's remarkable achievements in guiding the Union through the many trials and tribulations of the Civil War." This, it seems to me, is a rationale that Native Americans could reasonably reject. "Symbolic honors portraying Lincoln as a moral hero," they could reasonably say, "illicitly suggest that the wrongs we have suffered are simply unimportant in the grand scheme of things. But from our particular perspective, it is (firstly) not the case that the harms that befell us were somehow compensated for by the benefits that Lincoln brought to the United States as a whole. And secondly, it is morally inappropriate to even attempt to assess whether Lincoln's positive deeds in other areas 'outweigh' his policies toward us to render him 'deserving of honors overall.'"

I have elaborated on this particular example for a simple reason. If reasonable complaints against "total desert" as grounds for honoring political leaders arise even in a case such as Lincoln's—arguably the most consensual icon in American political history—then similar complaints are bound to arise in the case of virtually any other political leader. Virtually any senior political figure who has played a central role in the making of

23. Sherry Salway Black, "Lincoln: No Hero to Native Americans," *Washington Monthly*, February 2013, https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/janfeb-2013/lincoln-no-hero-to-native-americans/. See also Schulz, *Must Rhodes Fall?*, 175. Even a sympathetic interpreter of Lincoln's views of Native Americans could not avoid recognizing that Lincoln took it for granted that Native Americans were "a foreign people that would need to be removed through purchase or conquest." See Christopher Anderson, "Native Americans and the Origin of Abraham Lincoln's Views on Race," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 37 (2016): 11–29, 25.

24. No such attempt was actually made, of course, not least because Native Americans were not recognized as US citizens until 1924.

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public policy is bound to have serious blemishes in his or her moral record—and therefore bound to give rise to reasonable complaints from wronged groups, who could reject a "total desert" argument for the conferral of symbolic honors.

Now, a defender of the desert-based approach may object that the approach is not wedded to a "totalist" view. Why—such a defender might ask—can't we offer "compartmentalized" individual honors? Why can't we honor political leaders for specific public services they have performed, without passing any judgment about any other aspect of their public performance?

The idea of compartmentalized honors does capture something important. It is indeed the case that, all else being equal, we should prefer compartmentalized honors, which explicitly focus on specific public contributions that political leaders have made, over honors that lack such particular detail. We ought to prefer, for example, a commemoration of Jefferson's work on the Declaration of Independence and freedom of thought (as in the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC) over forms of commemoration that leave out such details (think of many streets and towns named after Jefferson). Yet we must be cognizant of the limitations of this strategy, at least when it comes to honors that the state confers on the most politically prominent figures. Whenever the state pronounces judgment on the "desert" of such figures, it is inevitably—even if only implicitly—pronouncing judgment on their "total" desert. The main reason why this is so is the totality of both the state's responsibilities and the responsibilities of the relevant honorees who have wielded power in the name of the state.

This point about the scope of responsibility, in turn, might be easier to see through a contrast with individual honors of a different sort—those bestowed on individuals for their performance within private organizations. Let us consider, then, a private organization in a sphere (normally) removed from the wielding of public political power—sports. To be more specific, consider the statue of Michael Jordan at the entrance to the United Center, where the Chicago Bulls play. The statue—featuring Jordan in a classic pose from his playing days—is explicitly meant to honor the sporting legacy of the Bulls' greatest-ever player. Now, suppose that a Chicago charity supporting the city's poor protested this statue, arguing that the Chicago Bulls committed a moral mistake by erecting it because Jordan did not sufficiently use his fame and riches to support Chicago's less fortunate, and he therefore does not deserve to be honored "overall"—taking his full range of activities into account.[25] To my mind, at least, it seems clear that such a complaint would be unwarranted, precisely because it mischaracterizes both the responsibilities of the Chicago Bulls as an organization and Jordan's role within this organization. The Chicago

25. This example is hypothetical. I am unaware of the actual extent of Jordan's donations to Chicago charities.

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Bulls is an organization with a very specific mandate: to compete in professional basketball. Michael Jordan's responsibility within this organization was also very specific: to play basketball as well as he could. That is why it would have been entirely sensible—indeed, natural—for the Bulls to respond to complaints about Jordan's "total deservingness" by saying, "We take no stance on Jordan's overall moral desert. We are honoring him for his specific services to our specific causes."[26]

Such agnosticism, however, while clearly available to private organizations, is, just as clearly, unavailable to state authorities, especially when it comes to honoring those who have led them. This is because there is no sphere of public concern that falls outside these authorities' mandate and that can be "bracketed" in the assessment of how those who have led them have performed their public tasks. A private organization such as the Chicago Bulls might be able to "pass the buck" and argue that the responsibility for caring for Chicago's poor (for instance) lies with public authorities. But public authorities themselves—at least nation-wide authorities with ultimate jurisdiction—cannot pass the buck in the same way. The buck, to paraphrase Truman, stops precisely with these public entities and with those who have led them. Here any judgment about political leaders' "desert" in their public role is necessarily, even if implicitly, a judgment of their total desert. This judgment cannot avoid taking all aspects of public life into account, because all of these aspects inevitably fall within the scope of the institution's—and the honoree's—direct responsibility.[27]

III. THE COLLECTIVIST ALTERNATIVE: A GENERAL FRAMEWORK

If my arguments up to this point have been cogent, then we have ample reasons to doubt an account of state honors centered on individual desert. With these doubts in mind, I now want to start developing my collectivist

26. This is true even if the Bulls could not have said the same had Jordan, for example, been guilty of grave criminal wrongdoing. Perhaps we could account for this difference by saying that such wrongdoing takes one out of the "moral community" entirely. But I will not pursue this issue here.

27. Is this reasoning vulnerable to counterexamples based on yet other sorts of honors? An associate editor points out that a scientist can receive a Nobel, for example, honoring specific discoveries that he has made, without forcing the Nobel committee to pronounce judgment on other parts of his work. But the more accurate comparison here is with a more specific kind of case—one where a scientist nominated for the Nobel turns out to have committed flagrant ethical violations qua scientist. Even if these violations are entirely independent of his seminal work (e.g., he committed plagiarism with regard to an entirely different project), such violations should rule him out as a plausible recipient of the Nobel. For an acerbic portrayal of just such a scientist, see Ian McEwan's *Solar* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010) (although McEwan's physicist commits his main transgressions, plagiarism being only one among them, after winning the Nobel).

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alternative. This alternative begins from the thought that state honors are ultimately awarded in the name of the sovereign people as a collective.[28] The moral function of state honors, on the collectivist alternative, is to mark and reinforce commitments that the people ought to hold.[29]

Three assumptions accompany this core idea. First, in line with what I said above, the collectivist approach assumes an independent constraint against deceit: collective commitments must not be marked through a manipulative choice of honorees that intentionally misrepresents any facts about them to the public.

Second, the collectivist approach presupposes at least a minimally democratic institutional environment, since without such an environment public officials cannot plausibly claim authorization from the people to bestow honors on the people's behalf. Such authorization, to be sure, will typically be only indirect.[30] But, however indirect it may be, some sort of popular authorization must be at play for the collectivist view to apply to any state honors. If, for example, a despot decides to create and bestow new honors, simply as a personal whim, without involving anyone else in any aspect of this process, then the despot's honors decisions might express his personal commitments, but these decisions could not plausibly be taken to express any collective commitments held by the people.[31]

The third assumption underlying the collectivist view is that the very act of publicly expressing certain collective commitments can—at least sometimes—increase their practical sway in society. When a democratic majority first votes, for example, for a presidential candidate who belongs to a long-marginalized group, this vote publicly expresses a commitment, by that majority, to oppose discrimination of the relevant group. But the

28. I am inclined to view "the sovereign people" as a collective agent, following Christian List and Philip Pettit, *Group Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). But those who prefer to think about collectively sovereign citizens as "sharing agency," without forming a collective agent, should still be able to agree with most of my claims here; see Michael Bratman, *Shared Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

29. I follow Jed Rubenfeld in understanding a "commitment" as "an enduring normative determination made in the past to govern the future"; Jed Rubenfeld, *Freedom and Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 92. I postpone to Sec. VI circumstances in which large portions of "the people" reject the relevant commitments. It should be clear that the main contrast between my view and the desert-based perspective has to do with the purpose of political honors, rather than with the identity of the agent who is ultimately conferring them. So, strictly speaking, my position is best described as "the collective commitment view." I use "the collectivist view" partly for terminological simplicity and partly in order to shift attention away from individual honorees.

30. As when a parliament elected by the people empowers an independent council to make decisions about state honors.

31. For multiple contemporary examples of despotic self-honoring, from Saddam Hussein's self-crowning as "the New Nebuchadnezzar" to Kim Il-sung proclaiming himself the "Light of Human Genius," see Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 80–81.

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same vote also reinforces the practical impact of the very same collective commitment, if nothing else, because this vote actually places a member of the marginalized group in an extremely powerful position. My suggestion is that appropriate state honors have a similar moral function: such honors publicly mark a collective moral commitment and, through this public marking, reinforce the practical impact of the relevant commitment.[32]

Notably absent in the list of assumptions I just laid out is any appeal to individual desert, as a component of the morality of state honors. This absence is an essential rather than an accidental feature of the collectivist approach. This approach contests the tendency—familiar across many countries—to focus state honors on individual desert.

Consider, by way of illustration, a public monument at the site in which a historic peace agreement was signed. According to the collectivist outlook, no automatic moral loss follows if this monument celebrates the peace agreement itself, rather than any of its individual signatories. The former mode of honor, after all, can serve to mark and reinforce a collective commitment to peace at least as well as a monument celebrating individual politicians. Similarly, placing a statue dedicated to racial equality at a site of a former slave market can be, at least in principle, as good a way of marking and reinforcing a collective commitment to racial equality as is a political honor to a prominent individual who was famous for contesting racial discrimination. Such collectivist honors decisions, I wish to reiterate, do not leave any "desert gap." This is because, as I argued in Section I, there is no preinstitutional moral desert to which honors decisions ought to respond.

We can bring this point into sharper relief through yet another example. If a given public space is used to enact a monument to anonymous soldiers who fought in a certain war, or to service dogs who perished in this war, there are no particular individual soldiers who fought in the same war whose desert is consequently neglected. Assuming that the relevant monument marks and reinforces morally appropriate collective commitments—for instance, a collective commitment to remember the many forms of tragic costs and suffering that war brings—there is no "desert remainder" that this monument ignores.

This observation, in turn, leads to a second, related upshot of the collectivist outlook: a rethinking of state honors that have been traditionally understood to revolve precisely around individual desert. The case of honors associated with war can be used to demonstrate this point as well. Consider the Medal of Honor—the United States' highest commendation for combat valor. In March 2014, President Obama awarded the medal to

32. There is an interesting question regarding the relationship of these claims to Austinian "speech acts"—that is, to speech that functions to constitute, rather than merely describe, social reality; see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Here, however, I shall put this question aside.

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twenty-four veterans who had fought in World War II, in Korea, and in Vietnam.[33] The ceremony was distinguished by the fact that nineteen of the recipients—African American, Hispanic, or Jewish—were identified as having been overlooked for the medal as a result of racial or religious discrimination.[34]

Now, given what I said earlier, it should already be clear that, on my view, the moral claim of these overlooked veterans to be honored cannot be fundamentally rooted in (preinstitutional) desert. Rather, it is rooted in the simple fact that the relevant veterans satisfied the criteria associated with the institution of the Medal of Honor, whose justification need not have anything to do with desert as such. These veterans have a moral claim based on simple institutional entitlement to receive the same symbolic recognition that others have received before them when satisfying these criteria.

Moreover, I assume that even if all the relevant veterans—and their families—had already passed away at the time of the award, there would still have been considerable moral value in this ceremony. But then it becomes even harder to explain this value through reference to individual desert. If the deserving individual is not alive to enjoy their due, nor is any descendent alive to "inherit" this due, then how can desert explain why it is so important to confer the honor after so many years? More specifically, how can desert justify spending considerable public resources and more than a decade of staff work—as the armed forces did at the instruction of Congress—to review service files going back as far as World War II?[35]

The answer, I suggest, lies squarely with collective egalitarian commitments. The Medal of Honor ceremony, as President Obama emphasized in his opening remarks, provided another symbolic opportunity for American society to "confront our imperfections and face a sometimes painful past—including the truth that some of these soldiers fought, and died, for a country that did not always see them as equal."[36] The ceremony simultaneously marked this collective egalitarian commitment and reinforced that very commitment by offering collective encouragement to other victims of discrimination to continue to struggle to be included as equal members of society, as well as discouragement to those still supporting exclusionary policies.

33. See "Remarks by the President at the Presentation Ceremony for the Medal of Honor," March 18, 2014, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/18/remarks-president-presentation-ceremony-medal-honor.

34. See Scott Wilson, "Obama to Award Medal of Honor to Two Dozen Veterans, Including 19 Discrimination Victims," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2014.

35. See ibid.

36. "Remarks by the President."

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I recognize that some readers may not be convinced by this particular example. Such readers are likely to be drawn to the thought that, when it comes to honors for extraordinary valor in combat, individual desert judgments really do have to lie front and center. Bearing such likely skeptics in mind, it may be useful to consider in brief an adjacent example, focused more directly on the Second World War. For over seventy years now, the British government has refused to bestow military honors on Bomber Command pilots that parallel the honors bestowed on many other units that took part in the war.[37] To my mind, it is clear that this refusal has been (and will indefinitely be) morally appropriate. But the reason for this moral judgment is not that Bomber Command pilots compared unfavorably with other military units in any measure of individual devotion or contribution to the cause of winning the war. Nor is the reason simply that Bomber Command pilots conducted missions whose moral status has long been controversial (most infamously, the bombing of Dresden). In fact, in my view, the refusal to honor Bomber Command pilots remains morally appropriate even if one grants (arguendo) that in the quintessentially tragic circumstances in which Bomber Command operated, all of its missions were appropriate, as an unfortunately necessary means of war. All of that notwithstanding, the refusal to bestow honors on Bomber Command pilots is still morally warranted because it represents a morally fitting refusal to take collective pride in the missions that this unit executed.

IV. THE COLLECTIVIST ALTERNATIVE: HONORING LEADERS

Equipped with these points, we can now return to honors centered on political leaders, which occupied us at length in Section II. It may seem tempting to think that the collectivist outlook rejects such honors *tout court*. Yet my suggestion is not that such honors necessarily ought to be avoided. Rather, the suggestion is that in cases where there is a firm intuition that such honors are appropriate, this intuition can be explained through reference to collectivist considerations that do not involve individual desert.

Three such considerations are particularly worth highlighting here. First, there is what we may call *collective opposition*, an opposition that is especially evident in honors to iconic political leaders who have been assassinated. Consider Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated at the end of a peace rally in Tel Aviv's central public square in late 1995, by a Jewish fanatic opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The square, as well as Israel's largest highway, military headquarters, and numerous schools and streets, has since been named (or renamed) after

37. See, e.g., "Campaign Medal Call for WWII Bomber Command Veterans," BBC, May 26, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-44255399.

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Rabin, while an annual Rabin Memorial Day is observed throughout the country by law. On the collectivist view, none of these individual honors depended for their moral force on any judgment as to what Rabin (all things considered) "deserved." Rather, these forms of commemoration have all been morally important as a way of marking, and trying to reinforce, precisely the collective commitments that Rabin's assassin (and, to this day, Israel's radical right) firmly rejected—both a commitment to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and a commitment to the peaceful resolution of political disagreement more generally.[38]

Second, the motivational superiority of concrete personal narratives over abstractions can sometimes provide an instrumental consideration in favor of state honors that focus on specific political leaders, even when the ultimate goal of the relevant honor has little to do with these leaders and everything to do with a collective commitment to a morally valuable cause. There are clearly cases where ordinary citizens are more likely to identify with and work for collective causes when these causes are embodied in personal narratives.

By way of illustration, imagine that a given government seeks to promote citizens' attachment to the country's public health system, aiming (among other things) to encourage citizens to pay their fair taxes to ensure that the system is adequately funded. As part of its "health first" campaign, the government initially considers a proposal to erect, next to the country's largest hospitals, a set of evocative statues of a wildly popular past president, who is strongly identified with the very creation of the public health system (perhaps one statue depicts him embracing famous early beneficiaries of the health care system he established; perhaps another statue depicts him battling his own severe illness, which is widely known to have contributed to his determination to improve health care access for the least advantaged). Absent other salient details, the government would be making a mistake if, instead of erecting these proposed monuments, it simply used the same public spaces to place billboards laden with highly technical medical statistics. But if what I said earlier is correct, the relevant mistake would not consist in "failing to honor the deserving president" (since this president, like everyone else, has no moral claim to special symbolic honors); rather, the government's mistake would consist in failing to pursue a much better way to motivate citizens to contribute to the relevant collective cause.

With these points in view, we can turn to a final, related set of cases. These cases concern a particular political language that comes to be associated with specific public figures. Precisely because the presentation of

38. On Rabin's assassination and its aftermath, see Dan Efron, *Killing a King* (New York: Norton, 2016). In Shmuel Nili, *The People's Duty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), chap. 5, I offer a sustained normative discussion of the highly precarious state of these Israeli commitments.

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abstract ideals is often inadequate as a way of motivating ordinary citizens to contribute to public life, there is considerable moral value in concrete language that can actually lead members of mass societies to engage in the collective work necessary for a more just politics. In turn, insofar as such inspirational language comes to shape any meaningful part of public discourse, this is typically (at least in contemporary politics) because of influential political figures with whom this language comes to be identified. These figures introduce a distinct, powerful rhetoric that allows many citizens to connect to collective moral aspirations. When such key aspirations become firmly attached in public consciousness to particular individuals, honors that revolve around these individuals make moral sense on purely collective grounds. These honors may be nominally centered on the relevant individuals, from statues depicting them to plaques quoting them. But it is the collective commitments that these individuals articulated, rather than the individuals themselves, that matter morally.[39]

I should add that the three considerations I just outlined—collective opposition, motivation through personification, and powerful political rhetoric—can sometimes come together. Consider, for example, the aforementioned Lincoln, and more specifically the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, DC—the "monumental core" of the United States.[40] It would be mistaken to ground the moral significance of the Lincoln Memorial in a judgment about Lincoln's individual desert, for the reasons given earlier. A better grounding can start with the fact that Lincoln was assassinated by someone who was clearly keen to preserve the subjugation of African Americans. If erecting a monument to Lincoln at the National Mall was morally important, this was partly because of the collective message that the monument sent to anyone who shared the assassin's political views—that while Lincoln may be dead, the moral ideals that cost him his life are collectively endorsed and will outlive him. Furthermore, there was ample reason to think that a monument focused on Lincoln would be at least as effective as any other form of symbolic commemoration of the Civil War, in motivating future members of the polity to make sacrifices for the sake of ending racial hierarchy in the United States. Finally, the Lincoln Memorial's moral significance can also be traced to Lincoln's extraordinary rhetoric, which is—appropriately—central to the monument. Lincoln's speeches famously weaved together some of the most searing indictments of collective moral failures, from collective self-deception and hypocrisy to collective complicity, as well as some of the

39. Moreover, it would be wrong to pretend that the relevant individuals deserve praise for any particular moral rhetoric when that is clearly false (e.g., when the relevant rhetoric was due to their speechwriters).

40. I borrow this phrase from Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 4.

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most stirring affirmations of democracy's significance as an egalitarian moral ideal.[41] Each of these themes warranted placing Lincoln's most inspirational words at the very heart of the National Mall. But it is the collective moral commitments that these words have marked and reinforced that are the true moral core of the Lincoln Memorial. "Canonizing" Lincoln's words, then, is morally appropriate, even if canonizing Lincoln the man is not.[42]

V. WITHDRAWING HONORS

Let us now turn from the awarding of state honors to their withdrawal. Here it may appear as if the collectivist outlook faces special difficulties. This is because, at least in some cases, the withdrawal of honors accorded in the past seems justified precisely because of the honoree's moral shortcomings. Yet it may seem unclear how the collectivist perspective can explain this moral judgment without falling back on individual desert considerations.

One way to assess this challenge is to consider individual honors given for specific public contributions, whose withdrawal seems to be justified because the honoree holds repugnant personal commitments. Is it not natural to explain cases of this sort by simply saying that the honoree does not, on the whole, deserve the honor?

In my view, repugnant personal commitments will have this kind of impact only if—upon inspection—they turn out to taint collective

41. See, e.g., John Burt, *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

42. A particularly trenchant critic might worry that this reasoning still fails to do justice to a very specific, and very firm, desert intuition: that (notwithstanding his treatment of Native Americans) both Lincoln's determination to pursue morally crucial aims during the Civil War and his remarkable success in pursuing those aims under extraordinarily demanding conditions make him deserving of our admiration. My first response is that this intuition (arguably) derives much of its appeal from the implicit thought that not bestowing special honors on Lincoln would somehow risk downplaying or even ignoring his profound political impact. But if, as I postulated above, there are independent reasons—not themselves rooted in desert—to be concerned with truth in public life, then there can also be independent, non-desert-based reasons to ensure that our historical record (as reflected, e.g., in public education) adequately captures the truth about Lincoln's pivotal political impact. Second, the intuition that Lincoln's Civil War record warrants our admiration bears (primarily if not exclusively) on how each one of us should think of (a key part of) Lincoln's skills, deeds, and character. But there is no simple move from this individual, evaluative question to the prescriptive, collective question whether the political community ought to commemorate Lincoln in any special way. So even if desert considerations really can provide meaningful guidance concerning the former question, this does not show that they provide such guidance regarding the latter, which is our main subject. For a related discussion, see Scanlon's distinction between "the appropriateness of an attitude and the justifiability of a particular mode of expressing it" in T. M. Scanlon, "Giving Desert Its Due," *Philosophical Explorations* 16 (2013): 101–16, 113.

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commitments. One way in which such tainting may come about is if the particular circumstances are such that the collective act of awarding the honor inevitably conveys collective acceptance of the relevant objectionable commitments. Suppose, for example, that a white soldier in the US Army officially learns from his commanders that he will be awarded the Medal of Honor, and then, in a press interview shortly before the award ceremony, he declares, "I am saddened by the fact that I will have to receive the medal alongside members of inferior races." In such circumstances, it seems obvious that there is a powerful moral case for withdrawing the Medal of Honor the soldier was about to receive, simply because awarding him the medal would amount to a collective legitimization of his racism.

Another way in which repugnant personal commitments may taint the collective is if these commitments have a pervasive presence in the honoree's public activity, clearly standing in the background of any specific public contributions. Consider, for instance, the case of John C. Calhoun. Calhoun's ardent commitment to slavery was more than a personal principle relating to his own private conduct and ownership of slaves. It arguably infected—directly or indirectly—virtually every aspect of Calhoun's political activity and political thought. It is hard to suggest any public view or project associated with Calhoun that was not—from Calhoun's own perspective, at least—connected in one way or another to slavery. None of Calhoun's constitutional doctrines, for example, can be detached from his desire to protect the institution of slavery. More generally, it is plausible to assume that Calhoun's stance with regard to any policy, when not directly motivated by the desire to protect slavery, presupposed either the labor of slaves, the perpetual exclusion of slaves from its intended benefits, or both.[43] Calhoun, as Harriett Martineau noted upon his death, "lived and died for the cause of slavery."[44] That is why a collective decision to retain Calhoun's state honors, no matter their direct subject, expresses a collective acceptance—in however reluctant, "excusing" form—of Calhoun's views on slavery. And this collective message, rather than any judgment of individual desert, is the best explanation of why no state honors to Calhoun should be retained.

If these claims are cogent, then the collectivist outlook has no obvious disadvantages in comparison to the desert-based approach when it comes to reflecting on the withdrawal of state honors. But this finding actually understates the point, since a collectivist understanding of withdrawal decisions has two fundamental advantages over a desert-based view.

43. For Calhoun, the country's entire "mission," as one biographer put it, "depended on the permanence of the labor system which a 'mysterious providence' had long ago wished upon the South. Slavery was the key to the success of the American dream." Irving Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun* (New York: Norton, 1993), 227–28.

44. Quoted in ibid., 377.

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First, the collectivist outlook avoids the mistake of attributing to past honorees any moral claim to have "their" honors preserved. Second, the collective outlook can capture differences in the moral reasons that pertain to different political communities that may be considering, even at the same time, the withdrawal of honors accorded to the same individuals.

The case of honors to Mahatma Gandhi can illustrate these advantages. While Gandhi celebrated nonviolent protest as a "feminine" principle, critics also accuse him of "monstrously sexist views," including the belief that "Indian women who were raped lost their value as human beings," and that "fathers could be justified in killing daughters who had been sexually assaulted for the sake of family and community honour."[45] In his own writings, Gandhi described how he had personally cut the hair of women followers who were harassed by men.[46]

Now, suppose that in light of these disturbing facts, feminist activists in India, protesting pervasive sexual violence against women,[47] sought to remove certain monuments to Gandhi, "the father of the nation," as a symbolic indication of the extent to which India ought to reexamine its core values with regard to women's rights. According to the desert-based approach, this feminist demand would have to be assessed with an eye toward what Gandhi the individual deserves. This means, first, that if Gandhi's leadership of India's anticolonial struggle were deemed to "outweigh" his legacy with regard to the status of women, so as to make him deserving of honors "overall," then feminists would be (at least presumptively) wronging Gandhi by removing the relevant monuments commemorating him. Second, the desert-based solution would be unable to explain why other nations with their own monuments to Gandhi would face completely different moral questions with regard to these monuments, even at the very same point in time. If a political honor is supposed to conform to desert as an "objective measure," as Walzer puts it—if the evaluation of desert is supposed to be an "absolute judgment"—then exactly the same desert "verdict" should apply whether the relevant honor is a monument to Gandhi in New Delhi or, say, in London.[48] This perspective would identify no qualitative difference between the moral reasoning in which English society must engage when considering its honors to Gandhi and the moral reasoning in which Indian society must engage.

45. See Michael Connellan, "Women Suffer from Gandhi's Legacy," *Guardian*, January 27, 2010. Connellan obviously admits that Gandhi "isn't singularly to blame for India's deeply problematic attitudes to sex and female sexuality." Yet although Gandhi's views became more moderate in his later years, "the damage was done, and the legacy lingers."

46. See the quotes from Gandhi and the description of the case in Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006), 161–62.

47. See, e.g., Belinda Goldsmith and Meka Beresford, "Poll Ranks India the World's Most Dangerous Country for Women," *Guardian*, June 28, 2018.

48. All of these terms come from Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 259.

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The collectivist approach avoids both of these shortcomings. First, on this approach, to reiterate what I said earlier in this article, no individual, no matter how widely admired, has any moral claim to any special forms of symbolic recognition by political entities. And so it is simply not true that a feminist call to remove any honors to Gandhi would wrong him even presumptively.[49] Second, on the collectivist outlook, what matters is the collective context surrounding a certain individual honor. And because the collective context faced by foreign societies that have chosen to honor Gandhi is fundamentally different from the collective context of Indian society, there are no grounds at all to expect any parity in the moral reasoning that these societies should employ when deciding about the fate of these honors. Whether the English should retain Gandhi's statue erected in London's Parliament Square, for example, is a question that concerns, first and foremost, England's collective commitment to distancing itself from its colonialist past.[50] This question can and should be entirely separate from Gandhi's treatment of women. But when considering the status of monuments to Gandhi within India, there are going to be at least some cases where such separation will be much harder to sustain. The collectivist approach, unlike the individual desert approach, can capture this fundamental difference between the two contexts.

Given the complexity of this case, it might be helpful, before moving on, to offer a few more thoughts about how the collectivist approach might adjudicate moral questions concerning honors centered on Gandhi, at least within India. Even if—as I just said—Gandhi himself would not be wronged by the removal of various honors focused on him, it does not automatically follow that any (let alone many or all) existing such honors ought, all things considered, to be removed. Whether that is true depends on other morally relevant factors. For example, the clearer it is that a given government decision to honor Gandhi is based (partly) on a direct dismissal of the significance of gender equality, the stronger is the moral case for withdrawing the relevant honor. If, for instance, Indian public officials created an "all citizens are equal" campaign but named new public buildings devoted to the campaign after Gandhi, there would be a clear moral

49. Notice, moreover, a broader dilemma here for the desert-based view (which the collectivist alternative avoids). The desert theorist can rely on a conception of desert that somehow fades over time, at the cost of counterintuitive results in cases such as the aforementioned Medal of Honor awarded after decades of discrimination. Or such a theorist can insist that honorees have an enduring claim to special symbolic recognition that is oblivious to the passage of time. But this stance runs afoul of the powerful intuition that as political circumstances change, posing new moral questions for the political community to tackle, even honors that were morally appropriate at a certain point can (and sometimes ought to) give way to others. For remarks along these lines, see, e.g., Peter Singer, "Should We Honor Racists?," *Project Syndicate*, December 11, 2015.

50. See James Dunn, "Gandhi Statue Unveiled in Parliament Square—next to His Old Enemy Churchill," *Independent*, March 14, 2015.

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case for removing this honor, insofar as it would imply that women do not really belong in the category of "all citizens" whose equality is supposed to be advanced. Similarly, imagine that a given Indian government set up a massive new Gandhi monument with the hope that it would be a significant tourist attraction,[51] and then it actively suppressed new disquieting revelations about Gandhi's treatment of women, so as to maintain touristic "buzz" and thus "protect the investment." If this silencing effort were eventually exposed, then any future government aware of the effort would have to view it as morally tainting the monument. It would therefore be morally appropriate for any government in that position to replace the monument with some alternative tourist attraction, even if such replacement would leave government revenue unchanged.

What, finally, of public monuments that are clearly meant to commemorate India's liberation from colonial rule? Should such monuments featuring Gandhi be removed as well? Insofar as there is no automatic reason to view these specific monuments as conveying a collective acceptance of Gandhi's views regarding women, there is also no automatic reason to think that there is a moral duty to remove these monuments in the name of gender equality.[52]

That said, there is a clear moral duty that lies in the vicinity—namely, to enact many more prominent public monuments (and other forms of state honors) featuring female protagonists. This moral duty, once more, is based not on individual desert claims but rather on the weighty and stringent moral need to distance Indian society as a collective from any acceptance of gender hierarchy—whether propagated by Gandhi or by anyone else.

VI. COLLECTIVE DISAGREEMENTS AND DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

I have spent the previous sections developing the collectivist approach to state honors as a contrast to the desert-based view. As part of this effort, I tried to show that the collectivist alternative can handle various desert-based objections. But it is now time to consider an important challenge from a different direction.

51. In late 2018, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi used tourism as a justification for erecting the world's tallest statute, of another Indian freedom fighter, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, at the astonishing cost of nearly half a billion dollars. Critics have portrayed this initiative as a transparent Modi ploy at self-aggrandizement. See, e.g., Sonia Faleiro, "Let Them Eat Statues," *Foreign Policy*, November 30, 2018.

52. It is important not to confuse this claim with the "compartmentalized desert" approach I criticized earlier. Unlike that approach, the argument I am presenting here does not seek to isolate a certain area of activity regarding which an individual "deserves" to be honored. Again, the relevant distinction has to do with the different collective context surrounding different honors, not with what honorees might deserve.

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This challenge concerns disagreements regarding collective commitments. When "we the people" face deep internal disagreements as to which political commitments we ought to adopt, does it still make sense to say that the function of state honors awarded in our name is to mark and reinforce "our" collective commitments?

I believe so. To see why, we need to distinguish between two kinds of collective disagreement and see how the collectivist approach can deal with each of them. First, there are legitimate disagreements about public affairs—the kinds of disagreements that we naturally expect in a democracy. The primary moral function of state honors with regard to such disagreements is not to resolve them; rather, it is to help prevent such disagreements from gravely undermining social cohesion. State honors can help this effort, by marking and reinforcing grounds for "solidarity in the absence of consensus."[53]

Upon reflection, at least, this use of state honors as social glue should not be surprising: it is far from uncommon. When a political community, for example, officially commemorates particular past wrongs suffered by particular social groups, it is effectively saying, "We agree that the memory of those wrongs ought to inform our collective conduct, whatever other issues of public morality we disagree about." Similarly, when a polity celebrates the heritage of antidiscrimination movements, it is effectively saying, "We agree that the particular moral aims for which these movements fought are essential to our collective aspirations, even if there are many moral questions that we contest intensely."

Things look quite different, however, when a large portion of society espouses principles that clearly lie beyond the pale—for example, flatly refusing to recognize the basic moral equality of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities. Under such circumstances—and especially when those resisting repugnant views are being portrayed as "fringe radicals"—political leaders once again come to the fore, not as recipients of honors but rather as individuals with a special power to bestow certain honors. Political leaders ought to use their distinctive position to push along the effort to transform collective commitments, so as to make today's "radicalism" tomorrow's mainstream. And one way to facilitate such transformation, in turn, goes through certain honors that political leaders, simply through the symbolic power inherent in their office, can confer.

A vivid example of effective use of such symbolic power can be found in one of the most famous speeches in modern American history. In March 1965, given his decades of congressional experience, President Lyndon Johnson expected continued southern opposition to federal

53. This phrase is from, e.g., David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 11.

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legislation protecting black voting rights, even after the brutality displayed by southern policemen against civil rights activists in Selma triggered widespread outrage. The president therefore refused to take any legislative success for granted and insisted on a special voting rights address to Congress, which would be nationally televised.[54] In that address, Johnson explicitly compared Selma to Concord, Lexington, and Appomattox and proclaimed that no American economic, scientific, or military accomplishments could make up for a collective failure to deal with the issue of racial equality.[55] More generally, Johnson went far beyond any previous president in repeatedly paying explicit homage to the civil rights movement.[56] And indeed, by far the most dramatic moment in Johnson's speech came when he directly honored the civil rights movement with three deceptively simple words: "we shall overcome."[57]

The tremendous import of this unprecedented presidential tribute to the movement was immediately clear to everyone in attendance. As one of Johnson's biographers wrote, "A moment of stunned silence followed, as the audience absorbed the fact that the President had embraced the anthem of black protest. And then almost the entire chamber rose in unison, applauding, shouting, some stamping their feet. Tears rolled down the cheeks of senators, congressmen, and observers in the gallery, moved by joy, elation, a sense that the victor, for a change, was human decency, the highest standards by which the nation was supposed to live."[58]

Uttered by the president in this extraordinarily symbolic fashion, "we shall overcome" acquired a crucial proleptic function. By using his unique official position to assert that we hold certain commitments, Johnson clearly tried to spur the transformation of collective attitudes, pushing more citizens to actually hold the commitments that would make them

54. "I wanted," Johnson later wrote, "to use every ounce of moral persuasion the presidency held." Quoted in Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson, 1961–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 218.

55. "And should we defeat every enemy, should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation." See, e.g., "President Johnson's Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise," March 15, 1965, http://www.lbjlibrary.org/lyndon-baines-johnson/speeches-films/president-johnsons-special-message-to-the-congress-the-american-promise.

56. "No other American President," the *New York Times* observed after the speech, "had made the issue of equality . . . so frankly a moral cause to himself and to all Americans. . . . No other American President had so completely identified himself with the cause." See Tom Wicker, "Johnson Urges Congress at Joint Session to Pass Law Insuring Negro Vote—Nation Hears Him," *New York Times*, March 15, 1965 (subtitled "President, in TV Talk, Pledges That 'We Shall Overcome'").

57. "Their cause must be our cause too . . . it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome." "President Johnson's Special Message to the Congress."

58. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 219.

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part of the relevant "we."[59] And, of course, by using the pedestal of the presidency to assert that "we shall overcome," Johnson, putting the full weight of the federal government behind the civil rights movement, made it more likely that the movement would indeed make meaningful progress against bitter opposition to black enfranchisement.[60]

VII. FROM DOMESTIC TO INTERNATIONAL HONORS: THE CASE OF THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

In the beginning of this article, I noted that in order to make moral questions pertaining to political honors more tractable, it makes sense to focus initially on state honors, awarded (ultimately) in the name of the sovereign people. My aim in this section is to illustrate how the collectivist view might nonetheless inform our thinking about other kinds of honors—and in particular, about international honors. I therefore want to return to the most famous international honor, which featured prominently in the introduction—the Nobel Peace Prize.

One obvious challenge in applying the collectivist approach to international honors such as the Nobel is that there is no collective agent, comparable to the sovereign people, to whom international honors can ultimately be traced. Unlike sovereign peoples, the group "humanity" does not, at present, enjoy the kinds of shared authority structures and decision procedures that would qualify it as an agent. And so any parallel between the "people's" collective commitments and "humanity's" collective commitments must be drawn with considerable caution and taken in qualified form.

59. Among other milestones, that transformation would receive symbolic expression in the form of six million signatories to the petition that (in 1983) helped in finally convincing Congress to enact (by a Reagan-veto-proof margin) a national holiday honoring Martin Luther King—"the largest petition in favor of an issue in US history"; see William Jones, "Working-Class Hero," *Nation*, January 30, 2006. To be sure, it is not easy to prove a clear causal link between Johnson's symbolic action and such popular attitudes. But to the extent that the link is plausible, we can see this case as an instance of genuine democratic leadership—recruiting "citizens as genuine partners in shared political activity." This phrase comes from Eric Beerbohm's insightful defense of a "commitment theory" of democratic leadership, to which this section is indebted; see Eric Beerbohm, "Is Democratic Leadership Possible?," *American Political Science Review* 109 (2015): 639–52, 639.

60. I use "make meaningful progress" rather than "overcome" because the latter phrase has a definitive connotation, which is sadly contradicted by resurgent right-wing efforts to resist the success of the Voting Rights Act—yet another proof of the continuous need to reinforce even morally basic collective commitments (through multiple means, of which symbolic honors are of course only one). See, e.g., Zoltan Hajnal, Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson, "Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes," *Journal of Politics* 79 (2017): 363–79.

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Yet, these qualifications notwithstanding, the proleptic function of political honors, flagged above, shows why the parallel between "the people's commitments" and "humanity's commitments" may still be relevant. By proceeding as if the group agent "humanity" already exists and is equipped with the decision procedures that allow it to bestow political honors, we may be better positioned to contribute—however modestly and symbolically—to a (distant) future in which the group "humanity" becomes a locus of identity that is significant enough to motivate different sovereign peoples to join together to actually form this global agent.

In principle, one could imagine a variety of symbolic international honors that might contribute to this cosmopolitan hope. Yet the unique standing of the Nobel nonetheless represents a natural channel for such hope. The standing is evident in the fact that the Nobel Peace Prize is the only prize that has led multiple dictatorships to launch formal diplomatic protests, censor foreign news broadcasts, or arrest individuals who celebrate it.[61] Moreover, the Nobel is the world's most recognizable award, providing the closest existing approximation of what one might call humanity's "moral barometer." There is no other prize to whose acceptance speeches social psychologists, for example, turn when they seek indications of "humanity's most cherished moral values."[62] In this sense, though it is formally a Swedish-Norwegian institution, the Nobel Peace Prize is a deeply global institution.[63]

The contribution of the collectivist approach to our thinking about the Nobel might be best seen through a contrast with two individualist views. On one such view, a morally warranted Peace Prize is one given for practical achievements that the laureate has already made. This view, however, has difficulty accounting for the various Peace Prizes awarded to dissidents struggling against dictatorship, from Carl Von Ossietzky (1935) and Andrei Sakharov (1975) to Liu Xiaobo (2010). The intuition is firm that the decisions to award the prize to such dissidents were warranted. Yet none of them had actually secured concrete achievements prior to the award.

A second individualist understanding of the Nobel Peace Prize also ties the prize to individual achievements, but it is future rather than past

61. These are some of the things that, e.g., Nazi Germany (in 1936), Soviet Russia (in 1975), the Burmese military junta (in 1991), and the Chinese dictatorship (in 2010) all did when dissidents were awarded a Nobel Peace Prize—aside from preventing the dissidents from traveling to Oslo to accept the prize.

62. Richard Kinnier et al., "Values Most Extolled in Nobel Peace Prize Speeches," *Journal of Psychology* 141 (2007): 581–87.

63. Another reason for focusing on the Nobel Peace Prize is the fact that, especially since the 1960s, the Nobel Peace Prize committee has consciously expanded its reach beyond a narrow focus on peace. This expansion was based on the understanding that, as former committee chairman Egil Aarvik had put it, "Nobel's will . . . was made in another time" (quoted in Erwin Abrams, *The Nobel Peace Prize* [Boston: Hall, 1988], 175).

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oriented. The idea here is that the recipient's past indicates that he or she will likely be able to put the prestige of the prize to good use in advancing valuable political causes going forward. Thus, awarding them the Peace Prize is akin in many respects to awarding a grant: providing tools for future success on the basis of a promising record.[64] This future-oriented approach, however, also encounters serious problems. It cannot really explain the moral significance of any Peace Prize bestowed on powerful figures, who had little need for any Nobel "grant." Nor can this approach justify morally appealing prizes awarded to dissidents who were clearly not in a position to make use of the "grant" of the prize.[65]

A collectivist approach to the Nobel Peace Prize, however, might do better here by way of a unified solution. On this approach, the function of the prize is to mark and reinforce morally appropriate collective commitments, this time with humanity as a whole serving as the pertinent collective. Which are the relevant commitments? Following the Nobel Peace Prize committee's increasing emphasis on human rights activism, we can answer by pointing to the value of basic political equality, articulated in seminal human rights documents. More specifically, in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we can assume that, whatever else basic political equality rules out, it clearly rules out legal systems that engage in systematic discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or religion, as well as manifestly undemocratic forms of political power.[66] Once we view the Nobel Peace Prize through the prism of these egalitarian commitments, the point of the prize changes. It has much less to do with the laureates' practical accomplishments (whether preceding the prize or facilitated by it) and more to do with the values embodied in the act of choosing a particular laureate.

Thinking about Peace Prize laureates in this way has at least three important advantages. First, this approach allows us to make sense of the firm conviction that certain prize decisions were, or would be, fundamentally

64. This rationale was defended, among others, by the then secretary of the Nobel Peace Prize committee, Geir Lundestad, in "The Meaning of the Nobel Peace Prize," in *The Nobel Peace Prize and the Laureates*, ed. Karl Holl and Anne Kjelling (Frankfurt: Lang, 1994), 7–10, 9.

65. When the Nobel Peace Prize committee had announced Ossietzky's Peace Prize, for example, he was already known to be subject to the most severe deprivations in the concentration camp where he was being held by the Nazis, and where he eventually died in 1938. Yet the fact that Ossietzky was—predictably—able to do little with the prize does not undermine the moral force of the decision to award him the Nobel. For background, see Irwin Abrams, "The Multinational Campaign for Carl Von Ossietzky," http://www.irwinabrams.com/articles/ossietzky.html.

66. See, e.g., arts. 2, 6–12, and 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html.

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misguided. Henry Kissinger's 1973 much-maligned prize is a case in point. Kissinger, regardless of his potential or actual achievements, clearly embodied the wrong values: his infamous celebration of amoral realpolitik made him an utterly implausible candidate for embodying the moral commitments with which the Nobel Peace Prize ought to be associated.[67] The collectivist framework easily captures this thought.

A very similar point, I believe, obtains with regard to President Carter's suggestion, noted at the outset, that President Trump "ought to be considered" for the Nobel Peace Prize if he secures peace between the Koreas. The current American president has come to embody disregard for basic norms of liberal democracy. Trump's frequent praise for authoritarians and unrestrained attacks on freedom of speech and the free press already ought to suffice to disqualify him from any serious consideration for the Nobel. When one adds to these fundamental transgressions the president's constant mockery of basic norms of racial, religious, and gender equality, the moral plausibility of him receiving the Nobel Peace Prize evaporates, even if he does in fact secure peace in Korea. This moral judgment is once again captured by the collectivist framework.

A second important advantage of thinking about Peace Prize decisions through the prism of the collectivist approach is that doing so allows us to make sense of our convictions regarding the dissidents' prizes. Once we orient our understanding of the Peace Prize around the message embodied in the choice of certain laureates, rather than around political outcomes they secure, we can much more easily ground the conviction that even political dissidents with marginal political achievements were appropriate recipients.

Finally, the collectivist approach, in contrast to the "future grant" view of the Nobel, can explain why even individuals who have no real need of any Nobel "grant" can still be eminently appropriate Peace Prize laureates. The answer is clear once we conceive of the prize as ultimately focused on humanity's commitments, rather than on the laureate's achievements.

Consider, as a closing example, Nelson Mandela's 1993 Peace Prize. According to the collectivist framework, Mandela's prize was warranted not because of the specific (and at the time still uncertain) policy outcome of a peaceful end to apartheid—the committee's official rationale for awarding him the prize; rather, Mandela's Peace Prize was warranted as a way of marking and reinforcing a global commitment to the rejection of racial hierarchy. The very act of awarding the Peace Prize to Mandela represented, as Mandela said upon accepting it, the ideal of "*all humanity*"

67. One is reminded here of Tom Lehrer's remark that Kissinger's Peace Prize made "political satire obsolete." See Tom Lehrer, interview by Stephen Thompson, May 24, 2000, http://www.avclub.com/articles/tom-lehrer,13660/.

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sharing in "one of the outstanding human victories of our century . . . *a common victory* over racism, apartheid and white minority rule."[68]

VIII. IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

I have spent this article arguing in favor of a collectivist approach to the morality of political honors. Rather than rehearse the specific claims I have made here, however, I want to end with a brief observation on normative political theory's neglect of political honors, which provided a key part of the motivation for my discussion.

This neglect, I believe, is likely due to the thought that symbolic recognition reflected in political honors is secondary to substantive political action. This concern is sensible. Yet just as we should be careful not to overestimate the significance of political symbols, we should also not underestimate them.[69] It is certainly true that if a black man in Washington, DC, for example, is condemned to sleeping in the streets partly owing to racial discrimination, the fact that he can try to sleep under a public monument to Martin Luther King is unlikely to comfort him. But this does not mean that it is a matter of moral indifference whether King's monument is removed, or replaced with a monument to Jefferson Davis. Similarly, the removal, throughout the former Soviet Union, of statues honoring figures responsible for the Gulag system will not by itself mend families still scarred by its history of torture and other violations of basic rights. But this does not mean that it is a matter of moral indifference whether these statues are to be reinstalled.[70] And what is true for these monuments is true, more generally, for the numerous political honors that are present in social life—from school and street names to national rituals. Such political symbols form much of the (often transparent) background of our everyday activities. And while it would be seriously misguided to think that "fixing" this symbolic background can by itself fix political realities, it would also be misguided to continue to neglect this background.

68. See Nelson Mandela, "Nobel Lecture," December 10, 1993, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1993/mandela-lecture_en.html?print=1. Whether including de Klerk in the prize diluted or reinforced this collective victory is a question I put aside.

69. As emphasized, e.g., in Schulz, *Must Rhodes Fall?*, 167.

70. See, e.g., Sarah Rainsford, "Russian Communists Look to Reinstate 'Iron Felix' Statue," *BBC News*, July 19, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-33549850/russian-communists-look-to-reinstate-iron-felix-statue.

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