It is often said that politics is an amoral realm of power and interest in which moral judgment is irrelevant. In this book, by contrast, John Kane argues that people’s positive moral judgments of political actors and institutions provide leaders with an important resource, which he christens “moral capital.” Negative judgments cause a loss of moral capital which jeopardizes legitimacy and political survival. Studies of several historical and contemporary leaders – Lincoln, de Gaulle, Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi – illustrate the significance of moral capital for political legitimation, mobilizing support, and the creation of strategic opportunities. In the book’s final section, Kane applies his arguments to the American presidency from Kennedy to Clinton. He argues that a moral crisis has afflicted the nation at its mythical heart and has been refracted through and enacted within its central institutions, eroding the moral capital of government and people and undermining the nation’s morale.

John Kane is the Head of the School of Politics and Public Policy at Griffith University, Queensland. He has published articles in such journals as *Political Theory*, *NOMOS* and *Telos*, and is also co-editor of *Rethinking Australian Citizenship* (2000).
As the twenty-first century begins, major new political challenges have arisen at the same time as some of the most enduring dilemmas of political association remain unresolved. The collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War reflect a victory for democratic and liberal values, yet in many of the Western countries that nurtured those values there are severe problems of urban decay, class and racial conflict, and failing political legitimacy. Enduring global injustice and inequality seem compounded by environmental problems, disease, the oppression of women, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, and the relentless growth of the world’s population. In such circumstances, the need for creative thinking about the fundamentals of human political association is manifest. This new series in contemporary political theory is needed to foster such systematic normative reflection.

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John Kane
For Kay
A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount T’ai or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends on the way he uses it.

Su-ma Ch’ien, Han shu
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This book had its genesis in an undergraduate class I convened as Olmsted Visiting Professor to the Department of Political Science, Yale University in 1996–97. The Olmsted were benefactors who had funded an Ethics, Politics and Economics program in the department as a means of addressing their concern about an apparent decline in the moral sensibility of national leaders. Their hope was that such a program would stimulate serious reflection on ethics and politics among undergraduates who might one day play significant roles on the political stage. Given the task of devising a suitable course, I thought long and hard about how I might approach the topic in a way that took the moral factor in political life seriously while avoiding naivete or fruitless moralizing.

The idea of moral capital was my solution to the problem, and I proposed it to the class as a concept to be collectively explored rather than as an indicator of knowledge to be mastered. All leapt on it with an energy and intelligence that quite overwhelmed me, and in the process provided me with one of the best teaching experiences of my life. It is to the twenty-two members of that class of ’96, then, that I owe my first debt of acknowledgment. It was their boundless enthusiasm, more than anything else, that caused me to believe there might be sufficient interest in the topic to make an extended study worthwhile. It would be invidious to name individual names, but I hope that all will remember with as much pleasure as myself the semester in which we first tested the concept of moral capital on a range of political leaders past and present.

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