Introduction

During the historic first visit by a US head of state to the new South Africa in March 1998, President Bill Clinton listened to President Nelson Mandela boldly defend an idiosyncratic foreign policy that countenanced friendly relations with Cuba, Libya and Iran, states regarded by the Americans as "pariahs." The US president chuckled indulgently and blandly agreed to disagree on such matters. Clinton, according to *Washington Post* correspondent John Harris, was less interested in foreign policy differences than in basking in the "aura of moral authority that had made Mandela so revered." Clinton went so far as to draw lessons from the Mandela myth for his own critics back home. The South African leader's odyssey from political prisoner to president was, he said, a lesson "in how fundamental goodness and courage and largeness of spirit can prevail over power lust, division and obsessive smallness in politics." The clear reference to the sexual scandals in which Clinton was then currently and apparently endlessly embroiled was, remarkably, not followed up by journalists, who declined to raise a subject that they had determinedly pursued for the previous two months. "It was as if," commented Harris, "the luminescent presence of Mandela . . . had briefly chased away the usual appetite for controversy."[1]

It was a curious meeting. On one side stood a president whose exalted moral status lent his country a profile that its size and struggling, marginal economy scarcely warranted; on the other, a president whose morality was something of an international joke but whose position as the executive head of the United States of America commanded necessary respect. If Mandela's moral standing enabled him to relate (as he insisted) on equal terms with Clinton, and to assert a genuine independence, it was nevertheless clearly gratifying to the South African to be so cordially embraced by the chief of the most powerful nation on earth. And if Clinton, for his part, enjoyed the prestige that preponderant power bestowed, he was nevertheless glad to bask for a while in the cleansing light

[1] *Washington Post*, 28 March 1998, p. A01.

of Mandela's moral halo (and on many a later occasion he would rekindle this glow by referring to the valuable life-lessons he had learned from Mandela). In short, Mandela, despite his saintly status, was not, and could not be, indifferent to the facts of power, while Clinton, for all his power, could not be indifferent to public perceptions of his moral infirmity.

The connections and divergences between temporal power and moral standing so oddly figured in this meeting mark the central theme of this book. The idea it introduces and examines is that moral reputation inevitably represents a *resource* for political agents and institutions, one that in combination with other familiar political resources enables political processes, supports political contestants and creates political opportunities. Because politics aims always at political ends, everything about political agents and institutions – including their moral reputation – is inevitably tied to the question of political effectiveness. Virtue, though a fine thing in itself, must in the political arena be weighed for its specifically political value. This political value I explore using the concept of moral capital.

To gain an intuitive, preliminary grasp of the idea, consider the case of George Washington. During the American War for Independence Washington acquired a towering reputation as leader of the victorious revolutionary army. A man of notable dignity and integrity, he proved himself capable, brave, enduring and occasionally daring in the dangerous fight for political liberty. At the war's end he confirmed his devotion to republican values by expressly turning his back on personal ambition and the temptations of tyranny. Exhorted by some to make himself king, he instead voluntarily disbanded his army (then the only cohesive power in the land) and retired from public life with a vow never to return. A few years later, however, Washington re-entered politics to assist in the founding of the United States, first presiding over the constitutional convention and then agreeing to become the new nation's first president. He had not, however, relinquished his solemn public promise without an agonizing inner struggle. Even more than most public figures of his age, Washington was fastidiously obsessed with "reputation," a thing valued for itself and not for the uses to which it might be put. Thus when called by anxious delegates in 1787 to lend his desperately needed moral authority to the convention and its products, he hesitated, fearful that going back on his word might fatally undermine his cherished honor and reputation. A confidante, observing his personal Gethsemane, helped him to his final decision by warning of a deeper danger – that of being thought a man too concerned with reputation.[2]

[2] See Richard Brookhiser, "A Man on Horseback," *Atlantic Monthly* (January 1996), pp. 51–64.

This story captures much of the essence of what I intend by use of the term moral capital. Washington showed that a high reputation, because it inclines others toward trust, respect, allegiance, loyalty, or perhaps only forebearance, can be politically invested to achieve things otherwise difficult or even impossible. It is significant, too, that Washington's capital was invested to establish first the moral legitimacy of a nation and later of its primary political office, the presidency. It is part of the argument of this book that there exists a dialectical relationship between the moral capital of political institutions and that of individuals. In the case of established regimes that are widely regarded as legitimate, incumbent individuals generally gain more moral capital from the offices they occupy than they bring to them, but the process always works, in principle, both ways. Loss or gain of personal moral capital will have an effect on the institutional moral capital of an office, and *vice versa*.

Washington was mistaken about the effects of breaking his vow, for the public could see it was broken for honorable purposes. His fears were not, however, unreasonable. He ended his second presidential term a deeply disheartened man, having found that a shining reputation is exceedingly hard to maintain in the strenuously partisan, bitterly competitive, end-driven world of politics. If his foundational actions showed the potential force of moral capital as a political resource, his later experiences revealed its vulnerability.

All politicians, even the most cynical, become intensely aware during their careers of both the value *and* vulnerability of moral capital. Vulnerability is a consequence of the fact that moral capital exists only through people's moral judgments and appraisals and is thus dependent on the perceptions available to them. But perceptions may always be wrong or mistaken and judgments therefore unsound. Furthermore, politicians have a vested interest in manipulating public perceptions to their own advantage, which is why, in the modern age, they seek the help of expert political advisers. They know that to survive the political game they must strive constantly to maintain or enhance their stock of moral capital, to reinstate it when it suffers damage, and to undermine their opponents' supply of it whenever they can. Yet the inevitable gamesmanship involved in this has, in the long run, the contrary effect of undermining the credibility of politicians generally, and arousing public cynicism about political processes. This is the central irony in the search for moral capital that raises a question about whether it can actually exist in politics at all, at least long enough to have any real effects. Part of the aim of this book is to show that – and how – it can and does.

Moral criteria form only a single set among the many that people employ in appraisals that take and retake the measure of human beings and institutions whose actions and attitudes impinge on their lives,

whether directly or distantly. But it is with the distinctively moral appraisals that give rise to moral capital in politics that this book is concerned. I must point out at the start, however, the kind of questions about morality and politics that such a focus excludes. The book will not, for example, be analyzing and judging particular political decisions to determine their moral justifiability or lack thereof. Whether the wartime allies did enough to assist victims of the Nazi holocaust; whether America should have dropped the atomic bomb on Japan; whether the United Nations did too little to protect Tutsis from genocide in Rwanda – such questions, important as they are, will not be addressed except insofar as they may have some bearing on a question of moral capital. Moral capital is less concerned with the ethical dimensions of decision-making than (to repeat) with the part played in political contests by people's moral perceptions of political actors, causes, institutions and organizations.

PART I

Moral capital

The term ''capital'' has been extended beyond its traditional economic usages on several occasions in recent years. The idea of human capital, for instance, has been advanced to encompass those natural and acquired skills and abilities individuals may utilize in pursuing a career, or that firms and nations may employ *en masse* for their profit or development.[1] Because of the central role of knowledge and information in modern economies, some writers point to the importance of intellectual capital as the key to the future success of businesses.[2] Then there is the well-known concept of social capital postulated by Robert Putnam to capture theoretically the social networks of trust that individuals form and which allegedly serve quite broad and beneficial functions.[3] Social capital has been argued, for instance, to be an important determinant of a person's ability to progress upward in a job and to obtain higher rates of pay,[4] and been used to hypothesize significant effects that the ''social glue'' characteristic of particular societies (the relative tightness and robustness of their social institutions) may have on their political and economic health.[5]

[1] R. Burt, ''The Social Structure of Competition'' in N. Nohria and R. G. Eccles (eds.), *Networks and Organizations: Structure, Form and Action* (Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 1992), pp. 57–91. See also G. Becker, *Human Capital* (New York, National Bureau of Economic Research, 1975); and Rita Asplund (ed.), *Human Capital Formation in an Economic Perspective* (Helsinki, Physica-Verlag, 1994).

[2] See Thomas A. Stewart, *Intellectual Capital: The New Wealth of Organizations* (London, Nicholas Brealey, 1997).

[3] Robert D. Putnam (with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

[4] See Burt, ''Social Structure,'' p. 58; P. V. Marsden and N. Lin (eds.), *Social Structure and Network Analysis* (Beverly Hills, Sage, 1982); and M. Higgins and N. Nohria, ''The Side-kick Effect: Mentoring Relationships and the Development of Social Capital,'' *Working Papers* (Boston, The School, 1994).

[5] John F. Helliwell, ''Economic Growth and Social Capital in Asia,'' *Working Papers* (Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research, 1996). See also John F. Helliwell and Robert D. Putnam, ''Social Capital and Economic Growth in Italy,'' *Eastern Economic Journal* 21(3) (1995), pp. 295–307; Robert D. Putnam, ''Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America,'' 1995 Ithiel de Sola Pool Lecture to the American Political Science Association, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28(4) (December 1995), pp. 664–683; Robert E. Rauch, ''Trade and Search: Social

Whatever the merits or otherwise of these postulates, the idea is generally the same: things valuable or pleasurable in themselves – people, knowledge, skills, social relationships – can also be resources that enable the achievement of other social, political or economic ends. The presumption is that people, corporations and societies that develop these forms of capital possess investable resources capable of providing tangible returns. Implicit here is the venerable distinction between wealth and capital. Wealth may be loved for itself, used for consumption or display or hoarded against future calamity, but only when it is invested in some productive enterprise for the sake of profitable returns does it become capital. Mere money, then, is not necessarily financial capital, nor skill necessarily human capital, nor knowledge necessarily intellectual capital, nor a network of social relationships necessarily social capital. They become so only when mobilized for the sake of tangible, exterior returns. Capital, in other words, is wealth in action. The same holds for moral capital. Moral capital is moral prestige – whether of an individual, an organization or a cause – in useful service.

Any capital is inevitably put at hazard in its mobilization, and moral capital as much as any other requires both continuous skill and luck in its maintenance and deployment. This is an important, sometimes ignored, consideration for political resources generally. When people speak of power politics they usually think of big bullies pushing little bullies around, outcomes being determined in the end by the sheer size and strength of the protagonists. Political power, on this view, boils down to the extent (observable, in principle) of the organizational, institutional, economic, electoral or military resources at one's command. And it is no doubt natural enough that we should expect power measured quantitatively to be a decisive factor: as a wise gambler once observed, the race may not always be to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that is the safe way to bet. Nevertheless, giant and apparently invulnerable corporations are occasionally brought low by the marketing success of tiny rivals; superpowers sometimes suffer humiliating defeat at the hands of rag-tag colonial armies in small and undeveloped, but canny and tenacious, nations. The strategic use of available resources is often more important than their relative abundance.[6]

As with all resources, so with moral capital. It is not enough to be good, or morally irreproachable, or filled with good intentions, or highly and widely respected. It is necessary to have the political ability to turn

Capital, Sogo Shosha, and Spillovers," *Working Papers* (Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research, 1996).

[6] See Alan Stam, *Win, Lose or Draw: Domestic Politics and the Crucible of War* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996).

moral capital to effective use, and to deploy it in strategic conjunction with those other resources at one's disposal that make up one's total stock of political capital. It may be well or foolishly, fortunately or unfortunately invested, it may bring large returns to oneself or one's enterprise or it may be wasted and dissipated – and in politics there are always opponents with a vested interest in doing everything they can to ensure dissipation. If the utility of moral capital explains why politicians scrabble after it with often unseemly enthusiasm and why they desperately try to staunch its hemorrhaging after a moral slip, the fractiousness and contentiousness of politics explain why, as a resource, it is frequently marked by a peculiar vulnerability. The existence of moral capital depends, I have said, on perceptions, but perceptions can be variously manipulated as the spin doctors who have an interest in manipulating them know well enough. Certainly, it is of no great political benefit to politicians if their finer qualities and actions are concealed from the public gaze, and it may be a benign function of the public relations professional to bring these convincingly to light. Sometimes, though, the appearances in which the professionals deal are only tenuously connected, if at all, to realities.

Nor is it just that leaders and their helpers are liable to deceive us, but that we sometimes lend ourselves too readily to deceit. However hard-headed we pride ourselves on being, it is doubtful that any of our assessments of others (or of ourselves) is ever without a tinge of irrational bias. With respect to our political leaders, we are always susceptible to irrationality of judgment, like ever-hopeful lovers liable to be unduly swayed by an attractive face or flattering attention or seductive words of promise. Generally speaking, we want to find them good and estimable, to find them worthy receptacles of our trust, hopes and aspirations, and, if possible, suitable objects of emotional identification. Our modern cynicism often betrays this wish in the negative guise of one too often disappointed. Yet our disappointment serves to remind us of the force and importance of the moral element in political life, just as do the actions of the spin doctors who strive to manipulate it.

Whatever our cynicism, whatever our gullibility, and whatever the real worth of our moral judgments we continue to make them (one is tempted to say we cannot help but make them), and our judgments continue to have political effects. When they are positive they inspire trust, belief and allegiance that may in turn produce willing acquiescence, obedience, loyalty, support, action, even sacrifice. In other words, they give rise to moral capital, an enabling force in politics for both individual politicians and political institutions. When such judgments become consistently negative, on the other hand, moral capital declines and individuals and

organizations face severe problems of legitimacy, perhaps of political survival.

The question is, what *kind* of moral judgment counts in the formation of moral capital in politics? The answer to this is closely bound up with the nature of the political field itself, and how it is possible, despite the difficulties of the terrain, for moral capital to gain any traction there at all. This forms the subject matter of Chapter 1, where I argue that moral end-values are integral to any politics, and that in the perceived relationship of political agents and institutions to these we find the basis for attributions of moral capital. Chapter 2 will then discuss the significance of moral capital for political leaders and their constituencies, and also examine the relationship between personal and institutional moral capital. In closing this chapter, I will outline some things that may be learned from case studies of moral capital in action, thus setting the scene for the remainder of the book.

1 Moral capital and politics

> Friendships that are acquired by a price and not by greatness and nobility of spirit are bought but not owned, and at the proper moment they cannot be spent. Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Politics is about power, and power has attractions and uses independent of its necessity for achieving legitimate social goals. It is not surprising, then, that one often encounters in the political realm acts of selfish ambition, venality, mendacity and betrayal. What is more, even the best-intentioned players are often forced from the straight and true path by the cruel exigencies of politics, so that ordinary standards of decent conduct are oft more honored in the breach than the observance. Yet the Machiavellian game must be seen to be about something larger than gain, ambition and survival. Political agents and institutions must be seen to serve and to stand for *something* apart from themselves, to achieve *something* beyond merely private ends. They must, in other words, establish a moral grounding. This they do by avowing their service to some set of fundamental values, principles and goals that find a resonant response in significant numbers of people. When such people judge the agent or institution to be both faithful and effective in serving those values and goals, they are likely to bestow some quantum of respect and approval that is of great political benefit to the receiver. This quantum is the agent's moral capital.

Since moral capital thus depends on people's specifically moral appraisals and judgments about political agents and institutions, it must be distinguished from mere popularity. Popularity may, indeed, be based in part on moral appraisals but is very often based on quite other sources of attraction. It is possible to be popular while lacking moral capital, or to possess moral capital while not being particularly popular. Moreover popularity, it is usually assumed, may be bought, while moral capital may not. Like popularity, however, moral capital has genuine political effects. It is a resource that can be employed for legitimating some persons, positions and offices and for delegitimating others, for mobilizing support