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The Demise of Leadership: Positivity and Negativity Biases in Evaluations of Dead Leaders

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Abstract

Five studies compared evaluations of living versus dead leaders. In Studies 1 and 2, participants displayed a *death positivity bias*, forming more favorable impressions of dead leaders than of equivalent living leaders. Study 3 demonstrated the death positivity bias in evaluations of real-world leaders in politics, sports, and entertainment. Study 4 showed that death polarizes morality judgments: Moral leaders were posthumously judged as more moral while immoral leaders were posthumously judged as more immoral. Study 5 demonstrated the *St. Augustine effect*: Dead leaders who had changed from sinners to saints were judged more favorably than living leaders who had undergone the same change. The implications of these findings for theory and research on leadership legacy and organizational impression management are discussed.

Key words: death positivity bias; leadership; legacy; terror management; extremitization bias; St. Augustine effect

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Tis after death that we measure men.

-- James Barron Hope

All men are wont to praise him who is no more.

-- Thucydides

In June of 2004, the death of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan triggered an outpouring of praise and admiration for the man from former political allies and adversaries alike (Von Drehle, 2004). These tributes and adulations were reported in all media outlets and caught many liberals by surprise (Troy, 2005). One study of media coverage of Reagan found that it was significantly more positive after his death than during his tenure as president (Lichter, 2004). Media coverage about Reagan during his presidency was more negative than that of virtually all his predecessors, and yet the same media posthumously showered him with many accolades. Why did Reagan attract more widespread respect in death than he was able to attract in life?

In this article, we propose that our evaluative judgments about the dead differ from those of the living. Specifically, we make the claim that people show a *death positivity bias*, forming more favorable appraisals of dead leaders than of equivalent living leaders. We suggest that Reagan's posthumous media coverage was more positive because his death elicited the strong universal norm to avoid speaking ill of the dead. We do not claim that death always triggers positive evaluations; a sizeable number of anti-Reagan websites also sprang up immediately after his death (e.g., Jackson, 2004), suggesting that circumstances exist under which posthumous evaluative judgments may take either a positive or negative direction. Before reviewing these circumstances, we

first review the ways in which past philosophers and social scientists have approached the manner in which people form judgments of the dead.

Philosophical Perspectives on Death Positivity

Not surprisingly, the notion of death has long been the subject of great philosophical attention. From our review of the literature, at least two recurring themes emerge from philosophers' musings on the specific topic of how people view the dead. The first theme, which is not the central focus of the present article, addresses the tendency of people's impressions of the dead to be less malleable than their impressions of the living. "One does not know more facts about a man because he is dead," observed British author John Berger (1967), "but what one already knows, hardens, and becomes more definite." In other words, Berger suggests that once people die our posthumous impressions of them become locked in place or frozen in time.

Eylon and Allison (2005) recently conducted three studies to investigate whether people display this frozen in time effect in their judgments of a dead leader. In the first study, participants formed an impression of a person who performed either a moral or an immoral action and then either died or remained alive. Participants were later given new inconsistent information about the person's morality; if the person had first been moral, they were told he later performed an immoral act, but if the person had first been immoral, they were told he later performed a moral act. The results revealed that perceivers' original impressions of the person were significantly less likely to change in response to the inconsistent information when the target was believed to be dead than when he was believed to be alive. In the second study, Eylon and Allison replicated the effect in perceptions of real-world movie critics Siskel and Ebert. Participants' judgments of Siskel (whom they knew was deceased) changed less in response to new information than did their judgments about Ebert (whom they knew was still living). A

third study replicated this effect in people's perceptions of political leaders. Overall, the data strongly support Berger's (1967) suggestion that death tends to seal our impressions of dead leaders.

The second theme that emerges from philosophers' treatment of death addresses the tendency of people to view the dead more favorably than the living. Sages, authors, and poets have long been keenly aware of this evaluational bias. For example, the great playwright Sophocles warned his audiences "not to insult the dead." Athenian statesman and legislator Solon echoed this sentiment when he implored citizens to "speak no ill of the dead." The eminent Greek historian Thucydides went beyond this simple admonition by observing that "all men are wont to praise him who is no more." Centuries later, Francis Bacon noted that "death openeth the gate to good fame, and extinguisheth envy." In more modern times, American poet John Whittier noted that "death softens all resentments, and the consciousness of a common inheritance of frailty and weakness modifies the severity of judgment."

From these and other philosophical contributions in the field of thanatology (see Choron, 1963; Hocking, 1957; Morgan, 1997), it has generally been observed that death engenders a heightened evaluational response from perceivers. Philosophers and noted scholars throughout history have also implied that the death positivity bias transcends perceivers' personal familiarity with the deceased. That is, there is a strong suggestion that we show the death positivity bias in our judgments of those we have known intimately in life as well as in our judgments of those who were complete strangers to us in life (e.g., Benton, 1978). Overall, the majority of philosophical writings on the topic of how people judge the dead have focused on the observation that we form more favorable responses to the dead, independent of the deceased's physical, emotional, or temporal connection to us. Consistent with these ideas are the abundant historical examples of physical, behavioral, and evaluative manifestations of human beings' reverence for the dead (Allison & Eylon, 2004). Although these inflated posthumous

evaluations are most noticeable in scope for deceased leaders, these positivity biases are present in death rituals and evaluative judgments of deceased lay-people as well (Allison & Eylon, 2004).

We suspect that the practice of exalting the dead may satisfy a natural and fundamental human need. Anthropological evidence supports this idea; investigations of early hominid settlements reveal that ritualistic practices of burial and ceremony surrounding death are a unique and hallmark feature of being human (Metcalf, 1991). Moreover, sociologists and psychologists have found that an important and natural part of the bereavement process includes a period of "idealization" of the dead, during which people form idealized images of the deceased person by focusing almost exclusively on the person's positive qualities (Attig, 1996; Benton, 1978). Idealization serves an important healing role by reminding survivors that the dead represent positive role models whose actions and values are to be revered and emulated. Overall, our review of the literature on death suggests that elevating the status of the dead, particularly dead leaders, appears to be a fundamental human tendency that has transcended time, culture, and geography (Allison & Eylon, 2004).

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Death Positivity Bias

We propose that there are two theoretical frameworks that provide a conceptual grounding for the death positivity bias in evaluations of leaders. The first theoretical framework focuses on recent work in psychology on terror management mechanisms; the second centers on social psychological theory on the processes underlying human judgments of morality and competence. We address each of these theoretical positions in turn.

Terror Management Theory

For the past two decades, terror management theory (TMT) has addressed the role of death or mortality salience in shaping human judgments (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Mikulincer

& Florian, 2002; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). TMT proposes that human beings are unique among animals in their awareness of the inevitability of their own deaths. To assuage the anxiety that results from this awareness, people are motivated to develop cultural worldviews and become meaningful participants in those worldviews. At its core TMT argues that the cultural worldviews provide meaningful interpretation to experiences, most noticeably when mortality is made salient. The theory proposes that when a person thinks about death, including subtle cues associated with death, the person experiences terror and thus engages in strategies aimed at reducing the terror.

One prominent strategy to assuage the terror of death is to engage in thoughts and behaviors that validate one's cultural worldview. Validating one's worldview mitigates the terror because the experience is viewed within the context of a framework that provides enduring structure and meaning. As Greenberg et al. (1997) note, "Cultural worldviews ameliorate anxiety by imbuing the universe with order and meaning, by providing standards of value that are derived from that meaningful conception of reality, *and by promising protection and death transcendence* to those who meet those standards of value" (italics added, p. 65). In short, a person's cultural worldview allows behaviors deemed valuable to take on higher order meaning, providing the person with a means for achieving symbolic immortality (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002).

From this perspective, we can now see why Eylon and Allison (2004) found that people's deaths "seal" our impressions of them. The finality of their existence and the impossibility of encountering new behavioral information suggest that we may close the door on our impressions of them. Moreover, if the dead upheld our cultural worldview, then it may be in our best interests to freeze our impression of them to reinforce the desired worldview or to set an example for others. As noted earlier, our idealization of the dead may help us cope with the pain associated with the loss, and terror management

mechanisms such as death transcendence and symbolic immortality offer explanations as to why such idealization may occur.

In general, this tendency to support one's cultural worldview in the face of mortality leads to a more favorable evaluation and attraction to those who uphold the values and norms of the worldview, and harsher judgments and less attraction to those who violate the worldview. The attitudes we form regarding others who uphold or violate our cultural worldviews are sufficiently robust to carry over to evaluative behaviors. The strength and impact of these behaviors can be clearly seen in the seminal series of studies by Ronsenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Lyon (1989) in which they showed that evoking thoughts of mortality led judges (as well as non-experts) to recommend harsh punishment for a prostitute and large reward recommendations for those who upheld cultural values.

Although terror management researchers have not yet investigated positivity biases in evaluations of dead targets, it seems reasonable that if a deceased target were a meaningful contributor to society – and hence affirmed the perceiver's worldview – then the perceiver may be motivated to form heightened posthumous appraisals of the deceased target. Following the tenets of TMT, when perceivers honor the dead, particularly dead leaders whose actions in life affirmed and validated the perceiver's cultural worldview, these enhanced evaluations may mitigate perceivers' own terror of death that arises from the sheer exposure to the thought of death. Honoring dead leaders who upheld the perceiver's worldview allows the perceiver to evoke the sense of security provided by adhering to the cherished principles of the cultural worldview.

From all the above considerations, the death positivity bias in posthumous impressions may be a phenomenon that is consistent with current theory and research on terror management mechanisms. Based on TMT's voluminous and consistent body of literature, we propose that perceivers will show a tendency to form more positive impressions of a dead leader than of an equivalent living leader. Moreover, this tendency

will be more pronounced when forming an evaluative judgment about leader whose actions validate or uphold the perceiver's cultural worldview.

Theoretical Work on Morality and Competence Judgments

Two common evaluations that people make about leaders are evaluations of the leader's level of competence and morality. Interestingly, people judge competence and morality in very different ways, and social psychologists have recently begun to uncover these differences. For example, although individuals tend to weigh positive information about competence more heavily than negative information about competence, they tend to weigh negative information about integrity more heavily than positive information about integrity (Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997; Martijn, Spears, Van der Plight, & Jakobs, 1992). Reeder and Brewer (1979) explained this asymmetry by proposing a schematic model of dispositional attribution, which suggests that attributions of competence and integrity are influenced by hierarchically restrictive schemas.

Hierarchically restrictive schemas assume that being at one end of a continuum for a given attribute will restrict one's behavior, whereas being at the other end of that continuum will not. For example, we intuitively believe that highly competent people are capable of exhibiting performance at many levels, depending on their motivation and task demands, whereas those with low competence can only perform at levels that are commensurate with or lower than their level of competence. For this reason, a single successful performance is judged to be a sign of competence, given the belief that those who are incompetent would not have been able to achieve that performance level. In contrast, a single poor performance is typically discounted as a sign of incompetence, given that those who are competent or incompetent can each perform poorly in certain situations (e.g., when there is inadequate motivation or opportunity to perform well).

In a similar vein, people intuitively believe that those with high integrity will refrain from dishonest behaviors in any situation, whereas those with low integrity may exhibit either dishonest or honest behaviors depending on their incentives and

opportunities. Thus, a single honest behavior is typically discounted as a sign of honesty, given that those who are honest or dishonest can each behave honestly in certain situations (e.g., when there are benefits for behaving honestly). However, a single dishonest behavior is considered to offer a reliable sign of low integrity, given the belief that only people of low integrity will behave in dishonest ways. For example, kicking a long field goal makes us a strong kicker in the eyes of others even if we miss a kick afterward. In contrast, robbing a bank makes us a robber in the eyes of other even if we refrain from robbing in the next few days, months, or even years.

Reeder and Brewer's theory of hierarchical restrictive schemas have additional implications for evaluations of dead leaders. For example, the theory suggests that people may view moral and immoral actions as reflecting volitional choice, whereas they may view competence as less volitional. Individuals cannot control their level of intelligence but they can freely choose whether to behave morally (see Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). To the extent that morality is viewed as more volitional, people may make more extreme evaluations of moral (or immoral) actions compared to competent (or incompetent) actions. Thus, we propose that the death positivity bias may stem from a fundamental human need to validate one's worldview (terror management theory) and that there may be limits to the effect, depending on whether the leader is being judged on the dimension of competence or morality. Because competence is less volitional, people may show a death positive bias in evaluations of leaders regardless of the leader's standing on competence whereas people's evaluations of leaders may be much more sensitive to the leader's standing on the dimension of morality.

Death Positivity and Leadership

What role do these posthumous impression phenomena play in our understanding of leadership? Leadership has long been known to shape the values and emotions of those who follow (Dasborough, 2006; Gardner, 1995). To the extent that leaders embody

the values of their groups or organizations, their deaths may inspire followers to create permanent positive remembrances of their leaders. These remembrances can take the form of statues, shrines, buildings, city and road names, epic stories, and visages on currency and stamps. These actions commonly taken to honor dead leaders are consistent with the tenets of terror management theory and its emphasis on the impact of mortality salience in validating one's cultural worldview (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). A great leader affirms the values of the group (Forsyth, 2005), and when the leader passes away, followers may be motivated to ensure that these affirmations endure by elevating the status of the leader beyond that which existed when he or she was alive (Allison & Eylon, 2004).

If there is indeed a death positivity bias in evaluations of leaders, such a finding would have several implications for promoting better and more responsible leadership. First, the death positivity bias would underscore the importance of leaders proactively engaging in activities aimed at validating the values of the group or organization. In short, a leader's moral conduct may be a more central determinant of perceived leadership effectiveness than other, more traditional, criteria for evaluating leadership (see Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987). A second implication of the death positivity bias is that enhanced posthumous evaluations of a leader may influence employee attitudes and behavior in the workplace long after the leader has passed away. Leadership has long been known to shape the values and performance of those who follow (Gardner, 1995), and it could be that moral leadership posthumously influences followers in significant ways. A third implication of the death positivity bias is that it suggests strategies for leaders to craft constructive posthumous legacies for themselves and for their organizations (Allison, Eylon, & Markus, 2004). Although firms and individuals work hard at building reputations, it is clear that the focus needs to be on long-term meaningful issues (e.g., morality), rather than on short-term profitability or pizzazz (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990).

Present Research

A voluminous literature in social psychology speaks to the process of how we come to understand others (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Gilbert, 1998, Hamilton & Sherman, 1996), and yet the entire focus of this work has been on our understanding of living persons. To the best of our knowledge, there has been virtually no direct empirical research on the question of how judgments or impressions of the dead are formed, and more specifically, how do they compare to those of the living. There exists an implicit assumption that our ways of knowing the dead are essentially the same as our ways of knowing the living. But as we have argued, our impressions of the dead may be qualitatively very different from our impressions of the living. Moreover, we also argue that any positivity bias that emerges in evaluations of dead leaders has important implications for leadership research that examines the long-term impact of leaders on organizations.

The purpose of the present research was to determine whether people do, in fact, show a death positivity bias in their social judgments of leaders. Do judgments about dead leaders differ from those formed about living leaders? In this article, we report the results of five studies that examined whether our participants showed a positivity bias in their judgments about a dead leader (Studies 1 and 2), whether the bias emerges in judgments of real world leaders (Study 3), and whether there exist leader characteristics that suppress, reverse, or accentuate the bias (Studies 4 and 5). Our first goal, in Study 1, was to determine whether people demonstrate the death positivity bias in a simple laboratory setting.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Design. The participants were 53 students from a university in the southeastern United States who participated in partial fulfillment of a course

requirement. All participants were randomly assigned to either the living target condition or the dead target condition.

Procedure. Participants were asked to read a short vignette describing a business leader. After being given as much time as needed to read the vignettes, participants were then given a questionnaire that measured their evaluations and impressions of him. After completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Overview of vignette. A one-page vignette described a leader named Erik Sullivan. Participants read that Sullivan established a company in Nevada in 1937 and turned it into a highly profitable organization. The vignette contained various details of Sullivan's life and his role in promoting the company's growth. Participants also read whether Sullivan was still living or deceased. One half the participants read that Sullivan was alive today, whereas the other half read that Sullivan died in 1990. Moreover, participants were informed of Sullivan's living or dead status either at the beginning of the vignette or at its conclusion[1].

Dependent measures. After reading the vignette, participants answered a number of questions intended to assess their evaluative impressions of Sullivan. One set of questions measured participants' overall liking of Sullivan. These items included three questions asking participants how favorably they viewed him, how much they liked him, and how much they would want him to be their friend. A second set of questions was designed to measure participant's beliefs about Sullivan's level of competency. These items included how favorably they rated him as a leader, how favorably they rated him as a businessman, how effective he was in his job, and how much they believed he was competent. A third set of questions measured the degree to which participants believed that Sullivan was inspirational. These items included how proud they would be to work for him, how proud they believed his employees were to work for him, how inspired they were by him, and how inspired they believed his employees were to work for him.

Participants responded to each of these questions by circling a number on a 1 to 6 rating scale anchored at the low end by "not at all" and at the high end by "extremely."

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. Of the 53 participants, 52 correctly recalled that Sullivan was either living or dead. The data from the one participant who failed this check were discarded.

Impressions of target person. Participants' responses to the three questions measuring overall liking were highly correlated (Cronbach's alpha = .86) and thus were averaged to produce a single measure of liking. Moreover, participants' responses to the four questions measuring Sullivan's competency were also correlated (alpha = .79), as were their responses to the four questions measuring level of inspiration (alpha = .82). Overall average estimates were also computed for these two measures.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on the liking measure[2], with the target's alive or dead status as the only factor, revealed a statistically significant effect, $F(1, 50) = 7.19, p < .01$. Participants formed more favorable impressions of Sullivan when they believed he was dead ($M = 4.10, SD = 1.20$) than when they believed he was alive ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.01$). Moreover, participants judged Sullivan to be significantly more competent when it was known that he was dead ($M = 4.24, SD = 1.12$) than when it was known that he was alive ($M = 3.36, SD = 0.97$), $F(1, 50) = 4.34, p < .05$. Finally, they were more inspired by the dead Sullivan ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.20$) than by the living Sullivan ($M = 3.00, SD = 0.89$), $F(1, 50) = 3.99, p < .05$.

Overall, our results show promising empirical support for the death positivity bias. Using a between-subjects design, we found that participants made more favorable ratings of a dead leader than of an equivalent living leader. Clearly, a more stringent test of the bias would require using a within-subjects design. In our next study, we asked participants to rate a female leader, first when they believed that she was living and then again at a later time after they were informed that she had recently passed away. Would

participants evaluate her more favorably than they did earlier simply as a result of being informed of her death?

Study 2

Method

Participants. The participants were 66 students from a university in the southeastern United States who participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement.

Procedure. Participants were asked to read a short vignette describing a target person named Sharon Wilkerson, a 55 year-old bank president currently living in Atlanta, Georgia. The vignette described Wilkerson's job activities and hobbies. After being given as much time as needed to read the vignette, participants exchanged it for a questionnaire that measured their impressions of Wilkerson.

Participants were then given a ten-minute filler task, consisting of anagram puzzles and basic tests of geographic knowledge. Then participants were given a second, shorter vignette in which they were told that the information they had read earlier was a description of what Wilkerson was like one year ago. One half the participants were told that "nothing much has changed in Wilkerson's life" in the year that had gone by, whereas the other half were told Wilkerson had died in the past year. The cause of death was not specified.

Participants were then given a second questionnaire, containing the same questions as in the first. After completing this second questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Dependent measures. After reading each vignette, participants answered the same questions as in Experiment 1. To reduce the likelihood that participants would remember their responses from the first questionnaire to the second, we asked participants to respond to each question by placing a slash along a 6 inch line (later converted to a 1 to 6 scale) anchored at the low end by "not at all" and at the high end by "extremely."

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. Of the 66 participants, 64 correctly recalled in the second questionnaire that Wilkerson was still living or had died after the one-year period had passed. Data from these participants who failed this check were discarded.

Impressions of target person. Participants' responses to the three questions measuring overall liking were highly correlated in both the first questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha = .82) and the second (alpha = .78), and thus single aggregate liking scores were computed. Moreover, participants' responses to the four questions measuring Wilkerson's competency were also correlated within each questionnaire (alpha = .77 and .84), as were their responses to the questions measuring their level of inspiration within each questionnaire (alpha = .85 and .88). Thus, aggregate competency and inspiration measures associated with each questionnaire were computed.

Insert Table 1 about here

A 2 (dead, alive) x 2 (time 1, time 2) repeated measures ANOVA of participants' liking ratings revealed a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 62) = 4.35, p < .05$. Table 1 displays the means associated with this effect. When participants believed that Wilkerson was alive after a year had passed, they reported liking her about the same after the passage of that time ($M = 4.16$) as they did before the passage of that time ($M = 4.09$), $F < 1$. But when participants believed that Wilkerson had died during the year that had passed, their liking ratings after being informed of her death were significantly higher ($M = 4.79$) than were their liking ratings made prior to knowledge of her death ($M = 4.12$), $F(1, 62) = 3.99, p < .05$. Another way to view these data is to make comparisons within time period. At time 1, when Wilkerson was alive, there was no difference in inferences ($M = 4.09$ vs. $M = 4.16, F < 1$). But at time 2, participants who believed Wilkerson was

dead made significantly more favorable judgments ($M = 4.79$) than did participants who believed she was alive ($M = 4.16$), $F(1, 62) = 3.99$, $p < .05$.

A similar pattern was found in participants' ratings of Wilkerson's competency and inspiring qualities. The interaction effects were $F(1, 62) = 5.35$, $p < .05$ and $F(1, 62) = 13.28$, $p < .01$, respectively. After a year had passed with Wilkerson still alive, participants' competency ratings did not change over time (Ms= 4.00 and 3.94, respectively), nor did their inspiration ratings (Ms = 4.09 and 4.01, respectively), both F's < 1. However, when Wilkerson was believed to have died, participants' judgments of competency increased [$M = 4.09$ versus 5.15, $F(1, 62) = 5.68$, $p < .05$] as did their judgments of her inspiring qualities [$M = 4.06$ versus 4.97, $F(1, 62) = 4.44$, $p < .05$].

In summary, Study 2's use of a within-subjects design represented a sterner test of the death positivity bias, and our data suggest that the bias passed this test. Our participants' evaluations of the leader changed over time, becoming significantly higher once they were informed that the leader had died. We were next interested in again testing the robustness of the bias: Does the death positivity bias emerge in judgments of real world leaders?

Study 3

Method

In this study we chose eight prominent celebrities who died in the 1990s and who appeared on the cover of *People* magazine more times than any other celebrities: Sonny Bono, Jerry Garcia, Florence Griffith Joyner, John F. Kennedy, Jr., Richard Nixon, Princess Diana, Tupac Shakir, and Frank Sinatra. The careers of these individuals spanned the areas of politics, entertainment, and athletics. We chose articles written about these individuals using the Factiva database whose search engine includes the world's most widely circulated English-language magazines. Articles written four years prior to, and four years after, each individual's death yielded a total of 697 articles, representing 46 different periodicals.

Each of these articles was content-analyzed by two independent coders who were blind to the hypotheses of the experimenters. For each article, the coders were instructed to code whether the article was positive or negative in its portrayal of the individual. Coders were asked to code each article as either positive or negative on two different dimensions: morality and competence. If an article contained both positive and negative information, coders counted the number of positive and negative statements and an article was coded as "positive" if it contained more positive than negative statements and as "negative" if it contained more negative than positive statements.

Results and Discussion

Our two coders achieved a high inter-rater reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .83) in their judgments of the positivity or negativity of the 697 articles. Table 2 displays the number of positive and negative articles written about the eight public figures both four years before and four years after they died. We analyzed these data using a 2 (time: before death, after death) x 2 (dimension: morality, competence) x 2 (valence: positive, negative) repeated measures ANOVA. The analysis yielded a significant time by valence interaction, $F(1, 7) = 5.71, p < .05$. This effect shows that, overall, significantly more positive articles were written about the public figures after they died ($M = 308$) than before they died ($M = 168$), $F(1, 7) = 7.95, p < .03$. There was also a non-significant tendency to write fewer negative articles after their deaths ($M = 99$) than before ($M = 122$), $F < 1$. We also conducted a chi-square analysis on these totals and it also showed an overall bias toward greater positivity in media coverage after death than before death, X^2 (1, N=697) = 24.44, $p < .01$. There were no significant effects associated with the dimension factor (morality versus competence).

Insert Table 2 about here

It is clear from Table 2 that there is tendency toward a positivity bias in media coverage of nearly all of the individuals. However, it is also clear that although we obtained an overall significant effect, the effect was stronger for some individuals than for others. The bias was strongest in articles written about Princess Diana [X^2 (1, N=167) = 28.83, $p < .01$], John F. Kennedy, Jr. [X^2 (1, N=78) = 6.51, $p < .05$], and Tupac Shakir [X^2 (1, N=83) = 9.56, $p < .05$]. The analyses for the remaining celebrities fell short of statistical significance but, with the exception of Nixon, the trends were consistent with our death positivity hypothesis.

The results of Study 3 suggest that the media may show a death positivity bias when reporting the deaths of recently departed leaders. Interestingly, a stronger bias occurred for individuals who died in the prime of life (e.g., JFK and Diana), suggesting that people may especially revere leaders who die young with their potential unfulfilled and/or who leave behind young children. We were especially fascinated by the pattern for Richard Nixon, whose nefarious political career may explain the slight reversal of the expected positivity bias in media coverage about him. The other seven public figures enjoyed successful careers and largely avoided the ignominious collapse that befell Nixon. Is it possible that unsuccessful or immoral people do not benefit from a death positivity bias in judgments formed about them? We address this issue in our next study.

Study 4

In Study 4, we explored three competing hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the death positivity bias is so robust that it transcends the leader's standing on the dimensions of competence and morality. Perceivers may always rate a leader higher in death than in life, regardless of the leader's past behavioral record as a competent or moral individual. A second competing hypothesis is that death does not inflate impressions but rather extremitizes them. From this perspective, posthumous evaluations may simply be polarized versions of evaluations made of living leaders. Thus, although a dead competent (or moral) leader may be viewed more favorably than an equally

competent (or moral) living leader, a dead incompetent (or immoral) leader may be viewed *less* favorably than an equally incompetent (or immoral) living leader.

Finally, a third possibility is that posthumous judgments are sensitive to the dimension on which leaders succeed or fail. Specifically, it seems reasonable that perceivers may show less posthumous forgiveness of immorality than of incompetence. One reason is that perceivers may recognize that leaders have more control over their moral actions than they have over their abilities (see Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). In addition, terror management research has shown that mortality salience leads to intensified allegiance to moral codes of conduct (e.g., Rosenblatt et al., 1989). This research has demonstrated that perceivers allocate greater rewards to an individual who behaves morally (i.e., to someone who validates the perceiver's worldview) and mete out stiffer punishments to an individual who behaves immorally (i.e., to someone who threatens the worldview). Thus, perceivers may exaggerate their favorable impressions of dead moral leaders as well as their unfavorable impressions of dead immoral leaders. Perceivers may therefore show a death positivity bias regardless of the target's standing on the dimension of competence but a death *extremitization* bias for leaders whose actions vary on the dimension of morality.

Method

Participants and Design. The participants were 113 students from a university in the southeastern United States who participated to fulfill a course requirement. All participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (status: living or dead) x 2 (dimension: morality or competence) x 2 (valence: positive or negative) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure. The procedure was similar to that of Experiment 1. Participants read a vignette describing a business leader and then were asked to make a number of trait ratings about him. Participants were thanked and debriefed when they finished making their ratings.

Stimulus materials and manipulations. A one-page vignette described a man named Erik Sullivan, who founded a company and presided over it for several decades. As in Experiment 1, half the participants were informed that Sullivan was now dead whereas half were told he was still living.

The vignette contained details of Sullivan's role in running the company. Participants were presented with evidence that Sullivan was either competent, incompetent, moral, or immoral. In the competence condition, participants read that Sullivan was viewed as intelligent by "people in the industry"; that he made investment decisions recognized by Money Magazine as "the most visionary corporate choices of the decade"; that he consistently made decisions that placed the company in an ideal competitive position; and that a book detailing his numerous accomplishments made the New York Times Best Sellers list. In the incompetence condition, participants read that Sullivan was viewed as unintelligent; that Money Magazine called his investment decisions "the most foolish" of the decade; that he almost bankrupt the company; and that a best-selling book was written about his incompetence at the helm.

In the morality condition, participants read that Sullivan was viewed as very moral by "people in the industry"; that to protect the community from his company's toxic waste he went well-beyond federal guidelines to dispose of it safely; that he was extremely generous to his employees, their families, and to charities; and that a book detailing his numerous philanthropic actions made the New York Times Best Sellers list. In the immorality condition, participants read that Sullivan was viewed as immoral; that he illegally disposed of toxic waste, causing health problems in his community; that he was found guilty of embezzlement, fraud, and sexual harassment at work; and that a best-selling book was written about his depravity.

Dependent measures. After reading the vignette, participants answered a number of questions intended to assess their impressions of Sullivan. Participants were asked the same questions as in Experiment 1, responding to each question by placing a slash along

a 13 cm line (later converted to a 1 to 13 scale) anchored at the low end by "not at all" and at the high end by "extremely".

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. Of the 113 participants, 103 correctly recalled that Sullivan was either living or dead. Data from the ten participants who failed this check were discarded. To check our dimension and valence manipulations, we asked participants to rate the competence or morality level of Sullivan as CEO of his company by circling a number on a 1 (not at all competent or moral) to 13 (very competent or moral) scale. Results showed that participants in the competence condition rated him as significantly more competent ($M = 9.93$) than did participants in the incompetence condition ($M = 3.04$), $F(1, 49) = 19.43, p < .001$, and that participants in the morality condition rated him as significantly more moral ($M = 9.59$) than did participants in the immorality condition ($M = 3.28$), $F(1, 49) = 18.66, p < .001$ These results suggest that our manipulations of dimension and valence were successful.

Impressions of target person. Again we obtained high correlations among participants' responses to the questions measuring overall liking (Cronbach's alpha = .84), the questions measuring competency (alpha = .77), and those measuring inspiration (alpha = .84). Thus, average scores were computed for these three measures.

A 2 (status: living or dead) x 2 (dimension: morality, competence) x 2 (valence: positive, negative) ANOVA of the liking measure revealed a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 95) = 7.76, p < .01$. Table 3 displays the means associated with this effect. The pattern in the table suggests that participants showed a death positivity bias on the dimension of competence but not on the dimension of morality. To better understand this three-way interaction, we conducted a status by valence ANOVA of the data associated with the competence dimension. This analysis revealed only a main effect of status, $F(1, 95) = 3.99, p < .05$, replicating the death positivity bias found in Study 1. Overall, participants showed greater liking for the dead Sullivan (M = 7.07, SD

= 1.33) than for the living Sullivan (M = 6.14, SD = 1.56). Participants formed more favorable impressions of the competent Sullivan when they believed he was dead (M = 10.85) than when they believed he was alive (M = 9.77), $F(, 1, 95) = 3.48, p < .05$. Moreover, participants also tended to form more favorable impressions of the incompetent Sullivan when they believed he was dead (M = 3.15) than when they believed he was alive (M = 2.46), $F(, 1, 95) = 2.86, p < .11$.

Insert Table 3 about here

We next conducted a status by valence ANOVA of the data associated with the morality dimension. This analysis failed to yield a main effect of status (F < 1). The ANOVA did, however, reveal a death extremitization bias for the dimension of morality, as shown in a status by valence interaction, $F(1, 95) = 23.33, p < .01$. As displayed in Table 3, participants showed a death positivity bias in their impressions of the moral Sullivan, forming more favorable impressions when they believed he was dead (M = 10.17) than when they believed he was alive (M = 8.85), $F(1, 95) = 3.95, p < .05$. However, participants showed a death *negativity* bias in their impressions of the immoral Sullivan, forming significantly more negative impressions of him when they believed he was dead (M = 4.23) than when they believed he was alive (M = 6.85), $F(1, 95) = 4.04, p < .05$.

The analysis of the inspiration measure revealed the same pattern as that of the liking measure. The ANOVA produced a three-way interaction, $F(1, 95) = 6.93, p < .01$, and a separate ANOVA of the competence dimension data revealed a main effect of status, $F(1, 95) = 3.77, p < .05$, revealing the death positivity bias. Participants were more inspired by the dead competent Sullivan (M = 11.08) than by the living competent Sullivan (M = 10.08), $F(1, 95) = 4.46, p < .05$. Moreover, participants also tended to be more inspired by the dead incompetent Sullivan (M = 3.77) than by the living

incompetent Sullivan ($M = 2.92$), $F(1, 95) = 3.93$, $p < .05$. Thus, the death positivity bias emerged in participants' inspirational ratings whether the target was described as competent or incompetent.

As with the liking results, the analysis of the morality dimension data showed an extremitization pattern, as shown by a dimension by valence interaction, $F(1, 95) = 16.32$, $p < .01$. Participants tended to be more inspired by the dead moral Sullivan ($M = 10.00$) than by the living moral Sullivan ($M = 9.04$), $F(1, 95) = 3.01$, $p < .08$. In contrast, participants were less inspired by the dead immoral Sullivan ($M = 4.39$) than by the living immoral Sullivan ($M = 6.99$), $F(1, 95) = 5.11$, $p < .05$.

Insert Table 4 about here

Competence ratings. Participants' judgments of the target's level of competence showed a slightly different pattern (see Table 4). The death positivity effect emerged, with higher competency ratings assigned to the dead Sullivan (M = 8.06, $SD = 1.45$) than to the living Sullivan ($M = 7.16$, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1, 95) = 9.49$, $p < .05$. Unlike the previous analyses, however, there was no three-way interaction but rather an interaction between dimension and valence, $F(1, 95) = 81.47$, $p < .01$. Although the competent Sullivan was obviously judged to be more competent ($M = 10.30$) than the incompetent Sullivan [$M = 2.91$, $F(1, 95) = 36.29$, $p < .001$], the immoral Sullivan was judged to have roughly the same competence ($M = 8.77$) as the moral Sullivan ($M = 8.44$, $F < 1$). Apparently participants believed that cutting costs in an unethical way, while immoral, nevertheless reflected somewhat good business acumen.

In summary, the results of Study 4 have identified a condition under which the death positivity bias may not emerge. Although the death positivity bias was replicated on the dimension of competence, it was not found on the dimension of mortality. When making posthumous evaluative judgments of leaders, perceivers seemed to be sensitive to

the leader's standing on the dimension of morality. The standard death positivity bias emerged when the leader had led a moral life but the effect was reversed when the leader had led an immoral life. In our next study, we investigated whether the timing of a leader's moral behavior makes a difference in how he or she is perceived. If leaders perform their most moral behaviors late in life, just prior to death, does the death positivity bias become especially strong upon their demise?

Study 5

Prior social psychological work has investigated people's intuitive notions of dispositional change in others (Heider, 1958; Mackie & Allison, 1987; Silka, 1984), and there has been an abundance of research examining primacy and recency biases in people's sensitivity to changes in information about others (Asch, 1946; Jones & Goethals, 1987). But to the best of our knowledge, no one has explored how perceivers' posthumous impressions of targets are affected by significant changes in morality or competence undergone by targets during their lives.

Our hypotheses regarding perceivers' impressions of a leader differed markedly as a function of whether the leader's change in behavior occurred on the competency dimension or the morality dimension. For the competence conditions, we expected that perceivers would generate more favorable ratings of a leader whose competencies increased over time than of a leader whose competencies decreased. This hypothesis is consistent with Aronson and Linder's (1965) gain-loss model of attraction, as well as research on contrast effects (Kenrick & Gutierres, 1980), adaptation levels (Helson, 1964), and framing (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Moreover, consistent with the results of Experiment 4, we expected that regardless of the direction of change in the leader's competency, perceivers would show the death positvity bias, forming more positive impressions of a dead leader than of a living leader.

For the morality change conditions, our hypotheses are derived from terror management theory, which emphasizes people's greater allegiance to moral codes of

conduct when death is made salient than when death is not salient. From this theoretical perspective, we hypothesized that participants would form the most favorable posthumous impressions of an immoral leader who transformed into a moral leader over time. That is, we expected participants to love sinners who became saints, a tendency we call the *St. Augustine effect*, named after the fifth century philosopher and priest who underwent such a transformation (Wills, 1999). Also consistent with terror management theory, we expected participants to posthumously show loathing for saints who became sinners, a phenomenon we call the *fallen angel effect*. In sum, we expected both the St. Augustine and fallen angel effects to emerge for both living and dead leaders, but we expected both effects to be especially strong (the extremitization effect found in Study 4) when impressions are formed of a dead leader.

Study 5

Method

Participants and Design. The participants were 130 students from a university in the southeastern United States who participated to fulfill a course requirement. All participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (status: living or dead) x 2 (dimension: morality or competence) x 2 (order: positive then negative or negative then positive) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure. The procedure was similar to that of Experiment 1. Participants read a vignette describing a target person and then were asked to make a number of trait ratings about the target. Participants were thanked and debriefed when they finished making their ratings.

Stimulus materials and manipulations. A one-page vignette described a man named David Uhles, who founded a company and presided over it for several decades. As in Experiment 1, half the participants were informed that Uhles was now dead whereas half were told he was still living.

The vignette contained details of Uhles' role in running the company. Roughly one-fourth the participants were presented with evidence that Uhles was competent early in his career (e.g., hired good employees, marketed his product effectively) but incompetent later in his career (e.g., moved to a poor location, made poor investment decisions). Another fourth were presented with the reverse evidence, namely, that Uhles made incompetent moves early in his career but competent ones later. Another fourth of the participants were presented with facts indicating that Uhles made moral choices early in his career (e.g., donated to community charities, cleaned the environment) but immoral choices later in his career (e.g., eliminated employee benefits, showed discrimination in hiring practices, failed to pay taxes). The final fourth of the participants were given the reverse evidence, namely, that Uhles performed immoral acts early in his career but moral ones later.

Dependent measures. After reading the vignette, participants answered a number of questions intended to assess their impressions of Uhles. Participants were asked the same questions as in Experiment 1, responding to each question by placing a slash along a 13 cm line (later converted to a 1 to 13 scale) anchored at the low end by "not at all" and at the high end by "extremely."

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. Of the 130 participants, 128 correctly recalled that Uhles was either living or dead. Data from the two participants who failed this check were discarded. To check our dimension and order manipulations, we asked participants to indicate whether Uhles' level of competence (or morality) changed during his career, and if so, to note the direction of change (from negative to positive or vice-versa). The data from two participants who missed this check were also discarded.

Impressions of target person. Again we obtained high correlations among participants' responses to the questions measuring overall liking (Cronbach's alpha =

.74), the questions measuring competency (alpha = .80), and those measuring inspiration (alpha = .74). Thus, average scores were computed for these three measures.

A 2 (status: living or dead) x 2 (dimension: morality, competence) x 2 (order: positive then negative or negative then positive) ANOVA of the liking measure revealed a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 118) = 4.23, p < .01$. Table 5 displays the means associated with this effect. The pattern in the table suggests that participants showed a death positivity bias on the dimension of competence regardless of whether Uhles grew more competent or less competent over time. A separate ANOVA of the competence data revealed only a main effect of status, $F(, 1, 118) = 8.78, p < . 01$. When Uhles changed from competent to incompetent, participants formed more favorable impressions of him when they believed he was dead ($M = 6.07$) than when they believed he was alive ($M = 4.56$). Moreover, when Uhles changed from incompetent to competent, participants also tended to form more favorable impressions of him when they believed he was dead ($M = 6.50$) than when they believed he was alive ($M = 5.47$).

Insert Table 5 about here

The ANOVA of the morality data revealed an unexpected status by order interaction, $F(1, 118) = 7.33, p < .01$. Participants showed a death positivity bias only when Uhles changed from immoral to moral, forming more favorable impressions when they believed he was dead ($M = 6.78$) than when they believed he was alive ($M = 4.19$), $F(1, 118) = 4.65, p < .05$. However, participants showed a death *negativity* bias in their impressions of Uhles when he changed from moral to immoral. Participants liked him less when they believed he was dead ($M = 4.71$) than when they believed he was alive ($M = 6.19$), $F(1, 118) = 3.99, p < .05$.

The analysis of the inspiration measure revealed the same pattern as that of the liking measure. The ANOVA produced a three-way interaction, $F(1, 118) = 8.57, p <$

.01, and a separate ANOVA of the competence data revealed only a marginal main effect of status, $F(, 1, 118) = 3.18, p < .06$, showing that Uhles tended to be judged more favorably in death (M = 5.92) than in life (M = 5.16). The analysis of the morality data also revealed a status by order interaction, $F(1, 118) = 10.18, p < .01$. Participants showed a death positivity bias only when Uhles changed from immoral to moral, reporting that they were more inspired by Uhles when they believed he was dead (M = 7.06) than when they believed he was alive ($M = 4.25$), $F(1, 118) = 5.95, p < .05$. However, participants showed a death *negativity* bias when Uhles changed from moral to immoral. Participants were less inspired by him when they believed he was dead (M = 4.79) than when they believed he was alive ($M = 6.06$), $F(1, 118) = 4.04, p < .05$.

The analysis of participants' judgments of Uhles' competence revealed only a main effect of status, $F(1, 118) = 4.42, p < .05$. Participants judged Uhles to be more competent when dead ($M = 7.82$) than when alive ($M = 6.62$).

In summary, Study 5 replicated the death positivity bias on the competence dimension, showing that perceivers bestow the dead leader with heightened evaluations regardless of the leader's change in competence over the lifespan. However, the morality change conditions produced some surprising results. Judgments about leaders who underwent a moral transformation were sensitive to the time period during the target's life when he performed his moral or immoral actions. Specifically, participants' impressions of the living leader tended to be influenced by the leader's behavior performed early in his career, whereas their impressions of the dead leader tended to be influenced by the leader's behavior performed later in his career. Thus, the St. Augustine effect and the fallen angel effect emerged only in impressions of dead leaders but not of living leaders.

Why should judgments of the dead, rather than the living, be based more on moral or immoral behaviors performed late in life? One possible answer to this question is revealed in participants' responses to our debriefing questions at the conclusion of our

study. Participants were asked to explain why they provided favorable or unfavorable ratings of the leader. We discovered that our participants were hesitant to bestow saintly status to a living reformed sinner because "the jury was still out on that person." Only after the reformed sinner's death were participants willing to concede that a change toward saintliness must have reflected a genuine and permanent change in character. Moreover, a person who changes from moral to immoral may be evaluated more negatively when dead than when alive because there is no chance for the dead to return to the moral state. For this individual, there is no possibility for redemption.

General Discussion

Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it.
-- William Shakespeare

We began this article by proposing that people harbor more favorable views of the dead than they do of the living. All five of our studies established empirical support for this death positivity bias in social judgments of deceased leaders. We demonstrated the bias using between-subject comparisons (Study 1) as well as more conservative within-subject comparisons (Study 2). We showed that the bias occurs in judgments of real world leaders (Study 3). We showed that the death positivity bias emerges on the target dimension of competence but a death *extremitization* bias characterizes judgments on the dimension of morality (Study 4). Finally, we discovered that when leaders die, our evaluations of them may be based especially on the level of their moral behavior just before they died (Study 5). Overall, these finding help shed light on predicting and understanding how people are evaluated after their death. Our findings also suggest that the process by which we evaluate leaders, and their organizations, differs from how we evaluate leaders who are still alive.

These data, especially the morality findings of Studies 4 and 5, help us understand the great reverence we have for those who sacrifice their lives for others. A prominent example can be found in our evaluations of those who died in the terrorist attacks of

September 11, 2001. Hundreds of firefighters, emergency rescue workers, and law enforcement personnel sacrificed their lives to save others from the World Trade Center. Although roughly 3,000 people perished in this tragedy, a disproportionate amount of media attention, and national mourning, focused on the loss of these emergency personnel. Their morally courageous and heroic actions at the time of their deaths sealed our impressions of them forever. Clearly, living emergency rescue workers have our great admiration, but our greatest veneration is reserved for individuals whose deaths occur in the performance of their moral altruistic services.

Posthumous Impressions and Effective Leadership

What role do these posthumous impression phenomena play in the practice of effective leadership? As mentioned in our introduction, we propose that there are at least three ways that our findings can promote better and more responsible leadership.

The Importance of Proactive Moral Leadership

First, posthumous impression phenomena clearly underscore the importance of proactive moral leadership. Our findings suggest that a leader's moral conduct may be a more central determinant of leadership effectiveness than other, more traditional, criteria for evaluating leadership (see Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987). The results of Study 4 suggest that a leader's immoral actions are likely to posthumously stain both the leader's reputation and the organization's image. This idea may appear trite and obvious, but what is less obvious is that the damage done by a leader's moral improprieties may be far worse than people realize. Death appears to intensify the affective reactions people have in response to a leader's moral or immoral behavior, and this affective intensification influences impressions of both the leader and the organization. The good news for organizations is that they stand to reap extremitized benefits from their departed leaders' beneficent actions, but at the same time their image may also incur extremitized damage from their departed leaders' corrupt actions.

For this reason, it is imperative that organizations ensure that their leaders engage in numerous well-publicized moral actions and, more importantly, avoid any moral breaches. Leaders, we argue, have both a moral and a fiscal responsibility to their company to be visibly and proactively ethical at all times. Our argument builds on the wealth of literature that supports this view, among them Etzioni's (1988) work that supports that most human decisions and actions are motivated not only be economic reasons, but also by moral concerns. The vast literature on stakeholder theory also provides a convincing case for why executives should act morally (e.g., Freeman, 1984), and why they should do so when there is no clear economic payoff (Swanson, 1995). In addition, due to the increased scrutiny by the media, organizational leaders are becoming more aware that they can no longer afford to assume that their actions, even personal ones, will escape public notice. Overall, we now know that the media can influence the reputation of the organization, thereby influencing executives to act more morally than they may have otherwise (Trevino & Nelson, 1999).

Leaders' Impact on Employee and Organizations' Moral Behavior

Currently there is strong consensus that leaders have significant impact on organizational culture, often long after they have passed away (e.g., organizations such as Disney, University of Virgina, Hewlitt Packard, etc.). In addition, numerous studies suggest that a critical role of the organizational leader involves guiding the ethical behavior of the employees (e.g., Trevino, Butterfield, & McCabe, 1998). Our findings extend this work by suggesting that the leader's influence goes well beyond the sphere of the culture of the organization, or of the individual actions of any particular employee. Rather, leaders' overt ethical behavior may markedly enhance their company's stature and well-being long after they are gone, whereas failing to behave ethically may have magnified negative posthumous consequences for themselves, for the decisions future employees make, and for the overall future success of the organization.

The most surprising finding of our research was that the moral (or immoral) actions of a living leader had their strongest impact when the actions were performed early in the leader's life, whereas these same actions performed by a dead leader wielded the greatest influence when they appeared late in the leader's life. Two possible lessons for business leaders may be gleaned from this result. First, leaders may benefit their own reputations and perceived effectiveness by ensuring that their early career moral actions are widely known. Second, our findings suggest that the ideal time for leaders to increase their level of philanthropic activity, or at least the visibility of such activity, is toward the end of their careers and/or toward the end of their lives. In this way, a leader's positive legacy will be cemented long after he or she is gone. We next address legacy management more specifically.

Leaders' Legacy Management

Although many leaders aspire to exert a positive and enduring impact on an organization long after they are gone, they often find it challenging to craft this legacy effectively. In the political arena, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton both left the office of U.S. President with their reputations morally stained, although for very different reasons and to a very different degree. After leaving office, Nixon made numerous efforts to repair his criminal image by serving as an elder statesman, writer, consultant, and informal ambassador to subsequent administrations. Upon his death, criticism of his presidency and of his personal character were softened out of respect for the dead, but his post-presidential activities did not feature the type of moral emphasis needed to overcome his past ethical indiscretions. Although he was eulogized as a skillful and insightful statesman, he was never quite able to shed his image as a morally corrupt individual, and in fact many historians are convinced that he is doomed to be eternally associated with his immoral transgressions as president (Hoff, 1994). Indeed, in comparison to other past presidents, Nixon continues to receive low public opinion poll ratings (Gallup Poll, 1999).

Other presidents have more complex legacies. The legacy of John F. Kennedy is a fascinating example, inasmuch as the public's fixation with Kennedy's administration as the perfect Camelot was no doubt due to a heightened death positivity bias resulting from his premature death. Admired as a president, Kennedy and his reputation have withstood posthumous revelations of his own numerous marital infidelities and self-calculating behaviors (Lasky, 1963). Had JFK lived to fulfill a second term, the realities of his lechery and dealings with the Mob would have most likely gravely damaged the presidency, debilitated his administration, and disillusioned his supporters (Reeves, 1991).

Similarly to JFK, Thomas Jefferson's image has remained intact despite recent DNA confirmations that he fathered several children with his slave, Sally Hemings. Why are Kennedy's and Jefferson's positive reputations so seemingly bullet-proof, despite new information emerging that calls into question their moral conduct while occupying the White House? One possibility is that evaluations of the dead are less likely to change than are evaluations of the living (Eylon & Allison, in press). We suspect that this frozen-in-time effect is derived from several factors. First, the dead are obviously not available to perform new behaviors from which to modify one's existing impression. Second, in the case of Kennedy and Jefferson, people recognize the inherent unfairness of slinging mud at those who are no longer around to defend themselves. Third, there is often a suspicion that posthumous mudslingers have some political, economic, or personal agenda. Finally, for many people, there are certain categories of behavior -- sexual promiscuity among them -- that are simply not relevant dimensions on which to evaluate a political leader's contributions. This last point, focusing on the relevant dimensions of morality, is a rich area for future research in the context of the topic of posthumous leader assessment.

One example of highly effective legacy management can be seen in the life and death of Walt Disney. An examination of his career reveals a man who went to great

lengths to project the cleanest and most wholesome of images to the public (Eliot, 1993; Thomas, 1976). We believe that there are at least two strategies that Disney used to successfully create a remarkable and enduring posthumous legacy. First, he painstakingly ensured that his body of work, in the form of dozens of cartoon motion pictures and theme parks, reflected positive family values and a love for children. Second, he employed many public relations individuals whose primary job was to ensure that all of America, and eventually the world, would associate Disney's name with morality, innocence, kindness, and family fun. Disney's efforts were eminently successful, and to this day the many dark sides to his personality and behavior remain largely unknown to the public (Eliot, 1993).

Conclusions and Future Directions

From our research findings presented here, it appears that a principal factor that people consider when evaluating a leader's effectiveness is the leader's status as living or deceased. We suspect that people are largely unaware of their use of this factor, and that they would ardently deny that it has any bearing at all on their assessment of a leader. But our data clearly show that people exalt dead leaders, judging them to be more effective and inspirational than equivalent living leaders. Interestingly, it seems that not only do we exalt the dead, but there is some generalized effect so that the leader's organizational association gains from this posthumous adulation as well. However, on issues of morality, we have found a pattern of extremitization: the good are exalted and the bad are viewed very negatively, far more so than if they were still alive. Again, these evaluations also influence how the leader's organization is perceived.

Thus, we propose that a leader's legacy of morality is just as important, if not more so, than a legacy of competence. Because our research also suggests that a leader's legacy and the organization's reputation appear to be intertwined, a leader's actions, especially on the morality dimension, may be far more significant than either the leader or her followers realize. The implications of these finding for leaders and their

organizations include constant vigilance directed toward the moral implications of their actions. In other words, even if actions lead to enhanced competence, we now know that the moral judgment of such actions may exceed material gain, although the shift in evaluation may occur only after the leader's death.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge some of the limitations of our work. Our participants were college-aged individuals with limited life experience, and we urge future researchers to replicate and extend our work using a more diverse range of participants. We sampled only North Americans and acknowledge the possibility that a more geographically and culturally diverse sample of participants might yield different results. Moreover, with the exception of Study 3, our methodology focused on scenario and questionnaire procedures. Study 3's results are promising in suggesting that the death positivity bias is a robust phenomenon that is not methodologically bound; nevertheless we encourage future investigators to pursue greater methodological convergence. Finally, we acknowledge that our studies did not address the possible effect of cultural and social conditions on the death positivity bias. We refer to an organization's or society's need to make an example out of someone, create a hero, a scapegoat, or an enemy to unite against. Evaluations of leaders are not made in a social or political vacuum and so we encourage future research to explore the broader environment and its impact on leader evaluations.

We should also acknowledge that while the death positivity bias may promote more responsible leadership, we have not addressed situations in which the beliefs, values, and ideology of the leader are destructive (e.g., leaders of terrorist groups). The same death positivity bias may occur in these situations, and these leaders may die as "martyrs", but it arguable whether such a death positivity bias promotes better and more responsible leadership. Moral relativism becomes apparent when the death of a leader causes mourning and idealization in one camp but celebration and condemnation in another. In addition, the extent to which people are attracted to the leader's ideology

versus being drawn to the personal attributes of the leader may make a difference in the death positivity bias. Clearly, issues of moral relativism and ideological leadership, and their connection to the death positivity bias, are promising areas for future research.

We also believe that a rich area of future investigation is the manner in which people process information differently about the dead than they do about the living. Our data suggest that death jolts people out of their ordinary ways of thinking and may therefore disrupt the automatic routine of everyday social perception. Overall, we believe that the contributions of this work have the potential of making an impact not only on the academic literature, but also in raising our awareness in how we evaluate organizations and their leaders. Recognizing that leaders' moral choices may posthumously magnify employees' beliefs and values far into the future may help elevate the recognition that leaders carry an important responsibility as organizational moral role models.

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Footnote

[1] The time at which participants were informed of the target's life or death status – as either the first or last piece of information – was manipulated but never emerged (in this study or in subsequent studies) as a statistically significant factor in our analyses of participants' evaluations of the target (all Fs < 1.2). Consequently, we neither mention nor report the results of this variable in the experiments reported here.

[2]Participants' gender did not significantly affect any of our primary dependent measures in this study or in subsequent studies. Hence, we neither mention nor report the results of this variable.

Table 1

Study 2: Mean Liking Ratings as a Function of Leader Status and Time

		Time	
		Time 1	Time 2
Status	Alive	4.09 (1.45)	4.16 (1.03)
	Dead	4.12 (1.67)	4.79 (1.16)

Note. The higher the rating, the greater the liking for the leader. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Table 2

Study 3: Number of Positive and Negative Articles Written About Eight Public Figures Before and After Their Deaths

	Before Death		After Death	
	Pos	Neg	Pos	Neg
Sonny Bono	7	6	19	5
Jerry Garcia	8	2	24	3
Florence Joyner	16	0	26	0
JFK, Jr.	27	18	29	4
Richard Nixon	30	27	48	53
Princess Diana	37	29	92	9
Tupac Shakir	16	25	30	12
Frank Sinatra	27	15	40	13
Total	168	122	308	99

Table 3

Study 4: Mean Liking Ratings as a Function of Leader Status, Dimension, and Valence

		Status	
		Alive	Dead
Competence	Competent	9.77 (2.28)	10.85 (1.86)
	Incompetent	2.46 (1.27)	3.15 (1.46)
Morality	Moral	8.85 (2.08)	10.17 (1.11)
	Immoral	6.85 (1.46)	4.23 (0.83)

Note. The higher the rating, the greater the liking for the leader. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Table 4

Study 4: Mean Competence Ratings as a Function of Leader Status, Dimension, and Valence

		Status	
		Alive	Dead
Competence	Competent	9.92 (1.65)	10.77 (1.66)
	Incompetent	2.40 (1.13)	3.35 (1.46)
Morality	Moral	8.00 (1.58)	8.92 (1.41)
	Immoral	8.23 (1.88)	9.31 (1.32)

Note. The higher the rating, the greater the perceived competence. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Table 5

Study 5: Mean Liking Ratings as a Function of Leader Status, Dimension, and Order

		Status	
		Alive	Dead
Competence	Pos-Neg	4.56 (1.44)	6.07 (1.76)
	Neg-Pos	5.47 (1.45)	6.50 (1.26)
Morality	Pos-Neg	6.19 (0.97)	4.71 (0.88)
	Neg-Pos	4.19 (1.41)	6.78 (1.32)

Note. The higher the rating, the greater the liking. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.