

Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to  
Remember its Misdeeds.

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## **Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds (review)**

Franklin B. Lebo

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

**Reviewed by:**

*Reviewed by*

*Franklin B. Lebo (bio)*

"Is patriotism possible? Is there a formula for combining civic shame with civic pride to yield an honest patriotism?"<sup>1</sup> From a theologian, academic, participant, minister, and author of approximately a dozen texts, comes a remarkable personal log of one American's journey into the source of his own patriotism. In the first half of this richly descriptive book, from Schöneberg, Germany with street signs memorializing progressively anti-Semitic laws<sup>2</sup> to Nelson Mandela's former isolated prison on Robben Island, South Africa,<sup>3</sup> Shriver guides his readers through a comparative yet intimate tour of two national efforts to reconcile painful pasts. In a rhythmic point-counterpoint analysis, transnational similarities in facing inter-generational history evaluation and reevaluation leap off the pages. Just as Germans learn to mourn "All the Dead of Our Wars,"<sup>4</sup> so do the Boers and the Zulu Tribe in South Africa learn to face one another's monuments on opposing hillsides.<sup>5</sup> Just as successive generations of Germans have come to expect their students to critically and imaginatively face the darkness of recent history, so have South African classrooms plastered walls with demanding reminders of the sins of obedience to segregation, exclusion, and dehumanization juxtaposed with testaments to the triumphs of human resilience and heroism.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, Shriver's main goal is to bring that which is geographically and culturally close within the gamut of American critical, religious, and moral review.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Shriver hopes to spark within his American readership the desire to blow off the dusty historical volumes of domestic policy as well as to crack open the newly inked chapters of recent foreign policy as "we Americans . . . hav[e] something to learn from these remarkable attempts . . . **[End Page 551]** to remember [and] to forget."<sup>8</sup> Only in this way may true "patriotism" by which one "combine[s] repentance and pride in the history of [one's] . . . country" be achieved.<sup>9</sup>

The second half of Shriver's text thus redirects the focus sharply inward to embrace the experience of African Americans and Native

Americans in their enduring struggles for reparation for past evils, redress of continuing injustices, and formal recognition of equal status and dignity. To approach this monumental task, Shriver first touches upon the African American experience through disturbing examples such as the trauma of three U.S. cities with horrific outbreaks of white racial animosity including Richmond, Virginia, Rosewood, Florida, and Tulsa, Oklahoma.<sup>10</sup> His subsequent chapter continues the narrative of "legalized human inequality perpetrated systematically against Native Americans."<sup>11</sup> Thus, through a detailed discussion of the attempts to both remember and honor the past of all Americans, he reveals the recurring challenges of multi-angled public memory construction which faces the task of reconciling the modern and ancestral struggles of competing peoples. As he explains, "it is hard to write the many American stories and to connect them with one American story."<sup>12</sup>

Through this comparative endeavor Shriver's methodological framework begins to emerge, as he builds towards seven principles for coming to terms with negative pasts, followed by nine poignant questions in need of additional review.<sup>13</sup> He provocatively asks, for instance, whether "the impacts of remote evils [are] calculable in the present?" and "[i]f the debt is so large, can society afford to pay it?"<sup>14</sup> As he begins to frame his response, his own debt to the transitional justice scholarship including giants such as Priscilla B. Hayner, Nicholas Tavuchis, and Charles Villa-Vicencio becomes evident in his finding that "[m]useums, statues, history texts, a constitution, a truth commission: They all grasp the past for the sake of letting it go."<sup>15</sup> Though overlooked by Shriver, Julie Mertus<sup>16</sup> and Martha Minow<sup>17</sup> are two additional voices in the chorus of scholars on "facing history."<sup>18</sup> As Minow writes: "What's needed, paradoxically, is a process for reinterpreting what cannot be made sensible, for assembling what cannot be put together, and for separating..."

ing of the inherently inclusive concept of human dignity would have to be unflinchingly aimed at strengthening fundamental protections and be prepared to confront challenges thereto. Such abstract questions are, after all, not so abstract when the cost of their non-examination is paid by human minds and bodies.

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*Elaine Webster tutors Public Law of the UK and Scotland and is a Ph.D. researcher at the University of Edinburgh, where her research in international human rights law focuses on the prohibition against torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and the analysis of examples in a socio-political perspective. She is an honors graduate of the University of Glasgow School of Law. She holds a Master of Arts in International Politics from the Free University of Brussels and a European Master of Arts in Human Rights and Democratization from the European Inter-University Centre for Human Rights/Catholic University Leuven.*

***Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds*, by Donald W. Shriver, Jr., (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Hardcover List Price: \$35.00, ISBN-13 978-0-19-515153-4**

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1. DONALD W. SHRIVER, JR., *HONEST PATRIOTS: LOVING A COUNTRY ENOUGH TO REMEMBER ITS MISDEEDS* 61 (2005).
2. *Id.* at 44.
3. *Id.* at 67.
4. *Id.* at 269.
5. *Id.* at 84.
6. *Id.* at 95-96, 128.
7. *Id.* at 126.



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Remembering Negative Pasts: Shriver, Donald W. Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough

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