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## **Titles of Honor in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Republics: The Case Studies of France, Italy, and the United States of America**

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**Abstract:** *It is a common misconception that Republics lack official titles of honor to recognize distinguished individuals in their societies. The present study focuses on three important examples of Republics that bestow officially recognized titles of honor to prominent people. France is known for the egalitarian ideas of the French Revolution and by the many contributions of its enlightened philosophers to the field of political science and public policy. Nevertheless, France has one of the most well developed and respected honors systems in the world. Italy abolished the monarchy shortly after the end of the World War II but kept the title of “cavalieri”/knight as one of the highest honors bestowed by the Republic. A less clear-cut case is the honors system of the individual states in the United State of America. The present study concludes that titles of honor are not incompatible with a republican regime as long as those honors are not hereditary in nature but rather are based on merit.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Highly developed and rigid honors systems tend to be connected to monarchies and many people in the developed democracies, and in particular in Latin America and in the United States, have a very superficial knowledge of their own countries' honors systems (Feigenblatt, 2014; Kissinger, 1994). There are many misconceptions such as that medals are only for the military and that formal titles are only used by monarchies to reward services to the nation (Feigenblatt, 2014). There are many interesting examples of highly developed honors systems used in republics. The gold standard for honors systems in continental Europe is arguably the French one. Napoleon's Legion of Honor became the standard to be followed and emulated by many other countries (Roberts, 1997). Italy continued to bestow the title of "cavalieri" after the establishment of the Republic and to recognize several dynastic honors such as the Sacred and Military Constantinian Order of St. George of the Royal House of Naples and the Two Sicilies (Reinalda, 2009). Moreover, the Italian Republic also recognizes the Sovereign Order of Malta with the same privileges as national honors (Bradford, 1991). A more ambivalent case is the honors system of the individual states of the United States. The present paper is an exploratory study of three honors systems and their social contexts in practice.

France is an ideal case study because it is the cradle of many important republican ideas and also the site of the famous French revolution (McCormick, 2005; Roberts, 1997). The French government has impeccable republican credentials because of the country's history and heritage. It is a great surprise to many foreigners that France has one of the most rigid and formal honors systems in the world and it is respected both in official and social occasions. The first section of this study focuses on the basic structure of the French honors system on how it actually functions.

The second section of the study focuses on the case of the Italian Republic. Italy abolished its monarchy after World War II as a result of a popular referendum (Katz, 1971; Roberts, 1997). Nevertheless Italy maintains a very formal system of honors which includes newly created republican honors and recognized Catholic and dynastic honors dating to before the unification of Italy (Duren, 1995). Italy's unique situation of having Rome as its capital and sharing the city with the Vatican has also resulted in a very active and highly developed honors system (Duren, 1995; Lal, 2004). The title of *cavaliere* is officially recognized and bestowed by the government with the interesting anomaly that it is bestowed on both men and women (Duren, 1995; Hieronymussen, 1966).

Honors such as the Purple Heart and the Congressional Medal of Honor have been immortalized in movies about the many wars fought by the United States (Manuel Noriega, 1997; Williamson, 1992). Nevertheless the American honors system for civilians is not as well known as its military counterpart (Cox, 2008). Moreover, there is a lot of confusion over the difference between federal, state, and local honors. The present study will focus on state and local honors because of the rarity of federal civilian honors and because they have a more significant social impact than the very rarely bestowed federal civilian honors.

## **2. France**

The cradle of the enlightenment and home to the revolution that would inspire many others all over the world, France is one of the countries with one of the most respected and rigid honors systems (Hieronymussen, 1966; Jelavich, 1969). It is a rare occurrence to see a French President who is not wearing the red rosette of the French Legion of Honor, the flagship decoration established by Emperor Napoleon himself. It is virtually impossible to attend an academic conference in Europe and fail to notice the purple ribbon of the Order of Academic Palms on the lapel of distinguished French professors (Hieronymussen, 1966). Moreover, the average

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Frenchman is capable of quickly recognizing the colors of the decorations. Therefore, the existence of a very developed honors system and also the social acceptance and respect of it make France as close as possible to a Weberian ideal case study (Moore, 2005; Perrow, 1972; Ritzer, 2008).

In order to have a strong honors system there are three main requirements. The first one is that honors and awards be clearly defined by the government. Secondly, that the general population recognize and respect those awards and symbols of social status and accomplishment. Thirdly, that the system is broad enough to include a wide array of members of society belonging to different economic and social sectors of the nation so as to have the vast majority of the population in contact with someone who has received an official decoration from the government.

France has a very well developed honors system (Hieronymussen, 1966; Oliveira, 1992). With three national orders, four ministerial orders, and more than forty military decorations, France has a very well developed system (Hieronymussen, 1966). The flagship order is the Legion of Honor which was established by Emperor Napoleon I and has survived both monarchical and republican governments until our day. The Legion of Honor is the most prestigious award that the French Republic can bestow on a foreigner or national and it is recognized worldwide as one of the most prestigious decorations in the world (Hieronymussen, 1966). The Order of Academic Palms was also established by Emperor Napoleon and continues to be bestowed to prominent academics and educators. There are clear guidelines for nominations for all French honors and their wear is also clearly regulated and standardized by the government (Hieronymussen, 1966). A ribbon for chevaliers, a rosette for officers, and a rosette with a ribbon for commanders or higher allow the observer to determine the level at which the honor was bestowed (Duren, 1995).

The second requirement that the general population recognizes and respects the symbols of social status, in this case the national awards is also clearly satisfied in France. One of the advantages of having a very stable and well publicized honors system is that the population at large can clearly identify the external symbols of the awards as important social markers to facilitate interaction. The system is publicized in Television by broadcasting ceremonies and even in the printing of stamps to commemorate the establishment of particular orders and medals. Thus, the vast majority of the population is aware of the names of the most important awards bestowed by the government most people are able to distinguish and identify the external symbols of those awards. It is also noteworthy that each award makes available a wide array of external symbols to the recipient in order for him or her to wear the award in public. Business suits and casual wear for women permit the wear of lapel pins, formal suits allow for rosettes and small lapel ribbons, and black and white tie allow for the full size medals (Hieronymussen, 1966). The availability of different versions of the same award is very important in terms of social recognition because it means that there are more opportunities for recipients to wear their honors. An entry level officer worker will in many cases see his or her CEO wearing the blue ribbon of the Nation Order of Merit or a student will have many occasions to see some of their most distinguished professors or teachers wear the purple ribbon or rosette of the Order of Academic Palms (Hieronymussen, 1966). French custom also allows recipients to include their honors in their e-mail and formal correspondence signatures further increasing the exposure of the extended network of the recipient to the honors system.

The third requirement is pivotal, the relationship between the majority of the population and recipients of the honors cannot be so far removed that there is virtually no interaction between those who have received honors and those who have not. This sociological principle is important because it reinforces the value of the awards as a useful social marker and it makes it more difficult for members of a particular society to ignore the importance of the

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accomplishments leading to the conferment of the award. One very good example of this is the Order of Academic Palms, education is compulsory in France, and therefore every single Frenchwomen and Frenchman will at one point or another have to sit in a classroom and interact with teachers. Chances are very high that as a student he or she will have attended a class with a teacher or professor wearing the purple of the Order of Academic Palms (Hieronymussen, 1966). This proximity between the recipient of the award and a vast proportion of the population has another important benefit which is that it forces people to face the fact that some members of society have accomplished things that other have not. This can serve two parallel social purposes, the first one is to accept the greater merit of those who have earned it which inspires respect and the second is that it inspires people to accomplish more things in order to eventually be worthy of receiving similar honors. The French Honors system is widespread and varied enough for people from all walks of life to have a reasonable opportunity with a lot of hard work and dedication to eventually qualify for one honor or another. This eliminates the excuse that an award is reserved exclusively for celebrities or for millionaires. It further provides a graduated scale of merit for the vast majority of the population instead of for a very small and distant few. At the core, it is a pivotal ingredient to a true meritocracy.

### **3. The Italian Republic**

Italy is a country that abolished its monarchy shortly after the end of the Second World War (Katz, 1971). At the time there was a high level of disenchantment with the perceived connection between the monarchy and the regime of Benito Mussolini (Roberts, 1997). Concurrently there was a growing communist movement which strongly opposed the continuation of the monarchy. A plebiscite resulted in a slim majority in favor of the abolition of the monarchy. This important constitutional change from a monarchy to a republic had immediate and important effects on the structure of the country's honors system (Duren, 1995; James-Chales Noonan,

2012; Katz, 1971). Most titles of nobility were abolished with the exception of the title of “*cavalieri*” (Duren, 1995). New orders and decorations were created to replace the dynastic orders of the Royal House of Savoy. Recognition of certain regional dynastic orders such as the Sacred and Military Order of St. George of the Royal House of the Two Sicilies was strengthened in addition of the continued preferential treatment given to the Sovereign Order of Malta (Duren, 1995; James-Chales Noonan, 2012). Moreover, the unique nature of Rome as the capital of the Republic of Italy and also of the Vatican, as the sovereign domain of Pope, adds to the complexity of the Italian honors system (Bradford, 1991; Duren, 1995; James-Chales Noonan, 2012).

The abolishment of hereditary titles of nobility was not surprising yet the maintenance and protection of the title of “*cavalieri*” which is similar to the British title of “*Sir*” is worthy of note. In terms of structure, the Italian honors system consists of five orders of knighthood which bestow on the recipient the title of “*cavalieri*” and more than twenty medals for the military and other government branches. The highest decoration bestowed by the Italian Republic is the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic which replaced the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus of the House of Savoy as the highest order for civil servants (Duren, 1995; Hieronymussen, 1966; Katz, 1971). Other orders of knighthood include the Military Order of Italy (only 14 living recipients), the Order of Merit of Labor, the Order of the Star of Italy, and the Order of Vittorio Veneto which was abolished in 2010 (Hieronymussen, 1966). The Order of Merit of Labor has an associated award called the Star of Merit of Labor which bestows the title of Master of Labor. Insignia and ribbons follow the continental system popularized by France and include the rosettes, miniatures, and full size medals depending on the occasion (Hieronymussen, 1966).

In terms of the recognition and respect for the symbols of the honors system, Italy fares very well (Hieronymussen, 1966; James-Chales Noonan, 2012; Katz, 1971). The vast majority of the

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population is at least vaguely aware of the symbols of the most important national honors (Katz, 1971). The use of the title “cavalieri” is also legal and socially accepted in both written and spoken language (James-Chales Noonan, 2012). Business cards, letterhead, cuff links, and even key chains are some of the external signs of the recipients of this high honor. In the case of the Order of Malta and of the Constantinian Order of St. George their flags can be seen waving in front of several palaces in Rome and in other parts of Italy (James-Chales Noonan, 2012). Most importantly, the vast majority of the population is aware of the meaning of the insignia of the orders and treats them with respect and deference. One clear sign of the degree of prestige of this type of honor is the large number of imitations. There is a plethora of private organizations bestowing medals of all types some with more or less prestige. Many of the insignias of those private organizations emulate those of the more prestigious ones in the hope that the similarities will translate into similar prestige.

The third criterion is more complicated in Italy. While there is a wide range of honors in Italy, many of them are reserved for the elite and thus the proximity between the majority of the population and a recipient may be in some cases less than in the previously discussed case of France (James-Chales Noonan, 2012; Oliveira, 1992). Proximity varies from sector to sector. Therefore the case of Italy deviates from the French ideal of a meritocracy but this may be partly due to structural reasons. Italy’s orders lack the specificity of the ministerial orders of France and thus there may be a lower representation of certain sectors of society as a result of this. Nevertheless Italy’s state orders carry with them social prestige based on merit but in many cases dynastic and catholic orders may be considered more prestigious in some elite circles (Duren, 1995). Dynastic orders and catholic orders have longer histories and are perceived to be more selective in terms of lineage (Duren, 1995; Hieronymussen, 1966; James-Chales Noonan, 2012). Two of the last orders that require noble lineage for the higher levels are the

Sacred and Military Constantinian Order of St. George of the Royal House of Two Sicilies and the Sovereign Order of Malta. Both orders require one hundred years of nobility for the level of “grace” and several centuries for the level of “justice” (James-Chales Noonan, 2012). The Italian government recognizes the two orders and military and government officials are permitted to wear the insignias on their uniforms. The two orders are the last two government-recognized orders which require noble proofs to be admitted. Having this parallel system of honors has resulted in conflicting sets of norms and values in terms of the meaning of social status and prestige. A person from a historically significant lineage may qualify for the higher levels of the Order of Malta or of the Constantinian Order but may not have achieved much as an individual while on the other hand someone may be the first person in his or her family to receive a college education and may have achieved a lot in his or her lifetime. Assuming that the first person joined one of the two noble orders and the second person received the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic, official rules of precedence would favor the recipient of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic however ingrained social norms and informal practice may favor the recipient of the noble orders in certain social circles.

Precedence which is closely related to social status and respect is also regulated by the factor of the social forum or jurisdiction. This means that the occasion and location of an event determines precedence to a certain extent (James-Chales Noonan, 2012). Thus in an event organized by the Red Cross in Japan, recipients of Japanese imperial orders take precedence over holders of foreign honors. Italy, and in particular Rome makes the issue of jurisdiction complicated because there are overlapping jurisdictions. Italy hosts the Vatican, the Order of Malta, and the dynastic orders of the Royal House of the Two Sicilies (Duren, 1995; James-Chales Noonan, 2012). Therefore because of the geographical proximity it is inevitable that recipients of honors from the Vatican, the Royal House of the Two Sicilies, and the Order of Malta, and the Italian

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Republic will interact with each other and in many cases overlap. In the not too rare case in which a person has received honors from several different sources, the issue of precedence is not as problematic but in the case described in the previous paragraph it can become a contentious issue. Legally, in events organized by the organization bestowing the order, that particular honor system has precedence but in all other social events that take place in Italy, the official orders of the Italian Republic officially take precedence. Even though this may seem as a minor point of interest for heads of protocol and related experts, it is an important factor that makes the Italian honors system deviate in practice from the French ideal and from a pure meritocracy. The primacy of the official honors system in France is undisputed. A grand cross of the Legion of Honor outranks a knight of grace of the order of Malta, *ceteris paribus*, in almost every social function held in French territory in the eyes of the vast majority of the population. Thus, at the level of social consciousness the social respect for the official national honors system is much greater than that for other parallel or ancillary systems. In Italy, this is not so which leads to overt and covert conflict over social respect and about the meaning and definition of earned or inherited social status.

#### **4. United States**

The United States honors system is very complex and fragmented. Recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor are treated with utmost respect and receive official benefits from the Federal government. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is bestowed with a lot of fanfare to a very eclectic selection of celebrities and politicians following an opaque and unpredictable set of criteria ("WHITE HOUSE: PRESIDENTIAL MEDAL OF FREEDOM," 2019). A myriad of opaque medals are available for public servants in certain departments. State governments have their own honors system with more or less structure and prestige. Therefore, the American honors system shows a clear ambiguity between the need to have an honors system to reward merit and

achievement and a concomitant aversion to social differentiation and stratification even when that stratification is based on achievement and merit.

Limitations of space and the sheer magnitude of the topic result in the need to focus on a few representative case studies so as to provide the reader with a broad overview of the main characteristics of the American honors system. It is also important to note that the military honors system will not be discussed because it is highly structured but it is largely separate from civilian life. The Congressional Medal of Honor and the Purple Heart are two military honors which are recognized by the majority of the population. Nevertheless the emphasis of this study is on civilian honors and thus the focus will be on the Presidential Medal of Freedom, a brief overview of civilian medals for federal public servants, and state honors ("NEBRASKA ADMIRALS ASSOCIATION," 2019; "TEXAS NAVY ASSOCIATION," 2015; "WHITE HOUSE: PRESIDENTAIL MEDAL OF FREEDOM," 2019).

The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the highest civilian honor of the United States of America. It is notable that it is not called an order but rather it is a medal ("WHITE HOUSE: PRESIDENTAIL MEDAL OF FREEDOM," 2019). This is important because the Federal government does not bestow any awards that bestow post-nominal or pre-nominal titles. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is bestowed at the pleasure of the President of the United States and there are on average 11 yearly recipients. It is the only official award of the United States that includes sash and a breast star for the higher levels. In contrast to the Medal of Honor, which has very clear and strict guidelines to determine eligibility, the Presidential Medal of Freedom is awarded for "an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors" ("WHITE HOUSE: PRESIDENTAIL MEDAL OF FREEDOM," 2019). However, the criteria to determine what that "especially meritorious contribution" are opaque and undefined. This has resulted in the

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politicization of the award and in an eclectic mix of recipients. Recipients include prominent world leaders such as Baroness Thatcher and former President Ronald Reagan, humanitarian activists such as Saint Theresa (at the time, Mother Theresa), to media personalities of arguably different merit. Nevertheless, the Presidential Medal of Freedom is well publicized and many Americans are vaguely aware of its existence.

Several government agencies have their own medals which are not well known outside of the agencies themselves and are rarely seen in public. Many agencies have organizational cultures that discourage the wearing of medals outside of the conferral ceremony itself and the lack of uniforms for most civilian agencies also makes it less likely to see the full size versions of those awards. Federal medals do not confer any post-nominals or titles and therefore it is very likely that few people are aware that a person received a particular medal or award outside of their very close circle of friends and co-workers. Even among recipients there is more interest in promotions and pay-grade raises than in the medals and awards themselves. This may be a result of the very few social benefits connected to the award other than the momentary recognition of an accomplishment. The vast majority of the population is completely unaware of the existence and meaning of these medals and awards and therefore they carry little to no social prestige.

State honors are in many cases more famous and carry more prestige than many of the federal medals. There is a wide and varied range of honors bestowed by the individual states of the Union. It should be noted that the constitution of the United States and the unique history of the country as a confederation that transitioned into a federation, has reserved certain powers to the individual States that are usually enjoyed only by sovereign nation-states. One example of this is how State governments have the right to organize militias which are basically regional military forces under the command of the governor. There are also several cases of states that were formally independent countries before joining the United

States such as the case of the Republic of Texas which had its own Navy before joining the Union ("TEXAS NAVY ASSOCIATION," 2015).

The most prestigious state honor and one of the last ones to confer an official pre-nominal title is the commission of Kentucky Colonel bestowed by the Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky (Lundergan-Grimes, 2012). At one point the Commonwealth of Kentucky had a well trained militia which actively fought in the War of 1812. The Governor appointed Charles Stewart Todd as aide-de-camp with the rank of colonel. Colonels wore uniforms to official events and served as the ceremonial guard of the Governor. This tradition was imported from the British custom of appointing local notables as honorary colonels to serve in a ceremonial role. The rank of Kentucky colonel is the highest honor bestowed by the Commonwealth of Kentucky and recipients of the commission are entitled to an official gala uniform, license plate, and presentation cards (Lundergan-Grimes, 2012).

In terms of a clear definition of an award, the Kentucky colonel commission is one of the few examples in the United States of an official title that is publicly presented as such by the issuing government. As explained in previous sections of this paper, there are other states bestowing similar titles but the ambiguity of the issuing authority in terms of the prestige, status, and privileges emanating from the honor tend to be more ambiguous ("NEBRASKA ADMIRALS ASSOCIATION," 2019). The State Department of the Commonwealth of Kentucky has a page dedicated to the title and unambiguously describes it as the "highest honor bestowed by the Commonwealth of Kentucky" (Lundergan-Grimes, 2012). In terms of the second requirement for an honors system, the Kentucky colonelcy is widely recognized by the population in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and to a certain extent in the rest of the country as a prestigious honor. The best known symbol of the title is the aid-de-camp lapel pin which follows American military regulations and is crowned by an eagle, the

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official symbol of the military rank of colonel in the United States. In terms of proximity to a recipient, the number of Kentucky colonels has fluctuated depending on the governor. Initially the honor was highly restricted until the 1980s when commissions started to be bestowed in higher numbers. The current trend under Governor Matthew Bevin has been a sharp decrease in the number of commissions. Nevertheless it is safe to say that there is a high chance of having some connection or interaction with a recipient of the commission of Kentucky colonel. This is important because it makes the Kentucky colonelcy an attainable honor and thus it can have a greater effect in terms of motivation of pro-social behaviors than the more politicized and distant Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The interesting case of the title of Nebraska Admiral is a very good example of the ambivalence that many Americans feel for titles of honor. This title is the highest honor awarded by the State of Nebraska and it is a title bestowed by the governor of the State ("NEBRASKA ADMIRALS ASSOCIATION," 2019). Nebraska is a State with no access to the sea. The natural reaction of the average observer to the title of Nebraska Admiral is that it does not make much sense to have an admiral which is connected to the navy and therefore to the sea in a state with no access to the sea. The story behind the creation of this honor is that Theodore W. Metcalfe, who was acting governor of Nebraska, created the title in 1931 to honor several of his friends ("NEBRASKA ADMIRALS ASSOCIATION," 2019). The certificate includes very humorous wording in terms of the duties and rights of admirals. "And I do strictly charge and require all officers, seamen, tadpoles and goldfish under your command to be obedient to your orders as Admiral..." ("NEBRASKA ADMIRALS ASSOCIATION," 2019). The wording of the certificate is clearly meant to detract from the official nature of the award and thus results in ambiguity. Receiving the commission is the state's highest honor but at the same time the award itself sends a message contradicting its importance.

A simple explanation for the wording of the Nebraska Admiral award is the ambivalence of many Americans towards titles of honor. There is a clear intention to recognize the accomplishment of members of the community while at the same time avoiding differentiating them from the masses. There are many problems with this approach to honors. The first challenge is that not taking an award seriously when recognizing important social accomplishments sends the wrong message to the community and to society at large. Assuming that a police officer receives the commission for more than two decades of service and that the commission is taken lightly, it sends society an ambiguous message about the social standing and regard for the acts and behaviors that resulted in him receiving the award.

The honors system of the United States of America is fragmented and highly complex. Complexity and the distance from the few well known Federal honors limits the social impact of the aforementioned honors system. Thus, other societal values such as the accumulation of wealth overshadow important public concerns, such as service, sacrifice, and patriotism.

## **5. Conclusions**

Honors systems both shape and are shaped by the social norms and values of a nation (Duren, 1995; Gila, 2015, 2016; Gila & Garcia-Loygorri, 2003; Hieronymussen, 1966; James-Chales Noonan, 2012; Oliveira, 1992; Salcedo, 2014). The potential to shape social behavior is an understudied aspect of honors systems. Most of the literature on the topic focuses on historical or artistic aspects rather than on the sociological significance of honors systems (Berrendero, 2017; Salcedo, 2014). Moreover, the psychosocial aspects are also understudied. A more pragmatic understanding of the value of honors systems as tools of public policy is needed in order to promote pro-social behavior in an age characterized by consumerism and cultural relativism. Thus, the present overview of the honors systems of three modern day

republics is simply a starting point for further study and should be considered an exploratory essay with obvious methodological limitations rather than as a strict academic research paper.

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