

WAIT TILL THEY'RE DEAD

U.S. postal officials sensibly honor Americans only posthumously; other nations honor the living, sometimes with unfortunate results

While researching and writing my essays on the theme of “Heroes or Villains on Stamps,” I’ve been thinking about the posthumous-only rule that prevailed from the earliest U.S. stamp portraits of 1847 (Franklin and Washington). For several years after 2011, the U.S. postal service considered honoring living Americans. But before they did anything rash, the powers-that-be came to their senses and returned to the dead-only custom, which remains in place.

Why not honor living Americans? Let me count the reasons. 1) You’d be playing favorites. 2) Giving competitive or commercial advantage. 3) You could be invading privacy, bringing unwanted attention. 4) Who gets to pick? 5) Would politics be involved? (Ya think?) 6) Would bribes be accepted, and acceptable? 7) How about boutique stamp orders from the 1 percent?

I could go on. There is still a prime reason I haven’t mentioned. Once a person is safely dead, she or he can’t cause any trouble. Or in the case of the stamp honorees on my “Heroes or Villains” list, any MORE trouble. There’s no doubt in my mind that if MLK, Ali and Pete Seeger were living — and still controversial — they would NOT be chosen by the postal poobahs for philatelic honors.

Outside the USA, many unworthy folks have had their faces on stamps. Adolf Hitler, for example. Long series of stamps in the 1930s and 1940s pictured him in profile, calm and resolute. Germans today have to live with this jarring philatelic reminder of that wretched chapter in their history; a small problem for collectors, perhaps, but a subject of no little national *weltschmerz*. If only they’d waited until Hitler’s death to consider a stamp, they’d have been spared this chagrin. Hitler wasn’t a bit popular after his suicide in April 1945, amid the smoking ruins of his Reich and the emerging horrors of his Holocaust. You may notice there have been no stamps issued in his honor since then.



The man formerly known as Prince Andrew





It's a good thing those poobahs on the U.S. Stamp Advisory Committee make the decisions about who to honor. In Africa, Big Men coming to power have displayed themselves in sets and commemoratives. Some of them were

Premier Bathelémy Boganda of the Central African Republic was killed in a mid-air plane explosion in 1959. Traces of explosives were found, but there was no investigation.



No, this is not a skit or a cakewalk; it's three African Big Men celebrating "The Great Reconciliation," whatever that was. Mobutu, left, was a world-class kleptocrat; Bokassa, center, was a psychopath; Tombalbaye, right, ruled for 15 years, and came to a bad end.



Here is Chad's François Tombalbaye in his official finery. By and by he would be assassinated by his own military.



Prince Louis Rwagasore of Burundi was heir to his tiny nation's traditional throne. Two weeks after national elections in 1961 made him prime minister, he was assassinated at dinner in Bujumbura's Tanganyika Hotel. There was no official investigation.

assassinated afterwards to make way



Rwanda's Grégoire Kayibanda was deposed in a "bloodless" coup. Well, not quite bloodless: He and his wife were detained and eventually starved to death.

for other Big Men.



Sylvanus Olympio certainly had an exotic name to match his job as president of Togo in 1961. He met JFK, and shared his fate: In 1963, his body was recovered outside the U.S. Embassy in Lomé.



A 1940s crooner? Maître'd at the Plaza? No, it's Modibo Keita, Mali's first dictator — er, president. His disastrous policies led to his ouster, but he was rehabilitated in 1992, long after his death.



Patrice Lumumba was the first prime minister of the Republic of Congo. He was deposed and executed in 1961. He never made it onto a stamp in his home country; this one comes from the "other" Congo, formerly a French colony.

In Afghanistan, a succession of leaders were mowed down — sometimes after being formally lauded on postage stamps. Gruesome stuff.



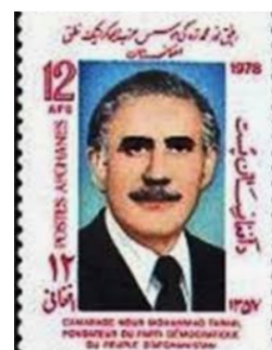
1972

Mohammad Musa Shafiq was appointed prime minister in 1972, just before King Zahir Shah was deposed. He was arrested and executed after the communist takeover in 1979. (This tribute stamp was issued in 2007, during the U.S. occupation.)



1978

Here is Mohammad Daoud Khan, signing Afghanistan's new constitution after helping to dethrone his cousin, King Zahir Shah, in 1973. In 1978 he was shot and killed in a gun battle outside the presidential palace.



1978

Here is President Nur Mohammad Taraki, who succeeded Khan. He didn't last long. .



1979

Here's another stamp featuring Taraki in his modest office. He was ousted and assassinated in 1979.



1980

After disposing of Taraki, Hafizullah Amin hardly had time to put out a stamp of himself. The Soviets, his former allies, invaded three months into his tenure and killed him.



1996

Mohammad Najibullah never made it onto a stamp, either, though he ruled during the Soviet occupation through the 1980s. The Taliban finally caught up with him in 1996. After his execution, his body was dragged through the streets of Kabul and hanged from a traffic light pole outside the presidential palace.



2001

This witty-looking fellow is, or was, Ahmad Massoud. A brilliant and charismatic military leader, he fought the Soviets as well as the Taliban, only to be assassinated by an Islamist cabal Sept. 9, 2001 — two days before 9/11. (This stamp was issued in 2002.)

For me, the case that bakes the cake against putting live people on stamps is the one that involves the man formerly known as Prince Andrew.

A bit of background: The world's first stamp in 1840 depicted a living person — Britain's Queen Victoria, just three years into her long reign. Since then,

monarchs around the world have graced postage stamps; their children as well.

Coronated in 1953, Queen Elizabeth II was pretty and photogenic, an ideal subject for stamps at home and in the sprawling British

Commonwealth. Stamps celebrated her long and happy marriage to Prince Philip. Stamps paid tribute to her children as they arrived — Charles, Anne, Andrew, Edward.



It's hard to look at a stamp featuring tiny Andrew with scorn and rebuke. It grows easier over time. I haven't done a detailed study of Andrew's *curriculum vita*, nor am I planning to do so. He went to prep school, was in the Royal Navy a long time, flew helicopters. He was a rowdy youth, eventually hitched up with Sarah Ferguson, about whom I also know little; nor do I need to know much more.



The pair wed in 1986 — unleashing a herd of stamps from the remaining outposts of the royalist British Commonwealth. **

** In 1986, stamp sets commemorating the marriage of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson were issued by British Commonwealth nations as follows:

- Antigua nos. 939-42
- Ascension 399-400
- Bahamas 655-8
- Barbados 731-4
- Barbuda 809-12
- Cayman Islands 560-1
- Dominica 970-73
- Gambia 635-38
- Great Britain 1154-5
- Grenada 1385-8
- Grenada Grenadines 758-61
- Jamaica 629-30
- Lesotho 545-8
- Maldives 1181-4
- Pitcairn Islands 275-6
- St. Helena 460-1
- St. Kitts 181-2
- St. Lucia 839-840
- Sierra Leone 769-72
- Seychelles 602-3
- Solomon Islands 567-8
- Tristan da Cunha 307-8
- Uganda 510-3
- Zambia 348-9
- Zil Elwannyen Sesel 119-20

Here you see Andrew in uniform; there he is, captaining a boat. You gotta admit, he's handsome in a loutish sort of way; and doesn't he dress up nice?

This longtime party buddy of Jeffrey Epstein's may be guilty of unspeakable and unmentionable acts — not that I've been paying much attention. Safe to say he stands condemned in the press and the public — and in the palace, where he has been stripped of his royal titles and perks.

No need to dwell on Andrew and Fergie — except to note the strangeness of this long-divorced couple still amicably sharing a house in London. (They are co-parents of two, by the way.)

Stamps featuring Andrew and Fergie are long out of circulation, curiosity items for collectors. Safe to say there won't be any more. (You can buy the complete "omnibus" series of Andrew-Fergie marriage stamps for under \$100. Why would you? I have no idea.)

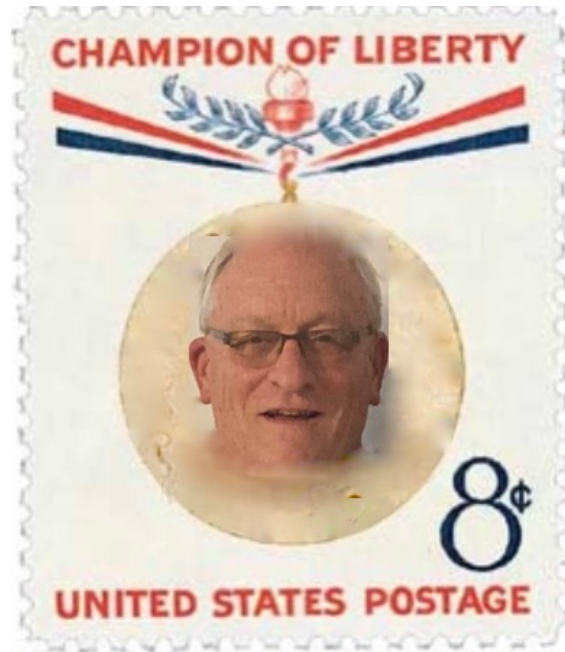
Just sayin' — to save the British future embarrassment, Royal postal authorities ought to think hard about the risks of honoring living people on their nation's stamps — fallible human beings who later on could fall from favor, or become globally touted rascals.



ENOUGH ALREADY!

POSTSCRIPT

If you have read this far and remain unconvinced about the wisdom of posthumous-only philatelic honors, brace yourself for the next images, which are admittedly not actual stamps but rather “cinderella” make-believe designs. One is a disturbingly believable rendering of what a Trump stamp might look like, gleaned from the Internet. The other I put together: a philatelic self-portrait.



To which I will only add this appeal to the USPS: Issue these stamps if you must, but please — wait till we’re dead!

THE END