

UNDER COVER

Gandhi's Truth

In Assam, Hindus and Muslims have been killing one another. In the United States millions of us have been attending *Gandhi*. The coincidence is jarring, and it ought to raise questions about the claim, circulated by the film's promoters, that Gandhi was "the man of the century."

As a political tactician, Gandhi was a Machiavelli in homespun, with a virtuoso's sense for his opponents' vulnerabilities, ingenious in inventing ways of taking advantage of those weaknesses, and with a very modern recognition of the political possibilities of the mass media. (One of the many virtues of Ben Kingsley's performance is that it captures both Gandhi's slyness and his sincerity.) His political detractors often point out that nonviolence—so perfectly calculated to distract, paralyze, and defeat an essentially liberal regime like the Raj—would not have been so apt to succeed against an opponent like Hitler. That criticism, however, ignores the possibility that Gandhi would have invented tactics suited to such an opponent. What seems undeniable is Gandhi's technical skill, and I suspect it is for that pragmatic power—the ability of one man to confront and defeat an empire—that so many Americans have come to admire him.

But Gandhi also aspired to be a law-giver, and here his credentials are not so strong. Gandhi struggled for a united India, but India, divided from its beginning, has now become three states. Nonviolent resistance was the centerpiece of Gandhi's political teaching; India has repeatedly appealed to arms and armaments, apparently relegating *satyagraha* to the cabinet of political relics. Gandhi suspected modern technology and urged the revival of village crafts; modern India puts the spinning wheel on her flag and the blast furnace in her policies.

Of course very few regimes live up to the hopes of their creators, but the aim of a great law-giver is at least recognizable in his or her creation. There is much to criticize in the thought of the American Framers, but contemporary America undeniably reflects their design. Gandhi failed to give political life to his most exalted hope. That result is a reflection, not on Gandhi's craft, but on his teaching.

In the first place, Gandhi's doctrine, seemingly so reverent toward embodied life, also involved a remarkable hostility toward the body and its needs. This was most evident in Gandhi's antisexual creed and in his rejection of bodily comforts. But the argument has other implications. The body must be resisted because it ties us more closely to those who are within range of its senses. The body is the root of familism, communalism, and nationalism—of all the human allegiances that strain our sense of duty to humanity *per se*—hence Gandhi's teaching that close friendships are a threat to righteousness.

It is hardly mysterious. Even if I am personally committed to nonviolence, how will I react if the wrong-doer threatens *you*? Gandhi answered that if those I care about are endangered, I have an obligation to put my body between them and the oppressor. But concern for you puts

the argument on special terms, since it argues that I *should* resist violently if such means would protect you where nonviolent means would fail.

If injury or death for the body is endurable in defense of what is right, it is difficult to see why the body of the enemy must be sacrosanct. Presuming that our only alternatives are the death of a good human being or the death of a bad one, there seem few reasons for preferring the former. Gandhi's argument turns on the proposition that the voluntary death of a good person is likely to daunt or redeem a bad one—to overcome evil by forcing it to confront its own nature. Yet this argument presumes that nonviolence *works* at least as much as it is *right*. This is, at best, a calculated risk. If I argue that nonviolence is humanly right, whether or not it protects you—which is Gandhi's ultimate position—I may be speaking truly, but you are likely to feel that my love and devotion are a bit impersonal. The proposition that I am only a part of the human whole appeals to my mind; it revolts my body and my senses. I can resist and overcome the body, given the strength and priority of its demands, only by the imperious rule of the will. At best, such rule is a kind of benevolent despotism—a raj within the soul exactly parallel to the external Raj against which Gandhi fought. British imperialism defined itself as the rule of reason aided by force over the anarchic passion that was India. Gandhi opposed British imperialism with an imperialism in the soul. But the body resists such sway as surely as India resisted the British: Like peoples, the body insists that some element of self-rule is better than the best alien rule. Politics hopes to educate the spirit, but it must govern the body, and fleshiness is its limiting term. Gandhi failed as a legislator because, fundamentally, he rejected political life, and he rejected politics because he rejected the specific conditions under which human beings live. There may be spiritual grandeur in this vision, but politically it falls short of the teaching that mortal life can accommodate the divine.

Assam is bound to make the British case, as *Gandhi* presents it, more persuasive to American audiences: Liberal imperialism argued that it was impossible and unnecessary to give India a common spirit. India could be held together and eventually united only by a "steel frame" of rationalistic institutions—the administration and the army, allied to modern technology and economic progress—capable of creating the material bases of political unity. Yet Assam is a rebuke to that view as much as it is to Gandhi's heritage. Gandhi understood that liberal secularism is superficial and fragile, winning no more than a weak devotion even from its champions. Gandhi's struggle against Britain demonstrated how much human beings, otherwise much divided, can unite in demanding something more. Whatever the other faults of his teaching, Gandhi revealed the truth that liberalism is not enough, and there is testimony to *that* truth even in the horrors of Assam.

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