

# UNDER COVER

## Mrs. Gandhi: Legacy of a Nationalist

Indira Gandhi was a dominating presence in the world as well as in India. Few contemporary political leaders even approach her political resilience, her cunning, and her forcefulness. Compared to her, Chernenko is a colorless bureaucrat, Kohl a worthy bourgeois, Reagan an amiable mountebank. During the 1984 vice-presidential debate, Geraldine Ferraro was asked if her lack of military experience—a code word for her sex—would disable her in the use of military force. Given the record of Mrs. Thatcher, Mrs. Meir, and Mrs. Gandhi, how could anyone ask so silly a question? Mrs. Gandhi used violence like a virtuoso: Her toughness was adamant and her bravery almost overbearing.

She was a successful war leader in 1971; she encouraged the development of Indian nuclear and space technology; in 1976, as part of her campaign to reduce India's birthrate, she forbade civil servants to have more than three children. She did not flinch at the use of force against the Sikh terrorists who were using the Golden Temple as a base of operations, and she did not shrink from risking and sacrificing her life in the pursuit of her convictions. India, with all its faults, is a model of democracy by the world's standards, due partly to the fact that Mrs. Gandhi, although she ruled autocratically for nearly two years, had the courage to restore democracy, to lose an election, and to yield power.

There was an authoritarian streak to her temperament, although that is not surprising. Politics—and democratic politics especially—requires bright and able people to conciliate knaves and to take oaths seriously, and it is not astonishing if they sometimes grow testy. Mrs. Gandhi could be wonderfully rude, as in her famous public impatience to escape from a 1967 interview with Richard Nixon, but her reaction surely must inspire sympathy, since even the American electorate eventually found Nixon too much to bear. Yet Mrs. Gandhi's inability to suffer political fools did not extend—as Alexander Hamilton's did—to a contempt for voters. She was adroit at oratory and the tumble of electoral politics, and she had a genuine faith in the

people. She reserved her disdain for the people's "pretended friends," the political leaders who did not share her vision.

For she was a visionary, entranced by the ideal of a united India, which had drawn her father before her. Nationalism was her leitmotif, and it made her contemptuous of leaders who would exploit and perpetuate India's divisions of religion, caste, class, region, and ethnicity. In the old days, nationalist argument claimed that this conflicting plurality was the result of Britain's policy of divide and rule; to Mrs. Gandhi, separatists and sectarians, like the imperialists before them, divided a nation meant to be one by appealing to the people's worst side, their ignorance and their fears. Devoted to an abstraction, the idea of India, Mrs. Gandhi was inclined to be ruthless with India in practice, intolerant of its rich complexity along with its parochiality and shortsightedness. Her strength was cerebral, not visceral; spirit at war with the senses.

Yet paradoxically, Mrs. Gandhi's devotion to India as a nation was combined with her peculiar familism, her attachment to the narrowest of political parochialities. She set out to make her son Sanjay her successor, and after his death turned to the much less able Rajiv, who has now taken his mother's place. Most explanations of this "dynasticism" seemed to have missed the point: Mrs. Gandhi turned to her sons because she felt she could trust no one else. Doubtless, she was certain that her sons would not become her rivals for power, but I suspect that it mattered more that Mrs. Gandhi relied on her ability to rule her sons' souls, to plant in them at least an approximation of her own nationalist faith.

Mrs. Gandhi's very fervor may have damaged the cause to which she dedicated her life. Democratic leadership is not measured by power or popularity but by the strength it imparts to political institutions and to public spirit. Democratic statecraft must aim to build the "mediating strata" that connect the public with the regime, shaping the patterns of politics and the habits of the heart that make democracy part of the life of a people rather than so many external forms. In those terms Mrs. Gandhi did not do well. The Congress party decayed under her leadership, and she expected the law to serve her purposes and policies. Distrusting the virtue and the public spirit of India's political leaders, Mrs. Gandhi excelled at manipulating their rivalries, stimulating their ambitions, and playing one faction against another in order to protect her own power. Ironically, she practiced the same divide-and-rule policy that she loathed; and in so doing, she accentuated distrust and political fragmentation, maximizing the political qualities she hated and sought to overcome. Perhaps she had no choice. It is at least possible, however, that India would have been better served had she been less ambitious for her country and had she cherished it less possessively.

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