

Why Gandhi Drives The Neoconservatives Crazy

by Jason DeParle

A year ago the story of Mahatma Gandhi was fast fading from memory. Those who were old enough might remember him from the newsreel footage that flashed in 1940s movie theaters—but recall little beyond the fact that he somehow brought the British empire to its knees. For the most part, Gandhi's fame had faded with the passing of time. He was just a foreign name connected to a distant land and a previous era.

Of course Richard Attenborough's film changed all that. Suddenly Gandhi was once again splashed across the pages of the world press. He has appeared in the film sections, in the style sections, on the op-ed pages, and in the Sunday magazines. Biographies have been rereleased, and foreign correspondents of an earlier day have gone digging for their notes. As an advocate of small-scale economics, Gandhi presumably would approve: a cottage industry has been spun out of Gandhiana.

As the reappraisals stack higher and higher, one would hope we'd all find ourselves getting closer to the elusive truth about one of the few indisputably great men of this century. Instead, however, we seem to be getting closer to something more mundane: the preoccupations and illusions of the left and the right. A review of the discussions and debates that Richard Attenborough's film biography has inspired provides a useful Rorschach of these ideologies, and some insights into where both camps go wrong in their view of contemporary America—to say nothing of colonial India.

The commentary ranges across a wide terrain. The liberal *Progressive*, for example, concluding that "Gandhiism . . . is relevant," argued that among the film's many messages is "the knowledge that diet is crucial to well-being." Given Gandhi's affection for such delicacies as groundnut butter and lemon juice—and his many nearly suicidal fasts—the *Progressive's* conclusions seem questionable. Ralph Nader, mean-

while, appropriated Gandhi on behalf of the consumer movement: never mind that Gandhi's asceticism had distinctly non-consuming proclivities.

Of course, most of the Gandhi discussion has focused on "peace." "In these days of raised consciousness about the nuclear threat," says *McCall's*, the film "speaks to the power of peace." *The Christian Century* had a similar thought: "It is good to be reminded of Gandhi's beliefs when the possibility of nonviolent conflict resolution as a substitute for war requires our serious consideration." So did *Newsweek*: "At a time of deep political unrest, economic dislocation, and nuclear anxiety, seeing *Gandhi* is an experience that will change many hearts and minds." Now *McCall's* doesn't reveal what it thinks the film says when it "speaks to the power of peace." Nor does *Newsweek* say what changes will come to our hearts and minds. But Colman McCarthy, a Catholic liberal, gets more specific. Writing in *The Washington Post*, he claims, "The relevance of *Gandhi* is that the moral force of nonviolence is always stronger than its opposite, the physical force of violence." *Gandhi* provided music to the liberals' ears. The weak triumph over the strong, good over evil, righteousness over injustice. Antiracism, anticolonialism, and nonviolence prevail.

On the other hand, a chorus of conservative voices has attacked the movie and attacked the man. Columnists like Patrick Buchanan and Emmett Tyrrell have joined the fray. The strongest words, however, have come from Richard Grenier, film critic for *Commentary*. Not satisfied with simply attacking the movie and the man, Grenier in a March article for the magazine went on to vilify all of India, all of Hinduism, and then to flail at a target closer to home, and close to the hearts of his fellow neoconservatives: American liberals. Grenier's 13,000-word tirade was widely reprinted and subsequently released as a book dedicated to Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter.

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If most debates about Gandhi tend to be passionate, this one has been particularly so. This is because the film touches upon issues prominent now in American politics. The release of the film comes at a time when the United States is engaged in a rancorous debate with itself about various issues involving questions of force. The legitimacy and the effectiveness of American military power underlay the debate about the United States's involvement in Vietnam and now underlie the debate about what to do in Central America. The fear that America has too much force fuels the passions of nuclear freeze supporters, while the fear that America has too little guides their opponents. The debate about *Gandhi*—and Gandhi the man—thus quickly becomes a debate about American politics.

Puff Job for Pacifism

I have watched these salvos fly back and forth with special interest because (I should confess) I am a Gandhi admirer. Remembering my own excitement in college while studying nonviolence—and when I had a chance to visit the Gandhi national museum while spending a summer in India—I can understand why the film has provoked such enthusiasm. Who can doubt it? The story of the world's greatest non-violent revolution is a magnificent one. Einstein got it right when he said, 'generations to come. . . will scarce believe that such a one as this, ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.' Perhaps it's Gandhi's greatness that makes him such a

polarizing topic of discussion. For the greatness tempts his admirers (myself included) to make him even greater, purer, less ambivalent, and less complex than he was, and to extend his solutions to situations where they may not work. The good about Gandhi was so sublime, and he embodies so many of our most idealistic hopes, that we want to tolerate no ambiguities and recognize no blemishes. The temptation to reduce (and that's the correct verb) Gandhi to parable is often irresistible. But surrendering Gandhi to the realm of myth inevitably invites a concentrated counterattack, against not only the sanctified Gandhi but the historical Gandhi as well. Too often, then, Gandhi becomes an all-or-nothing proposition, pitting those who would deify him against those who would destroy him.

The debate about *Gandhi* starts with an argument about the film as a film. The film's strength lies in its excitement and its ability to convey emotion; it wrenches a response from even the most coarsened viewer. Take, for example, the scene depicting Gandhi, the young barrister, being thrown from a segregated South African train. This specific story is well known, and expulsion from segregated quarters has become almost a cliché about racism. Yet when Gandhi lands with a thud upon the station platform, the viewer feels the sting, almost like discovering racism anew. *Gandhi* has that ability to summon outrage and empathy.

Attenborough's depiction of the famous 1930 march on the Dharasana Salt Works provides one



of the film's most powerful moments. United Press correspondent Webb Miller's often-quoted account of the scene is worth recalling: "In complete silence the Gandhi men drew up and halted a hundred yards from the stockade. A picket column advanced from the crowd, waded the ditches, and approached the barbed-wire fence. . . . Suddenly, at a word of command, scores of native policemen rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows upon their heads with their steel-shod lathis. Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins. From where I stood I heard the sickening whack of the clubs on unprotected skulls. The waiting crowd sucked in their breath in sympathetic pain at every blow. . . ." I had read and reread Miller's strong prose, and I knew the scene was coming. But I didn't cringe any less when it flashed on the screen, and others around me cringed too. Attenborough's re-creation of the scene turned theaters full of people into crowds who "sucked in their breath in sympathetic pain." *Gandhi* has many such powerful moments and they make the film memorable.

Skipping the Gita

But in many ways *Gandhi* is what journalists call a puff job. The film puts forth a "saintly" Gandhi without ever questioning whether that saintliness was real, or even desirable. George Orwell's appreciative but critical depiction of Gandhi, written in 1949, is worth recalling: "Of late years it has been the fashion to talk about Gandhi as though he were not only sympathetic to the left-wing movement, but were even part of it. . . . But one should, I think, realize that Gandhi's teachings cannot be squared with the belief that man is the measure of all things. . . . Gandhi's basic aims were antihuman and reactionary. . . it is not necessary here to argue whether the other-worldly or the humanistic ideal is 'higher.' The point is that they are incompatible."

The film doesn't seek a portrayal of Gandhi as a person with the contradictions, ambivalences, and failures that all people share; it projects a candidate for canonization. In Gandhi's case, the "flaws" (as we in the West might see them) and the "saintliness" both stemmed from the same source: Gandhi's fierce religious devotion.

The fervor behind his desire for moral perfection had its darker underside. Gandhi harbored an authoritarian streak which demanded that others adhere to his own code of morality and

treated them harshly when they failed to measure up to that code or rejected it altogether. Members of his ashrams, for example, were subjected to strict discipline on matters of sex, diet, prayer, work, education, clothing, and other matters. He distrusted close human relationships, viewing them as a source of temptation, and an impediment to his spiritual aspirations.

The burdens of Gandhi's moral fervor often fell most heavily on his own family. He imposed celibacy on his wife and children, opposed his children's education and marriage, and insisted that they join his campaigns, landing them in jail. Mahatmaship had the harshest effect on Harilal, Gandhi's eldest son, who became estranged from his father, converted to Islam, took to embezzlement, and died in drunken poverty. The film leaves the consequences of Gandhi's spiritual imperatives for the lives of his friends and families unquestioned. It also leaves unquestioned the consequences of those imperatives for public life. Gandhi's hunger fasts, for example, always carried with them the hint of blackmail.

The failure of the film to question the desirability of Gandhi's ascetic ideals is a minor fault. Its failure to question the limitations of nonviolence is a major one. *Gandhi* is a puff job for pacifism, even more credulous about nonviolence than was Gandhi himself. The film ignores Gandhi's own very real vacillations and contradictions with regard to nonviolence as an absolute. It makes no mention, for example, of the fact that Gandhi endorsed three British wars and himself attempted to enlist (he led an ambulance corps to support the war when the British refused to have Indians as soldiers in South Africa).

The most troubling issue raised by *Gandhi*, of course, is the effectiveness of nonviolence in confronting a Hitler, to which the film devotes a single line. Asked how nonviolence could stop the armies of Nazi Germany, the film *Gandhi* responds simply that evil must be opposed wherever it is found, and disappears from the screen. The historical Gandhi remained unable to come to grips with the Hitler question, and at various times advised the British to surrender and the Jews to commit collective suicide. (In 1941, Gandhi insisted to the British that "Hitler is not a bad man.")

The film concludes with the moral of the story spelled out, in case anyone should miss it. "Tyrants and murderers can seem invincible at the time, but in the end they always fall. Think of it. Always." The message is repeated twice. These

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are the last words of the film, and they are never questioned. It is an uplifting thought, but poor history—very much like Colman McCarthy's "the moral force of nonviolence is always stronger than its opposite, the physical force of violence," another noble sentiment that ignores the reality of places like Indochina, Afghanistan, and Central America.

Homespun Obsessions

Given these weaknesses in the film and even the man, it's hardly surprising to see a neoconservative critique appear that takes exception to the liberal reaction to *Gandhi*. But Grenier's review wasn't a critique so much as it was an epileptic seizure. The virulence of Richard Grenier's attack on the film and even the people of India seemed to know no bounds. What's all this stuff about nonviolence? "Hindus," says Grenier, "are among the most bestially violent people on the globe." What's all this stuff about Gandhi as a saint? He "was a man of the most extreme, autocratic temperament, tyrannical, unyielding, even regarding things he knew nothing about, totally intolerant of all opinions but his own." He "retained an obvious obsession with excreta." He dwelled in a "permanent state of semen anxiety." Gandhi, says Grenier, "believed in a religion whose ideas I find somewhat repugnant." Grenier continues at this moderate pitch for his entire review.

It is tempting to perform a point-by-point exegesis of the distortions, digressions, and deletions that characterize this review, but a few examples will have to suffice. For instance, Grenier first attacks India for its lack of sanitation. Then he attacks Gandhi's sanitary efforts for constituting a "morbid preoccupation with filth." He criticizes "swaraj" (home rule) as an idea "originated by others." Then he attacks Gandhi's doctrine of "satyagraha" (truth-force) for being something "he made up himself." Grenier even hints that the spokesman of nonviolence murdered his wife. "When Gandhi's wife lay dying of pneumonia and British doctors insisted

that a shot of penicillin would save her," he writes, "Gandhi refused to have this alien medicine injected into her body and simply let her die." Grenier fails to mention that Kasturbai Gandhi already lay on her deathbed, that oxygen and several doctors had been summoned but had failed to revive her.

Grenier's treatment of Hinduism is just as shoddy. "With the reader's permission," he writes, "I will skip over the Upanishads, Vedanta, Yoga, the Puranas, Bhakti, the Bhagavad Gita. . ." and so forth. Grenier goes on to devote much space to the practice of "suttee" (widow-burning), a practice officially abolished 40 years before Gandhi's birth—and one Gandhi specifically deplored. Perhaps ("with the reader's permission") Grenier would discuss Christianity by skipping over Genesis and Exodus, the Psalms, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and focus instead on the Crusades and the Inquisition—or the practice of, say, witch-hunting in Salem, Massachusetts.

What is it that sends Grenier into such a rage? To understand Grenier's reaction, it's necessary to understand neoconservatism. In the words of Irving Kristol, neoconservatism was "provoked by disillusionment with contemporary liberalism," and in many cases with good reason. Neoconservatives were right to argue that liberal reform often carried unintended, and undesirable, consequences. They were right to argue that the American left too often was given to knee-jerk condemnations of America. They were right to argue that some on the left had romanticized communism, revolution, and the Third World. They were right to argue that some on the left had unfairly disparaged the American values of family and the institutions of traditional religion. They were right to argue that America had enemies, and that it needed to be defended.

But the enemy isn't Gandhi—man or movie—and the topic isn't one that calls for a loyalty test, as Grenier would have it. I don't recall a single reference in the film to America. Gandhi never visited America. Perhaps when Grenier watched the British hit 1,516 Indians with 1,650 bullets at

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Amritsar it reminded him somehow of Bull Connor and My Lai and he saw anti-American overtones. I didn't, as Grenier fears, sniff out "the intimation. . . that we are a society with poorer spiritual values than, let's say, India." Whatever his reasoning, Grenier saw a need to devote the introduction to his book to telling us, "I appear to have been born (primitive and vulgar as this has been made to seem in subsequent decades) extremely patriotic. . . both my paternal and maternal grandparents. . . framed their Certificates of Naturalization on the wall. . . they pledged their allegiance to the Stars and Stripes with all their hearts. They were Americans." And so it goes: "I at no time, for even a blink of an eye, have admired Moscow, Havana, or Hanoi. . . I have found all the societies I have visited frankly inferior to our own." To Grenier, Gandhi can be admired only at America's expense.

This reveals a contradiction in the neoconservative vision of the world. While the neoconservatives are quick to celebrate American values as the best the world has to offer, they are distrustful of the consequences those values may bring. Gandhi understood that the British (and by extension all Western constitutional democracies) are vulnerable to being held up to their own standards. Countries less "good" than Britain (those that lack a free press, constitutional values, respect for human rights) are more readily equipped to handle the "challenge" of men like Gandhi; they might be content with simply putting a Gandhi to death. Gandhi knew the "goodness" of the British (their willingness to be held to their own professed values) was their weak spot.

Neoconservatives seem to fear that America—by braving the perils of dissent and democracy—will be similarly weakened. Part of what presumably makes America "great" is, theoretically at least, its reluctance to use force against other nations. Yet, fearful that standards such as this place us at a disadvantage in the real world, some neoconservatives advocate that America needs to win a war somewhere, to use violence successfully. Their insecurity would have

us violate American values—to mirror the hideous brutality of less open societies—in order to preserve them.

It becomes doubly ironic that—of all Third World leaders, of all "revolutionaries"—Gandhi would be the target of a neoconservative attack, because in many ways, he embodies the very values they promote. Neoconservatives value patriotism; Gandhi was a patriot. Neoconservatives believe in community—as did Gandhi. Neoconservatives believe in strict codes of personal morality, restraints on sexuality—as did Gandhi. Neoconservatives believe in respect for the traditional institutions of social and political authority, the church and the state—as, in his own way, did Gandhi.

What Gandhi didn't share, of course, was the neoconservatives' enthusiasm for unfettered capitalism. This points to another contradiction. On the one hand, neoconservatives claim to value service, community, and traditional codes of morality. On the other hand, they endorse the material self-seeking and worldly ambition that is fundamental to the laissez-faire marketplace. Gandhi's hopes for a decentralized, village economy sometimes tended to be utopian but he sensed correctly that industrialism doesn't necessarily promote—and may actually erode—community and traditional morality. A capitalist economy and the values Gandhi held aren't necessarily mutually exclusive; neoconservatives, however, do not even want to concede that they are inevitably in tension. It's almost as if the example of Gandhi—who more fully embodied some of the values that they often simply mouth—reminds neoconservatives of their own contradictions. The reminder seems to enrage them, and rather than assess Gandhi in a rational way, they attempt to dismiss him with lies, half-truths, innuendos, and racial slurs.

This helps explain not only the attack, but also its virulence. Gandhi poses a particularly inconvenient complication of the neoconservative view of the world. Neoconservatives have devoted immeasurable effort to reminding us of foreign

threats, and urging us to meet them with sufficient resolve and military hardware. To the liberal prejudice that truth always triumphs over force, neoconservatives reply the opposite: that force always triumphs over truth. The real lesson to be learned from the historical Gandhi is that truth may not always triumph, but it sometimes does. Tyrants and murderers may not always fall, but they sometimes do.

A final irony to the great Gandhi debate is that neither the left nor the right—both busy either making grand claims for nonviolence or dismissing it altogether—has paid much attention to where Gandhian tactics may have left their greatest legacy, which is right here in the United States. Speaking in a radio address in 1966, Martin Luther King Jr. paid tribute to the gains won by the civil rights movement by the use of nonviolence:

“The Civil Rights Commission, three years before we went to Selma, had recommended the changes we started marching for, but nothing was done until, in 1965, we created a crisis the nation couldn’t ignore. Without violence, we totally disrupted the system, the lifestyle of Birmingham, and then of Selma, with their unjust and unconstitutional laws. Our Birmingham struggle came to its dramatic climax when some 3,500 demonstrators virtually filled every jail in that city and surrounding communities, and some 4,000 more continued to march and demonstrate non-violently. The city knew then in terms that were crystal clear that Birmingham could no longer continue to function until the demands of the Negro community were met. The same kind of dramatic crisis was created in Selma two years later. The result on the national scene was the Civil Rights Bill and the Voting Rights Act, as the president and Congress responded to the drama and the creative tension generated by the carefully planned demonstrations.”

The influence of Gandhi on King was direct and profound; King had studied Gandhi and even traveled to India to meet Gandhi’s followers. King’s adherence to nonviolence as a standard surely saved the lives of thousands of black and white Americans. And to the extent that racial inequality has been lessened as a result, Gandhi remains a living legacy, one that brought the United States closer towards realizing its professed ideals. Fortunately, someone fell “prey to the pro-Gandhi-what-can-the-decadent-West-learn-from-the-idealist-East propaganda” that Grenier so derides. There’s nothing un-American about that. ■

THE WASHINGTON MONTHLY

Journalism Award

for May and June 1983 is presented to

**Robert Frump
and Timothy Dwyer**
Philadelphia Inquirer

Last February a rusting, dilapidated tanker capsized off the Virginia coast, taking 31 men to their deaths. In this painstaking investigation of the accident and its causes, the authors show how ship-owner greed, lax safety enforcement, and misguided federal efforts to protect the U.S. maritime industry from foreign competitors make such disasters all too likely in the future.

Dale Rice
Dallas Times Herald

To determine how well Dallas is teaching its elementary students to read, Rice didn’t just solicit the opinions of education bureaucrats and disgruntled parents. Rice visited elementary schools throughout Texas and discovered that students whose teachers broke down complex words into groups of letters—the “phonics” method—did much better than those in systems (such as Dallas’s) where the “look-see” method (“See Spot Run”) is preferred.

George Getschow
The Wall Street Journal

Getschow interviewed dozens of day laborers and then posed as one to reveal that the temporary labor market is rife with abuses, from dangerous working conditions to unscrupulous bosses whose exorbitant demands for “travel” and “housing” expenses often reduce a laborer’s pay to nothing.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to the best newspaper or magazine article (or series of articles) on our political system. Nominations from any newspaper or magazine in the country are welcome. The subject can be government in its federal, state, or municipal manifestation.

The award for articles published in August will be announced in the November issue. Nominations will close September 15. Nominations should be accompanied by two copies of the article or articles.