

Imperial Bedfellows

Gandhi and Churchill:
The Epic Rivalry
That Destroyed an Empire
and Forged Our Age

by Arthur Herman
Bantam. 681 pp. \$30.00

Reviewed by
Mark Falcoff

ARTHUR HERMAN is a prolific historian known principally for works on British history, most notably his remarkable *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*. In this new, massive tome he undertakes a dual biography of two of the most important figures of the 20th century, each of whom was a key personality in the struggle to preserve (or dismantle) the British empire.

There are many books on Gandhi and Churchill. But as far as I am aware, until now there has been no attempt to integrate the two men's histories. This is understandable. People who want books on Gandhi do not usually have a high opinion of Churchill, and vice-versa. Yet, as Herman shows, their lives were in many ways part of a larger fabric, an entire world that in terms of historical epochs has disappeared but recently. In order to tell his story, Herman stretches out a huge canvas on which he locates such disparate events as the 1857 mutiny in Cawnpore, the birth of Churchill at Blenheim palace, the suppression of

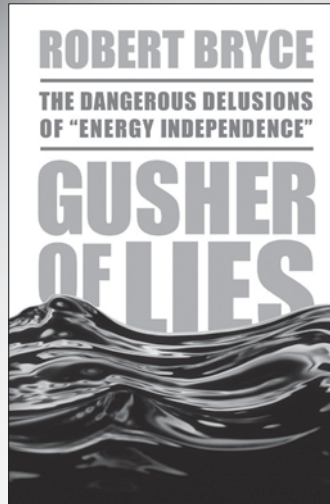
MARK FALCOFF is resident scholar emeritus at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

the Mahdist revolt in the Sudan, the Boer war, Gallipoli, the complicated negotiations among various Indian nationalist movements and the British Raj, the Japanese capture of Britain's East Asian empire, and, finally, the run-up to Indian independence. This is, in short, a detailed and richly filigreed account that introduces the Anglo-American reader to many facts and vivid

if little-known personalities, both English and Indian.

IT IS now some 60 years since the Afro-Asian peoples acquired their independence from their European colonial masters. During the first decades of the process, the literature about it, often written by citizens of the metropolitan powers, was overwhelmingly anti-imperialist. But the

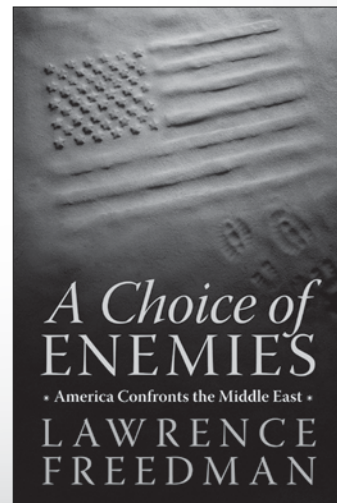
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emergence of so many failed states in Africa and South Asia could be ignored for only so long. The late historian Elie Kedourie, and the writers V.S. Naipaul and his late brother Shiva, all three of them ex-colonial subjects, were among the first to say out loud what many knowledgeable people had been privately thinking: namely, that the departure of European rule from the

former colonial world had been a disaster, and principally for the formerly colonized peoples.

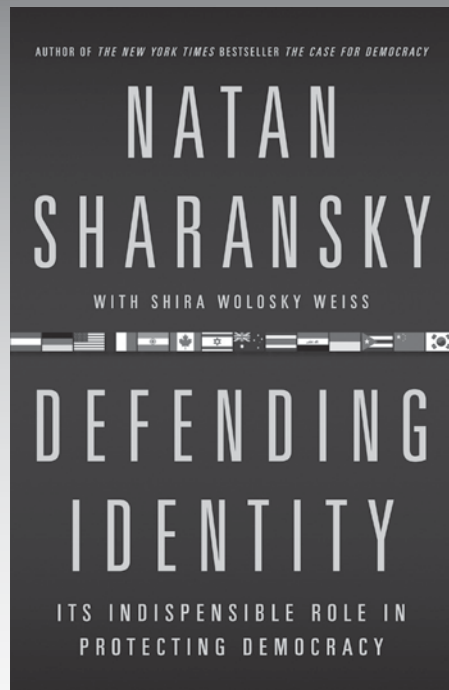
One could argue that India today forms a signal exception, especially given its recent economic indicators and its high-tech revolution. But the same is assuredly not true of the former Muslim areas of the Raj now known as Pakistan and Bangladesh. Moreover, as Herman's book shows,

the India that today is emerging as a dynamic society and a positive factor in international relations bears no resemblance whatsoever to Gandhi's own vision of a nation of primitive, self-sufficient villages. Conversely, all the horrors that attend the former Muslim areas confirm the rightness of Churchill's imperial warnings.

Paradoxically, both men began from much the same ideological locus—as loyalists of empire. The son of a wealthy Indian merchant, Gandhi arrived in London to study law, eventually becoming a barrister. Through an accident of family connections he started his professional practice in South Africa, where there was already a large and prosperous Indian community. Theoretically co-equal with other subjects of the empire, the Indians sided with the British in the Boer war. Gandhi even organized an ambulance corps of 1,100 volunteers, for which he and 37 others were awarded the War Medal. Apparently Gandhi was untroubled by racial distinctions as such; he merely believed that Indians were far superior to African blacks—or “Kaffirs” as they were then called—and deserved the franchise (which they were denied when, after the war, the British achieved reconciliation with their Boer adversaries at their expense).

The South African experience was one vector of Gandhi's intellectual development; the other was represented by his two periods of residence in London (1885-1888 and 1909-1910), during which he fell in with what George Orwell, a generation later, would characterize as “sandal-wearers and fruit-juice drinkers.” As Herman writes, since aristocratic London was “resolutely cosmopolitan, materialistic, and self-consciously modern. . . [its] opponents decided they would be esoteric, spiritual, and resolutely anti-modern.” Their countercultural gods were Edwin Arnold, John Ruskin, Tolstoy, and Edward Car-

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penter: back-to-the-land primitivists and fantasists.

Gandhi's particular genius was to see how to weave together the two opposing strands in a manner that would appeal to Anglicized upper-class Indians and illiterate villagers alike. By 1927 he had managed to bring together in his Congress party Hindu nationalists, Bengali nationalists, Sikh separatists, old-line loyalists, and cutting-edge socialists. He also had the good fortune to launch his movement at a moment when, thanks to the devastation of World War I, Europeans were losing faith in their own civilization. The environment in London, Paris, and Berlin was ripe for new ideologies and styles of life, and was fascinated by non-Western cultures.

Gandhi was introduced to a wide reading public through the Nobel laureate Romain Rolland, who produced an adoring biography of him in 1924. Even more important, he was the first third-world politician to understand how to exploit and manipulate the credulity of Western media. As early as 1912, when he left South Africa for good, he ceased to wear British clothes, and was often photographed with his spinning wheel. For most of his life his diet consisted of fruits, nuts, and goat's milk, a token of the saintly image he sought to convey. His famous "march to the sea" to protest the Raj's salt tax was staged mainly for the benefit of newsreel cameras, which conveyed the images around the world.

To be sure, not everybody was impressed. Churchill, for one, regarded Gandhi as "a fanatic and an ascetic of the fakir type well known in the East"—a judgment not altogether true, but not altogether false, either.

HERMAN'S PORTRAIT of Churchill will be far more familiar to most readers since the story has been told many times, most notably by Martin Gilbert in his monumental biography. The son of an aristocratic family connected with the dukes of

Marlborough, Churchill had seen service in the British army in the Sudan and South Africa. His father, whom he idolized and who died prematurely of syphilis in 1895, had served as secretary of state for India, and had been the principal spokesman on Indian questions for the Conservative party in the House of Commons. After leaving the army and entering parliament on his

own in 1900, Churchill took up his father's interests, eventually becoming undersecretary of state at the India office, in which capacity he met Gandhi for the first and only time.

Churchill's basic point of view in his imperial capacity was that "India" was an abstraction; without British rule, it was a heterogeneous continent made up of peoples who would otherwise be at each other's

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throats. Herman is skeptical of Churchill's prejudices and bugaboos, but tries manfully throughout this book to be fair to both of his protagonists. He summarizes the dilemma between them in these terms: "What the Indians needed [in order] to be free, the British could not afford to give up. What the British were willing to give up the Indians did not want." The "crux of the matter," he goes on to say, was "the communal problem"—that is, "the need to reassure India's multiple minorities that their rights would be respected in a democratic state dominated by a quarter-billion Hindus." This happy result did in fact finally occur in what is now India, but only after the shedding of enormous quantities of blood.

In some ways the careers of Gandhi and Churchill rose in inverse proportion to one another. Throughout the 1930's, the lingering wounds of the world war had made it impossible for the British

to face the challenge of a rising Japan and an aggressive Nazi Germany. Then, in World War II, the struggle to defeat the Axis exacted so enormous a price that, by the end, Churchill's vision of a worldwide empire appealed to almost nobody.

Were it not for this long continuum of European conflict, it is not at all clear that either Gandhi's protests or his periodic spells in British prisons would have led to his desired outcome. As it was, by 1945 Clement Atlee's Labor government was eager to let go of India in the interests of both financial prudence and socialist ideology. All Gandhi had to do was to wait for the last viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, himself somewhat inexplicably a man of the Left, to do the work for him.

Before this could be consummated, however, Gandhi himself fell to an assassin's bullet; the perpetrator was a young member of one of the extreme Hindu political organizations whose existence the Mahatma preferred to ignore or minimize. By this time, sectarian violence was fully under way throughout India. Gandhi had the good fortune to depart the scene before the full fruits of his movement—the partition of the subcontinent into two disconnected halves—became evident.

HERMAN'S VIEW is that the blame for the carnage lies more or less equally upon the shoulders of both Churchill and Gandhi. "If Churchill had offered postwar independence in 1940 instead of in 1942," he argues, "India might have had breathing space to work out a suitable framework for either a unified constitution or a peaceful India-Pakistan split."

Readers will have to decide for themselves whether this is a credible charge on Churchill's side of the ledger. As for Gandhi's derelictions, Herman writes that

for the sake of an unrealizable ideal [i.e., unity], he had undermined the last chance at a


peaceful settlement to India's freedom. . . . His decade-and-a-half of defiance of the law through civil disobedience had bred an atmosphere of contempt for social order, a celebration of recklessness and militance. . . . [B]y encouraging others . . . Gandhi helped to spread the dangerous fiction that all street action was soul force and vice-versa.

Above all, Gandhi never really came to terms with the price that Indian society would have to pay for the departure of British rule—or for that matter, with the lasting benefits it would ultimately derive from its previous lengthy experience under imperial tutelage. That is but one of the ironies, if a very large one, that are brightly illuminated by this scrupulous, compelling, and un-failingly instructive book.

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