

# Our infantile search for heroes

By Johann Hari

*People who are heroic in one respect can be fools or monsters in another*

**D**O you find yourself staring at the television and pining for a good leader – a person who will rise and make the world right again? Do you long for a Mandela, a Churchill, a Gandhi? Then grow up. Our political debate – what passes for it – increasingly focuses on a search for an elusive Messianic leader who will show us the way. This is the opposite of rational politics.

This search for leaders is based on a desire to return to childhood – to snuggle into the political cot and close our eyes, knowing daddy is outside watching over us. The highest compliment we pay to a politician is to call him “father of the nation”. I feel this urge too. It is difficult and disturbing to try to figure out what is wrong in the world, and how to put it right. How much more tempting to simply snuffle out somebody who you think is good and decent and kind, elect them, and assume they will sort it all out.

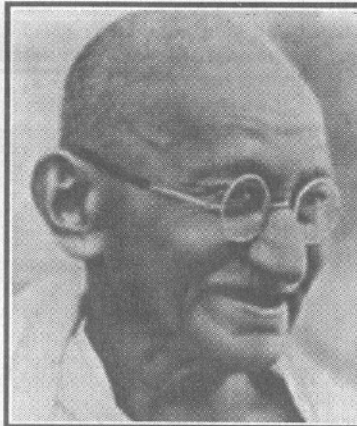
But this discourages us from doing the one thing that might actually solve these problems – figuring out solutions for ourselves then going out and campaigning to make them happen. Every civilising advance in history – from workers’ rights to women’s rights to gay rights – was won because ordinary people banded together and agitated for it. If we had waited for a good leader to hand it down from above, we would still be waiting today.

There is a bigger danger still. It is that, in finding a “good” leader, we then

blindly follow them into dark and fetid places. Let’s look first at a leader whose ninetieth birthday we are celebrating this week: Nelson Mandela. Nobody needs to be reminded of his stunning heroism in the fight against apartheid. But because they were so awed by that, most South Africans followed him unquestioningly as he perpetuated economic apartheid – and worsened the most extreme economic inequality on earth.

Apartheid was not just a system of laws; it was an economic system where a tiny white elite owned almost everything. By 1990, the elite realised they could no longer maintain the laws – but they fought desperately to maintain economic control. They demanded that the land and resources they had stolen from poor blacks be recognised in the constitution as theirs, and never redistributed. They demanded that the new democracy pick up all of apartheid’s debts, making spending to lift up the poor majority impossible. They demanded the recognition of “intellectual property rights”, making the distribution of cheap Aids drugs unaffordable. They demanded their apartheid finance minister and head of the Central Bank continue in position. Western governments, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank piled in behind them in support.

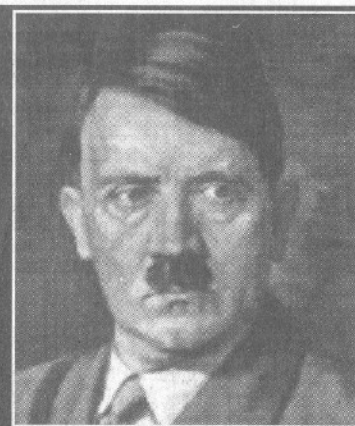
Mandela agreed to it all. He discreetly buried the ANC’s Freedom Charter, with its commitments to clean water, free healthcare and land for all. The result is that today whites own 70 per cent of the South African economy, despite being only 10 per cent of the population. Mandela believed this deal was the only way to prevent white flight



Mahatma Gandhi



Winston Churchill



Adolf Hitler

Gandhi’s shimmering qualities don’t need to be rehearsed here – but who now remembers that he killed his wife, and told Europeans to allow the Nazis to conquer their continent?

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and increase poverty. But he was wrong. Since the fall of apartheid, average life expectancy has fallen by 13 years. The black unemployment rate has doubled. This isn’t because white ruled ceased; it is because it continues today, with a new black corporate logo.

People who are heroic in one

respect can be fools or monsters in another. If we look at two of the most admired leaders of the twentieth century, this becomes even clearer. Mahatma Gandhi’s shimmering qualities don’t need to be rehearsed here – but who now remembers that he killed his wife, and told Europeans to allow the Nazis

to conquer our continent?

The British occupiers of India jailed Gandhi and his wife Kasturba in 1942, and she soon developed bronchial pneumonia. Their son Devadas turned to the obvious solution: penicillin. But because of his Hindu fundamentalism, Gandhi believed “Western” medicine – medicine

# heroic leaders

that had been tested in clinical trials to make sure it works - was immoral. He said she should drink muddy water from the "Holy" Ganges instead. Whenever Kasturba flickered into consciousness, he told her she would "bankrupt (his) faith" and hers if she took penicillin. So she died. Six weeks later, Gandhi himself got ill with malaria - and glugged down the "Western" medicine happily. For the rest of his life, he continued to condemn the medicines that had saved his life, and told his followers to eschew them.

Gandhi's response to Nazism was even worse. He said the peoples of Europe should let Hitler and Mussolini conquer and "allow yourselves, man, woman and child to be slaughtered". And the Jews? They "should have offered themselves to the butcher's knife. They should have thrown themselves into the sea from cliffs ... Collective suicide would have been heroism." It would be "immoral", he said, to fight back. Again, this was a result of his absurd superstitious beliefs.

What about Gandhi's nemesis, Winston Churchill? Today we only remember his heroic opposition to Nazism. But while he was against gassing and tyranny in Europe, he was passionately in favour of it for "uncivilised" human beings whose riches he wanted to seize. In the 1920s, Iraqis rose up against British imperial rule, and Churchill as Colonial Secretary thought of a good solution: gas them. He wrote: "I do not understand this squeamishness. I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes". It would "spread a lively terror".

He was quite clear about why Britain should do this. He explained: "We have engrossed to ourselves an altogether disproportionate share of the wealth and traffic of the world mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force".

Don't misunderstand me. There are no perfect leaders, but there are always better and worse ones. I would have backed Gandhi against Churchill, and Churchill against Hitler - while always condemning their flaws.

You can see this principle in the current US election. Barack Obama is considerably better than John McCain - but he too has his dreadful drawbacks we will have to oppose. He has pledged, if he wins, "Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided" - a pledge that would make any proper two-state solution impossible. He has defended the right of Colombia's hard-right government to invade its neighbours. Faced with this, you can't give up: support the great parts of his programme - like expanding healthcare in the US - and oppose the bad. Be a political adult.

Human beings are invariably flawed. Every person who is capable of moments of greatness is also capable of cruelty or stupidity. The only way to check this is for us to be constantly watching each other - even the best amongst us - and to never be blinded by admirable acts. We will never reach a point where we find the good leader and can sigh, sit back, and relax. If you care about the state of the world, you have to keep watching and pressuring and fighting, forever. COURTESY THE INDEPENDENT