

A Cautionary Tale for Americans
By Pankaj Mishra

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The Bullet's Song: Romantic Violence and Utopia
by William Pfaff
Simon and Schuster, 368 pp., \$27.95

In the early 1920s, during the first of his long spells in prison, Mohandas Gandhi read *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Many of his British friends had recommended it to him; they probably thought it a useful book for Gandhi to read while confronting a powerful empire. But Gandhi was only partly impressed by Gibbon. He admired Gibbon's marshaling of "vast masses of facts." But, as he put it, "facts are after all opinions." He claimed that his Indian ancestors had done well to ignore history and seek philosophical wisdom in the *Mahabharata*, the account of a terrible war that apparently occurred in India in the first century BC. For, as he wrote, "that which is permanent and therefore necessary eludes the historian of events. Truth transcends history." [1]

What was this permanent and necessary truth of the *Mahabharata*? Certainly it had little to do with affirming the greatness of extinct empires and civilizations or even with historical facts—the epic, as Gandhi emphasized, was full of supernatural events. The truth lay in the *Mahabharata*'s portrait of the elemental human forces of greed and hatred: how they disguise themselves as self-righteousness and lead to a destructive war in which there are no victors, only survivors inheriting an immense wasteland.

As Gandhi saw it, there was no clear-cut good or evil fighting for supremacy in the *Mahabharata*. The epic depicted a world full of ambiguities, where the battle between good and evil actually went on within individual souls, and where human beings had to make their own moral choices and strive for virtue. Though unconcerned with facts, the *Mahabharata* taught the importance of an ethical life based upon individual self-examination. History, Gandhi claimed, couldn't do this, certainly not "history" as it is understood today, "as an aid to the evolution of our race."

Gandhi was right to suspect that history in the twentieth century meant something more than how the first great historians Herodotus and Thucydides had seen it: as a record of events worth remembering or commemorating. [2] Many people in Western Europe, which had known a period of extraordinary dynamism in the nineteenth century, had concluded that history described humanity's progress to a higher state of evolution—a rational process whose specific laws could be known and mastered just as accurately as processes in the natural sciences, and which backward natives in colonized societies could be persuaded or forced to duplicate.

The notion that history is a meaningful narrative of progress shaped by human beings existed in no major traditions of Asia or Africa. As William Pfaff pointed out almost four decades ago, modern Western culture had first "practiced the belief that the physical and social environment of man is subject to rational manipulation and that history is subject to the will and action of man." It was the faith in rational manipulation that had powered the political, scientific, and technological revolutions of the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it had also been used to explain and justify Western domination of the world.

Though not an intellectual, Gandhi had a shrewd underdog's awareness of how powerful men from the world-conquering nations and empires of the West often obscured their worst excesses –

slavery, massacres, despotism, and the destruction of traditional arts, crafts, and languages – by presenting themselves as the avant-garde of humanity's march to a glorious future. He could sense that a quasi-scientific theory of history, which justified dishonorable means by pointing to noble ends, could, as Camus wrote in 1951, "be used for anything, even for transforming murderers into judges."

1.

Writing during the cold war, Camus denounced Soviet Communists and their Western supporters for their blind faith in the ideology of history, which he held largely responsible for the great and peculiar violence of the twentieth century – "slave camps under the flag of freedom, massacres justified by philanthropy." [3] But Camus failed to point out how a mode of reasoning that retrospectively justified past crimes and legitimized present ones for the sake of an unknown and unknowable future had been embraced by even those political elites that claimed to represent the "free world" or "Western civilization."

As William Pfaff wrote in *The Politics of Hysteria: The Sources of Twentieth-Century Conflict* (1964), an original and provocative book he coauthored with Edmund Stillman, "The West does not like to admit this fact about itself": that it "has been capable of violence on an appalling scale, and has justified that violence as indispensable to a heroic reform of society or of mankind." He pointed out that "the atomic bomb, napalm, phosphorus raids, and indiscriminate area bombing were American and British techniques, used in a "mission of bringing liberty to the world."

He asserted that the "passion to change history and the world" which admits "none of the compromise and quietism of certain other civilizations" has resulted in disasters on an unprecedented scale: how while shaping the extraordinary success of the West, this Faustian passion had also incited the West's often brutal conquest of the world, and caused Europe itself in the twentieth century to degenerate, after the relatively peaceful nineteenth century, into two world wars, totalitarianism, and genocide. "To be a man of the modern West," he wrote, "is to belong to a culture of incomparable originality and power; it is also to be implicated in incomparable crimes."

Pfaff has continued to describe unsentimentally the full implications of the great material success of the West in his columns on international affairs for the *International Herald Tribune*, and such books as *Condemned to Freedom* (1971), *The Wrath of Nations: Civilization and the Furies of Nationalism* (1993), and *Barbarian Sentiments: America in the New Century* (2000). Before turning to intellectual journalism, Pfaff had served in the Korean War, and helped American "political warfare" against Soviet communism during the early years of the cold war. This experience appears to have made him particularly alert to the trauma and resentments of societies conquered or manipulated by the modern West.

His broad-ranging intellectual and emotional sympathies distinguish him from most foreign policy commentators who tend to serve what they see, usually narrowly, as their "national interest." Pfaff is also indifferent to, and often brusquely dismissive of, the modish theories that describe how and why dominoes fall, history ends, and civilizations clash – "theoretical formulations" that Pfaff believes policymakers periodically come up with in order to legitimize "the huge material and intellectual investment American society has made in the apparatus of national defense and international engagement."

In his new book, *The Bullet's Song: Romantic Violence and Utopia*, a long essay on utopian violence, Pfaff returns to examining many of his themes – the Western faith in progress, the individual and national fantasies of changing history and the world. He reiterates his conviction

that "the idea of total and redemptive transformation of human society through political means" is the "most influential myth of modern western political society from 1789 to the present days." Pfaff is especially wary of its "naive American version," which "although rarely recognized as such, survives, consisting in the belief that generalizing American-style political institutions and economic practices to the world at large will bring history (or at least historical progress) to its fulfillment."

Some years before the Bush administration decided to spread democracy and freedom around the world, Pfaff had warned that although the "totalitarian utopian movements of the past ended with the collapse of Nazism and Marxism," the "utopian impulse is not exhausted in the United States, where it has always been an element in the national sense of self." "Americans," Pfaff wrote in a recent column in the *International Herald Tribune*, "do not conceive of themselves as inheritors of a Western legacy of Promethean violence." This may be because, as Pfaff asserts in his new book, "America largely excluded itself from the inner history of the twentieth century, which was written in Europe, and mostly at Europe's expense." Few Americans experienced the trauma of the destructive wars and totalitarian regimes that forced such European writers and thinkers as Paul Valéry, Robert Musil, Thomas Mann, Karl Jaspers, and Albert Camus to examine the larger assumptions of their compatriots, their hitherto unchallenged confidence that science or communism or free trade would create a bright future for humanity.

Pfaff, who has lived in Paris for many years, often writes in his columns about why Europeans, who have not forgotten their own disastrous experiments with utopia, are wary of the Bush administration's mission to remake the world. Much of his new book reads as a cautionary tale for Americans in the new century, which, he notes, "has begun in futile manipulations of the intellectual remnants of progressive thought." Its discursive, essayistic form combines memoirs and reflections on war with brief biographies of men and women who "saw in violence or its intellectual counterpart, manipulation, means to redemptive political change and the possibility to impose through action as well as art significant form upon historical materials and experience."

Pfaff writes admiringly about Simone Weil, whose political activism and intellectual work flowed out of her spiritual ideals of self-examination, empathy, and compassion. But most of his biographical subjects are writers and artists with a craving for large-scale drama and publicity – people who wished to and often did change the world, if only for the worse. They include T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia"), who as a British intelligence officer during the First World War encouraged Arabs to revolt against their Ottoman overlords in Turkey; Ernst Jünger, the German author of the World War I memoir *Storm of Steel* and a former Nazi; Gabriele D'Annunzio, the nationalist Italian poet with a weakness for political drama; Willi Münzenberg, the Communist propagandist; André Malraux, the French novelist with a gift for self-fabrication; and Arthur Koestler, the Hungarian-English writer who embraced communism and anticommunism with equal fervor.

His tormented inner life makes T.E. Lawrence seem the most complex of Pfaff's subjects. Lawrence spent four hard years imagining that he was bringing political independence to Arabs suffering from Ottoman misrule. As it turned out, Britain and France divided up the Ottoman Empire into zones of influence after the First World War, leaving a mortified Lawrence to realize that he had been part of a British effort to secure the "corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia."

Pfaff seems right to claim that Lawrence, though a self-confessed failure, has had a "very large and very strange" influence on the "Western mind." His own early readings in Lawrence's memoir *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* led Pfaff to join the military and US Special Forces, and then work as a "political warfare operator" during the early years of the cold war. In the 1940s and

1950s, the upper-class, Anglophilic members of the OSS and CIA seem to have had Lawrence of Arabia on their minds as they undermined governments they saw as unfriendly to the United States. Even as late as 2001, in an era of high-tech weapons, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld appeared vulnerable to the myth of the brave white warrior leading barbaric tribes when, at a press conference during the war in Afghanistan, he proudly displayed blown-up pictures of Special Forces men on horseback helping Abdul Rashid Dostum, the brutal Afghan warlord, emerge from exile.[4]

Pfaff is less interested in the romantic role Lawrence created for himself as a British secret agent in the Middle East than in how he saw his own actions and their consequences. In Pfaff's subtle reading, Lawrence was trying to live by Edwardian standards of "rectitude, honor, and chastity" that were growing obsolete as big commercial empires fought each other for control of the world. As Pfaff puts it, "The realities of guerrilla war among an Islamic people...were beyond the moral resources of that English conception of life and conduct by which he had set out to live."

Pfaff shows how Lawrence stayed loyal to his high ethical standards even as the business as usual of empire came to mock his personal commitment to the Arabs. Instead of blaming his superiors or the political system he served, Lawrence assumed personal responsibility for his failure, and led a self-consciously "penitential life." "Self-degradation is my aim," he wrote. He wished "to make me impossible for anyone to suggest for a responsible position." Lawrence seems to have realized that the era of chivalry and individual heroism was past, and that it was merely a form of self-deception to have imagined himself making history while working as a replaceable cog in the ruthless economic and military machines of the modern era—a bitter lesson that the latter-day imitators and versions of Lawrence – the CIA and Special Forces officers looking for their own private Arabia in Afghanistan and Iraq – may yet learn.

2.

Pfaff believes that "the moral function of war" has been to "recall humans to the reality at the core of existence: the violence that is part of our nature and is responsible for the fact that human history is a chronicle of tragedies." He writes perceptively about Vladimir Peniakoff, a restless, literary-minded Belgian, who found great happiness and contentment in running a private army in the North African desert during the Second World War. Boldly venturing behind enemy lines, Peniakoff seemed almost self-consciously to reject the impersonal ways of modern warfare, which, waged by machines, is mostly about efficient slaughter.

However, André Malraux believed that while it degraded human beings, technology also opened up fresh opportunities for existential heroism. "Man," he asserted, can "build his greatness, without religion, on the nothingness that crushes him" and the sense of meaninglessness and lack of conviction could drive him to "extreme action." Upholding Lawrence's bold mission ("of hustling into form, while I lived, the new Asia which time was inexorably bringing upon us") Malraux claimed to have helped the Communist revolution in China. He also claimed to have been wounded while fighting in the Spanish civil war, and then was largely an absentee member of the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation of France, before becoming, in his strangest career move, Charles de Gaulle's cultural minister and emissary to Mao and Nehru.

With his many little deceptions, Malraux resembles the totalitarian thinker whose most significant quality, as Hannah Arendt once defined it, is "extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it." Although, as Pfaff points out, Malraux lied mostly about himself, this engagé intellectual now appears a prototype of the ambitious ideologues of our time who busily create virtual realities for the rest of us, the

"reality-based community," to inhabit – even as the Asia they wish to hustle into form becomes ever more intractable.

It is sobering to think that, as Pfaff says, "the disordered and morally catastrophic century in which the persons in my book live might represent our future and not only our past." Toward the end of *The Bullet's Song*, Pfaff reconsiders the idea that history is a narrative of progress shaped by human will. He points out that most of the intellectually powerful figures of the last two centuries – Alexis de Tocqueville, Edmund Burke, Jacob Burckhardt, Lord Acton, Reinhold Niebuhr, Raymond Aron, Hannah Arendt, George Kennan – were "hostile to the progressive view of history." Pfaff believes that there is actual progress only in technology, and he remains skeptical about what it amounts or leads to:

Man has improved in competence, knowledge, and manners. He eats with a fork, uses the computers he has invented to spare him myriad boring tasks, and conducts his wars, when he can, in a way that allows him to avoid the distress of a direct encounter with the pain he inflicts on his victims. This is a form of progress from the axe-wielding and pelt-wearing human past. Western man also today assumes that gadgetry and industry will continue to leap forward in near-geometric progressions. He is beckoned by technology toward a future in which human consciousness is superseded by a more accommodating virtual reality, and invited by economists to a seamless global marketplace that creates ruinous disruptions in the short term allegedly to provide universal happiness in the long term. Where all this will really end, only God would know, should He (She) still exist. Pfaff notes that despite the ample evidence against them provided by the barbarisms of the twentieth century, "naïve and desiccated versions of the theory of historical progress provide a vocabulary in which the declarations of governments are still phrased, editorials written, and a good deal of the routine work of the academy is conducted." This may be because what he calls "the myth of secular salvation" had "generally replaced religion in Western high culture" in the nineteenth century. Certainly the current version of this myth – that democracy, free enterprise, globalization, and technology will save humanity from violence and chaos – is now commonplace among powerful elites around the world, invisibly shaping the prejudices and assumptions that an average issue of *The Economist*, or a column by Thomas Friedman, contains. But as Pfaff put it in *Condemned to Freedom*,

A faith that the free play of market forces will eventually end in Good is, in fact, more "absurd" than religious belief, for there, at least, there is a presumption of an intelligent Agent Who writes straight with His crooked lines.

Many writers nearing the end of their careers tend to grow pessimistic about the state of the world. But then Pfaff has seen events that grimly vindicate much of what he has written over the previous four decades, particularly in *The Politics of Hysteria*, which, though published at the height of the cold war, as a warning against its paranoia and delusion, remains a marvel of intellectual vigor and moral subtlety. Pfaff described in it how "our tangled Western accomplishments of technology, mass movement, popular wealth, and individualism – and of ideology and total war – dominate the contemporary world." Such extraordinary success provoked foreboding rather than self-congratulation:

In the modern world there is no real alternative to the purposive and aggressive culture of the West. All the other ways by which men have organized their existence and sensibility have been shattered in the past three hundred years by the dual impact upon the world of Western industrialism and political philosophy. The consequence is that the modern West can no longer be quite distinguished from its victims – in short, from the larger modern world.

Such views immediately set Pfaff apart from many Western scholars and writers who try to define what is wrong with Islam, the Middle East, or Muslims by taking the modern West as a superior and largely unquestionable standard – as a culture and civilization existing in splendid isolation from the rest of the world. But then, as Pfaff once wrote about Asia, "the radical and disruptive remaking of its life and society – the challenge to Asians' understanding of existence itself, made by the West's four-century-long intrusion – is ignored or simply not understood by Western policymakers and observers."

Pfaff has not only been aware of the profound social and psychological effects of Western colonialism upon the older societies of Asia and Africa; he also knows how the postcolonial attempt to Westernize these societies, usually seen benignly as a process of "development and progress" in the West itself, is often experienced by its presumed beneficiaries. Writing after September 11, he once again challenged the widely held Western assumption that everybody must eventually become like us.... Westernization, to westerners, means liberation.... For people in other societies, westernization frequently means destruction, social and moral crisis, with individuals cast adrift in a destructured and literally demoralized world. Cultural and political disorientation, violent resistance to the intruder, and attempts to recapture a lost golden age are natural reactions to this. We see all of this today. Pfaff has always insisted that "really to understand the contemporary political crisis it is necessary to understand the West; it is the Western world which has made the modern crisis, because it is the West which has made the modern world." In his complex view, radical Islam in the Middle East and religious-political fundamentalism in America appear not so much as eruptions of a medieval religiosity as deeply materialist ideologies that strive for secular rather than spiritual power in the modern world that the West made. Pfaff doesn't think it likely that "the non-western world, its own traditions pulverized, [will] cope any better than we with the destructive impulses of the modern political and industrial life that we ourselves originated." As he wrote in *The Politics of Hysteria*, four decades before September 11:

If it is true that the West has characteristic crimes in its past, as well as those manifest virtues we are quick to acknowledge, then we must face the possibility that a disposition to these crimes – primarily a crime of ideological violence – is neither burned out in our West itself nor precluded in those vaster regions of the world now being swept into the ambiguous experiences of our own disordered Western past.

Almost half a century after Pfaff wrote this, the non-Western world appears full of botched experiments in Western-style nation-states, with millions of people uprooted from tradition but still far from the benefits of modern society and increasingly susceptible to political and religious extremism. However, neither the so-called failed states nor radical Islam-ists threaten the West in the long term as much as the old countries that are widely perceived as successes of Westernization: India and China.

As they make themselves over in the image of Western consumer societies, these populous nations seek a progressively larger share of the world's energy resources that the West, particularly the United States, has monopolized for so long.[5] Rising American demand for oil imports after the Second World War deepened US involvement in the Middle East; the growing energy needs of India and China will no doubt make them assertive beyond South and East Asia. And just as a newly Westernized and ambitious Japan in the early twentieth century had challenged the West, so India and China are likely to become more aggressive with the nations they emulate at present. Pfaff had warned in *Barbarian Sentiments* that continued American military presence in Asia is likely to lead to a conflict with China. More Asian nations armed with nuclear weapons may also seek to undermine the long supremacy of the West.

Alarmed at this prospect, many policymakers and pundits in the West find consoling the American neoconservative vision of a "United States whose military power was so awesome that it no longer needed to make compromises or accommodations (unless it chose to do so) with any other nation or groups of countries." [6] No amount of awesome military power seems likely to realize this dangerously naive vision of a "unipolar world." But, as Andrew Bacevich, a foreign policy analyst who, like Pfaff, served in the US military, writes in his new book, *The New American Militarism*, the "collision between American requirements and a non-compliant world...may well doom the United States to fight perpetual wars."

Bacevich thinks that these wars will be justified to the American public and the larger world "in terms of ideals rather than interests." Pfaff also sees a future of "totally self-interested power struggles," which are disguised by the rhetoric of democracy and free enterprise. It makes him more partial to a politics that looks for "solutions within, rather than without, in experienced reality rather than imagination about the future." He believes that a society's first task is to attend to its own imperfections: "The only thing we can remake is ourselves." On the next-to-last pages of *The Bullet's Song*, he quotes George Kennan: "Any message we try to bring to others will be effective only if it is in accord with what we are to ourselves." Pfaff agrees with Kennan that "despite all its material difficulties," the world is still ready to recognize and respect "spiritual distinction" in a nation.

"Spiritual distinction" may not appear to advance the national interest, such as it is defined these days. And Pfaff's belief that "the pursuit of virtue" is "the only proper pursuit for a human being" is likely to look quaint to foreign policy analysts – closer to the truth of the *Mahabharata*, as Gandhi saw it, or to the wisdom of the classical Greeks, than to the imperatives of US foreign policy. But it explains why he has remained, for over four decades, immune to the delusions that power as great as America's invariably creates – what now makes him a persuasive, if melancholy, guide to the new politics of hysteria that threatens to make the new century even bloodier than the one just past.

Notes

[1] "My Jail Experiences – XI," *Young India*, September 11, 1924, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting), Vol. 29, pp. 134–135; available at www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html.

[2] For a stimulating account of the many perceptions of history see R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford University Press, revised 1993). See also Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern," in *Between Past and Future* (Viking, 1961).

[3] *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower (Penguin, 1971), p. 11.

[4] The best-selling book by Robin Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden: Task Force Dagger* (Random House, 2003), celebrates some of the CIA and Special Forces officers and their Afghan beneficiaries. But the book seems to have required drastic revision since last year when one of its heroes, Jack Idema, was caught while torturing Afghan civilians in Kabul. Idema is presently serving eight years in a Kabul prison. See Mariah Blake, "Tin Soldier: An American Vigilante in Afghanistan, Using the Press for Profit and Glory," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January–February 2005.

[5] The United States now consumes one out of four barrels of oil produced worldwide. In the period up to 2020, China is likely to match America's demand for oil. With its growing middle

class, India is unlikely to be very far behind. See "Rivals and Partners," *The Economist*, March 5, 2005.

[6] James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (Viking, 2004), p. xii.

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