

Criticizing an Icon

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I guess it is always risky to criticize an icon. In this case, I am going to take on Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC).

When I was recently in the United States, I visited some friends in Maine who took me to a teen choir concert by a group called Village Harmony. Among the four leaders was a woman from South Africa. So naturally, the concert had a good number of rousing South African songs. But I objected to one. It was called "The Machine Gun" and glamorized the ANC switch in the early 1960's from non-violent direct action against the apartheid regime to one of violent resistance. I think that this was a great mistake (I also thought so at the time it happened). I wrote an email to Village Harmony to express my displeasure. So I thought that I would give you my thinking at length.

Here are some of the implications of that decision to the fight for equality in South Africa.

1. Non-violent direct action, which the ANC had promoted from its beginnings in 1917, is a grass-roots mobilization of large numbers of concerned people. Violent revolution is the work of a small elite group that is willing to be trained, follow hierarchical orders, willing to kill others/destroy property, and to risk long term imprisonment or death. At the time of this decision the ANC was well aware of this change.
2. The resort to violence forced the South African police and security forces to become more professional, better equipped, higher tech, vicious, and confrontive. The South African Black, Colored, and Asian populations were the ones that suffered from this increased effectiveness and brutality.
3. It took only a short time for the ANC leadership to be either put in prison, like Nelson Mandela, or flee the country. This caused the freedom movement to be essentially leaderless inside South Africa until the Black Consciousness Movement (which essentially was a return to non-violent mass direct action) began again in 1976. Therefore independence was delayed by a decade or more.
4. The resort to violence by the ANC allowed the South African Government to gain international support because many governments in the world are very worried about violent insurrections among their own populations.
5. In the end the armed liberation struggle in South Africa was not particularly effective (regardless of the mythology, most violent revolutions aren't successful). Nonetheless

great damage was done to surrounding countries as South African commandoes frequently invaded them to destroy the South African freedom fighters.

6. Most of the deaths from this violent struggle were Black on Black. Necklacing – placing a tire filled with gasoline on the neck of a suspect and lighting it – became an acceptable practice.

But these are all issues that deal with the liberation struggle itself. It is the long term implications that bother me most.

1. By the time majority rule came in 1994 South Africa had become a very violent country. After fifteen years the new South African Government has been unable to put this genie of violence back into the bottle.
2. It was remarkable how easy it was for Nelson Mandela to tour African countries in the early 1960's and receive all the weapons, training, and funding that he wanted for the violent resistance in South Africa. The problem is that hundreds of other Africans – claiming discrimination and exploitation of their group by the ruling elite – have done the exact same thing. This acceptable behavior by both “rebels” and other governments has been one of the necessary conditions for the continued armed insurrections and violence on the continent.
3. Those elite guerrilla fighters in South Africa now control the government themselves. This elite felt that they “sacrificed” during the freedom struggle; now they feel that they are due just rewards. The result has been a focus on enriching this small segment of the Black population as they enter the wealthy, privileged society of formerly white-only South Africa. Those at the bottom have been mostly ignored except during the rhetoric occurring during election times. While racial inequality has diminished (but only to a certain extent) wealth inequality continues as before.

So the Machine Gun song bothered me. I spend my time trying to get guys to put down their machine guns and repairing the trauma that those machine gun carrying guys – whether rebels or government soldiers – have created. And I am not alone in this. All the AGLI workers and supporters plus countless others are striving toward the goal of a peaceful, just, Africa. Let us not glamorize violence as a means of change since the end result is that those at the bottom get hurt and there is little more than a change of faces at the top as the elite continue to exploit the situation and their country for their own benefit.