

worldview

A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

THE MIXED LEGACY OF NEHRU

The diverse and mixed reactions to the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, are a testimony to the mixed legacy he has bequeathed to India and to the world. It is customary, after the death of a great leader, to remind oneself that it is necessary to gain perspective before one can accurately assess his accomplishments and failures, that only the distance afforded by time will allow us to make the proper discriminations.

Never was this prudential caution more necessary. Nehru's attitudes and policies endeared him to most Indians and generally won affection and respect from his many friends and allies. But he was also capable of infuriating these same friends and allies by stubbornly adhering to ideas and policies that had run headlong into recalcitrant fact. Central to his role of political leader on the world scene was his policy of non-alignment. This led him to think that India could live in "peaceful coexistence" with all nations, even those who were in sharp conflict with each other, even those which loomed large on India's own borders.

Nehru pursued this policy tenaciously under circumstances that were trying not only to India but to her allies, including the United States. He resisted logical argument and firm persuasion, appeals to history or to political theory. It was only when China encroached on her borders that Nehru acknowledged realities that others had tried to point out. "We were living in an artificial atmosphere," he said at that time, "and we have been shocked out of it. . . . The real thing that's out of joint is our whole mentality."

Nehru was rescued from this awkward situation—and his policy of non-alignment given new life—by the split between Peking and Moscow. His prestige as a leader among the non-aligned countries of Africa and Asia, however, never fully recovered from this blow. He was forced to recognize that India, like other weaker nations, had to rely on the strength and cooperation of the great powers. It became generally

agreed at this time that Nehru was a great leader of India but not a great world leader.

Even at home he failed to solve the grave economic problems that must be overcome if India is to progress. Nor did he groom anyone for a successor or allow the development of strong constructive critics. Although Lal Bahadur Shastri has assumed the role of Prime Minister, it is clear that he cannot assume the role of Nehru. There is still real danger that the Congress party will split up, that the tenuous unity India has won with such difficulty will not withstand the severe strains placed upon it.

All of these judgments could form the basis for a fairly harsh judgment of Nehru as a person and a leader. But such judgments must be balanced by the virtues which formed an inextricable part of his person and his policy. Nehru was a dedicated idealist, sincerely devoted to world peace and progressive Indian democracy.

Although he sometimes betrayed himself into seeing a more trusting, pacific world than in fact existed, his ideals and very real moral authority were neither totally ineffective nor entirely submerged. Indeed, as Paul Power argues in this issue of *worldview*, some of the ideas for which Nehru fought over the years have recently emerged in one of the most important recent critiques of our own foreign policy.

When Nehru supported the proposal that the UN declare 1965 to be International Cooperation Year he said: "We live in this world of conflicts and yet the world goes on, undoubtedly because of the cooperation of nations and individuals. . . . Perhaps it would be a truer picture if the cooperating elements in the world were put forward and we were made to think that the world depends on cooperation and not on conflict." This statement sets forth high and worthy goals; it is also open to easy abuse. It is representative of the complex, unfulfilled legacy of India's first Prime Minister.