

Indian Express

## The amateurs in charge

**K S Bajpai** Posted online: Sat Nov 20 2010, 03:34 hrs

Blaming Pandit Nehru for everything wrong with India has grown from a fashion to a rage, so the letters he addressed to American President John F. Kennedy on November 19, 1962, will be used as another stick with which to beat him. Destructive denigration serves him as ill as the idolatry in which he could do no wrong. Of course he made mistakes, who doesn't, and to pretend they really were not mistakes — worse, to conceal facts — only feeds his detractors. What our country owes him becomes ever more apparent, time and our travails keep confirming its value. Viewing so great a man whole, faults and all, cannot diminish his stature, or our debt. What we need is to learn from the mistakes, his and ours — which we stubbornly refuse to do.

November 1962 was a national disaster, all the more painful for being so self-inflicted: blinding ourselves to it is to invite repeats. Panditji must bear his share of responsibility, but the totality of our failure extends far beyond individuals. India failed to function as an organised state, alive to its challenges and opportunities, appropriately prepared to deal with them. Have we used our experience to become such a state now?

People today cannot realise the horrific pressures of those weeks. Despite our foolishness in imagining that suppressing facts can change them, plentiful evidence has been published by important actors of the time, inter alia recording the frightening situation Delhi saw itself facing that November 19 morning. Key positions had been left to the enemy, Sela and Bomdila augured horrendous dangers, civil officers had started being withdrawn and a complete evacuation from Assam was being considered, the DIB even starting to plan a resistance movement. An outstanding soldier, Major-General “Monty” Palit wrote 20 years ago that he was shown the draft letter seeking 12 fighter and two bomber squadrons; as “DMO, at a desperate stage of a war that seemed to be moving along a course of escalating disasters, [he] could only welcome the proposal of obtaining military help, whatever its source,” though confessing he “had not for a moment imagined that... the architect of India's non-alignment policy, would ask for actual intervention by US forces.” (War in the High Himalayas pp 342-343)

Nehru-baiters will indulge their love of taunts on this: how could this proud nation plead to be saved by outsiders, a champion of non-alignment by one of its prime opponents? Even as the second letter was being delivered, we were already told of the unilateral ceasefire, exposing us to more sarcasm.

Contrarily, guardians of his image (largely self-appointed and self-seeking) who discern hard-headed realism underlying Panditji's idealistic rhetoric, will argue that in our hour of need he had no hesitation in supping even with the devil. Also, that he was a shattered man, the Chinese attack a mortal blow to his whole worldview as well as his longing to develop India in its own special way. Temporarily, he let himself be guided by advisers. Palit records being told only the PM, foreign secretary and joint secretary (ground) of defence, who consulted him, knew of the

draft. It was certainly known Panditji was not himself those days, and the letters were indeed drafted by advisers, especially his strange foreign secretary. And, sure enough, as soon as he was better we were more non-aligned than ever. No doubt our reversion was encouraged by the derisory nature of the Anglo-American response — but the explanation that we had never in fact deviated but only practiced realpolitik will be elaborated.

It won't wash. The letters clearly show to what depths we had fallen. It was as embarrassing for Carl Kaysen, the US deputy national security advisor, who was as high as we could reach at that late hour, to receive the second letter, as it was for the great public servant who was our envoy to deliver it. Panditji signed them, the onus falls on him. Let's just acknowledge that, and focus on the broader causes of a national failure.

Apart from Palit, two criticised officers, B.N. Kaul and J. Dalvi have left accounts which, even allowing for their special pleading, leave convincing impressions of the utter amateurishness of our whole approach to, and handling of, this first great challenge to our state. B.N. Mullick gives the most vivid picture of our chaotic ways, soldiers and civilians rushing back and forth, our top leaders hovering around a front commander conducting operations from a Delhi sickbed; greatly respected in his profession, this director of the Intelligence Bureau justifies claims of reliable intelligence, but unintentionally makes things look worse by citing involvement in operations — which is none of an intelligence officer's business. Memoirs of two foreign secretaries, Y.D. Gundevia and Rajeshwar Dayal, independently recount how, barely a few days before the Chinese attacks, they were bewildered by being called to meetings under the defence minister to be solemnly told (with the director's concurrence) that it was not China that was preparing mischief but Pakistan!

None of the civilians had the slightest notion of grand strategy, much less of fighting a war; with some honourable exceptions, our military emerge no better. Except for the gallant victims of our ineptitude, nobody comes out well.

These letters have been available for years on special request by scholars, awaiting dispassionate study in the context of the whole story. (Incidentally, no copy was kept in our embassy, but our lunatic attitude towards archives and secrecy needs separate attention). Everything, from our assessment of security needs, the planning of strategy, the build-up of resources, not least the application of trained minds — we were like schoolboys playing games. The key to serving a state is statecraft, which we simply will not learn. Today we have the added problem that the instruments of state have become increasingly dysfunctional. The wake-up call of 1962 keeps ringing, unheard, after 50 years.

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