



Timothy J. Roemer

MAHATMA IS A BRIDGE BETWEEN

Mahatma Gandhi was a guiding light for Martin Luther King, and his teachings on civil disobedience set the tone for the civil rights movement in America

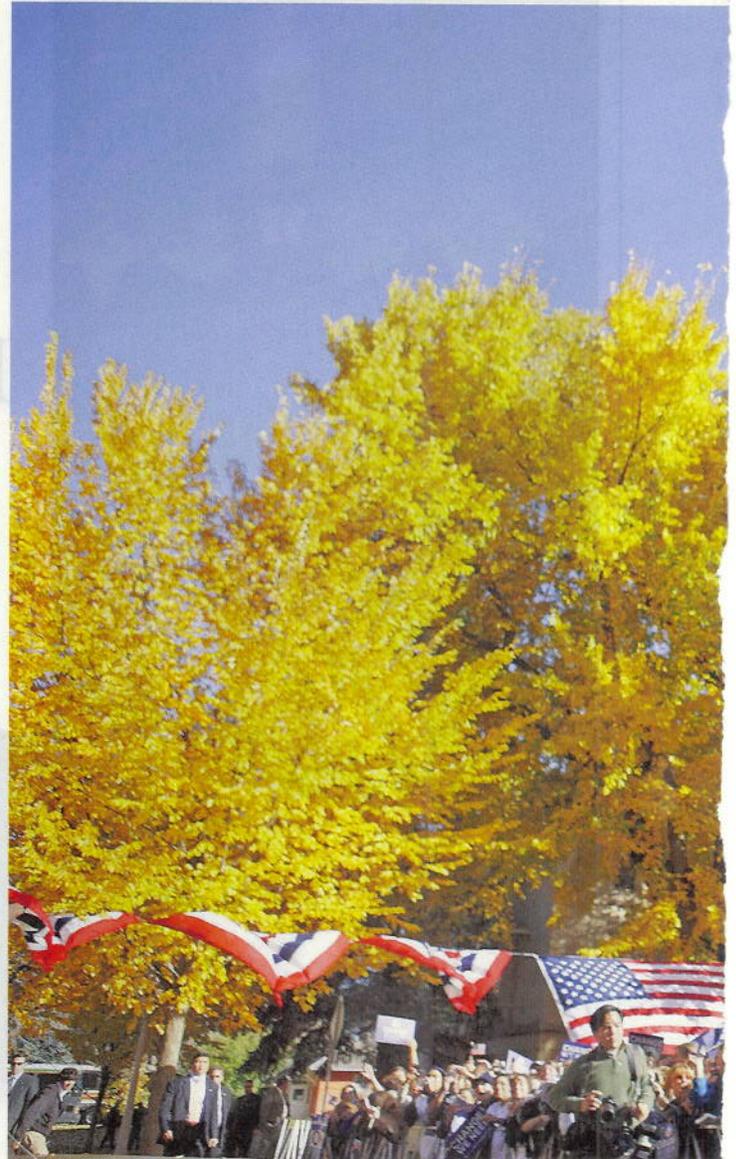
Since my arrival as the US Ambassador to India, one of my most memorable and moving experiences was attending last year's birthday commemoration for Mahatma Gandhi at Raj Ghat. While listening to the songs and prayers of the numerous religions represented (there were more than 20), I could not think of a more fitting tribute to Gandhiji and the values he espoused and passed on to India. The truths and principles of equality, tolerance and religious freedom came shining through over the course of the two-hour ceremony.

The US, India, and Gandhiji have a long history of influence on each other and Gandhiji's impact, both past and present, on the US has been immeasurable, invaluable and immense.

Gandhiji was a guiding light for Dr Martin Luther King Jr, and Gandhiji's teachings on civil disobedience set the tone for the civil rights movement in America. As Dr King himself said during his visit to India, "Since being in India, I am more convinced than ever before that the method of non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. In a real sense, Mahatma Gandhi embodied in his life certain universal principles that are inherent in the moral structure of the universe, and these principles are as inescapable as the law of gravitation."

Just as Gandhiji inspired Dr King, the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau helped shape some of Gandhiji's strongest beliefs. Thoreau was once sentenced to serve in prison for his peaceful protest against slavery in America. Gandhiji certainly would have appreciated Thoreau's views on living a simple life. Most importantly, Gandhiji's civil disobedience movement was greatly inspired by Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," written in 1849. In fact, Gandhiji titled his 1930-31 movement after Thoreau's essay.

Thoreau himself was motivated by the ancient Hindu writings, the Upanishads, which had been translated into English in the early 1800s and read by Thoreau while studying at Harvard College. Thus, as former US Ambassador to India Chester Bowles wrote, the political technique of boycott and non-violent protest has already crossed and re-crossed the ocean to strengthen hearts and to influence



minds in South Asia, South Africa and in the US.

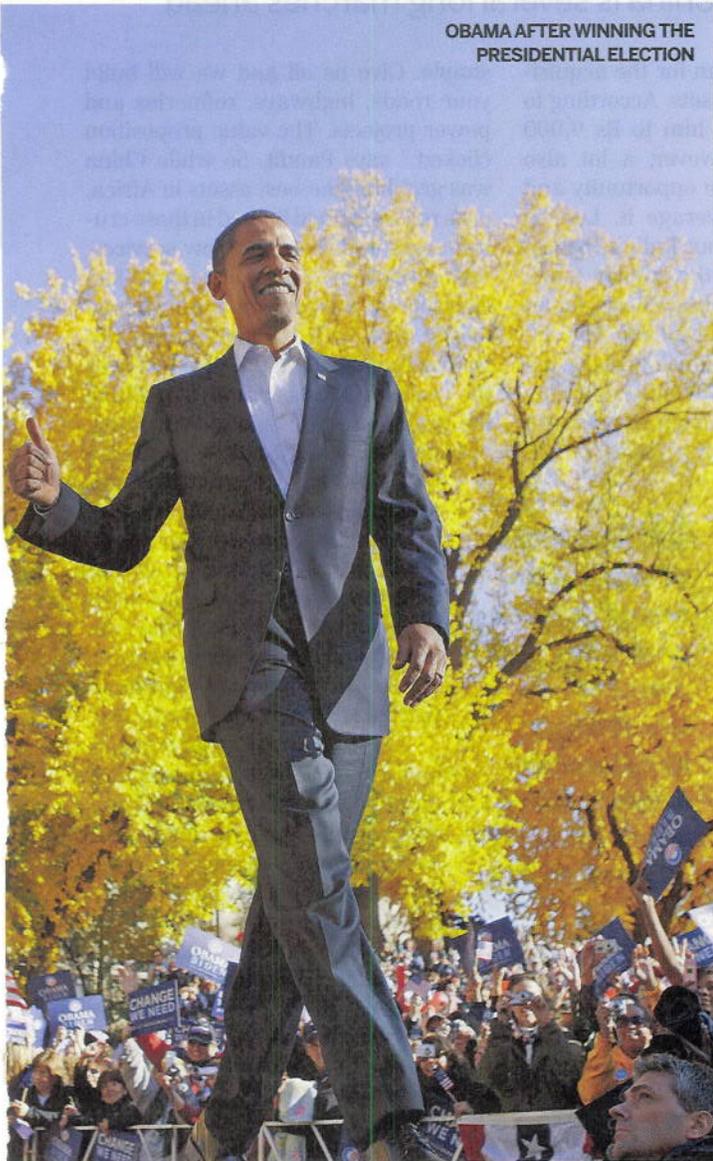
Dr. King used the same tactics, such as boycotts and marches, that proved successful for Gandhiji in his struggle for Indian Independence. The Selma Marches eventually helped lead to the passing of the Voting Rights Act, which ended voting discrimination. Forty-three years later, this law was the cornerstone for the election of America's first African-American president, former senator Barack

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OBAMA AFTER WINNING THE
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



Obama. Recognising this connection between his presidency, Dr King, and Gandhiji's teachings, President Obama said, "He (Gandhiji) is somebody I find a lot of inspiration in. He inspired Dr King with his message of non-violence. He ended up doing so much and changed the world just by the power of his ethics."

The US-India partnership is driven by our shared values, many of which have been heavily influenced by Gandhiji's

teachings and beliefs. For example, Gandhiji's values and thinking on equality and acceptance of all religions, tolerance, and communal unity, which are now part of the fabric of Indian society and culture, are among the strongest of the shared values that have driven our close people-to-people ties and our growing strategic government-to-government ties.

The consequence of Gandhiji's belief in religious tolerance and communal unity is the strengthening of India's democracy. Each year, Indians go to polling stations, whether for local, state, or national elections, to elect public officials, state representatives, or members of the Lok Sabha. The support and acceptance for these democratic principles has been inspired in Indian society by Gandhiji. This also results in an enduring respect for the results of the ballot box, regardless of who wins or loses.

Accepting the voters' wishes at the time of elections is the foundation of a well-functioning democracy. The value and belief in democracy is one of Gandhiji's greatest gifts and lasting legacy to India since without Gandhiji's influence on Indian society to accept all religions, India's democracy would certainly not be as vibrant as it is today.

We speak often of the shared values between the US and India. Such values include human rights, religious freedom, open society, education, and rule of law, to name a few. But among our most important shared values, and what is making the US-India partnership the defining partnership of the 21st century, is our core belief in democracy. This is our bedrock principle and the foundation of our strategic partnership. This important sustaining value will get us

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through occasional disagreements. For this, we have profound gratitude to express to Gandhiji.

Gandhiji's legacy will live on into the future as his teachings are both timeless and enduring. The Gandhiji "tree" has grown and spread new seedlings—Nobel Peace Prize winners Dr King, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, and President Obama. New trees will surely grow, future Nobel Peace Prize winners will surely thank Gandhiji in their acceptance speeches, and as long as there is oppression and discrimination in the world, people will surely speak out in civil disobedience to protest such wrongs. Wherever these new trees grow, justice for all and democracy will prosper, as they have bloomed in the US and India. For as Gandhiji once said, "If we want to cultivate a true spirit of democracy, we cannot afford to be intolerant." ■