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Review - Others
From true grit comes myths

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ONE of the miracles of our time was how little blood was shed when apartheid rule ended in South Africa in 1994. A minority white population had brutally oppressed a majority black population for decades. When majority rule came, the natural result should have been an explosion of violence directed against the minority. Instead, peace reigned. Why?

The explanation is one word: Mandela. Despite having been jailed for 27 years, he bore no bitterness towards his white oppressors. Instead, he forgave them. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up to examine all the wrongs done and achieve cathartic relief by exposing them.

Through his words and deeds, Mr Nelson Mandela shared his values with South Africans, black and white. And because the people loved him, they absorbed his values. Mr Mandela's strong moral compass was embedded in the body politic, and more importantly, in the soul of South Africa. The story of post-apartheid South Africa shows the importance of nations choosing the correct moral heroes.

The one Singaporean who reminds me most of Mr Mandela is Mr S. Rajaratnam, one of Singapore's founding fathers. He was more affectionately known as Raja to friends and family. I have had the good fortune of meeting both Mr Mandela and Raja. Of course, I met Mr Mandela only a couple of times, and worked for Raja for many years. But I was once invited to tea at Mr Mandela's modest bungalow in South Africa with a group of United Nations Security Council ambassadors. I saw Mr Mandela at his best in his own home.

Both Mr Mandela and Raja shared some attributes. Both had a twinkle in their eyes. Both were unpretentious, with no arrogance whatsoever. They smiled and laughed a lot. Both were politically astute. And most importantly, both had a strong moral compass.

Virtually everyone in South Africa has heard of Mr Mandela and respects his legacy. The same, however, cannot be said of Singapore and Raja. This might explain in part why there has been a re-surfacing of ethnic and religious insensitivities in Singapore. A group of young men made insensitive comments about 'dark-skinned people' on their website. And Pastor Rony Tan made some disparaging comments about Buddhists and Taoists in his sermons.

Both actions went against the core of Raja's moral compass: a strong and profound belief that all races and cultures should be treated with equal respect in Singapore and that Singapore was one multiracial nation.

And why hasn't Singapore imbibed fully Raja's vision? The answer is simple: We have made relatively little effort to share the virtues of our three great founding fathers - Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr S. Rajaratnam - with our population. This claim can be tested simply. Each school teacher who reads this column can walk into his or her classroom today and ask the students a simple question: How many of you know who Mr Rajaratnam is and what he stands for?

The random tests I have done reveal an amazing degree of ignorance. And this is a great tragedy. While the United States has masterfully deified its founding fathers - with each American child expected to know the virtues of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and John Adams - few Singapore schoolchildren know of their founding fathers.

Let me say something provocative at this stage. National myths do not surface naturally. They are manufactured. And a nation that manufactures the right myths survives the longest. The US is exhibit A. Remarkably, Jefferson continues to be worshipped in modern times though he was a slave owner who fathered children with his female slaves. This is what national myth manufacturing can do.

Raja was as politically astute and courageous, and more morally virtuous, as any of America's founding fathers. He too fought against great odds to secure Singapore's independence. The communists were tougher opponents than the British colonists whom the Americans fought. I was present on several occasions when Raja had to fight against great odds. Each time, his spine of steel would emerge. He

was, by any definition, a real hero.

The time has come for Singapore to manufacture great national myths. Ms Irene Ng has done Singapore an enormous favour by producing *The Singapore Lion: A Biography Of S. Rajaratnam*. We now have the data to start constructing a national myth around Raja.

The use of the word 'myth' may puzzle some. A myth is supposed to connote a falsehood, not reality. Yes, we can say 'that's a myth' - meaning it's not a true story. But it is also a fact that we cannot record every drop of history. Instead, we assemble a set of few facts and then build a true story around them. True stories can be called myths when they become embedded in the national consciousness. The 'myths' of Washington and Jefferson, Hamilton and Adams explain the national values of integrity, valour, justice and patriotism.

Singapore can become an equally strong nation - with a strong moral compass - by building a national myth around Raja. And if the soul of Singapore begins to resemble the soul of Raja, we will become universally admired and respected.

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