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Travels along the Ind-US

History is bunk, Henry Ford is famously quoted as saying in a remark condensed to gratify American penchant for brevity, at some risk to accuracy. But many Americans love history. Hitting the nostalgia button is a good way to engage erudite Americans.

Speaking recently with Nick Burns, U.S. pointman for the nuclear deal, I boasted lightly that the Times of India, a mere 169 years now, had covered the American Civil War. "And I hope you backed the right side!" Burns, a history major and a Red Sox fan, riposted.

With no instant access to our archives to check out circa 1862-64, I really wasn't sure, but I would be surprised if ToI didn't back Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. In any case, Britain did not recognize the Confederate South. It overcame the cotton squeeze by having Egypt and India grow more. The Civil War boosted industry in Bombay. Indian owned cotton mills made fortunes.

A few days after the Burns interview, I recalled that the American national anthem Star Spangled Banner was written on board HMS Minden, made in the Bombay docks by Wadias, master builders who were so good at their craft that British ship builders raised hell about the Royal Navy outsourcing manufacturing even back then. In their time, Wadias built more than 150 warships, including HMS Cornwallis in 1800, named after a man who offers one of earliest links between America and India.

Routed in Yorktown in 1781, Lord Cornwallis repaired to England for R&R before he was sent to India, where he triumphed over Tipu Sultan in the Fourth Battle of Mysore in 1799. Tipu was at the height of his power when George Washington became the first American president in 1789 with Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State. Washington died in December 1799, a few months after Tipu's death, having reaped the fruit of French support

against the British which the Tiger of Mysore was denied. Perhaps Jefferson, who had been the American envoy to France, had left a greater mark in Paris than Tipu's emissary.

It's commonly believed that no American president came to India till Eisenhower did in 1959. But since Americans use the Presidential honorific to even those who have demitted office, it should be noted that Ulysses Grant, who became the 18th U.S President the year Mahatma Gandhi was born, visited India a couple of years after he left White House in 1877, a sojourn that should ease Burns' doubt about who we backed in the Civil War (since Grant led Lincoln's Unionist forces against Confederate General Robert Lee.)

Swami Vivekananda and social reformer Pandita Ramabai visited U.S in the early 1890s, while Mark Twain traveled to India in 1896 (and was a guest of Jamshedji Tata in Bombay), ahead of Rabindranath Tagore's visit to U.S in 1912. Tata himself visited U.S at the turn of the century, while Ambedkar (who studied law at Columbia University under John Dewey), Swami Yogananda and other remarkable Indians came to U.S in the 1920s. One curious visitor to India at this time was Allen Dulles, who taught English and studied Sanskrit in Allahabad, and would go on to become the founding Director of the CIA.

What about Ford and Gandhi? They never visited each other, but they exchanged some remarkable correspondence, including an autographed charka the Mahatma sent Ford, and which he spun meditatively when stressed. Indo-U.S relations have been motoring along after and before this, propelled by such personal ties and sentiments, as much as the geo-politics now in vogue.