
ANDREW BISHARAT

The Tyranny of History

Though the most famous question in climbing is ‘Why?’, the answer is actually quite boring. The infinitely more interesting question is ‘How?’ You don’t even need to be a climber to understand why you’d want to climb Cerro Torre. She is the Queen. At 3128 metres, Cerro Torre is an enormous granite turret whose slender majesty is a paragon of mountain architecture. More than any other, this fearsome, beautiful mountain has challenged climbers to define the rules of our game. Cerro Torre has brought out our best and worst, and dared us to face one question: How do you climb the impossible?

When Hayden whooped after pioneering his way up new, brilliant terrain at the top of the Cerro Torre headwall, Jason, down at the belay, knew they had done it. It was 16 January 2012. Hayden Kennedy, 21, and Jason Kruk, 24, had become the first people ever to climb the elegant spine of rock and ice that is Cerro Torre’s striking south-east ridge without using the infamous bolt ladders placed there by Cesare Maestri in 1970.

Their ‘fair means’ ascent of the *Compressor Route* was the apotheosis of an idea that has been a work in progress. (More on this later.)

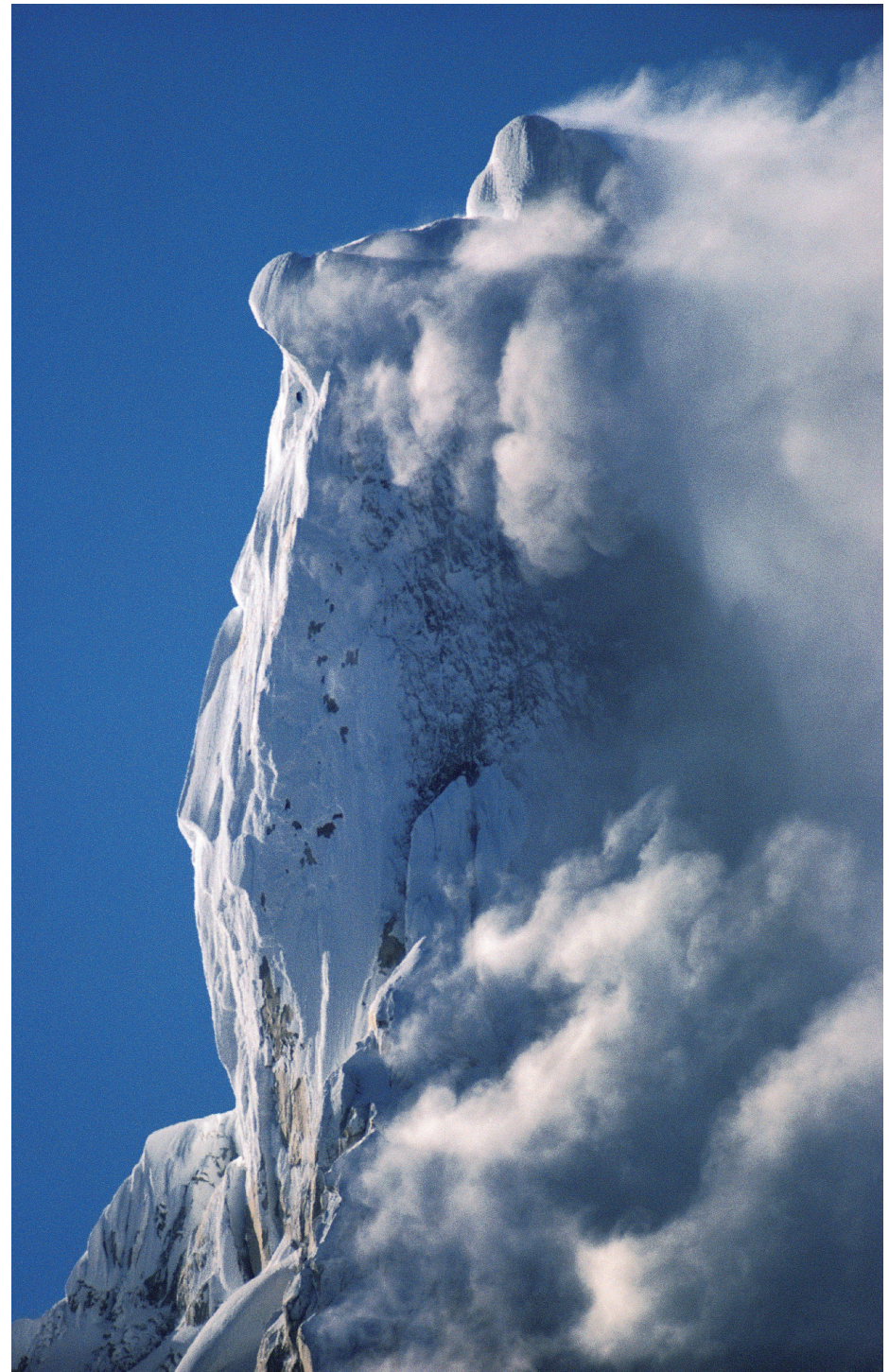
Hayden and Jason sat for 45 minutes atop the wind-sculpted snow of Cerro Torre’s summit, fuelling-up and debating what to do next. They hadn’t exactly expected to reach the top so quickly, just 13 hours after leaving the Col of Patience 900m below. Chopping Maestri’s bolt ladders had not been their original intention, even though that idea had been stirring for years within the climbing community.

On Cerro Torre’s headwall, Maestri’s bolt ladders lead you onto completely blank rock. To the right and left of the bolt ladders, however, are perfectly climbable features.

Hayden and Jason had just shown that the bolt ladders were unnecessary and that the route could be climbed via its natural features at the relatively attainable grade of 5.11 A2. On their ascent, they had clipped five bolts that were not originally placed by Maestri and used two of Maestri’s belays (which double as rap anchors). Hayden did most of the leading, and free climbed well over 90 percent of the route onsight, mostly standing in aiders for speed and efficiency: for example, while cleaning ice out of cracks to place cams. His leads were extremely bold, as he short-fixed off anchors and free climbed out on lead with 35-metre loops of slack.

The two sat on the summit and weighed their options. They could go

This article was first published in *Rock and Ice* magazine, April 2012 issue. Andrew Bisharat is the magazine’s senior editor.



67. Cerro Torre in storm. (Leo Dickinson)

down, leave the bolt ladders in place, and return to El Chalten with a pretty proud tick. Or they could chop the superfluous bolts, and deal with the inevitable fallout. The summit of Cerro Torre was an audacious but somehow perfect place to make such a momentous decision.

Their ideals and emotions churned within them. Would chopping the bolts be the best way to pay respect to the mountain that had just given them one of the greatest climbing experiences of their lives? Swept up in their exuberance – a sense of being on top of the world and having a rare opportunity to change it for the better – Hayden and Jason descended Cerro Torre and removed the bolt ladders Maestri had placed on the headwall.

They placed their ice tools into the eyelets of the ‘bolts’ – which, in fact, are more like soft-iron pitons banged into drilled holes – and pried them out. The bolts popped relatively easily, but the toil added some three hours to the descent. All in all, they removed about 120 of Maestri’s 450 bolts – the majority from the headwall ladders.

Five days later, almost unbelievably, the south-east ridge received its second ‘fair means’ ascent, this time with the 21-year-old Austrian climber David Lama making the first free ascent of this striking line, redpointing the now very runout route at 5.13b.

Twice in one week, this next generation of alpinists proved that the relics of an intractable egomaniac from four decades ago were not needed to climb Cerro Torre. In fact, in 2007 – when the debate about the bolt ladders came to a head as various climbers in El Chalten caught wind of Josh Wharton and Zack Smith’s intentions to climb Cerro Torre by fair means and, if successful, chop the bolts on the descent – Cerro Torre had been climbed only seven times by other routes without using Maestri’s bolt ladders.

That year Wharton and Smith came close but ultimately failed either to climb Cerro Torre by fair means or to chop a single bolt. However, their intentions brought the issue to the table and it created a stormy public debate that had an interesting and little-known consequence. By 2008, climbers’ attitudes in Patagonia seemed to have changed, and fewer people aspired to climb the *Compressor Route*. That year the number of non *Compressor Route* ascents doubled, and seven parties summited Cerro Torre via the west face – the route used on the mountain’s first true ascent, by an Italian team of six led by Casimiro Ferrari in 1974. By 2011 the number of non *Compressor Route* ascents was up to 15; at the time of writing it’s 17.

The reaction to the recent bolt removal has been mixed, muddled and heated. Cerro Torre, once again, has become a catalyst for a seething debate. The tyranny of history that has prevented these actions from occurring for so long and the nuanced ethical complexity of the whole situation, seem to have challenged the climbing community to re-evaluate what it thought it knew and to decide what it now believes.

Cerro Torre is climbing’s greatest theatre, and the recent drama upon the vertical world’s most savage stage is nothing short of Shakespearean. A

close but not quite perfect rendition would be Hamlet, with Cesare Maestri as the treacherous uncle Claudius, who ‘murdered the impossible’, if you will, as Reinhold Messner famously put it in his polemic, only to have, 42 years later, this ‘death’ avenged by a couple of Hamlets (albeit Hamlets who act) in the forms of Hayden Kennedy and Jason Kruk. With 120 of Maestri’s evil bolts now removed, in an unforeseen plot twist, the one-time Patagonian villain David Lama nabs the route’s first free ascent, setting him up for what ought to be redemption in the eyes of the blunt and blood-thirsty climbing community.

This story has been one twist and turn after another. And now we are left with, exactly, what?

To fully understand the events of this past season one must go back to 1959 when the 29-year-old Italian climber Cesare Maestri and the Austrian ice ace Toni Egger – supported by a third partner, Cesarino Fava – claimed the first ascent, via the east face, of Cerro Torre in a lightning-fast, four-day alpine-style push.

Considering that Cerro Torre was the most technically difficult summit on earth, and that the two were using 12mm hemp ropes and slow prusik ascenders, theirs would have been the greatest climbing achievement of all time... had they actually done it. All evidence points to the conclusion that Maestri and Egger climbed little more than 300m – essentially reaching no higher than the shinbone of this granite giant. The only certainty is that at some point during those four days Egger was somehow killed by the mountain. Blatantly wrong route descriptions, the unsupported nature of their unbelievable claims and a total lack of evidence of their passage up high indicates that Maestri and Fava conspired to perpetrate one of climbing history’s greatest hoaxes.

Definitively proving a lie, however, turns out to be quite difficult – especially considering that Maestri, now 81 years old and still living in Italy, has always maintained that he did in fact make the first ascent of Cerro Torre in 1959, despite having refused to speak to anyone about the details of their expedition for the last four decades. Argentine climber and Patagonia expert Rolo Garibotti, however, did a bang-up job of disproving Maestri and Fava in his exhaustively researched article, ‘A Mountain Unveiled’, in the *American Alpine Journal* of 2004.

A year after publishing the article, Garibotti, then 34, confirmed his research when he climbed – with Ermanno Salvaterra, 51, and Alessandro Beltrami, 24 – Maestri’s purported line. They called their route El Arca de los Vientos, and found no evidence of the anchors Maestri claimed to have left up high.

Though Maestri and Fava returned as heroes to Italy in 1959, by 1970 doubts had grown in the public sphere, eventually driving Maestri so mad that, as he wrote in *2000 Metri della Nostra Vita*, he returned that year to Cerro Torre, to ‘attack [his detractors’] routes, the routes they were not able to climb. I will humiliate them, and they will have to feel ashamed of having doubted me and having insulted the memory of my fallen partner’.

In a complete and curious reversal to the alpine-style he had claimed in 1959, Maestri and his team (which again included Fava) fixed ropes and hauled a 200-pound gas-powered compressor up the south-east ridge and indiscriminately bolted his way straight up blank rock, disregarding many naturally climbable features on either side. In fact, the south-east ridge had received an attempt in 1968 by an Anglo-Argentine team – Martin Boysen, Mick Burke, Pete Crew, Jose Luis Fonrouge and Dougal Haston – that, without placing bolts, reached a point higher than the one where Maestri first broke out the drill.

Motivated by vengeance, Maestri was literally gunning for the summit. He would stand on top regardless of how he got there.

Ironically, he failed once again. Drilling up the headwall, he reached a point 35m below the rime-covered summit and decided that that was close enough. Strangely, he dubbed his ascent a success, reasoning that he didn't need to go any higher. 'It's just a lump of ice,' he said of the summit. 'Not really part of the mountain; it will blow away one of these days.'

After calling it good, Maestri then began chopping his own bolts on his descent. He later wrote: 'A devilish plan comes into my mind: I'll take out all the bolts and leave the climb as clean as we found it. I'll break them all, so that whoever tries to repeat our route won't even be able to benefit from the holes we've drilled.' However, he only managed to take out about 20 of his own bolts and also to break, so it wouldn't work for others, the compressor, which he abandoned at the belay at the headwall's base.

Again Maestri had failed, only this time he had left Cerro Torre severely altered. In his wake over 450 bolts remained, creating what Jim Donini has called 'the world's hardest via ferrata'.

I'd call it really, really bad style.

One thing many climbers misunderstand is that not all bolts are equal. It's one of our sport's great ironies that a piece of metal smaller than a human finger can incite such vehement, emotional responses spanning a very large spectrum of opinion. How, where and why bolts are placed, and even who places them, are all important pieces of information, but can carry extreme biases that rival the selective blindness of religious beliefs.

It would be easier to be of the opinion that all bolts are categorically good or bad, but climbing is far from being black and white. The result is that the most outspoken zealots either don't climb or, if they do, inevitably become hypocrites. Meanwhile most climbers are just too confused to really understand why one bolt is OK, and the other isn't.

To me one of the most interesting aspects of 2012's Cerro Torre drama is the degree to which the events have challenged our understanding of climbing ethics. It seems like many of the same people who were upset about David Lama's crew adding new bolts to existing fixed anchors in 2010 are now upset that the headwall bolt ladders are gone.

Many climbers have argued that chopping the bolts has somehow robbed us of an important piece of history – even though the 'first ascen-

tionist' himself intended to remove his own bolts and leave the mountain clean. (Further, there are still 300-plus pieces of history, including the compressor, still on the mountain.) Some people, who probably will never climb Cerro Torre in their lives, are upset about the bolts' removal – but can they honestly condone what Maestri did in 1970?

With so many multifarious egos adding to the fray, this already fraught situation becomes even more problematic due to how difficult it is to separate sentiments driven by ego from those that may be justified.

Those who believe Maestri, or who have climbed the *Compressor Route* and feel that their ascents of this route on Cerro Torre were crowning achievements of their careers, have a lot to lose with the recent events. Why? Because any ascent that needed to use Maestri's bolts to get to the top of this difficult mountain is now a diminished achievement.

My own impression is that most people don't really know how to feel about Cerro Torre being chopped. Most people will never set foot on the Col of Patience, let alone blitz up the 900m south-east ridge. Most climbers' understanding and subsequent espousal of climbing ethics is derived more from principles than direct experience. Most of our ethical foundations are derived from key manifestos that we've read over the years and then pieced together into some kind of semi-coherent Frankenstein of a viewpoint.

One reason that this story is so engaging and widely discussed is that we feel like we are being tested on our climbing ethics. And I would say that we are realising how little we actually understood about them in the first place.

Creation and destruction are two sides of the same coin, and maybe in some ways history has to be destroyed – which does NOT mean forgotten or rewritten – in order to be created again. I believe that that is what has happened on Cerro Torre this year. The tyranny of one history has ended, allowing a new one to begin.

I'm astounded by the sweeping scope of characters who have played a part in shaping the plot of this mountain's uncontainable story. Even the climbing community as the audience, with its newfound and extremely powerful voice on the Internet, has been prominent in helping to decide Cerro Torre's fate.

Everyone is talking about the bolt removal, but the real story of 2012 is that David Lama free climbed the entire *Compressor Route* – without the bolts. This incredible individual achievement, however, is actually the capstone to a pyramid of many other climbers' efforts that directly run back to 1999, and before that even to Maestri himself.

In 1999 Ermanno Salvaterra and Mauro Mabboni pioneered three new pitches, adding a total of five bolts, and avoiding 200 Maestri bolts. This variation took an arête that would turn out to be the crux (5.13b) free pitch for Lama.

In 2007 Josh Wharton and Zack Smith made the first explicit effort to avoid using Maestri's bolts. They followed the 1999 variation down low,

and then discovered a completely rad chimney of perfect, steep water ice that allowed them to skip the next bolt ladder. All those years, when people had just been following Maestri's path, there was really good climbing to the side. Cold, windy conditions that prohibited free climbing high on the route, however, forced Smith back onto the bolt ladder and ended this endeavour.

Wharton tried removing one of Maestri's bolts, just to see how difficult it would be. When climbers in El Chalten caught wind, some were outraged. Tempers flared. Blows were exchanged. Steve Schneider was so pissed at Wharton for intending to chop the route, which Schneider has tried over multiple years, that he dismantled Wharton's tent and left his gear strewn about.

'That whole episode really made me lose faith in the climbing community,' says Wharton, who abandoned his goal of chopping the *Compressor Route*. Wharton, however, is happy that the deed is now done. His sentiments are also shared by such prominent climbers as Reinhold Messner and the Argentine legend Carlos Comesaña, who did the first ascent of the *Supercanaleta* on FitzRoy for the mountain's second ascent, in 1965.

After Wharton and Smith's attempt, a town-hall style meeting took place in El Chalten, and attendees voted on whether they wanted to see the *Compressor Route* stay or go – 30 voted for it to stay, 10 for it to be chopped. Wharton wasn't there, however. 'The meeting took place in a good weather window,' he says. 'I was out climbing. In fact, most of the climbers in El Chalten weren't there for the meeting.'

Cerro Torre returned to the spotlight in 2010 when Lama – who has a background in sport and competition climbing, but in recent years has put in time repeating hard big-wall trad climbs in the Dolomites – came to Patagonia to free the *Compressor Route* and film the whole process with the Red Bull Media House production team. The producers added bolts to the route for rigging, and when bad weather moved in, the team abandoned two haulbags and 300m of rope on the route. Team Red Bull peaced out of Argentina and discreetly paid other climbers in El Chalten to take down their gear for them.

Adding bolts to what was already considered the most over-bolted route in the world created yet another outrage, with this one taking place almost entirely on the Internet – mostly because word only got out months after the fact. Nearly all of the public ire was directed at Lama, who didn't place any bolts himself. Internet forums were afire. One poster suggested that climbers: 'Beat this a-hole to a pulp. Knock out his front teeth next time you get within arm's reach. This douchebag is screwing up the future of the whole sport so he can spray to his sponsors. Yeah, go to the Valley, and add 60 bolts to the Nose. I hope you get beaten till your bowels unload in your pants. I hope Red Bull tastes good in your hospital bed.'

Much misinformation revolved around the number of bolts Lama's team placed, with estimates jumping from 30 to 60. In 2011 when Rolo Garibotti went up on the *Compressor Route* to see what kind of damage had

been done, he found the actual number of Red Bull bolts placed to be 37: 20 above the Col of Patience, and 17 below. Garibotti and Doerte Pietron removed 17 of the 20 bolts above the col, and Pietron and Colin Haley removed 12 of the 17 below.

Lama deserves a lot of credit even for returning to Patagonia after he was so thoroughly condemned and maligned. Certainly part of the criticism he received was justified, but part of it was excessive. Regardless, one can't help but believe that the heavy criticism in some way pushed Lama into climbing Cerro Torre in a better style, even though it was sheer circumstance that the headwall had been chopped right before his successful redpoint. Still, he persevered and realized his goal in a bold style.

Lama used Wharton's ice chimney to approach the headwall. In freeing the headwall, he took a variation to the right of Maestri's bolts, instead of climbing left as Kennedy and Kruk did. Many people believe that Lama's line will become the preferred path for future ascents. Lama styled many 40-plus-foot runouts on 5.10 to 5.12 terrain. However, he did have a camera crew hanging on fixed ropes directly above him, which may create a footnote to his 'onsight' of this section. The impressive camera team – which included the onetime Yosemite climbing ranger Lincoln Else – had climbed the west face and rappled down from the summit to capture the action.

In the end, I think that Kennedy-Kruk's and Lama's ascents complement each other. Had the bolts not been removed, Lama's first free ascent would not have been as impressive and his redemption not as absolute. In the same vein, Lama's ascent helps justify Kennedy and Kruk's actions by emphasising that the next generation of alpinists is here, and stepping up to the true challenge of the mountain.

As one young, local up-and-coming Argentine climber, Jorge Ackerman, put it: 'Maestri's bolts would have eventually come out, especially with the level of climbing that is around these days, and I respect [Kennedy and Kruk's] decision to do so... The Red Bull fiasco was deplorable... but one thing that [Lama's] free ascent does show is that the bolts are not necessary. For those of us who aren't as strong as Lama, Kruk and Kennedy, a lot of training lies on the road ahead to climb Cerro Torre for real.'

History has not ended with the removal of these unnecessary bolts. In fact, it's just beginning. Yet amid the enduring debates remains one sad irony.

Says Kennedy: 'The ironic thing is that no one will ever care about the actual amazing climbing that's on this mountain. No one will ever care about the climbing because this controversy runs so deep.'