

Nelson Mandela, the Greatest Black Man of the Twentieth Century. **Ron Stockton, July 2013**



Jane and I had two encounters with Nelson Mandela. Neither was a close encounter but both were memorable. The first was in 1965. We were teaching in Kenya, young, no children, and apparently with little common sense. We got the crazy idea of driving down to Cape Town during our six-week winter break. With two friends, one British, one American, we set off in our ancient VW Beetle with its 110,000 miles of punishing Kenya road experience.

The timing was awful. This was just a month after Ian Smith of Southern Rhodesia had rejected a transition to majority rule and had proclaimed a Unilateral Declaration of Independence for that white-ruled British colony. The US Embassy told us the situation was unstable and we should not go but we ignored them. UDI had produced an international boycott, which had the unintended result of cutting off Zambia, Rhodesia's northern neighbor, from its oil supply. The British and other countries began running petrol convoys from Dar Es Salaam, through Tanzania, to Lusaka. These convoys ran along the Great North Road, which was originally meant to go from Cape Town to Cairo (although it stopped somewhere in East Africa). The convoys were running on dirt roads barely able to handle normal traffic, much less waves of heavy-duty lorries. The roads were quickly demolished. By the end of the first day, we had lost all four of our hubcaps. The situation did not improve until we got well into Zambia itself.

Given the oil embargo, the roads were not the only problem. We were also concerned about running out of petrol. We decided to take a five-gallon gas can with us in the car, just in case. It sat in the front, between the knees of the person riding shotgun. I shudder when I think back on this. If we had rolled or crashed that car, it would have become an inferno. Fortunately, everything was ok, and we never crashed or even encountered the feared petrol shortage.

This trip, which was only 18 inches on the map, turned out to be 7,000 miles on the road. We drove constantly, only twice spending more than one night in the same place. We averaged around 250 miles a day, with me doing almost all of the driving. One of those two-night stops was in Cape Town. This is a wonderful city, straddling the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. (Swimming in the ocean on Christmas Day was a thrill for Midwest kids). Table Mountain rises sharply out of the ocean for a thousand feet and looms above the city. We took the cable car to the top. (It was not until the year 2000 that I managed to climb it, which is a story of its own). As we stood on top of that mountain on that sunny day, we could see Robben Island, a small barren pile of rocks four miles out into the Atlantic Ocean. The Rivonia trial had found Nelson Mandela and nine fellow ANC defendants guilty of trying to overthrow the white apartheid regime. Mandela had delivered a defiant speech in response to his conviction, acknowledging his activities and affirming his goals, and acknowledging the fact that he was facing a possible death sentence. ["This is the struggle of the African people, inspired by their own suffering and experience. It is a struggle for the right to live. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society, in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunity. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But, if needs be, my Lord, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die"]. The accused had been given life sentences and sent to that desolate place. Standing on that most beautiful mountain peak, it



gave Jane and me pause to realize that this great heroic man was down there breaking rocks or doing whatever it was that prisoners did on Robben Island.

Twenty-seven years after his incarceration, Mandela emerged from prison in 1990 as a triumphant hero. As we watched his release on television that Sunday morning we were thrilled. No one had seen any image of him since his imprisonment. His black hair had turned white but his back was straight and he was as determined as ever to create a multi-racial South Africa with a constitutional democracy. Releasing him and decriminalizing the ANC was an implicit commitment to create a majority-rule political system.

The inevitable “all races” election occurred in 1994 and Mandela became President of the “New South Africa,” as it was called. Very quickly he was the premier world leader, a notch above everyone else. His political instincts were perfect and he had an inner strength that made him unshakable. I am of that school of political analysis that sees leaders as an outgrowth of the power structures that produce them. Their personal qualities are important but the structures of power are often so strong that the outcomes would not be much different if someone else had been chosen. With Mandela, the models went out the window. I had taught a class on South Africa for some time and had always predicted (along with Nadine Gordimer in her wonderful novel *July’s People*) that the white population would never negotiate and the Republic would go up in flames, with enormous human suffering. Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu made sure that did not happen. They were indispensable men in the salvation of their country.



Our second encounter with Mandela was when he visited Detroit in 1990. He was an international hero, but not every stop on his six-city American trip went smoothly. Ted Koppel’s *Nightline* held a 90-minute prime time Town Meeting. Early on, Koppel recognized two prominent Jewish leaders who said that while American Jews supported the liberation movement, they were concerned that Mandela had received Yasser Arafat, Colonel Khadafi and Fidel Castro. There was “profound disappointment” at the “amorality” of Mandela’s position. [These words were met with boos from the audience].

Mandela did not mention the elephant in the room, that Israel, with winks and nods from the Reagan Administration, had maintained a very close security relationship with South Africa (Ariel Sharon was a point man) and had helped South Africa evade the arms embargo. [Congressman Howard Wolpe of Michigan, Chair of the African Affairs Subcommittee—and my professor one summer—had played a major role in getting the Israelis to stop that transfer]. He looked straight ahead throughout the whole interview, not making eye-contact with Koppel. To say that Koppel was disoriented would be an understatement. To the comments, Mandela responded with his firm but non-confrontational style. “There are people who think their enemies should be our enemies.” [Stunned silence]. Then he continued. As we struggle for our freedom, “they supported us to the hilt” with “more than rhetoric,” and we will not forget them. When Koppel suggested that Mandela be more nuanced in his words lest he offend America’s Jews and Cubans, Mandela’s response brought down the house: “For anybody who changes his principles depending on whom he is dealing with, that is not a man who can lead a nation.”

Mandela had been friendly to South African Jews. He had noted once that several had made a “particularly outstanding contribution” to the liberation movement, which was true. (Names such as Slovo, Suzman, and Fischer stand out). He specifically mentioned that as a young lawyer the only law firm that would give him a job was a Jewish firm. On the other hand,

he had been critical of Israel, saying that they would never be secure if they clung to “narrow chauvinistic interests.” For a man who had spent his life fighting white domination of his country, there was no authentic alternative to this position. He had also met with Yasser Arafat, then the demonized head of the PLO. Mandela had said to Arafat at their Lusaka meeting, “We live under a unique form of colonialism.” The common form to which he alluded was that settler populations had come into the land and become indigenous. I saw this as a very positive statement, that the settler populations must be accepted, but the Israeli government of Mr. Shamir saw such a comparison as a serious threat. Now, to Koppel, Mandela called Arafat a “comrade in arms” and said that “We identify with the PLO because like the ANC they are fighting for self-determination.” Only his enormous stature saved him from being savaged for his integrity.

An equally difficult situation was in Miami where he was snubbed because he had greeted Castro and made friendly comments about him. City officials would not even welcome Mandela at the airport. He was received by a group of community leaders.

Given these incidents, his triumphant reception in Detroit was a welcome relief. Mandela had been razor focused on this trip. He was asked once if he had anything to say about the treatment of Black people in this country He said he was here to establish strong relations with America in the ongoing struggle for liberation but “It would not be proper for me to delve into the controversial issues that are tearing this country apart.” Ouch!

In Detroit, the only place big enough to host him was Tiger Stadium. There was no way that Jane and I were going to miss that event, in spite of the traffic jams. We went down early, paid our \$10.00 and got our seats. Everyone was there: Mayor Coleman Young, UAW President Owen Biber, Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder, and Isaiah Thomas. Jesse Jackson was in the audience. When he walked in, all eyes turned to look. He had a proud, majestic manner, towering a head above those with him.



Mandela arrived with his strikingly beautiful wife Winnie, the Mother of the Revolution, as she was called. This was before she betrayed him with another man and he divorced her. On that night, they looked like the Power Couple to end all power couples. During the decades when



he had been in prison, Winnie had defiantly stood up for Nelson and spoken the words he could not speak. Now Mandela delivered a speech designed to inspire and please. He did not mention how the Americans had tipped off the South African secret police as to his location back in 1962 and had enabled them to arrest him.

[President Clinton officially apologized

for this later, as did the U.S. Congress. John Conyers sponsored that resolution]. He did not mention that the Reagan administration had permitted Israel to transfer American weapons to South Africa to undercut the arms embargo. Instead, he said that the prisoners had been aware of the divestment movements on American campuses and knew that the American people were with them. I was pleased with that comment since I had been active in the pro-



boycott International Defense and Aid Fund, an ANC-support group banned in South Africa. I had published an article in *Transafrica*, the ANC-linked journal and had once even spoken to the UM Regents urging them to sell university stocks in companies that traded with or had facilities in South Africa. One of the Regents explained to me that their investments were building up the Black middle class and heading off a bloody revolution. I knew that was a foolish observation on several levels but was grateful that he did not pat me on the head, which was the spirit of his response.

That evening Mandela also said that the prisoners on Robben Island had been encouraged by the music of Motown. He even quoted a song by Marvin Gaye: “Brother, brother, there’s far too many of you dying. Mother, mother, there’s far too many of you crying.” Whatever the reality of life on Robben Island, on that wonderful evening, everything he said received loud cheers.

As Jane and I walked out, we were stopped by a reporter from a local Black radio station. I would like to think that we were chosen because we looked wise and insightful but it may also have been an effort to find a conventional-looking white couple to say something for the record.

Jane spoke first: “Twenty-seven years ago we stood on top of Table Mountain and looked out into the Atlantic Ocean. We saw Robben Island and realized that Nelson Mandela was there in a cell, serving a life sentence. Now he is a free man and he is here in triumph.”

I was stunned at the eloquence of her statement. If I had spent an hour thinking about it, I could not have come up with anything so powerful. I could see no reason to continue the interview and started to walk away but then the microphone was pushed in my direction. I just mumbled a few words: “Nelson Mandela is the greatest Black man of the twentieth century and as a white person I am proud to be here to honor him.”

As we walked away, Jane said to me, “I know what that was. That was a sound bite.”

Of course, she was right. The radio station ignored her eloquence and replayed my short comment over and over during the next day. At times, life is just not fair.



Photos: The young activist lawyer; Mandela walks free from prison (with Winnie); Mandela becomes UAW member (with Owen Biber); Mandela speaks in Tiger Stadium; Mandela and Winnie t-shirt (Amandla means power. The chanted response is Ngawethu, to us); Mandela and Bishop Tutu; New South Africa “rainbow nation” necktie. Rainbow Nation was Tutu’s term.

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