

Mandela's Long Walk with African History – Part 1

From reviled terrorist to venerated hero, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza examines Nelson Mandela, both man and myth. This is the first of three posts in which the historian posits South Africa's founding father alongside some of the major events of the 20th century.

The death of Nelson Mandela has provoked an outpouring of mourning, celebration, and commentary around the world that is unprecedented for an African leader. Glowing tributes have gushed from world leaders and major magazines and newspapers have carried special features on his extraordinary life and legacy. He has been showered with lavish praise as a great man, titan, colossus and conscience of his nation and the world for his magnanimity, moral courage, and dignity; for his resilience, patience, and passion; for his charisma, charm, regal countenance and common touch; for his humility, visionary and political brilliance; and above all, for his spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, believed to be the driving force behind the South African "miracle" that steered the beloved country from the abyss of a racial bloodbath. Several countries including Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania have declared three days of mourning, and in several European countries and the United States flags were flown at half-mast as part of national mourning for Mandela.



Mandela walks free from prison on 11 February 1990

Everyone, it seems, seeks to bask in Mandela's reflected glory, including many African leaders who compare quite unfavourably with him for their mendacity, self-aggrandisement, and dictatorial tendencies. But there are critics, including some in South Africa and among the African left, who accuse Mandela of having failed to dismantle the South African apartheid economy that has left millions of black people especially the unemployed youth in grinding poverty. Reconciliation, they argue, rescued whites from seriously reckoning with apartheid's past and its legacies and deprived blacks of restitution. Mandela's death forces South Africans to reflect on the post-apartheid state he helped create. Deprived of Mandela's aura, some believe, the ANC's monopoly of power will continue to erode. Such critical assessments of Mandela's legacy can only be expected to grow, but for now they are drowned by outflows of endearment.

It is hard to remember that Mandela was once widely reviled in much of Euroamerica as a terrorist as he was revered in Africa and the progressive world as a revolutionary figure. He is now everyone's venerated hero, the man sanitised into a transcendent myth; his place in African history stripped of its messy contexts and multiple meanings; his life and legacy of protracted struggle morphed into a universal redemptive tale of reconciliation. His iconic image of lofty leadership satiates a world mired in pettiness; it is a resounding reproach to the small-minded leaders most countries are currently cursed with. The various Mandelas being commemorated offer different opportunities to people, politicians and pundits in the North and in the South—absolution from the barbarous crimes of imperialism for the former and affirmation of their humanity for the latter and a reminder of the heady dreams of independence.

As with the day he was released from prison in 1990, many will remember where they were when they heard the news of Mandela's death. I remember February 11, 1990 as if it were yesterday. I sat glued to the television with bated breath for the live broadcast of Mandela's release. I told my then six-year-old daughter this was one of the most memorable days for my generation and she would live to remember it, too. I choked with tears of joy, anger, sadness, pride, anticipation and other bewildering emotions as we watched the tall, smiling, dashing, and unbowed Mandela walking out of Victor Verster Prison beside his wife, Winnie, a militant in her own right who had suffered so much and done a lot to keep his memory alive. They walked with defiant dignity, holding hands, their other arms raised with clenched fists. The announcement of his death, although long anticipated because of his age and grave illness, came more unceremoniously. It arrived as a news alert on my iPad as I was working on some memo in my office. But it was no less momentous for it marked the end of an era, of Africa's long 20th century.

Predictably, the traditional media and social media have been awash with tributes, reminiscences, and verdicts on Mandela the person, the politician, and the symbol. In the United States and Britain, politicians, pundits, and celebrities have been falling all over themselves to find the most laudatory words to describe Mandela as the epitome of global moral authority, of humanity at its best, the last in the hallowed canon of twentieth century saintly liberators from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King. Such encomiums are to be expected for a world hungry for goodness, forgiveness, trust, and optimism that Mandela exuded so masterfully. Conveniently forgotten is the fact the British and American governments upheld the apartheid regime for decades and condemned Mandela's African National Congress as a terrorist organisation. We all remember Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's resolute defense of the apartheid regime and fierce condemnation of the ANC and its leaders including Mandela. In the United States, ANC leaders were officially regarded as terrorists until 2008!

The sanctified portrait of Mandela hollows out the exceedingly complex and contradictory man and historical figure that Mandela was and the true measure of his life and legacy. Anyone who has ever read Mandela's two-volume autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, and the equally voluminous biographies including Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* and Meredith Martin's *Mandela: A Biography*, knows he was not the caricatured figure of the popular media who rose from clan royalty to the South African presidency and global political celebrity, appropriately purified by 27 years of imprisonment. Rather, his greatness arose from the very complexities and contradictions of his life and times and how he embodied them, experienced them, articulated them, learned from them, manipulated them, deployed them, and tried to transcend them. He was not much of a father for his children, but he became a beloved father of the nation; he had several failed marriages but the public was seduced by his warm embrace; he was a ruthless political operator as much as he was a self-effacing leader; and his deep sense of empathy cultivated out of the very texture of daily life and struggle under apartheid allowed him to effectively deal with his jailors and negotiate with his Afrikaner opponents in the transition from apartheid to democracy.

Moreover, Mandela's unflinching loyalty to his comrades in the liberation movement sometimes blinded him to their limitations with adverse consequences as exemplified by his two immediate successors; and there was the loyalty he exhibited to the unsavoury leaders of states that had supported the anti-apartheid struggle such as Libya's Moammar Gadhafi and Nigeria's Sani

Abacha. The early Mandela was known for being impetuous and boisterous; the later Mandela could be fiercely stern, coldly calculating, and compellingly charming to seize opportunities and advance his aspirations. At age 33, he declared that he would be South Africa's first black president, but when he did achieve this goal at 76 he forswore the grandiosity of office so beloved by many leaders in Africa and elsewhere. However, there were constants in his life, too. He remained supremely proud and confident of himself and his African heritage, and his commitment to South Africa's liberation struggle was steadfast.

Many have remarked on Mandela's remarkable understanding of the nature of politics and the performance of power that enabled him to embody the nation better than many of his fellow founding fathers of African nations and his two successors. Above all, he is praised for his lack of bitterness after spending 27 years in jail and his embrace of forgiveness and reconciliation. The manner in which this issue is discussed often serves to advance the redemptive narrative of Mandela's road to political sainthood. Only he and his closest confidants of course know how he truly felt. Post-apartheid reconciliation may or may not have been a romantic attribute of Mandela the man; it was certainly a pragmatic imperative for Mandela the nationalist leader. Mandela's life and legacy cannot be fully understood through the psychologising and symbolic discourses preferred in the popular media and hagiographies. It could be argued that he and his comrades were able to sublimate their personal anger and bitterness because the liberation struggle was too complex, too costly, too demanding, too protracted, and too important to do otherwise. Reconciliation was both a tactic and a necessity because of the dynamics of the liberation struggle in South Africa.

This is to suggest that like all great historical figures, Mandela can best be understood through the prism of his times and the political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics and conditions that structured it. Mandela changed much in his long life but it was a life defined by the vicissitudes of African nationalism. For those who don't know much about African history, or are wedded to exceptionalist notions of South African history they would be surprised to learn the parallels Mandela shares with the founding fathers of many other independent African nations, in whose rarefied company he belongs. In fact, his historic significance, and the eruption of grief over his death and gratitude for his life in the Pan-African world and elsewhere can partly be explained by the fact that he is Africa's last founding father.

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