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RUGBY

Nelson Mandela's Legacy

What the World Must Learn from One of Our Greatest Leaders

By John Carlin

Ever since Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa after winning his country's first democratic elections in April 1994, the national anthem has consisted of two songs spliced—not particularly mellifluously—together. One is "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika," or "God Bless Africa," sung at black protest rallies during the forty-six years between the rise and fall of apartheid. The other is "Die Stem," ("The Call"), the old white anthem, a celebration of the European settlers' conquest of Africa's southern tip. It was Mandela's idea to juxtapose the two, his purpose being to forge from the rival tunes' discordant notes a powerfully symbolic message of national harmony.

Not everyone in Mandela's party, the African National Congress, was convinced when he first proposed the plan. In fact, the entirety of the ANC's national executive committee initially pushed to scrap "Die Stem" and replace it with "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika." Mandela won the argument by doing what defined his leadership: reconciling generosity with pragmatism, finding common ground between humanity's higher values and the politician's aspiration to power.

The chief task the ANC would have upon taking over government, Mandela reminded his colleagues at the meeting, would be to cement the foundations of the hard-won new democracy. The main threat to peace and stability came from right-wing terrorism. The way to deprive the extremists of popular support, and therefore to disarm them, was by convincing the white population as a whole that they belonged fully in the 'new South Africa,' that a black-led government would not treat them the way previous white rulers had treated blacks. In a political context so delicate, Mandela pointed out, you had to be

◁ President Nelson Mandela and Francois Pienaar, captain of the South African Springbok rugby team, after the Rugby World Cup final, Johannesburg, June 24, 1995. *Mark Baker/Reuters/Corbis*

very careful with the messages you put out. Strike a false note and you risked undermining the nation's stability; make the right gesture and national unity would be reinforced. The matter of the anthem offered a case in point, Mandela said: the short term satisfaction of banning the despised old song might come at a dangerously high price, whereas the magnanimous act of retaining it could yield mightily valuable returns.

And so it proved. Mandela's wisdom in reaching out to the old enemy, repressing any vengeful impulses he might have accumulated during his twenty-seven years in prison, is the principal reason why South Africa has consolidated its transition from tyranny to democracy, and done so not, in the time-honored style of revolutions, through repression, but by persuasion. The triumphant expression of Mandela's life's work is seen in a political system that, seventeen years after he took power, remains as stable as it is authentically democratic. The rule of law, freedom of speech, free and fair elections: these are the gifts Mandela has bequeathed his nation.

Flaws, nevertheless, abound today, stemming from corruption in all its creeping manifestations. These could in time destroy the edifice Mandela built. But they will not undermine Mandela's place in history, which is more durable than any political construct. As with Abraham Lincoln, his deeper legacy lies in the example he has left for succeeding generations.

Mandela is Africa's Lincoln. You don't do Lincoln too many favors if you scrutinize the detail of what came after him: he fought against slavery, yet black Americans would remain second-class citizens for more than one hundred more years; he appealed to "the better angels of our nature," yet genocidal massacres of American Indians continued for some time after his death. It would be as unfair to tarnish Lincoln's memory with the shortcomings of those that followed him as it would be to question Mandela's lasting value by pointing to the mediocrity or venality of his successors.

The big truth is that Mandela, like Lincoln, achieved the historically rare feat of uniting a fiercely divided country. The feat is rare because what ordinary politicians have always done is seek power by highlighting difference and fueling antagonism. Mandela sought it by appealing to people's common humanity.

It was behind bars that he learnt his most valuable lessons in leadership. As he himself has acknowleged, prison shaped him. He went in angry, convinced that the only way of achieving his people's freedom was by force of arms. This was neither an original nor a morally opprobrious approach back then, in 1962, given every attempt to negotiate with successive white governments over the previous half century had been contemptuously rebutted; and given, too, the enormity of

the injustice to which the eighty-five percent of the population who were not white had been subjected since the arrival of the first European mariners in 1652.

What the experience of prison did was elevate Mandela to a higher political plain, setting him apart from the great mass of ordinarily brave, ordinarily principled freedom fighters within his country and beyond. He learnt that succumbing to the vengeful passions brought fleeting joys at the cost of lasting benefits; he learnt, through studying his jailers closely, that black and white people had far more in common, at bottom, than they had points of difference; he learnt that forgiveness and generosity and, above all, respect were weapons of political persuasion as powerful as any gun.

When his time came, he deployed these lessons to devastating political effect—through countless small gestures in the same spirit of the big one he made on the national anthem, and, equally important, in the critical encounters he held, one on one, with figures from the white establishment whose influence on South Africa's political destiny was almost as great as his own. During Mandela's last four years in prison, he held secret talks about talks with the minister of justice of South Africa and the country's top spy, and—once—with the president himself, the iron-fisted and (by reputation) ogreish P. W. Botha. The outcome of these meetings was that he was released from prison and the process of negotiations began that led to his people's freedom and his rise to the highest political office in the land.

How did he convince his enemies to succumb to his will? First, by treating them individually with respect, by showing them trust, and by making it clear that he had a core set of values from which he would never be persuaded to depart. The human foundations having been laid, his sincerity having been established, he set about rationally persuading them that violent confrontation would only lead to the peace of the cemeteries, to everybody losing out, and that the only hope for all parties lay in negotiation.

I have talked at length to two of those three men with whom Mandela met secretly when he was still in prison, the minister of justice, Kobie Coetsee, and the intelligence chief, Niel Barnard. Coetsee wept while describing Mandela to me as "the incarnation of the great Roman virtues, gravitas, honestas, dignitas." Barnard referred to him continually as "the old man," as if he were talking about his own father.

Mandela had the same effect on practically everyone he met. Take the case of General Constand Viljoen, who in 1993, with the path set for multiracial elections a year later, was anointed leader of South Africa's far right, charged with heading "the white freedom struggle." Viljoen, who had been head of the South African Defence Force between 1980 and 1985, travelled the country organising what he called armed resistance units, others called terrorist cells. Mandela reached out to

him through intermediaries and the two men met in secret at his home. Viljoen, with whom I have talked about this encounter, was almost instantly disarmed. Expecting a monster, having conditioned himself to regard Mandela as a fearsome Communist with little regard for human life, Viljoen was dumbstruck by Mandela's big, warm smile, by his courteous attentivenes to detail ("Do you take sugar in your tea, General?"), by his keen knowledge of the history of white South Africa and his sensitivity to the apprehensions and fears white South Africans were feeling at that time. When the two men began discussing matters of substance, Mandela put it to him that, yes, he could go to war and, yes, his people were more skilled in the military arts than black South Africans; but against that, if it came to race war, black South Africa had the numbers, as well as the guaranteed support of practically the entire international community. There could be no winners, Mandela said. The general did not disagree.

That first meeting led to another, then another. Viljoen succumbed to Mandela's lethally effective political cocktail of charm, respect, integrity, pragmatism and hard-nosed sense. He called off the planned "armed struggle" and, to the amazement of the South African political world, he agreed to take part in the all-race elections of April 1994, thereby giving his blessing to the political transformation Mandela had engineered, agreeing to the peaceful hand over of power from the white minority to the totality of the population. Viljoen won a parliamentary seat in representation of his freshly formed rightwing Freedom Front and I remember watching him on the day the new, all race parliament was inaugurated. Mandela was the last to enter the chamber and, as he walked in, Viljoen's eyes settled on his new black president. His face wore an expression that could only be described, I thought at the time, as adoration. I asked him when we talked some years later whether I had been right in that description and he said I had been. The retired general also reminded me that before taking his seat on that inaugural parliamentary occasion Mandela had broken protocol by crossing the floor to shake hands with him. What had Mandela said to him? "He said, 'I am very happy to see you here, general'." And what did the general reply? "I said nothing. I am a military man and he was my president. I shook his hand and I stood to attention."

Viljoen, who has had many encounters with Mandela since then, told me that one left his company feeling as if one were a better, more virtuous person. Viljoen was not alone. Mandela did appeal, and with uncanny success, to the better angels of people's natures. But he did so—and this is very important—not primarily out of a desire to win a place in heaven, or to be well-liked. Mandela was the quintessential political animal: he did everything he did with a clear political purpose. Not to understand this—to insist only on his admirable 'lack of bitterness' and his

spirit of forgiveness—is to miss the bigger point that Mandela's widely applauded saintliness was the instrument he judged to be most effective in the achievement of his political goals. Had he calculated, as he once did, that violence was the way to liberate his people, he would not have hesitated to pursue that route. Luckily for South Africa, he reached the conclusion that there could be no democracy without reconciliation, no justice without peace.

He acted wholeheartedly on this understanding, investing every last drop of his boundless charm, his political cunning, and his farsightedness in achieving his life's goal by following the only strategy he knew could realistically work. Mandela's legacy, the imperishable lesson he holds for the ages, and the reason why he stands head and shoulders above every leader of his generation, or practically every leader there has ever been, is that he showed it is possible to be a great human being and a great politician at the same time; that showing respect to friends and enemies alike can get you a long, long way; and that nothing beats the combination—in Mandela's case, the seamless convergence—of magnanimity and power.