
Book Reviews

Mandela's 'long walk,' from prison to the Presidency of South Africa

by Donald Phau

A Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela
Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1994
558 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

It's rare that one gets to read a book about a person who has risen, despite adversity, to become the father of his country, and is still alive, leading his country today. Mandela became President of South Africa in April 1994, after winning an election which, for the first time, included voters from among the 13 million-strong black African majority of the country. Mandela had, just months earlier, been released from 27.5 years in prison, for fighting successive white minority governments which sought to prevent just such a free election.

The autobiography gives a picture of a man of courage and integrity, but reveals as well, some potentially fatal flaws.

The early years

Mandela was born in 1918, at a time that South Africa was a virtual British colony, and the racial oppression of the African majority by a small white minority was a fact of life. Mandela, however, was not born into the poverty that nearly all his countrymen suffered. He was the son of the ruling family of the Thembu tribe, from a large rural province of South Africa called the Transkei. The British recognized the hereditary rule of the chiefs, and even paid them, as a means of controlling the population at large. Though his father died when he was young, Mandela was destined to become either a chief or a top adviser to a chief.

Mandela was treated like a prince in a small kingdom, and attended college when most black Africans had no schooling. The college, the University of Fort Hare, was a training ground for 150 members of the black elite. Mandela characterized it as "Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Yale all rolled into one."

It was while attending college, that the young Mandela

revealed that he was not just another "Uncle Tom" Negro. A year before his graduation, he was elected to the school's "representative student council," which was a not-so-very-disguised means whereby the administration exerted its authority. Mandela was elected by only a small minority of students, however, since most of the students had boycotted the elections to protest the school's miserable food. In solidarity with his fellow students, Mandela announced that he was resigning. The next day, he was called before the school director and told either to serve on the council or face expulsion. Expulsion meant not only the end of a promising career, but also ostracism from his family and the province's chief, who was now his benefactor. He was given the night to decide.

Mandela writes of his quandary after the meeting:

"I was shaken by what he had said and I spent a restless night. I had never had to make such a consequential decision before. . . .

"Even though I thought what I was doing was morally right, I was still uncertain as to whether it was the correct course. Was I sabotaging my academic career over an abstract moral principle that mattered very little? I found it difficult to swallow the idea that I would sacrifice what I regarded as my obligation to the students for my own selfish interests. I had taken a stand, and I did not want to appear as a fraud in the eyes of my fellow students. At the same time, I did not want to throw away my career at Fort Hare."

The next day, he told the school director that he would not serve on the council. Surprised, the director said he would postpone any action until after the summer break. Mandela, however, never returned after the summer, but decided to move out of the countryside, and, for the first time, go to a big city, Johannesburg.

When he reached Johannesburg, he continued his studies and became a lawyer. He would establish the first black African law firm in South Africa. While studying, he worked as a clerk in a law firm where he met a number of supporters of the Communist Party and the African National Congress (ANC).

Mandela began attending ANC meetings and soon rose to the leadership of its Youth League. One must read between



President William Clinton hosts President Nelson Mandela in Washington, Oct. 4, 1994.

the lines, however, to understand how he gained this leadership. Mandela's writing is devoid of any of the "ego gratification" that all too frequently accompanies becoming a leader. The beauty of his soul is revealed through his absolutely single-minded commitment to the idea that "all men are created equal," and this totally subordinates any personal concerns. Throughout the entire 558-page book, it is only in a few instances that he even mentions the personal agonies he went through, during his 27.5 years in prison. Toward the conclusion of the book, Mandela writes how he dealt with his personal fears:

"Time and time again, I have seen men and women risk and give their lives for an idea. I have seen men stand up to attacks and torture without breaking, showing a strength and resiliency that defies the imagination. I learned that courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. I felt fear myself more times than I can remember, but I hid it behind a mask of boldness. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

Mass action

On May 1, 1950, the Indian Congress Party, representing South Africa's Indian population, and the Communist Party called a one-day general strike against apartheid measures, without official ANC support. Mandela writes that though he supported the action, he was afraid that the Communists were trying to "steal the thunder" of the ANC. He thought the ANC should have originated the action. The strike was overwhelmingly successful, with two-thirds of all African workers staying home.

The government responded with heightened repression

and passed the Suppression of Communism Act. The Act outlawed membership in the Communist Party, with membership punishable with up to ten years imprisonment, and it also essentially outlawed all but the mildest forms of protest. It deemed it a crime to promote "political, industrial, social or economic change within the Union by promotion of disturbance or disorder."

The ANC now took its first step toward mass action. Together with the Indian Congress and other organizations, they called for a National Day of Protest, on June 26. Earlier, 18 Africans had been shot by police at a demonstration. By this time, Mandela writes that he had been "coopted" onto the National Executive Committee of the ANC, its leading organ.

This strike was important, Mandela writes, because it was a "political strike," not an economic one. When the appointed day arrived, the majority of black workers stayed at home and most black businesses did not open.

Next the ANC, together with Indian and "coloured" organizations, began what it called the "Defiance Campaign." Under a new law, a pass was required to go almost anywhere, for example, to enter a train station. The protest consisted of "well-trained" volunteers entering areas without their passes, as well as utilizing White Only facilities such as toilets. The "defiers" would notify the police in advance of their actions, so that arrests could take place with a minimum of disturbance. The action was modelled on Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance protests. Within a few days, 8,500 people were arrested.

In July 1952, Mandela and most of the ANC leadership were arrested for violation of the Suppression Act. They were found guilty and given a nine-month suspended sentence. Mandela

writes, "As a result of the campaign, our membership swelled to 100,000. The ANC emerged as truly a mass-based organization with an impressive corps of experienced activists who had braved the police, the courts, and the jails. The stigma usually associated with going to jail had been removed . . . going to prison became a badge of honor among Africans."

Mandela and others were again arrested in 1956, but this time for high treason and conspiracy for violent overthrow of the government. The government's case was totally dependent on paid informants, many of whom lied outright. From the outset, Mandela confronted the government with their lies and turned the trial around, putting the government on the defensive. On Aug. 3, 1959, almost three years after his arrest, the trial began. The judge for the case had been an appointee of the previous government of the United Party, and ran a fair trial. For example, it came to light that the government had used informants to give false reports on meetings held by the ANC. These meetings were conducted in English, yet it was revealed that the informants couldn't understand English. The judge found the defendants not guilty.

In 1962, he was rearrested. The charge was treason, but this time the judge was an appointee of the Nationalist Party. The nationalists, the party of the Afrikaners, had, for the first time, taken power from the United Party. The entire country and the press around the world followed the trial closely. If found guilty, Mandela could get the death sentence. In his testimony, he admitted to planning acts of sabotage against government installations, but denied charges of terrorism against people.

On June 11, 1964, the judge read out the verdict of guilty for Mandela and some six others of the ANC. That night, Mandela and the others told their lawyers that, though facing death, they would not appeal the case. He writes, "I believed an appeal would undermine the moral stance we had taken. We had from the first maintained that what we had done, we had done proudly, and for moral reasons." The next day, 2,000 people gathered outside the courtroom. Inside, the judge announced the sentence of life imprisonment.

'The Dark Years'

Mandela calls the section of the book on his imprisonment: "Robben Island: The Dark Years." Robben Island is located 25 miles off the coast from Cape Town. It had been established to hold South Africa's most dangerous criminals, but had added one new category, "political prisoners." The political prisoners were kept strictly segregated from the general population, for fear of "political contamination." Mandela was housed with his friends in the ANC leadership. One leader, however, Oliver Tambo, was able to flee the country and set up ANC branches around the world.

The segregation of political prisoners was actually an advantage. Mandela writes: "I do not know what I could have done had I been alone. But the authorities' greatest mistake was keeping us together, for together our determination was

reinforced. We supported each other and gained strength from each other. Whatever we knew, whatever we learned, we shared, and by sharing we multiplied whatever courage we had individually."

Though he had the consolation of being imprisoned with other political prisoners, the purpose of putting them on Robben Island was to totally cut them off from the outside world. They were allowed no newspapers or books, and one letter and one visitor every six months. If they "behaved," after a time, they could be moved to a higher status and receive two letters. The longer you served and the more you behaved, restrictions would lessen. Mandela notes that since most inmates came from poor families and lived far from Cape Town, he knew of men who spent a decade on the island without a single visit.

After three months on the island, he received his first visit from his wife, Winnie. He writes: "Our conversation was awkward at first, and was not made easier by the presence of two warders standing directly behind her and three behind me. Their role was not to monitor but to intimidate. . . . Any line of talk that departed from the family and verged on the political might mean the abrupt termination of the visit. If one mentioned a name unfamiliar to the warders, they would interrupt the conversation, and ask who the person was and the nature of the relationship." After one-half hour, the visit was abruptly terminated, and though he thought he would see his wife again six months later, Winnie was not able to visit him for another two years.

Winnie would undergo continuing harassment, with her house raided and searched by the police at all hours of the day and night. The government campaign was designed to break not only the spirit of Winnie, an activist in her own right, but of Nelson, who was powerless to help her.

Mandela's first years in prison were spent at hard labor. He and the others were brought into a yard each day, where each one was given a hammer and a pile of stones. Their job was to break the stones into small rocks to be used for road construction. Later, their work changed to even harder labor. Each day, they were marched out to a lime quarry and, with picks and shovels, made to chisel out the lime from between layers of rock. Though blistered, hot, and exhausted, Mandela said, at least he was out of the prison and had a view of the ocean. The worst part, however, was that the sun, reflecting off the lime, forced everyone to squint, so much so, that even after returning to their cells (where they washed with a cold bucket of water), it would take hours to stop squinting. Mandela requested sunglasses, but it took three years for the request to be granted.

Occasionally, the island would get a visit from some foreign delegation investigating prison conditions. These visits were heartily welcomed, since it presented a rare chance to make known to the "outside" under what conditions they suffered. One visit turned out not to be welcomed. It was from a representative of the American Bar Association.

Mandela writes:

"We were informed that a Mr. Hynning, a representative of the American Bar Association, would be coming to see us. Americans were then a novelty in South Africa, and I was curious to meet a representative of so august a legal organization. . . .

"Mr. Hynning was a heavysset, unkempt man. I thanked him for visiting us and said we were honored by his presence. I then summarized our complaints, beginning with the central and most important one, that we were political prisoners, not criminals, and that we should be treated as such. I enumerated our grievances about the food, our living conditions, and the work detail. But as I was speaking, Mr. Hynning kept interrupting me. When I made a point about the long hours doing mindless work, he declared that as prisoners we had to work and were probably lazy to boot.

"When I started to detail the problems with our cells, he interjected that the conditions in backward American prisons were far worse than Robben Island, which was a paradise by comparison. He added that we had been justly convicted and were lucky not to have received the death penalty, which we probably deserved.

"Mr. Hynning perspired a great deal and there were those among us who thought he was not altogether sober. He spoke in what I assumed was a southern American accent, and had a curious habit of spitting when he talked, something none of us had ever seen before. . . .

"We discussed Mr. Hynning for years afterward and many of the men imitated the way he spoke to comic effect. We never heard about him again, and he certainly did not win any friends on Robben Island for the American Bar Association."

By 1973, after nearly ten years in prison, the authorities finally allowed in books, but only for study in high school and college courses. They would not permit any newspapers. Mandela reports one of their happier "coups" was when the administration let in a subscription to the weekly news magazine the *Economist*, thinking it was part of college work because of the name. This came to an end, unfortunately, after a few months.

By this time, conditions were slowly improving. The prisoners were allowed to hold on to their own individual prison uniforms, and Africans were now given bread, which had been reserved for coloured or whites. At the quarry, they were able to openly converse with each other.

As work schedules eased up, Mandela and his fellow political prisoners turned their prison into what they called "the University." They studied English, Afrikaans, art, geography, and mathematics. He writes, "We became our own faculty, with our own professors, our own curriculum, and our own courses. We made a distinction between academic studies, which were official, and political studies, which were not." They even formed an amateur drama society and performed plays, minus a stage, scenery, and costumes, each

year. Mandela only performed in a few of them. One character he especially liked to play was Creon, the king of Thebes, in Sophocles' *Antigone*. He saw the play as about a fight against injustice.

In 1975, some ANC members approached Mandela with an idea on how to keep their struggle before the public. They asked Mandela to write his memoirs with the plan to have them published for his 60th birthday. Mandela agreed and began writing each night. Another ANC member transcribed them into "micro-shorthand," so that ten handwritten pages were reduced to one small piece of paper. It took him four months to write, and then it was smuggled out with another prisoner who was released. Mandela's memoirs became the basis for his book.

Over the next ten years, the ruling Nationalist Party ruthlessly implemented apartheid. This included the forced removal of millions of black African families to segregated townships on the outskirts of major cities. Also a separate, purposefully inferior school system for black Africans was created. During this time, mass rioting occurred many times, ending in savage police repression and killings. The ANC soon became the leadership of a radicalized black population, challenging the government for power, and with Nelson Mandela its martyred hero.

In 1985, Mandela was offered his freedom, in an unexpected way. In a debate before Parliament, state President P.W. Botha offered to free Mandela and all political prisoners if he "unconditionally renounced violence as a political instrument." Mandela saw the "offer" as an attempt by the government to "drive a wedge" between him and his colleagues in the ANC, and wrote Botha with his rejection.

For the next four years, Mandela would meet, off and on, with representatives of the government. From the outset, the government asked Mandela to drop Joe Slovo, the head of the South African Communist Party (SACP), from his negotiating team. Mandela refused. From early in his political involvement, he and the ANC had been accused of being communist. The government used this as a basis for prosecution, but Mandela says he was never a communist, though he was influenced by Marxist philosophy when he was young. Slovo and the SACP had worked closely in defending Mandela and the ANC from the first trials. Despite pressure from both within and without the ANC, he refused to denounce the Communist Party.

On July 4, 1989, Mandela met with President Botha. The talks continued when Botha was replaced by F.W. de Klerk. Mandela had been moved to a small house on the perimeter of a new prison on the mainland. A prison lieutenant, who was an excellent cook, became his housekeeper. Mandela called the house his "gilded cage."

On Oct. 10, 1989, de Klerk announced that he would free Mandela, but Mandela did not jump at the chance. He set several conditions for his release. These included lifting the ban on the ANC and all other political organizations, lifting

the State of Emergency, releasing all political prisoners, and allowing all exiles to return. Exactly four months later, de Klerk stood before Parliament to make the traditional opening speech, and announced new policies in conformity with all of Mandela's conditions, as well as a suspension of capital punishment. Mandela writes of the speech, that de Klerk "truly began to dismantle the apartheid system and lay the groundwork for a democratic South Africa."

A week later, Mandela was released from prison.

For the next months, he would crisscross the country, holding meetings and giving speeches. In a Soweto stadium, he spoke before 120,000 people. He later set up town meetings directly modelled, he notes, on Bill Clinton's 1992 Presidential campaign. Mandela spoke on the ANC's Reconstruction and Development Program, which included a plan to create jobs through public works; to build a million new houses with electricity and flush toilets; to extend primary health care and ten years of free education to all South Africans; to redistribute land through a land claims court; and to end the value-added tax on basic foodstuffs.

Though now free, his long separation from Winnie had taken its toll. On April 23, 1992, he announced their separation. At a press conference, he praised her for being "an absolute pillar of support and comfort" for him while he was on Robben Island, and said she endured persecutions with exemplary fortitude, and, "My love for her remains undiminished." In his book he writes: "My commitment to my people, to the millions of South Africans I would never know or meet, was at the expense of the people I knew the best and loved most. It was as simple and yet as incomprehensible as the moment a small child asks her father, 'Why can you not be with us?' And the father must utter the terrible words: 'There are other children like you, a great many of them. . . ' and then one's voice trails off."

Elections

Mandela and de Klerk agreed to have elections and, for the first time, they would be open to all South Africans, "one man and one vote." But as organizing for the elections commenced, terrorism and massacres spread throughout the country. Bloody battles between members of the Inkatha Freedom Party, led by Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, and the supporters of the ANC were a regular occurrence. Shootouts with police often ended with dozens of ANC supporters lying dead. Many times armed supporters of Buthelezi were unexplainedly allowed to enter areas of ANC supporters with the knowledge of the police. The result was often savage massacres of women and children. Mandela called for investigations and would demand an explanation from de Klerk, but would never get an answer.

Mandela concluded that there existed what he calls a "Third Force." He never, however, identifies who this force is. Readers of *EIR* know that, up until the present, the British monarchy has looked favorably on seeing South Africa go up

in flames. Lyndon LaRouche has identified the three African nations of Nigeria, Sudan, and South Africa as the key to the future prosperity of all of Africa. Today, all three of these countries are subject to British-run destabilization. This could very well be the "Third Force."

Mandela reveals in his book a potentially fatal weakness, his open partiality for the British. As his nation's leader, this weakness today may be his Achilles' heel, and could have tragic consequences for South Africa. It could allow England to fulfill its desires to reassert control over Africa, by destroying the nations of black Africa through such means as inter-tribal warfare.

He writes: "I confess to being something of an Anglophile. When I thought of Western democracy and freedom, I thought of the British parliamentary system. In so many ways, the very model of the gentleman for me was an Englishman. Despite Britain being the home of parliamentary democracy, it was that democracy that had helped inflict a pernicious system of iniquity on my people. While I abhorred the notion of British imperialism, I never rejected the trappings of British style and manners."

In the elections of April 27, 1994, the ANC won 62.6% of the national vote, just short of the two-thirds majority they needed to push through a final constitution without support from other parties. Mandela writes that some in the ANC were disappointed they fell short, but he was "relieved," because "I wanted a true government of national unity." On May 10, 1994, Mandela was sworn in as South Africa's President and de Klerk as second deputy President.

Mandela ends his autobiography in 1994. From one standpoint, it has a happy ending. After 27 years in prison, he became his nation's President. But, as Mandela writes, his story is not over, and his trials, now as President, have yet to begin: "I never lost hope that this great transformation would occur. . . . I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished. . . ."

Editor's note: *Reviewer Donald Phau is currently a political prisoner in the state of Virginia, serving a 25-year prison sentence on trumped-up charges of "securities violations." His incarceration began on Nov. 4, 1993. He and four other associates of Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. are serving draconian prison terms, up to 77 years, as the result of a railroad prosecution run by a federal-state-private "Get LaRouche" task force.*