Nelson Mandela:
The Man Behind the Symbol

When the apartheid government of South Africa decided to release him on February 11, 1990, after 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela was arguably the most famous prisoner in the world. The campaign to free the champion of black South Africans had spread around the globe, bringing with it prizes, honorary doctorates, streets named after him. Cheering supporters hailed the 71-year-old variously as a Black Moses or a latter-day Jesus Christ.

Four years later, despite initial doubts that a man who had spent over a third of his life behind bars could cope with the modern world, Mandela was elected president of his country. In that post, he became the nation’s single most important force unifying blacks and whites. In a lifetime, he had gone from outlaw to convict to the father of his nation. His influence on the stability of post-apartheid South Africa was enormous: mere rumors of his illness were enough to rock the national stock market.

What was it about Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela that persuaded people to follow him? His detractors were few. Even cynics went only so far as to allow a faint tone of sarcasm when they referred to “Saint Mandela.” Mandela was born into a noble tribal family, and he had about him the aristocrat’s easy air of authority and expectation of respect. He was tall and handsome, an impassioned orator and spokesperson for the cause of black African rights. As one fellow prisoner put it, Mandela “is everything that is noble and good. How do you describe a person who, when you are at rock bottom, is a shining example of how to behave in adversity, who by his walk would inspire you, by his touch would inspire you, by his little talks would inspire you.”


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Yet this inspirational figure was born a black man into an era and a political system that might well have stripped him—as it did many others—of virtue, self-respect and even life. How did Mandela, despite trials that would have driven many to despair, emerge with his faculties intact and without bitterness? Mandela was not the only hero in the battle for black rights. Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Steve Biko—all of them suffered as much as Mandela and Biko gave his life. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Nobel prizewinner and fellow freedom fighter, may have captured the essence of Mandela’s sway over his nation when he wrote:

[Nelson Mandela] is, quite simply, a giant of a man with an enormous intellect. ... You had no doubt when you were with him that he had what we call in our language ‘shadow’—substance, presence. He was regal.¹

“He is a traditionalist”

Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela’s earliest memories were of three strong institutions: the church, the school and the tribe. From these three authorities he derived much of his character and his values. As his future wife Winnie observed, Mandela owed a great deal to the love of people and country imparted to him as a child. She wrote:

He is a traditionalist ... in the sense that what he is in the struggle, he is because of the love of his country, the love of his roots. ... He himself as a person comes second to this love for his people and the love of nature.³

The tribe. Mandela was born on July 18, 1918 into the royal family of the Thembu tribe (a Xhosa branch) in the Umtata district of the Transkei province of South Africa, 800 miles east of Cape Town and 550 miles south of Johannesburg. He was named Rolihlahla, which in Xhosa, Mandela’s tribal language, means “pulling the branch of a tree.” But its colloquial meaning is “troublemaker,” which some have seen as prophetic. As a boy, he grew to love the mythology of tribal history which he learned at the knees of his elders, tales which enchanted and inspired him even after he learned that some of the details were apocryphal. But the stories of colonial conquest, remembers a relative, made the young Mandela “angry that the British had done these things to us and ashamed that our ancestors had allowed these things to happen to them.”⁴

Mandela had a traditional upbringing. At 16, the boy was circumcised according to tribal custom. Mandela vividly remembered not only the pain and pride of the ceremony, but the surprising remarks of the chief who addressed the young men afterward. The circumcision which promised manhood was, said the chief, an illusion. “For we Xhosas, and all black South Africans, are a conquered people. We are slaves in our own country.” Mandela was, he recalls, cross at the

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The tribe vs. the government. Mandela’s father was a chief, both by blood and by
government appointment. His birth gave him prestige among his people; his appointment was an
attempt by the government to harness that prestige in the service of enforcing its political
mandate—to create a white-dominated society. The declaration in 1910 of the Union of South
Africa had joined British and Afrikaner provinces into one nation. The new constitution denied
blacks the right to vote (except in the Cape) or to become a member of parliament. Although the
excesses of apartheid lay well in the future, the 1913 Land Act restricted blacks, who at some 8
million strong represented 70 percent of the population, to owning 12 percent of the available
land.7 The Mines and Works Act (1911) curtailed blacks’ access to skilled labor positions. A pass
system, which had long been in place in the Afrikaner republics and required blacks to carry
passes confirming their employment and right to be in the area, was extended by stages to the
entire union.

These measures had an economic purpose—to take advantage of cheap black labor for
South Africa’s white-owned bountiful gold and diamond mines. But they also had a racial
motivation: to codify in law the superiority of the white race. This ideology had long been
espoused by the Afrikaners, descended from Dutch settlers but over time evolved into a people
with its own identity. Vast numbers in 1836 migrated from the Cape Province rather than give up
slaves as the British demanded. As one Voortrekker (pioneer) woman wrote at the time, Afrikaners
could not accept blacks “being placed on an equal footing with Christians, contrary to the laws of
God and the natural distinctions of race and colour. …” Such sentiments found a political voice in
the founding in 1914 of the avowedly racist National Party.

Tribal chiefs such as Mandela’s father were useful to the government as long as they
supported its aims. The government encouraged tribal leaders to maintain their authority within
the tribe, to exercise moral and cultural influence. But when Mandela was a child, his father lost
his government appointment—and his relatively significant income—after refusing to appear
before a British magistrate. Apparently the father’s spirit of defiance was passed on to his son. But
the boy never knew his father well. When Mandela was nine, his father died and the youngster
was adopted by an uncle, the regent of the Thembu people, Chief Jogintabo Dalindyebo.

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6 The British colonies of the Cape and Natal merged with the Afrikaner Orange Free State and South African
Republic.
7 Benson, p. 20. The population is characterized here as African vs. white. In fact, there have long also been sizable
Coloured (mixed race) and Indian populations in South Africa.
As ward of the regent and a chief’s son, Mandela was raised a princeling, earmarked for a special destiny as counselor to the Thembu king. In his small world, he was accorded considerable respect. As a future friend would comment: “Nelson ... was groomed from childhood for respectability, status and sheltered living.” But the boy also observed that on critical matters the chief did not dictate; he consulted the elders during lengthy tribal councils. Mandela in later life praised the councils as “democracy in its purest form. ... The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens.” A leader, he learned, is above all a listener.

As a leader, I have always followed the principles I first saw demonstrated by the regent at the Great Place. I have always endeavored to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion. ... I always remember the regent’s axiom: a leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.9

*The church.* The young Mandela was also exposed early to the precepts of Christianity. While his father had not been a Christian, his mother was a fervent convert to the Methodist faith. His guardian was also a steadfast churchgoer. Through a local pastor, Mandela at a young age became aware that, as he put it, “virtually all of the achievements of Africans seemed to have come about through the missionary work of the Church. The mission schools trained the clerks, the interpreters, and the policemen, who at the time represented the height of African aspirations.”10

While Mandela was never a church proselytizer, he did absorb an enduring respect for men of the cloth. In college, he joined the Students Christian Association and taught Bible classes. He seemed to carry within him an abiding religious faith which sustained him in his own trials. More powerful even than his religious convictions, however, proved a lifelong belief that education was the universal passport to a fulfilled life.

*Education.* Mandela was fortunate that his hereditary position within the tribe as counselor to the chief made an education essential—not (from the elders’ point of view) that he might integrate into white society, but that he should better facilitate relations between the tribe and white society. He was offered unusual educational opportunities for a black African: in the 1930s, two-thirds of black children, for whom school was not compulsory, had no education. Less

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11 Ibid., p. 22.
12 Ibid., p. 19.
than two percent of those entering school completed even the primary grades. Spending per white pupil at state schools was at least six times that for blacks.\textsuperscript{13}

Mandela, who enrolled at parochial schools, proved an apt pupil and rose swiftly through grade levels to achieve one of the highest educations available to any black African. He went first to the Clarkebury Boarding Institute (a Wesleyan mission school), then to Healdtown College (a Methodist mission school) to complete his secondary schooling. In 1938, Mandela advanced to the University College of Fort Hare, a traditionally black university, for his BA. “For young South Africans like myself, it was Oxford and Cambridge, Harvard and Yale, all rolled into one,” recalls Mandela.\textsuperscript{14} At Fort Hare, he matured from a country boy into, if not a sophisticate, at least a more worldly person, learning among other things to wear pajamas and use a toothbrush.

His time there coincided with the implementation by the South African government of the 1936 Hertzog bills, which removed black voters from the common voters rolls in the Cape province, the only province where Africans had been allowed to vote. Instead, black Africans were to be represented in a Natives’ Representative Council.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{First Run-in with Authority}. While Mandela was not involved in the unrest which greeted the Hertzog bills, he had his own run-in with authority. In 1940, at the age of 18, Fort Hare expelled Mandela for his support of a student council election boycott. The students had voted to boycott until the student council was given increased authority to act on student grievances, in this instance unsatisfactory food in the dining hall. Mandela insisted on resigning when elected to the council by a tiny minority of students breaking the boycott. The college principal warned him that resignation would mean expulsion, but as Mandela remembered it: “[A]t the moment I needed to compromise, I simply could not do so.”\textsuperscript{16}

When Mandela’s guardian pressed him to apologize to the school authorities and return, the young man refused. Instead, and in order as well to escape a traditional marriage to a girl he did not love, Mandela in 1941 set off for South Africa’s greatest city—built on the gold from the mines that lay under it—Johannesburg.\textsuperscript{17} These twin rebellions marked enormous steps in Mandela’s maturing. To defy his guardian meant to reject nearly all the precepts of tribal fealty with which he had been raised. To leave a prestigious school instead of accepting the white administrator’s dictates was likewise a daring and frightening move.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 166.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 43.
\textsuperscript{15} The council was comprised of 12 elected and four nominated Africans, plus five white officials. In addition, under the bills blacks were allowed three Cape-elected white members of parliament and four nationally-elected white senators. Juckes, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{16} Mandela, \textit{Long Walk}, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{17} To pay for the journey, which Mandela made with the regent’s son, Justice, the two boys sold two of the regent’s prize oxen and pocketed the proceeds.
But Fort Hare had exposed him to the possibilities in the world beyond the tribe. At school, for example, he had for the first time made non-Thembu friends. The South African government, under a “divide and conquer” policy, encouraged tribalism among black South Africans. Mandela began to recognize the costs to blacks of supporting that policy, realizing that “we were not different people with separate languages; we were one people, with different tongues.”

Some of his new friends—among them Oliver Tambo—would become close companions for life on the path of defiance and resistance to authority Mandela first demonstrated at Fort Hare.

But when Mandela left for Johannesburg, he had no strategy or even desire to challenge the existing order. Rather, he planned to continue his education, which he valued highly. As he would later write:

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.

The young scholar hoped to eventually become a lawyer. He was 23, tall, fit and light-skinned compared to many Africans. He attracted attention with his height and his demeanor, and so far the attention had been largely beneficial.

“I learned ... that a degree was not in itself a guarantee of leadership”

In Johannesburg, Mandela avoided the common lot of blacks: a crippling life in the gold mines. Instead, he pursued his BA through the University of South Africa (UNISA) correspondence program while working as an articulated clerk (law apprentice) for the progressive Jewish law firm of Witkin, Sidelsky and Eidelman—a large firm with both black and white clients. In Lazar Sidelsky, Mandela was fortunate; at the time it was highly unusual for a white law firm to take on a black clerk. Sidelsky was a champion of education rights for black Africans. In engaging Mandela, Sidelsky urged him to complete his education and become a model for other blacks through his work as an attorney; he warned against political activism as dangerous and counterproductive.

Mandela met Sidelsky through a young black real estate agent who would become a lifelong friend: Walter Sisulu. Sisulu would later recall that first meeting:

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18 Ibid., p. 84.
19 Ibid., p. 166.
Well, he was a very bright young man, impressive and open about things. He appeared quite ambitious to develop educationally. I liked him very much.  

Mandela, who had very little money ("I often went days without more than a mouthful of food, and without a change of clothing,"²¹), found a second home with the Sisulus and for a short while even lived with them. Mandela was surprised to learn that Sisulu, despite his intelligence and business success, had never gone beyond elementary school. “In Johannesburg I found that many of the most outstanding leaders had never been to university at all,” observed Mandela.²²

I realized that hardly anything I had learned at university seemed relevant in my new environment. … No one had ever suggested to me how to go about removing the evils of racial prejudice, and I had to learn by trial and error.²³

This discovery did not turn Mandela against education; rather, it began to suggest to him that the system which prevented advancement of blacks needed to change. Contrary to what he had been taught at his liberal missionary schools, Mandela observed that talented South African blacks had far fewer opportunities than whites and that even those blacks with a higher education could not advance beyond a certain point. Mandela would later tell a court about his own experience of discrimination as a black lawyer.

We were constantly aware that no matter how well, how correctly, how adequately we pursued our career of law, we could not become a prosecutor, or a magistrate, or a judge. We became aware of the fact that as attorneys we often dealt with officials whose competence and attainments were no higher than ours, but whose superior position was maintained and protected by a White skin.²⁴

At the same time, in Johannesburg Mandela encountered social racism, from overt insults to the subtle indignities inflicted by liberal whites. There were many instances, but one stood out in his memory. At the Sidelsky law firm, the friendly young secretaries gallantly invited the blacks in the office to have tea together. It was painfully obvious, when they insisted the black Africans take particular teacups, that the young ladies were unwilling to drink from any cup, even after washing, that a black person’s lips had touched. Mandela resolved his own discomfort by politely declining tea at all.

²⁰ Juckes, p. 57.
²¹ Mandela, Long Walk, p. 77.
²² Ibid., p. 69.
²³ Ibid., p. 89.
²⁴ Mandela, No Easy Walk, p. 149.
Angry young man. While such incidents did not provoke Mandela to rudeness, they began to grate on him increasingly. During his early years in Johannesburg, the country boy grew angry as he became aware of the systematic repression of blacks. As he would later write:

To be an African in South Africa means that one is politicized from the moment of one’s birth, whether one acknowledges it or not. His life is circumscribed by racist laws and regulations that cripple his growth, dim his potential, and stunt his life. ... While I was not prepared to hurl the white man into the sea, I would have been perfectly happy if he climbed aboard his steamships and left the continent of his own volition.25

Sisulu and other new acquaintances of the young Mandela encouraged him in developing these views. Sisulu was a member of the African National Congress, founded in 1912 (and then known as the South African Native National Congress) to advance peacefully the cause of black rights in South Africa. The ANC, composed in its early days of relatively privileged, educated blacks, sought to persuade the white government through logic and example to allow blacks political and economic opportunity.

By the 1940s, however, young members of the ANC were urging it to take more forceful action: to organize the masses in protest. The younger ANC group, known as the Youth League, rejected the belief of older activists that intelligent accommodation with the white government would eventually lead to recognition from whites that blacks, too, should enjoy full civil rights. That strategy, felt Mandela, had failed.

I, too, had been susceptible to paternalistic British colonialism and the appeal of being perceived by whites as “cultured” and “progressive” and “civilized.” But it was an illusion.26

Mandela during this period sided with an ANC faction which argued that black Africans had a unique struggle to wage against white domination, which would only be undermined or preempted by white or mixed-race partners. Communists, Indians and white liberals, they insisted, had no rightful part in the crusade.

With time, however, Mandela and the other militants muted their view. In 1946, for example, the ANC Youth League admired the defiance and radicalism of the Indian community when it staged a campaign of passive resistance against restrictive legislation. The Youth League gradually realized that to achieve even their initial goals of an equitable redistribution of land, the readmission of Africans to skilled labor and free, compulsory education for all would require all the allies they could muster, particularly after 1948.

25 Mandela, Long Walk, pp. 95,112.
26 Ibid., p. 97.
Victory of the National Party. In 1948, the situation for blacks took a dramatic turn for the worse with the election to power of the racist and Afrikaaner-dominated National Party (NP). During this same period, blacks in other African nations were casting off colonial rule to establish new, black-dominated governments. In South Africa, the NP moved in the opposite direction: toward repression and segregation of blacks. Immediately upon assuming office, the NP changed the course of South African history by passing into law apartheid, the legal separation in all areas of life of blacks from whites. The NP, as one writer summarizes it, “embodied the Afrikaner philosophy of racial survival, racial superiority and racial domination.”27 The Nationalists’ goal was the establishment of separate societies, with blacks living in land- and resource-poor designated homelands while the whites enjoyed the nation’s most fertile regions and the wealth of its vast natural resources.

Over the next six years, the government executed a swift and stunning assertion of control. A 1949 law banned mixed marriages, in 1950 a law restricted blacks to designated “group areas,” the Suppression of Communism Act outlawed the Communist Party (Communists supported the black liberation movement), and the Population Registration Act classified all South Africans by race. In 1953, the state upped the ante in its effort to create a docile African populace by promulgating the Bantu [African] Education Act. Implemented in 1956, the act meant to prevent Africans from aspiring above their station by denying them more than a rudimentary education. As then-Minister of Native Affairs Hendrick Verwoerd said at the time:

The Bantu must be guided to serve his own community in all respects.
There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour.

Verwoerd later added: “What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it (sic) cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd.”28

By then, Mandela had moved into the thick of the struggle to force the white government to listen to the views of the black majority it was exploiting and repressing.

“I was now bound heart and soul”

Mandela had joined the ANC in 1944 and was promptly elected to the executive committee of its Youth League. He did not, however, exercise much early influence as he was pursuing a law degree at the multiracial and prestigious University of the Witwatersrand. At Wits, as it is known locally, Mandela for the first time met a large number of white and Coloured people of his own age, many of whom accepted him on his own terms. Lifelong friendships were formed with such future liberation leaders as Communist Joe Slovo and his wife, Ruth First, Indian activist

27 Juckes, p. 65.
28 Both Verwoerd quotes from Juckes, p. 119.
Ismail Meer and Afrikaner lawyer Bram Fischer. At the same time, Mandela was keenly aware that he was the only black student in the law faculty.

Starting in 1947, with his election to the executive committee of the Transvaal branch of the ANC, Mandela grew steadily more involved with the ANC. Activism helped Mandela find an outlet for his growing frustration and represented a milestone in his commitment to the organization.

I came to identify myself with the congress as a whole, with its hopes and despairs, its successes and failures; I was now bound heart and soul.29

In 1949, he took a leading role in drafting a new Youth League “Program of Action” which, after considerable internal upheaval, was adopted by the entire ANC. This document called for the first time in ANC history for extralegal protest, such as boycotts, strikes, stay-at-homes, passive resistance and demonstrations. The first test of the new program came in 1950, with a “National Day of Protest” on June 26. The one-day general strike—organized in cooperation with the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) and the African People’s Organization (APO)—enjoyed considerable success, though it was less widespread than the organizers had hoped. But the Day of Protest proved just a training exercise for the next undertaking, the 1952 “Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign.”

_The Defiance Campaign_. Mandela had been moving up in the ANC organization as others began to recognize his maturing gifts for oratory and leadership. In 1950, he became a member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC; in 1951 he advanced to become president of the Youth League; and in 1952 he took over the ANC’s most ambitious campaign to date, the national civil disobedience movement dubbed the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign. By then, he had realized the path his life would take.

I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments, produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, from henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead, I simply found myself doing so and could not do otherwise.30

For the Defiance Campaign, Mandela agreed to be chair of both the National Action Committee and the National Volunteer Board, as well as volunteer-in-chief coordinating campaign activities. According to the plan, trained volunteers of both the ANC and the SAIC would

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29 Mandela, _Long Walk_, p. 108.
30 Ibid., p. 95.
deliberately break laws after informing the police of their intention. A second stage would involve mass defiance, accompanied by strikes and industrial action. The Defiance Campaign, which began officially on June 26, mustered an unprecedented show of political strength against the ruling party. It involved over 8,500 volunteers during six months from June to December 1952. It garnered the ANC tremendous publicity and drove membership up from 20,000 to 100,000. It also had the effect, important for an oppressed opposition, of making a prison term a mark of honor for blacks.

For the 34-year-old Mandela, the campaign marked his transition from a local to a national and even international figure. He discovered his gifts as an orator and found it “exhilarating” to address a crowd of 10,000. The campaign, he said, restored his pride: “I could walk upright like a man and look everyone in the eye with the dignity that comes from not having succumbed to oppression and fear.” Fellow ANC leader and eventual law partner Oliver Tambo remembers the Mandela of that time:

As a man Nelson is passionate, emotional, sensitive, quickly stung to bitterness and retaliation by insult and patronage. He has a natural air of authority. He cannot help magnetizing a crowd: he is commanding with a tall, handsome bearing; trusts and is trusted by the youth, for their impatience reflects his own; appealing to the women. He is dedicated and fearless. He is the born mass leader.

A revealing portrait of Mandela’s grace and stature also emerges from a description left behind by a white South African who observed the young man in Cape Town, enlisting volunteers for the campaign. He wrote:

I noticed people turning and staring at the opposite pavement and I saw this magnificent figure of a man, immaculately dressed. Not just blacks but whites, including white women, were turning to admire him.

But the Defiance Campaign also brought Mandela definitively to the attention of the authorities. He was arrested July 30, 1952 on charges of promoting communism. Although in its December decision the court found no evidence that he and his fellow defendants were practicing communists, they were found guilty of “statutory communism” and given nine-month suspended jail sentences.

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31 In a sign that he had not yet fully adopted the multiracial approach which would later distinguish him, Mandela had first argued for exclusively African participation in the Defiance Campaign. Voted down by the ANC, he said he “fully accepted the agreed upon position.” Ibid., p. 123.
32 Ibid., p. 140.
33 Mandela, No Easy Walk, from Oliver Tambo’s introduction, p. xiii.
34 Benson, p. 46.
Meanwhile the government, to ensure that there would be no repeat of the Defiance Campaign, legalized corporal punishment for defiers. The 1953 Public Safety Act went much further, authorizing the government to declare martial law and to detain people without trial. As for Mandela, the government in December 1952 “banned” him for six months and confined him to Johannesburg. A ban required no proof of wrongdoing; it restricted a person from attending gatherings of any kind (including, for example, birthday parties) and often involved forced resignation from organizations. Mandela termed it a “kind of walking imprisonment.” To ignore it meant legal charges and often prison. Mandela had just been appointed ANC first deputy president under Chief Albert Luthuli, a tribal leader and ANC activist. He was also president of the Transvaal ANC.

This first of many bans on Mandela had, however, only a limited effect; during its term he conceived of and began to institute the Mandela-plan, or M-plan. Ever since the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, he and others had anticipated the day that the government would ban the ANC. The plan, never very successful, tried to create a pyramid network of trusted individuals who would form the underground links of an illegal ANC. As part of the implementation process, the ANC leadership—including Mandela—delivered political lectures to members. The curriculum included “The World We Live In,” “How We Are Governed” and “The Need for Change.”

Out on a limb. When his ban expired in June 1953, Mandela addressed an assembly in Sophiatown, a Johannesburg township blacks considered their Greenwich Village or Left Bank. In 1950, the government had decided it wanted Sophiatown for whites and had begun a campaign of forced removal to another area. The ANC resolved in 1953 to resist the removal and called the meeting to galvanize Sophiatown residents. Mandela remembers himself at that time as “something of a rabble-rousing speaker. I liked to incite an audience, and I was doing so that evening.”

In Sophiatown, Mandela went out on a limb, articulating a position which had no institutional ANC backing but which he felt was inescapable. It was a tactic which would come to characterize his political modus operandi. Although Mandela was always careful to defer to collective decisions and the consensus of the ANC leadership, he harbored a streak of independence. Mandela told the crowd that because the government was making legal dissent impossible, the time for peaceful resistance and nonviolence had ended, that violence was the only weapon which would destroy apartheid. The ANC leadership sharply reprimanded Mandela for his outburst, and he accepted the rebuke. But within days he had, equally without authorization,

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35 Mandela, Long Walk, p. 135.
36 In September 1952, Luthuli refused a government order to quit the ANC or lose his government-appointed and paid chieftainship. Stripped of his position, Luthuli famously said: “Who will deny that thirty years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately and modestly at a closed and barred door?” Ibid., p. 143.
37 Ibid., p. 157.
encouraged his old friend and ANC colleague Walter Sisulu to go to China to ask for weaponry. Said Mandela in retrospect:

They were the actions of a hotheaded revolutionary who had not thought things through and who acted without discipline. They were the actions of a man frustrated with the immorality of apartheid and the ruthlessness of the state in protecting it.\textsuperscript{38}

The Sophiatown resistance did not stop the removals. Mandela said the experience taught him that his unauthorized endorsement of violence was, in fact, the correct course.

A freedom fighter learns the hard way that it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle, and the oppressed is often left no recourse but to use methods that mirror those of the oppressor. At a certain point, one can only fight fire with fire.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Banned again.} The government responded more forcefully than the ANC to Mandela’s rhetoric. In September 1953, it banned the 35-year-old lawyer for two years and required him to resign from the ANC. All his future work for the ANC would be illegal. Mandela did have one last say, however, before he fell silent under the banning order. He had already drafted an address to that year’s Transvaal ANC annual conference, which was delivered by a stand-in. Although the press of the time dared not cover it, Mandela’s words would eventually be read worldwide. In his speech “No Easy Walk to Freedom,” Mandela called again for “new forms of political struggle.”

The day of reckoning between the forces of freedom and those of reaction is not very far off. … To overthrow oppression has been sanctioned by humanity and is the highest aspiration of every free man.\textsuperscript{40}

The banning order, hateful to Mandela politically, did allow him more time for his family and the fledgling law practice he had started in August 1952 with Oliver Tambo.\textsuperscript{41} Although Mandela continued to influence the ANC from behind the scenes, the ban provided a kind of respite in a life that had almost no room for family and personal commitments.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 159.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 166.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 162.
\textsuperscript{41} Mandela failed his law exams at Witwatersrand several times. However, under South African rules he could practice law because he passed a qualifying exam for lawyers and worked as an articled clerk. He later obtained an LL.B. by correspondence from the University of London, passing his exams in 1964 while in jail awaiting the verdict in the Rivonia Trial.
“Life with him was a life without him”

In 1953, Mandela had been married for nine years to Evelyn Mase, a nurse. But the union was not destined to last; Mandela was never at home and Evelyn did not share his overriding commitment to the black African struggle for rights. Even at this early stage in his career, Mandela had little time for family life. Nonetheless, the marriage produced three children to whom Mandela was devoted: Thembi (1945), Makgatho (1950) and Makaziwe (1954). He did not see much of them. Makgatho was born in the midst of the preparations for the Day of Protest. When he was five, Thembi asked his mother: “Where does Daddy live?” The question, Mandela recalls, touched his heart.

The struggle, I was learning, was all-consuming. A man involved in the struggle was a man without a home life.

In 1952, Evelyn was able to pursue her own career, studying midwifery in Durban. She also turned to religion. These two circumstances lent her confidence when, in 1955, she issued Mandela an ultimatum: choose between the family or the ANC. As Mandela remembers: “She had always assumed that politics was a youthful diversion, that I would someday return to the Transkei and practice there as a lawyer.” But her husband had already made his choice, and she moved out. With his second marriage, Mandela would continue the same pattern, but this time with no pretense that anything but the struggle came first.

Winnie Madikizela. Mandela met Nomzamo Zanyiwe Winifred Madikizela in 1957 and decided almost on the spot, he recalls fondly, that he wanted to marry her. Known as Winnie, the lady was beautiful and young, 18 years junior to the 39-year-old Mandela. In the African community, Mandela was already a great man and the young social worker found herself a bit intimidated, amazed that he took an interest in her. Even on their first date, he could not escape his work, she recalled: “He couldn’t swallow one spoonful without people coming to consult him.”

They married June 14, 1958 at her home but had no time for a honeymoon. Nor did they have much time for a marriage. As Mandela himself recognized: “The wife of a freedom fighter is often like a widow, even when her husband is not in prison.” He rose at 4 a.m. and was often not home until midnight, after political meetings. Winnie wrote:

There was never any kind of life that I can recall as family life, a young bride’s life, where you sit with your husband and dream dreams of what

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42 A second daughter, born earlier and also called Makaziwe, died in 1948 at nine months old.
43 Ibid., p. 119
44 Ibid., p. 206.
45 Winnie Mandela, p. 58.
46 Mandela, Long Walk, p. 217.
life might have been. ... You just couldn’t tear Nelson from the people, from the struggle. The nation came first. Everything else was second.\footnote{Winnie Mandela, p. 65.}

But the young bride had no illusions it would be otherwise—“Even at that stage, life with him was a life without him. He did not even pretend that I would have some special claim to his time.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 59.} Winnie was left to keep the small house they found for themselves in Orlando, one of Johannesburg’s black townships, and to take care of the children as they were born. On February 4, 1959 a daughter Zenani arrived, followed by Zindziswa on December 23, 1960. Mandela was not present for either of the births.

Winnie’s response was to turn to political activity as well. Before Zeni’s birth, in October 1958, she joined a protest by black women against government insistence that they carry passes. She was arrested and spent two weeks in jail. It was an introduction to jail life she would need, for, like her husband, over the years Winnie would be in and out of prison. Functioning as a single parent of children ages 3 and 1 after their father was first arrested (in August 1962), Winnie’s life was arduous. As she once exclaimed: “I think I am the most unmarrried married woman!”\footnote{Ibid., p. 85.}

\textit{A Family Apart}. Winnie became as politically active, and as famous, as her husband. Her persecution by the government became doubly motivated: to punish Mandela and to punish her. When not jailed, Winnie found herself banned and rebanned. From 1966-69, Winnie was charged three times. From May 1969 to September 1970, she spent 17 months in solitary confinement (a condition Mandela himself tolerated only briefly) before winning an acquittal in court. From 1970-78 she was charged three times and imprisoned for six months. In 1972, two men broke into her bedroom and tried to strangle her. In May 1977, she was taken from jail to internal exile in the Orange Free State, a stronghold of apartheid, where she lived for eight years.

Mandela always felt keenly the injustice of retribution against his family for the crime of being related to him. He meditated often on the burdens he had placed on his relatives and, while always clear about his own path, questioned his right to inflict the consequences on his children. In his autobiography, he wrote: “I was always prepared to face the hardships that affected me personally. But my family paid a terrible price, perhaps too dear a price for my commitment.”\footnote{Mandela, \textit{Long Walk}, p. 623.} On the other hand, he argued that a black South African man trying to honor his dual obligations to family and community had the cards stacked against him.

In South Africa, a man of color who attempted to live as a human being was punished and isolated. ... I did not in the beginning choose to place my people above my family, but in attempting to serve my people, I found
that I was prevented from fulfilling my obligations as a son, a brother, a father and a husband. In that way, 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 best and loved most.  

In a similar bittersweet vein, he reflected at his daughter Zindzi’s wedding after his release that his children had never enjoyed a father’s participation in their lives. “It seems to be the destiny of freedom fighters,” he said, “to have unstable personal lives.”

We watched our children growing without our guidance and when we did come out [of prison], my children said, ‘We thought we had a father and one day he’d come back. But to our dismay, our father came back and he left us alone because he has now become the father of the nation.’

The burden, he always acknowledged, was greatest on Winnie. As he wrote to her from prison:

I often wonder just how far more difficult it would have been for me to take the decision to leave you behind if I had been able to see clearly the countless perils and hardships to which you would be exposed in my absence. I sincerely think that my decision would, nonetheless, have been easily the same, but it would certainly have been preceded by far more heart-searching and hesitation than was the case twenty-four years ago.

His family’s love and affection, he told them, had sustained him throughout his years in prison. Yet he repeatedly fought off the demons of guilt when he dwelt on their sufferings. He wrote to Winnie:

[T]here have been moments … when conscience and a sense of guilt have ravaged every part of my being, when I have wondered whether any kind of commitment can ever be sufficient excuse for abandoning a young and inexperienced woman in a pitiless desert, literally throwing her into the hands of highwaymen; a wonderful woman without her pillar and support at times of need.

But in 1953, all that lay ahead. As his ban went into effect, Mandela devoted himself to the private law practice he had set up in 1952 with Oliver Tambo. It was the first black law firm in South Africa and was deluged with business. Mandela discovered that, while he could not be overtly active politically, his legal affairs carried political overtones and stimulated his desire to

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51 Ibid., p. 623.
52 Ibid., p. 600.
53 Winnie Mandela, p. 148.
54 Ibid., p. 149.
reform the system which sent him clients. The majority had violated apartheid regulations because they had sat in the wrong train compartment, were out too late at night, or were unemployed. As Tambo recalls:

If, when we started our law partnership, we had not been rebels against South African apartheid, our experiences in our offices would have remedied the deficiency.\textsuperscript{55}

As a lawyer, Mandela discovered that he enjoyed the drama, the parry and thrust of the court room. He called himself “flamboyant” in court. “I did not act as though I were a black man in a white man’s court,” he wrote, “but as if everyone else—white and black—was a guest in my court.”\textsuperscript{56} It was a demeanor and a style which would stand Mandela in good stead with the authorities in the years to come.

Mandela’s ban expired in September 1955, but it was not long before, in March 1956, he was banned anew. By then, however, he had only contempt for banning restrictions: “I resolved not to become my own jailer.” He threw himself into the struggle with renewed vigor.

\textit{“I never expected justice in court”}

During Mandela’s 1953 ban, the ANC had convened a critical convention, a congress across race and color lines to draw up a “freedom charter” for an envisioned multiracial South Africa of the future. While Mandela could not attend in an official capacity, he mingled anonymously in the crowd which assembled on June 25 and 26, 1955. The charter it adopted would remain a blueprint for the freedom struggle for the next 35 years. The charter called for an end to racial discrimination, declaring that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.” It called for government by the people, along with a fair distribution of the country’s wealth and land under a capitalist system.

This event proved the last straw for the apartheid government which, on December 5, 1956, arrested 156 members of the ANC and other opposition parties, charging them with treason and a conspiracy to replace the government with a communist state. After two weeks and a formal reading of the charges, the accused were released on bail provided they reported to the police once a week and stayed away from public gatherings. This was the point at which Mandela returned home to find his wife, Evelyn, had moved out with the children. But he had scant opportunity to dwell on his personal difficulties.

The “Treason Trial,” which took a great deal of the accused’s time and resources, dragged on for four years. The actual trial began only on August 3, 1959 and the prosecution concluded its

\textsuperscript{55} Juckes, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{56} Mandela, \textit{Long Walk}, p. 153.

**Sharpeville.** In April 1959, the ANC had seen the emergence of its first serious competitor as a champion of black rights. Tired and frustrated with the ANC’s gradualist approach toward winning rights for black Africans, on April 6 the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) held its founding meeting. Many of the members, including its newly elected president Robert Sobukwe, were former ANC Youth League leaders. PAC rejected multiracialism and communism, claiming Africa for the Africans. While Mandela found the PAC “immature,” and considered their promise of liberation by the end of 1963 dangerous, he understood well its appeal.

By 1960, PAC was looking for ways to sharpen its public profile and win new members. Therefore, PAC announced that on March 21, it would sponsor a demonstration against the country’s pass laws. The PAC campaign anticipated by 10 days an identical ANC initiative, which it apparently sought to upstage. Response to PAC’s call varied enormously around the country, but in Sharpeville, 35 miles south of Johannesburg, several thousand demonstrators surrounded the police station. Panicked, the police opened fire on the unarmed crowd, and after the smoke cleared, 69 blacks lay dead while more than 400 were wounded.

The shootings shook the world. The UN Security Council for the first time condemned the South African government. World governments registered their protests. The Johannesburg stock exchange plunged. Whites thought of emigrating. The ANC responded with a mass burning of passes on March 26 followed by a national day of mourning, a stay-at-home, on March 28.

In response, the South African government declared martial law and, on March 30, Mandela was again arrested, without charges and under the “state of emergency.” Mandela was one of 2,000 or so detained for the duration of the emergency, which was lifted only in August. It was little surprise when, on April 8, the government outlawed the ANC and the PAC under the Suppression of Communism Act. Now even membership in either organization meant jail and a fine.

It was during this detention that Mandela began to display an authority and insistence on prisoners’ rights which would distinguish his later jail term. On being ordered by a station commander to take his hands out of his pockets, Mandela replied coolly that he might condescend to do so if the jailers would feed the prisoners. Shortly afterwards, a detective sergeant greeted him pleasantly: “Hello, Nelson.” Mandela shot back: “I am not Nelson to you, I am Mr. Mandela.”

But he also respected warders who treated him well. Mandela was given leave from prison to wrap up his now-defunct legal practice in Johannesburg. Of the sergeant detailed to guard him, Mandela said:

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57 Ibid., p. 241.
We had a kind of gentlemen’s code between us: I would not escape and thereby get him into trouble, while he permitted me a degree of freedom.\textsuperscript{58}

Mandela always tried to demonstrate civility toward his guards, believing that in general they were ignorant and understood little of the black cause. Mandela proposed to educate them.

Only a white electorate indoctrinated with the idea of the black threat, ignorant of African ideas and policies, could support the monstrous racist philosophy of the National Party. Familiarity, in this case, would not breed contempt, but understanding, and even, eventually, harmony.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{Back to Trial.} Meanwhile, Mandela and the other defendants in the Treason Trial still had to attend sessions of the trial, which continued its slow pace until March 29, 1961. During the state of emergency, the defendants were prevented from meeting properly with their lawyers and so released their defense team. As the only lawyer among them, Mandela during this period emerged as their legal authority and spokesperson. In August, Mandela took the stand. He reiterated the ANC commitment to non-violent struggle and, while careful to acknowledge the debt of gratitude the ANC owed the Communist Party for its support, denied he himself had ever espoused communism. He also stated the terms of accommodation the ANC was prepared to accept from the government; even 60 seats in parliament for blacks, while far from universal suffrage, would represent a significant advance, acceptable for an interim period. When the verdict came, it was received with cheers and tears. The panel of three judges had found no evidence that the ANC had a policy to overthrow the government by force or that it was a communist organization. The accused were discharged.

Mandela was relieved, but neither grateful to the system nor deceived into thinking it just. With maturity had come increased cynicism about South Africa where, as a student, he had learned the rule of law of paramount. Experience had taught him otherwise: “I never expected justice in court, however much I fought for it, and though I sometimes received it.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{“The struggle is my life”}

As the Treason Trial defendants were pronounced free to go home, Mandela prepared instead to go underground. With the ANC banned, the leadership was forced to continue the struggle illegally and elected Mandela to direct its efforts. His standing in the community was immense. When he addressed a unity forum in Pietermaritzburg in March 1961, his first public

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 246.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 249.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 260.
speaking for nine years, his remarks were greeted with “thunderous applause.” Said one participant, “This is like a State of the Nation address by the American president.”61

But going underground was a difficult decision for Mandela personally, to leave behind his wife and two small daughters for the life of a fugitive. In an open letter to the press dated June 26, 1961, the anniversary of the Day of Protest, he explained his action:

I have chosen this course which is more difficult and which entails more risk and hardship than sitting in gaol. I have had to separate myself from my dear wife and children, from my mother and sisters to live as an outlaw in my own land. I have had to close my business, to abandon my profession and live in poverty, as many of my people are doing. I shall fight the Government side by side with you, inch by inch, and mile by mile, until victory is won. I will not leave South Africa, nor will I surrender. The struggle is my life. I will continue fighting for freedom until the end of my days.62

With his retreat underground, Mandela, like his colleagues who had defected to the PAC, came to feel increasingly that non-violent protest was futile. The spring of 1961 was frustrating. An appeal penned by Mandela on behalf of the ANC to the prime minister calling for a national convention to establish a multiracial republic received no response. In May, the government arrested 10,000 people, banned meetings, raided printers, and mobilized the army and police to intimidate protesters. Thanks to the crackdown, an attempted stay-at-home strike by disenfranchised blacks and their supporters on May 31, the day South Africa was declared a republic, had only limited success. Mandela told a Rand Daily Mail reporter:

If the government reaction is to crush by naked force our nonviolent struggle, we will have to reconsider our tactics. In my mind we are closing a chapter on this question of a nonviolent policy.63

Chastised again by his colleagues for his talk of violence, Mandela complained that “[i]f you wait for textbook conditions, they will never occur.”

I was raising the issue of violence so soon after the Treason Trial, where we had contended that for the ANC nonviolence was an inviolate principle, not a tactic to be changed as conditions warranted. I myself believed precisely the opposite: that nonviolence was a tactic that should be abandoned when it no longer worked.64

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61 Meer, p. 162.
63 Ibid., p. 270.
64 Ibid., p. 271-272.
**Umkhonto we Sizwe.** Over a series of meetings in June, Mandela won over the leadership. While the ANC distanced itself institutionally from the new association, Mandela became director of a separate military group forthrightly committed to fighting back against the apartheid government with all the means at its disposal. Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation, known as MK) was nonetheless specific in targeting only government buildings, not people. Its manifesto stated boldly:

The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defence of our people, our future and our freedom.  

While planning Umkhonto’s first operation, Mandela moved from hiding place to hiding place, earning the moniker the “Black Pimpernel” for his ability to avoid arrest. His most comfortable period was spent at Liliesleaf Farm, an estate in the northern Johannesburg white suburb of Rivonia. There he could spend time with Winnie and his children, confer with colleagues and lay plans. Winnie recalls it as one of the most satisfying periods of Mandela’s life.

It was the most inspiring time of his life—he was totally with them, totally part of the people he has sacrificed his life for. He lived among them. And to see him with his people was one of the most inspiring things, even to me.  

MK’s first action came on December 16, 1961, with simultaneous sabotage against electric power stations and government buildings in Johannesburg, Durban and Port Elizabeth. There was irony in the fact that, only days before, the respected ANC president, Chief Albert Luthuli, won the Nobel Peace Prize. The ANC delighted in the Nobel announcement, which disapproved the National Party’s claim that the ANC was a communist conspiracy. Mandela followed up Umkhonto’s inaugural display of force with a trip abroad to raise funds for the fledgling paramilitary group. On January 11, he was smuggled out of South Africa (he had no passport) and spent six months touring Africa and Europe.

**The Africa Tour.** As Mandela’s first trip outside his native country, many experiences during his half-year journey made a powerful impression on him. Among them was the moment when, at a ceremony with Ethiopia’s Emperor Haile Selassie, Mandela realized he was seeing “black soldiers commanded by black generals applauded by black leaders who were all guests of a black head of state. It was a heady moment.”

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65 Ibid., p. 285.
66 Winnie Mandela, p. 75.
It was also a successful tour for MK. Mandela, joined at times by Oliver Tambo, who had established an ANC office in exile, raised thousands of dollars and obtained pledges of assistance to train soldiers. Mandela returned home July 20, 1962 rejuvenated and enthusiastic about the struggle’s future prospects. What he could not know was that his own activist role in his people’s battle for rights was about to come to an abrupt end.

“If I had my time over I would do the same again”

On August 5, 1962, Mandela was detained by police and arrested on the road from Durban to Johannesburg. He was dressed as a chauffeur and gave a pseudonym, but the authorities knew who they had. At the formal laying of charges on August 8, one journalist recorded that Mandela “made a slow and dramatic appearance, mounting the steps to the court like a quiet avenging giant.”68 The charges against him were leaving the country without permission and inciting African workers to strike. The prisoner was then taken to the Johannesburg Fort to await trial.

In court, Mandela was struck by the deference paid him by the professionals he had met during his days as a lawyer—notably the white magistrate and other attorneys. It was at that moment, he says, that he realized he represented something beyond his own circumstances; that the prospect of punishing Mandela for his beliefs made his white colleagues visibly uncomfortable.

I realized the role I could play in court and the possibilities before me as a defendant. I was the symbol of justice in the court of the oppressor, the representative of the great ideals of freedom, fairness, and democracy in a society that dishonored those virtues. I realized then and there that I could carry on the fight even within the fortress of the enemy.69

It was indeed an unprecedented opportunity to speak publicly to the wrongs and injustices black Africans suffered. The eyes of the world were on the courtroom in Pretoria. On November 6, the United Nations for the first time voted for sanctions against South Africa. The public galleries in the court were filled and thousands more waited outside. Since his arrest, supporters had started a “Free Mandela” campaign, in contravention of a law banning gatherings related to his imprisonment. Slogans were scrawled everywhere.

Mandela used the trial to advantage. Starting with dress as a powerful signal of solidarity, Mandela appeared in court wearing a tribal leopard-skin kaross. Winnie, in mute support, also wore a beaded headdress and traditional African skirt. Mandela turned his defendant’s statement into a bully pulpit. He addressed the court:

68 Benson, p. 118.
69 Mandela, Long Walk, p. 317.
Your Worship, I would say that the whole life of any thinking African in this country drives him continuously to a conflict between his conscience on the one hand and the law on the other. ... The law as it is applied, the law as it has been developed over a long period of history, and especially the law as it is written and designed by the Nationalist Government, is a law which, in our view, is immoral, unjust and intolerable. Our consciences dictate that we must protest against it, that we must oppose it, and that we must attempt to alter it.

The popular violence of which the government complained was the result of its own policies, argued Mandela.

Government violence can only do one thing and that is to breed counter-violence. We have warned repeatedly that the government, by resorting continually to violence, will breed, in this country, counter-violence amongst the people, till ultimately, if there is no dawning of sanity on the part of the government—ultimately, the dispute between the government and my people will finish up by being settled in violence and by force.

As for his own course, Mandela made clear, it was far from easy. But breaking the law, he told the court, was inevitable for a black person of honor. Mandela said he did not seek imprisonment, but if that was the price of ultimate victory, it was a price he was prepared to pay.

If I had my time over I would do the same again, so would any man who dares call himself a man. ... I was made, by the law, a criminal, not because of what I had done, but because of what I stood for, because of what I thought, because of my conscience. Can it be any wonder to anybody that such conditions make a man an outlaw of society? ... More powerful than my fear of the dreadful conditions to which I might be subjected is my hatred for the dreadful conditions to which my people are subjected outside prison throughout the country.\(^70\)

The trial began in October 15 and on November 7, 1962 Mandela was found guilty and sentenced to five years of hard labor. It was a sign of Mandela’s standing, and the growing perception among some groups of whites that the state’s campaign against the ANC was unjust, that the prosecutor stopped Mandela on the way into court one day, apologized for the sentence he was having to demand and embraced the African.\(^71\)

Mandela was headed for jail, but his leadership of the black freedom movement had never been so visible. Mandela could not know, however, that within months his Pretoria trial and five-

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\(^{70}\) All quotes from defense speech from Mandela, *No Easy Walk*, pp. 150-159.

\(^{71}\) Meer, p. 212.
year sentence would seem like child’s play compared to the charges brought against him and the bulk of the ANC leadership at the infamous Rivonia Trial, where prosecutors sought the death sentence for the accused.

“I am the first accused”

The government was trying to tighten its grip even further. The Sabotage Act of June 1962 included trespassing as sabotage. Another law prohibited printing any statements by a banned person. House arrest became standard. On May 1, 1963, the popularly-known Ninety-Day Detention Law went into effect, giving police the authority to detain anyone without warrant for up to 90 days (which could be extended). In November, the bantustan system of “separate development” was extended with the creation of legislature for a Transkei “self-governing” homeland. Transkei voters, however, by a margin of 3 to 1 elected to the legislature members opposed to the homeland policy.

The government had also quashed the PAC, the ANC’s rival for black African allegiance. Its leader, Robert Sobukwe, had been sentenced to prison in 1960, and his jail term was renewed without explanation in May 1963. The government boasted of smashing PAC in early 1963 after it rounded up some 3,200 members. Forty were sentenced to death and 1,000 went to jail. Meanwhile, the authorities turned their attention to MK.

The Rivonia Trial. On July 11, 1963, the government staged a spectacular raid on the Liliesleaf farm in the Rivonia suburb where Mandela had lived incognito before his trip abroad. There they had arrested the leadership of Umkhonto we Sizwe and collected hundreds of incriminating documents. The 11 accused were charged with sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the government. Mandela, of course, was already in custody. When the first appointment was arranged with the defendants’ lawyers, the advocates were dismayed to see Mandela had lost 40 pounds during his incarceration and looked yellowish. Yet Mandela asserted his leadership with the old spirit. One account reports:

His stature impressed even the prison staff who treated him not quite with deference, but as if realizing that he was a ‘big’ man; not that this mitigated their hatred of all he stood for but there was a strange kind of awe for one whom they regarded as a ‘kaffir.’ On one occasion when he complained to a white warden, the retort was: ‘When you are the government, you will do it to us.’

The Rivonia Trial began in Pretoria on October 9, 1963. A writer has described the scene:

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72 Benson, p. 136.
The dark-panelled court with its high-domed ceiling had a rococo atmosphere reminiscent of the American South. Suspended from the ceiling above the prosecutor’s table was an old fan which wobbled and creaked as it slowly turned. Police with satchels of teargas grenades guarded the doors. The galleries were crowded despite security police intimidation: spectators’ names and addresses were taken and they were photographed on leaving the court.73

The state rested its case on February 29, 1964 and the defense began on April 20. Once again, Mandela took the opportunity to preach the ANC message to a wide audience. His conviction they would be condemned to death only added to his fervor. As he put it: “I felt we were likely to hang no matter what we said, so we might as well say what we truly believed.”74

Mandela, as at the Treason Trial the preeminent spokesperson for the accused, was chosen to make the first statement for the defense. He spoke for four hours. Mandela did not deny that sabotage was planned. But he clarified, once again, that violence was “planned as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by whites. ... I can only say that I felt morally obliged to do what I did.”75 To fight, he said, was the only choice.

We of the ANC had always stood for a non-racial democracy, and we shrank from any action which might drive the races further apart than they already were. But the hard facts were that fifty years of non-violence had brought the African people nothing but more and more repressive legislation, and fewer and fewer rights.

Mandela denied the oft-heard charge that he or the ANC was communist. Although he said he was grateful for the unstinting support that communist parties around the world had lent his cause, “I am not a Communist and I have never been a member of the Communist Party.” Rather, he said, he had always particularly admired British parliamentary democracy, while “I have always regarded myself, in the first place, as an African patriot.” He concluded by addressing the court without notes:

During my lifetime I have dedicated my life to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to see realized. But my lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

73 Ibid., p. 137.
74 Mandela, Long Walk., p. 362.
75 All quotes from Rivonia testimony from Meer, pp. 233-258.
Around the world, governments and individuals anxiously awaited the verdict. There were vigils at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London and students at London University elected Mandela president of the Students’ Union. More significantly, the UN Security Council urged the South African government to end the trial and declare amnesty for the defendants. The sentence was read on June 11, 1964: life imprisonment instead of the death penalty. There was a hush, wrote one witness, “an almost deathlike, motionless silence. Then the eight men in the dock—who had stood erect showing no sign of emotion—turning to the packed courts and smiling [sic].”

The Africans waiting outside raised cheers of Amandla! (Power!); they broke into Nkosi Sikelel’i-Afrika (God Bless Africa), the African national anthem, when Winnie appeared on the steps; and women circled the Palace of Justice chanting and singing.

Mandela and his co-defendants were shipped straight to Robben Island, South Africa’s Alcatraz, a high-security prison eight miles off the coast of Cape Town. Mandela had spent a few months there already before the Rivonia Trial began; now he would be spending his life.

“Any man or institution that tries to rob me of my dignity will lose”

Mandela had discovered during his earlier prison tenure that he could not endure solitary confinement. He tried it at Pretoria Local jail for several weeks, the quid pro quo exacted by the prison director in exchange for Mandela’s right to wear long trousers instead of the shorts mandated for the “boys” that black prisoners were considered. The price, he concluded, was too high, and he accepted wearing shorts: “Every hour seemed like a year. ... Nothing is more dehumanizing than the absence of human companionship.”

But on other principles, Mandela did not concede. A crusade he conceived early and pursued throughout was the improvement of prison conditions for political prisoners, the insistence that they be accorded respect and rights commensurate with their status separate from common criminals. As he told PAC President Robert Sobukwe when their paths crossed, “it was always unacceptable to live in degrading conditions and ... political prisoners throughout history had considered it part of their duty to fight to improve prison conditions.”

At Robben Island, Mandela had to respond forcefully and often to brutish behavior by guards. He started early, on the day of his arrival in early 1963. approached threateningly by an officer eager to teach the upstart a lesson, Mandela said with a feigned calm: “If you so much as lay a hand on me, I will take you to the highest court in the land and when I finish with you, you will be as poor as a church mouse.” The prisoner’s dignified and educated demeanour shocked

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76 Ibid., p. 260.
77 Mandela, Long Walk, p. 334.
78 Ibid., p. 335.
79 Ibid., p. 342.
the officer, who backed off. Mandela never abandoned this strategy, which proved remarkably effective.

On his return to Robben Island after the Rivonia Trial, Mandela found the place harsher. “It was a hardship station,” he says, “not only for the prisoners but for the prison staff. ... The racial divide on Robben Island was absolute: there were no black warders, and no white prisoners.” Mandela made a pact with himself for his own survival: he would not allow hope to die.

Prison and the authorities conspire to rob each man of his dignity. In and of itself, that assured that I would survive, for any man or institution that tries to rob me of my dignity will lose because I will not part with it at any price or under any pressure. I never seriously considered the possibility that I would not emerge from prison one day. ... I always knew that someday I would once again feel the grass under my feet and walk in the sunshine as a free man. I am fundamentally an optimist. ... I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lay defeat and death.

Instead, he treasured the company of those with whom fate had thrown him together. As he put it: “The authorities’ greatest mistake was keeping us together, for together our determination was reinforced. ... By sharing we multiplied whatever courage we had individually.” Their daily life was far from pleasant—rising at 5:30, humiliating inspections, occasional brutality, grueling days spent digging lime in quarries on the rocky island, appalling food inferior even to what was served the Coloured and Indian populations in the prison. But over time, a rhythm and a purpose to their lives emerged. As Mandela told an Australian journalist in 1973:

We devise our own ways of obtaining information and this stops us from getting depressed. On this island we abound in hope. I can say I have never had a single moment of depression, because I know that my cause will triumph.

Mandela emerged as a spokesperson for the prisoners, chosen equally by them and the warders to present prisoner complaints. Eddie Daniels, a member of the Liberal Party and a prisoner with Mandela, remembers that “Nelson was very good at negotiations and everybody, including the warders and the commanding officers, all held him in high esteem. They always

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80 Ibid., p. 387.  
81 Ibid., p. 391.  
82 Ibid., p. 390.  
83 Johns and Davis, p. 165.
greeted him, and he is a very courteous person and always replied.” Another fellow prisoner, “Mac” Maharaj, recalls:

Nelson has been outstanding. He has had the confidence of all prisoners, whatever their political persuasion, and has been accepted by all as a spokesman of the whole prisoner community. ... His image in the prison is that of the first commander-in-chief of Umkhonto we Sizwe. There therefore is seen as symbolising the new phase in our struggle—a phase where we have turned our backs on the view that nonviolent struggle will bring us our victory.

With the years, as new generations of prisoners arrived who knew Mandela and his colleagues only by reputation, a kind of tutorial tradition grew up as the youngsters brought their elders up to date and the older men passed on their own experience. The ideological differences which separated such groups as PAC and the ANC on the outside could be debated and reconciled. “The prison,” says one account, “became a university.”

The political prisoners talked out their differences, learnt from them and learnt to cope with them. ... They discussed their approach to the prison authorities, rules and regulations. There were disagreements and arguments, but they built a fraternity in that completely closed, strongly guarded, highly restricted society.

For Mandela, the pursuit of education became a saving passion. He had passed the exams for his LL.B. from the University of London in the tense days awaiting the Rivonia Trial verdict. Study, he said later, “was a way to keep myself from thinking negatively.” In prison, Mandela continued to pursue higher degrees and won study rights for himself and other students.

Adhering to his old principle of “educate the enemy,” Mandela also tried to stay on the best possible terms with prison authorities. Whenever a new commanding officer arrived, Mandela would request a meeting “to impress upon him the seriousness of our cause and also to evaluate his character.” With the warders, he made even greater efforts.

I always tried to be decent to the warders in my section; hostility was self-defeating. ... It was ANC policy to try to educate all people, even our enemies; we believed that all men, even prison service warders, were

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84 Ibid., p. 158.
85 Ibid., p. 150.
86 Meer, p. 265.
87 Mandela, Long Walk, p. 458.
capable of change and we did our utmost to try to sway them. In general, we treated the warders as they treated us.\textsuperscript{88}

Mandela seemed to have an abiding faith in the humanity of individuals, saying later that “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.”\textsuperscript{89} He learned to control his own emotions and tasked himself when he failed: “He had caused me to violate my self-control, and I consider that a defeat at the hands of my opponent.”\textsuperscript{90} His friend Maharaj, who was released in 1976, confirmed that during his imprisonment Mandela’s “anger and hatred of the system has been increasing, but the manifestations of that anger have become less visible to a person. They are more subdued, more tempered.”\textsuperscript{91}

Mandela, who had always been a bit of a fanatic about exercise (“Exercise dissipates tension, and tension is the enemy of serenity.”\textsuperscript{92}), kept up his routine of physical activity in prison. In later years, as regulations relaxed, he took up tennis and was permitted to keep a garden. His fellow prisoners noted his consistent air of calm and optimism. As prisoner Maharaj wrote:

I do not recall a time when he showed any despondence ... not even when Winnie was in jail, detained or when news came out of her torture or whatever demoralising actions were taken by the enemy, has Nelson flagged. His confidence in the future has been growing.\textsuperscript{93}

Prisoner Daniels stressed how Mandela’s non-racialism—he honored whites as well as others who died fighting apartheid—educated those around him: “He wanted to press the point ... that a person is not judged on the color of his skin but on what kind of person he is.”\textsuperscript{94} Daniels’ testament to Mandela was ardent:

Mr. Mandela is a good man. He can walk with kings and he can walk with beggars. I want to tell [the South African president], if he speaks to Nelson Mandela, he speaks to a reasonable man, not a violent man—one of the kindest, most honest, peace-loving men. Mr. Mandela took to violence, like I took to violence, not because he wanted to, but the laws of the land pushed me over the brink.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p. 418.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. 622.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p. 473.
\textsuperscript{91} Johns and Davis, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{92} Mandela, \textit{Long Walk}, p. 490.
\textsuperscript{93} Winnie Mandela, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{94} Johns and Davis, p. 158.
\textsuperscript{95} Benson, p. 13.
International hero. Mandela’s reputation outside prison began to take on mythic proportions as reports seeped out about his mental stability and leadership. Oliver Tambo wrote in 1964 that “his inspiration lives on in the heart of every African patriot.”

He is the symbol of the self-sacrificing leadership our struggle has thrown up and our people need. He is unrelenting, yet capable of flexibility and delicate judgement. He is an outstanding individual, but he knows that he derives his strength from the great masses of people who make up the freedom struggle in our country.”

A rare visitor in those days, Progressive Party MP Helen Suzman, saw Mandela in 1967. She recalled a “man with great dignity, tall, with a very upright stature and undeniable leadership qualities. That these qualities were recognised both by his fellow prisoners—who immediately directed me to his cell—and by the prison authorities, who treated him with respect bordering on deference, was immediately evident.” In 1973 Ruth First, a celebrated white opponent of apartheid, wrote that:

Mandela, it is whispered through prison walls, is as magnetic a political prisoner as he was once mass orator and underground political commander and he continues to radiate the confidence, the strength and the moral authority that has sustained the African freedom struggle in its most difficult days; and that will, in time, bring the apartheid system toppling down.

As his fame grew, Mandela was allowed to receive ever greater numbers of visitors, who found him astonishingly gracious and well-informed. The family doctor saw Mandela in 1976 and commented:

Oh powerful, powerful! Except for a few grey hairs he was the same Nel I have known for many years. Absolute dignity, a grand Xhosa chief! Extremely fit, mentally and physically.

A lawyer who saw him in 1977 on family business noted that Mandela, who had not practiced law for 15 years, “commented on the documents as a lawyer, which was amazing, without letting emotionalism have an effect on him whatsoever.”

She also observed the tone and quality of his exchanges with the guards: “After so many years, he still commands that authority. He’s got every quality of a statesman.” Winnie, too, commented on Mandela’s sway over his guards. She said:

96 Mandela, No Easy Walk, p. xv.
97 Johns and Davis, p. 178.
98 Mandela, No Easy Walk, p. ix.
99 Winnie Mandela, p. 130.
The warders have come to treat him very respectfully. His attitude is somehow as if they are his Praetorian guard. He has maintained his role within prison itself; he has continued looking after his family of black people even in there.\(^{100}\)

Outsiders noticed this air of natural authority as well. In 1970, British Labour Party MP Denis Healey visited Mandela, whom he pronounced “completely confident of the victory of his cause, and I couldn’t help feeling that the obvious respect in which he was held by his gaolers owed a little to the possibility that he might, like so many in prison before him, go from prison to the presidency.”\(^{102}\) In 1985, Britain’s Lord Nicholas Bethell paid an official call on Mandela, then in jail for 23 years and moved from Robben Island to a mainland prison. As Lord Bethell waited in an office, three men approached and one spoke to him.

“How do you do?” he said. I greeted him in return. “You must be related to Winston Churchill,” he went on, hinting presumably at my need to lose a few pounds in weight. “Anyway, I’m very pleased and honored to receive you.” He was anxious to put me at my ease, and he invited me to sit down at the desk where I was ready to make my notes. It was a second or two before I realized that this was the man I had come to see.

To his visitors, Mandela repeated the ANC demands: a unified country with no “homelands,” black representation in the national parliament, and one man-one vote. But for all that Mandela educated himself, expanded his authority and watched his international reputation grow from behind bars, he drew spiritual sustenance from the support of his family.

**A Family’s Role.** In the early days, prisoners at Robben Island were allowed to receive one half-hour visit, and to write and receive one 500-word letter, every six months. Children between two and 16 years old were not allowed in the prison, meaning for all their growing years parents did not see their children. As Winnie said of Mandela’s case: “He did not bring them up, they had to be introduced to him—one of the most traumatic experiences for all of us.”\(^{103}\) The letters were censored and often arrived in tattered condition, offending sentences simply cut away. Still, the letters and visits were a lifeline for the prisoners. As Mandela wrote Winnie in 1979:

A happy family life is an important pillar to any public man. ... Had it not been for your visits, wonderful letters and your love I would have fallen apart many years ago.\(^{104}\)

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100 Ibid., p. 131.
101 Ibid., p. 134.
102 Johns and Davis, p. 163.
103 Winnie Mandela, p. 135.
104 Ibid., p. 137.
In return, Mandela’s physical presence during the all-too-brief and often postponed visits seemed to hearten his family members enormously. Winnie wrote that “he has this way about him of reassuring you and dispelling whatever fears you have. Just seeing him reconstructed those emotions that were falling apart and rebuilt me.” 105 During Mandela’s imprisonment, Winnie discovered additional qualities—as a psychologist and a philosopher—in her husband she had never suspected.

Had Nelson not been what he is, he could have been one of the greatest psychologists. He is able to read people’s personalities from almost nothing, just from the handwriting, ... He is a complete lawyer through and through. He is a perfectionist without imposing himself. He philosophizes a great deal. This is his natural self. I hardly lived with him. So I only discovered that side of his life when he was on the island. 106

The children, however, had to make do with Mandela’s letters. The prisoner found resources within himself to deal unsentimentally with his daughters and sons even from behind bars. He constantly urged them to further their educations. He solicited their private thoughts and gave his own in return. To his daughter Zindzi he wrote in a triumph of understatement:

There are moments in life when people forget their precious gifts as human beings, virtues that make them shine wherever they may be and whatever the difficulties; times when those who’re always sure of themselves begin to hesitate, when potential geniuses look less than average, when something caves in and an otherwise tough and dynamic person melts into soft and motionless jelly jammed down by the walls of its container. They mean this when they say life is no bed of roses. 107

Throughout these years, which seemed at the time to have no end, Mandela himself drew strength from the belief that he would one day emerge from prison into a changed South Africa, one where the racial equality he had fought for was realized. In the meantime, he sought to prepare himself and those around him for that future.

“I regarded my role ... [as] an honest broker”

The political landscape in South Africa had changed dramatically between Mandela’s sentencing in 1964 and the late 1980s. The seminal event was the 1976 riots in Soweto, a sprawling black township area of Johannesburg. On June 16, 1976, black schoolchildren turned out by the thousands in Soweto to protest yet the latest government regulation: that all instruction in schools

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105 Ibid., p. 83.
106 Ibid., pp. 136-137.
107 Ibid., p. 96.
be in Afrikaans, a language not only the children but their teachers did not speak. The police, massed for the demonstration, opened fire on the crowds and killed 13-year-old Hector Pieterson. In the ensuing riots, other children were killed, hundreds were wounded and two white men were stoned to death.

The following year, on August 18, 1977, Steve Biko, president of the South African Students’ Organization and a leader of the emerging and radical Black Consciousness Movement, was arrested. Within a month, his interrogation caused brain damage and he died September 12 in police custody. The government tried to control the expected violent backlash by banning Black Consciousness organizations, but the demon could be contained no longer.

In a turn of events whose irony was not lost on people such as Mandela, that very generation of blacks whom the government had sought to make more docile by denying them education and opportunities were instead angry and anchorless. Young black people had no employment and no stake in the society in which they lived. Two million blacks were unemployed—one in four and rising. Their prospects so bleak, they turned instead to political violence and common crime. Their numbers were legion: in 1980 some 25 million Africans versus 4.5 million whites, Coloureds and Indians. As Archbishop Tutu put it, “In 1976 the anger came from people’s heads. Now it is coming from their guts and that is much more serious.”

_Uniting the Generations._ As the state sent thousands of people to jail in the wake of the Soweto riots, the new arrivals radicalized the prison population, including Robben Island. Mandela recalls his amazement at meeting the young militants: “After so many years of being branded a radical revolutionary, to be perceived as a moderate was a novel and not altogether pleasant feeling.” He realized he could either argue with the young men or listen to them. “I chose the latter,” he said. They in turn revered Mandela. Dan Montsisi, who spent 1979-83 on Robben Island, remembered meeting Mandela, Sisulu and other celebrated ANC leaders.

It was amazing to us that in spite of so many years on the island, they were still so courageous, mentally alert, and determined to fight on. We developed a deep comradeship with them through discussions and understanding of the problems we face in South Africa. We also felt great respect. They were like fathers to us.

Mandela found thrust upon him the role of elder statesman, who could convert Black Consciousness believers into loyal ANC members. He tried to do so without being overtly partisan. He wrote: “I regarded my role in prison not just as the leader of the ANC, but as a

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108 Benson, p. 204.
110 Johns and Davis, p. 159.
promoter of unity, an honest broker, a peacemaker.” One of the younger prisoners, Seth Mazibuko, was awed by Mandela’s 6-foot height and his “deep but gentle voice.” Mazibuko’s time on Robben Island changed him “because eventually I came to the decision that I had to follow Mandela and nonracialism.” Another young man, Strini Moodley, recalled that “I found him more tolerant of differing points of view than most of the others.”

At the same time, Mandela worked tirelessly to keep himself informed. Besides teaching a course on political economy in prison, he studied law, economics and Afrikaans. As Walter Sisulu later confirmed: “There has never been a greater university for political education than there was in prison.” Mandela wrote:

I did not doubt that I would someday be a free man. … On the day that I did walk out of prison, I did not want to appear to be a political fossil from an age long ago.

In the 1980s, Mandela would be no fossil, but a player whose voice was heard with increasing frequency, sometimes in public but more often, and as powerfully, behind closed doors. In 1980, he sounded his frustration with the status quo. An ANC-in-exile message published in his name pledged support for the ongoing struggle and characterized the government stance as immovable.

Vague promises, tinkerings with the machinery of apartheid, constitutional juggling, massive arrests and detentions, side by side with renewed overtures aimed at weakening and forestalling the unity of us blacks and dividing the forces of change—these are the fixed paths along which they will move.

The time of waiting for change to occur was proving too long. Mandela sought to take matters into his own hands.

“Only free men can negotiate”

The government had long since acknowledged Mandela’s importance as a symbol and spokesperson. It was December 1973 when Minister of Prisons Jimmy Kruger first approached Mandela and his fellow prisoners with an implicit offer of release. If the inmates would agree to move to the “independent homeland” of the Transkei, they could have their freedom. The

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111 Mandela, Long Walk, p. 487.
112 Johns and Davis, p. 160.
113 Meer, p. 273.
114 Johns and Davis, p. 162.
115 Mandela, Long Walk, p. 508.
116 Benson, p. 205.
response was a resounding no: “The policy of separate development is wholly unacceptable.” Nonetheless, within another decade the state concluded that it could not keep the world’s most famous prisoner on the infamous Robben Island and in April 1982, he and his closest colleagues were moved to Pollsmoor, a prison on the mainland near Cape Town.

The government continued to present its proposal for conditional release—six offers by 1985, according to a count Mandela kept. But he would not accept the conditions. The state made its most famous overture on January 31, 1985. President P.W. Botha, during an open session of Parliament, offered Mandela his freedom if he would renounce violence. Mandela refused but then insisted on his right to explain why: “Botha wanted the onus of violence to rest on my shoulders and I wanted to reaffirm to the world that we were only responding to the violence done to us.”

Mandela’s opportunity to reply came on February 10, 1985, at a rally of the United Democratic Front (formed in 1983 to coordinate anti-apartheid protest) to celebrate Archbishop Tutu for winning the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. Mandela’s 24-year-old daughter Zindzi appeared at the podium to deliver her father’s message. Mandela began by challenging Botha to renounce violence first, to dismantle apartheid, free prisoners, unban the ANC and guarantee political activity. He concluded his remarks:

I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom. Too many have died since I went to prison. Too many have suffered for the love of freedom. ... I am not less life-loving than you are. But I cannot sell my birthright, nor am I prepared to sell the birthright of the people to be free. ... Only free men can negotiate. Prisoners cannot enter into contracts. ... I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when I and you, the people, are not free. Your freedom and mine cannot be separated. I will return.

Throughout his imprisonment, Mandela had taken very seriously his responsibility as an ANC member always to defer to the higher authority of the organization. He emphasized in the February 10 speech that “I will remain a member of the African National Congress until the day I die.” But in August 1985, he was diagnosed with prostate problems. While in the hospital, Kobie Coetsee, minister of justice, paid Mandela a secret visit. Recalls Mandela: “Though I acted as though this was the most normal thing in the world, I was amazed.” For his part, Coetsee was impressed at the ease exhibited by Mandela, “who acted as though we had known each other for years and this was the umpteenth time we had met. ... He took complete command of the

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117 Benson, p. 181.
118 Mandela, Long Walk, p. 521.
119 Ibid., p. 523.
120 Ibid., p. 522.
121 Ibid., p. 524.
situation. He was like the host.” Coetsee was also struck by Mandela’s old-world manners, reminding him of a “Roman citizen, one with dignitas, gravitas, honestas, simplicitas.”

On his return to Pollsmoor, Mandela was taken to different, solitary—but singularly comfortable—quarters. Initially dismayed by his isolation, Mandela soon concluded that it provided an opportunity. He decided to approach the government for talks on his own authority.

I resolved to use [the isolation] to do something I had been pondering for a long while: begin discussions with the government. … If we did not start a dialogue soon, both sides would be plunged into a dark night of oppression, violence and war. … I chose to tell no one of what I was about to do. … I knew that my colleagues upstairs would condemn my proposal and that would kill my initiative even before it was born. There are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way.

Mandela sought talks to lay the groundwork for drafting a new constitution, which would guarantee equal rights for all South Africans. For years, the government would not consider even preliminary discussions on reform with any ANC member, for such contacts would carry an implicit recognition of the illegal ANC as a legitimate representative of black South Africans. Yet as the domestic and international political situation deteriorated for the National Party government, Mandela’s requests for dialogue offered increased promise.

In 1986, 1987 and 1988 the government was forced to declare a state of emergency to try to control escalating violence in the townships. Thousands died in the balck uprising and tens of thousands were detained without trial. Although the National Party won elections in 1987 by an overwhelming majority, it was clear that the days when 20 percent of the population could vote to control the other 80 percent were numbered. International sanctions were taking an ever larger toll on the economy; the rand, the South African currency, tumbled. Companies were leaving the country in droves.

Mandela offered the government its only graceful way out of the box into which it had backed itself. He was internationally renowned. The Indian government in 1979 awarded Mandela its top Nehru award. In 1980, the ANC-in-exile had officially launched a “Free Mandela” campaign. He was a candidate for chancellor of London University. Britain named streets and parks after him. In 1983, City College of New York gave Mandela an honorary degree, the city of Glasgow awarded him freedom of the city and London University made him a life member. Other honors followed.

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123 Ibid., pp. 525, 526.
More importantly to the South African government, his standing with black Africans was as high as it had ever been; if anyone could retain credibility during negotiations for a transition to a non-apartheid system, it was he. In mid-1986, Mandela was taken to Cape Town for a first official meeting with Coetsee. In 1988, a government committee began regular meetings with Mandela.124

The negotiations process did not proceed smoothly. Mandela experienced frequent frustration at the fitful bursts and starts of the government. Then in August 1988, Mandela himself fell ill and was administered emergency treatment for tuberculosis. On his recovery in December, he moved quarters again to a comfortable private house, with a swimming pool, on the grounds of the Victor Verster prison 35 miles from Cape Town. The entire country expected his release, but it did not come.

Instead, the negotiations continued into 1989. Mandela walked a fine line between negotiating for what he held essential and consulting with his ANC colleagues on the progress made. As he put it: “Although I knew I was going out ahead of my colleagues, I did not want to go too far ahead and find that I was all alone.”125 July was a momentous month. Mandela met President Botha and celebrated his 71st birthday at Victor Verster with his entire family in attendance. By August, however, Botha had resigned and F.W. de Klerk assumed the presidency. In October, de Klerk announced the release of all the most prestigious ANC prisoners except Mandela, and in December de Klerk invited Mandela to an official meeting at Tuynhuis in Cape Town.

De Klerk has been called the Gorbachev of South Africa because both men unleashed processes of reform which carried consequences unforeseen by their initiators. De Klerk in early 1990 undertook to dismantle the apartheid system. As regulation after ban after law tumbled, the country trembled with an unprecedented excitement. It reached a crescendo with the February 11 release of Nelson Mandela.

The crowds had been gathered in front of Cape Town’s City Hall for hours before Mandela finally appeared. As he stepped onto the balcony, the thousands sent up cheer after cheer. Mandela spoke to them: “The sight of freedom looming on the horizon should encourage us to redouble our efforts.”126 He assured the country, during a press conference the next day, that he harbored no resentment against his oppressors.

124 They would meet 47 times over the next four years. Sparks, p. 64.
125 Ibid., p. 546.
126 Ibid., p. 566.
I knew that people expected me to harbor anger toward whites. But I had none. In prison, my anger toward whites decreased, but my hatred for the system grew.  

As time went on, that lack of bitterness became one of Mandela’s greatest strengths in uniting South Africans, black and white, behind him. Many commented on it and marveled at his magnanimity. Archbishop Tutu wrote in 1985:

God is good. This man and those imprisoned with him should by now be embittered, disillusioned persons. But they are remarkably abreast of what is happening in our land. They can express concern about the welfare of others outside prison.  

For Mandela, the years of freedom ahead would pose challenges as great as those he had faced during the struggle and prison. It took nearly a year before the constitutional negotiations could begin. Meanwhile De Klerk, having freed Mandela and his colleagues, sought political common ground with Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, ANC rival and head of the Inkatha Freedom Party. One observer surmised that de Klerk was playing for time “for Mandela to be demythologized from a messianic figure into just another fallible politician, unable to bring instant deliverance to his people.”  

Mandela did face political trials. While he was easily elected head of the ANC, his older friends and colleagues in the ANC were gradually eased out of leadership positions to make way for younger activists. Political violence escalated, first in Natal but soon in Johannesburg and elsewhere, between ANC and Inkatha supporters. Common crime spiraled, highlighted by carjackings and drive-by shootings. The months of stagnation in the talks between the government and the ANC ended only after massacres when, on September 26, 1992, de Klerk and Mandela signed a “record of understanding” to restart the negotiations. An interim constitution, providing for a five-year government of national unity, was adopted on November 18, 1993. In April 1994, Mandela was elected president of South Africa. 

Throughout these difficult years and even more so as president, Mandela continued to command the trust and esteem of the nation. He had devoted his life to achieving a new, nonracial South Africa and citizens of all races recognized that sacrifice. Yet Mandela, while acknowledging that the struggle had exacted a high price, also ascribed to it a transforming force that sustained him even now. He wrote:

It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, that transformed a

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127 Ibid., p. 568.
128 Benson, 85, Introduction.
129 Sparks, p. 74.
frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk. I am no more virtuous or self-sacrificing than the next man, but I found I could not even enjoy the poor and limited freedoms I was allowed when I knew my people were not free.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{130} Mandela, \textit{Long Walk}, p. 624.