What Mandela Did and Didn’t Do

While an inspiring tale of resilience and reconciliation, Nelson Mandela’s saga also marked a failure of black South Africans to transform their hard-won political power into economic equality, as domestic and foreign whites retained the reins of money, as Danny Schechter writes.

By Danny Schechter

As the body of Nelson Mandela heads for its “final rest” in the rural community where he was born, reverential exhilaration is turning into emotionally draining reflection tinged with criticism and self-criticism. Mandela has moved from a person into a historical figure as in “now he belongs to the ages.”

In the world at large, this final Mandela moment has been bathed in media attention as have earlier spectacular events like his release from prison and his inauguration as South Africa’s first democratically elected president. This time, there were more than two billion social media references leading to a growing backlash of negativity from those who never supported him in the first place, as if the events were a distraction from the daily news parade of war, economic decline and political scandal.

Despite his death, this saga drawing lessons from his life and his efforts at racial reconciliation is largely considered “positive,” good news in a sea of bad. You can be sure that once he is in the ground, all you will hear from media mavens is “We did Mandela. Next.”

Wrote the Daily Mail in London, a newspaper that has over the years disseminated nasty and questionable criticisms of Mandela (even as in the Thirties the newspaper was worshipful of fascists): “While some reflected on the remarkable life of Nelson Mandela, some world leaders saw it as the perfect opportunity to grab a quick ‘selfie’ with their peers – prompting a backlash from web users accusing them of undermining the seriousness of the event.”

Mandela’s African National Congress was more upset that its leader, Jacob Zuma, was booed while Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe was cheered.

Beyond the coverage of the formal events the talkathon by world leaders and related pomp you did get a sense of the genuine affection in which the man they call Madiba is held by most South Africans.

Former labor leader Jay Naidoo wrote to me and others: “I found the spirit of Madiba amongst the ordinary people in the queues that went to pay their respects. There were no dignitaries and celebrities here. Just the people Madiba
loved, black and white, young and old, even the infirm had travelled hours and days to join the sombre lines that snaked around the streets, through parks and stadiums to pay their final respects. They were here to reclaim the legacy of Madiba and re-ignite his courage and fearlessness to demand the promise of freedom now.”

At the same time, more and more critical voices began to surface, and not only on leftist websites where he was faulted for various betrayals and not leading the socialist revolution they hoped for or on the Right where they “always knew” he was nothing but “a communist terrorist.”

In South Africa, some the writers like Mark Gevisser, who wrote a biography of Mandela’s successor Thabo Mbeki, saw the memorials as also mourning the death of idealism in what used to be called “the beloved country.” Gevisser editorialized in the Mail & Guardian:

“This is a consequence of the way Mandela’s legacy has been popularised: the world’s embrace of him only as an icon of forgiveness and reconciliation of love rather than also as a fierce combatant for justice who turned to forgiveness and reconciliation because he understood it as the best route to the liberation of his people. It took Barack Obama, of all people, to remind the world of the latter.”

Others, like labor columnist Terry Bell were willing to lash out at the “deification” of Mandela, noting “As everyone from monarchs to the labouring masses this week sought to share in the Mandela memorial moment, the myth machine went into overdrive, the very machine Mandela had so disparaged when I sat with him in his Johannesburg office in 1992.

“One sentence he uttered then has resonated with me throughout the years: ‘I am no messiah.’ ... The virtual deification of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, would almost certainly have been anathema to the man.”

I have seen several articles referring to Mandela as an aristocratic democrat who pumped out plenty of myths himself to motivate his country to take the path of reconciliation. Unfortunately, in his desire to pump money for jobs and services into his country, he mellowed his approach to economic policy, embracing the markets and sucking up to big business which rarely honored the promises to him.

In the research for my book Madiba AtoZ: The Many Faces of Nelson Mandela, commissioned by the producer of the movie “Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom,” I heard many stories of Mandela’s pragmatic right turn away from nationalization and strict regulation of big business for fear that would alienate the country
from the West.

This troubled many in the ANC like Ronnie Kasrils, a former commander in the ANC’s armed struggle who became a Minister of Intelligence. He now scolds his comrades for not holding firm as poverty and inequality remains pervasive.

He told me: “What I call our Faustian moment came when we took an IMF loan on the eve of our first democratic election. That loan, with strings attached that precluded a radical economic agenda, was considered a necessary evil, as were concessions to keep negotiations on track and take delivery of the promised land for our people.

“Doubt had come to reign supreme: we believed, wrongly, there was no other option, that we had to be cautious, since by 1991 our once powerful ally, the Soviet Union, bankrupted by the arms race, had collapsed. Inexcusably, we had lost faith in the ability of our own revolutionary masses to overcome all obstacles. Whatever the threats to isolate a radicalizing South Africa, the world could not have done without our vast reserves of minerals. To lose our nerve was not necessary or inevitable”

This too is part of the Mandela legacy that does not feature in the coverage, and hence, what conversation there has been around it.

When he spent those long years in prison, photos of Mandela’s image were strictly prohibited in South Africa. Most of the world media did not press his jailers to give them access and went along with the prohibitions. Censorship there was accompanied by self-censorship here because media outlets feared they could be denied access when and if things began to change.

Africa has never been covered fully or fairly, and that is unlikely to change. Wrote former ANC Leader Pallo Jordan in South Africa’s leading business newspaper: “South Africa will not experience such a proud moment for a lifetime or two! Not only the does this moment demonstrate the tremendous goodwill South Africa enjoys, thanks to Mandela, it is also a symbolic expression of the world community’s unmistakable endorsement of the achievements of South African democracy.”

Yet, many Western countries whose own democracies are being challenged don’t want this spectacle to go on too long; it could inspire more activism of a kind that is being suppressed in countries like Ukraine, China, Egypt and Turkey. (It shouldn’t be surprising that leaders like Netanyahu and Putin were no shows at the memorial).

You can bury people like Nelson Mandela but you can’t bury their ideas and triumphs.
News Dissector Danny Schechter made six non-fiction films about Nelson Mandela and has written Madiba AtoZ (Madibabook.com) Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org.

The Real Existential Threat

Most people on Earth everyone born after World War II have lived their entire lives under the threat of nuclear annihilation. But just because an existential threat has always been there doesn't mean it won't be activated, as Ira Helfand and Robert F. Dodge reflect.

By Ira Helfand and Robert F. Dodge

As physicians we spend our professional lives applying scientific facts to the health and well being of our patients. When it comes to public health threats like TB, polio, cholera, AIDS and others where there is no cure, our aim is to prevent what we cannot cure. It is our professional, ethical and moral obligation to educate and speak out on these issues.

That said, the greatest imminent existential threat to human survival is potential of global nuclear war. We have long known that the consequences of large scale nuclear war could effectively end human existence on the planet. Yet there are more than 17,000 nuclear warheads in the world today with more than 95 percent controlled by the U.S. and Russia.

The international community is intent on preventing Iran from developing even a single nuclear weapon. And while appropriate to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, there is precious little effort being spent on the much larger and more critical problem of these existing arsenals.

Despite the Cold War mentality of the U.S. and Russia with their combined arsenals and a reliance on sheer luck that a nuclear war is not started by accident, intent or cyber attack, we now know that the planet is threatened by a limited regional nuclear war which is a much more real possibility.

A report released on Dec. 10, by the Nobel Laureate International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and its U.S. counterpart Physicians for Social Responsibility documents in fact the humanitarian consequences of such a limited nuclear war.
Positing a conflict in South Asia between India and Pakistan, involving just 100 Hiroshima sized bombs, less than 0.5 percent of the world’s nuclear arsenal, would put two billion people’s health and wellbeing at risk. The local effects would be devastating. More than 20 million people would be dead in a week from the explosions, firestorms and immediate radiation effects. But the global consequences would be far worse.

The firestorms caused by this war would loft 5 million tons of soot high into the atmosphere, blocking out sunlight and dropping temperatures across the planet. This climate disruption would cause a sharp, worldwide decline in food production. There would be a 12 percent decline in U.S. corn production and a 15 percent decline in Chinese rice production, both lasting for a full decade. A staggering 31 percent decline in Chinese winter wheat production would also last for 10 years.

The resulting global famine would put at risk 870 million people in the developing world who are already malnourished today, and 300 million people living in countries dependent on food imports. In addition, the huge shortfalls in Chinese food production would threaten another 1.3 billion people within China.

At the very least there would be a decade of social and economic chaos in the largest country in the world, home to the world’s second largest and most dynamic economy and a large nuclear arsenal of its own.

A nuclear war of comparable size anywhere in the world would produce the same global impact. By way of comparison, each U.S. Trident submarine commonly carries 96 warheads each of which is ten to thirty times more powerful than the weapons used in the South Asia scenario. That means that a single submarine can cause the devastation of a nuclear famine many times over.

The U.S. has 14 of these submarines, plus land-based missiles and a fleet of strategic bombers. The Russian arsenal has the same incredible overkill capacity. Two decades after the Cold War, nuclear weapons are ill suited to meet modern threats, and cost hundreds of billions of dollars to maintain.

Fueled in part by a growing understanding of these humanitarian consequences of nuclear war, there is today a growing global movement to prevent such a catastrophe. In 2011, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement called for its national societies to educate the public about these humanitarian consequences and called for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Seventeen nations issued a Joint Statement in May 2012 on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons that called for their total elimination. By this fall
the number rose to 125 nations.

The international community should continue to take practical steps to prevent additional countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. But, this effort to prevent proliferation must be matched by real progress to eliminate the far greater danger posed by the vast arsenals that already exist.

Simply put, the only way to eliminate the threat of nuclear war or risk of an accidental launch or mishap is to eliminate nuclear weapons. This past year the majority of the world’s nations attended a two-day conference in Oslo on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war. The United States and the other major nuclear powers boycotted this meeting.

There will be an important follow up meeting in Mexico in February. It is time for us to lead the nuclear weapons states by example in attending this meeting and by embracing the call to eliminate nuclear weapons.

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