

## **Human Rights Day Balloon Debate: who is the greatest of the 20th century?**

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### **Nelson Mandela**

My name is Rolihlahla Mandela. I was born a member of the Xhosa nation at the end of the first world war in a tiny village in the Transkei in a country known as South Africa.

I was the first member of my family ever to attend school. It was there that at the age of seven my African schoolteacher re-named me after a famous English sea captain, Lord Nelson. As I had not yet met a white person it was to be many years until I truly understood the significance of this early baptism into English culture.

And it was to be decades until I realised that my destiny was to work with others to challenge and ultimately overturn a system – that became known as Apartheid – which was based on the belief in the total superiority of one group of light skinned people, the minority in my country and in the world, over another group of darker skinned people, which happened to include me.

I know you are all people of good will and I am sure you all cheered – assuming you can remember it – the day Apartheid was overthrown and the good people of South Africa waited patiently in line from dawn to dusk to vote for the first time in their lives.

But the issue before us tonight, as I stand before you, my fate in your hands, is what has been my contribution to the noble and enduring cause of human rights?

I am not asking you to save me from extinction tonight because you thought Apartheid was a uniquely pernicious system which dishonoured us all, black and white.

I am not asking you to vote for me because I spent twenty-seven years in prison, for struggling to overthrow that system, mostly doing hard labour in the flat disc of rock in the Atlantic Ocean known as Robben Island.

I am asking you to save me because ours is, as yet, the only successful human rights struggle known to man and woman. A struggle which has been able to demonstrate to the world in word and deed what human rights stands for and, above all, can achieve.

We walked the walk as well as talked the talk.

I'm not denying the importance of the French and American revolutions, of course, in establishing the idea of inalienable human rights but the first ended in wholesale Terror – this is where the word terrorism is derived from – and the second defined slaves as three-fifths of a man in a constitution upholding life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Nor am I overlooking the many important liberation struggles against colonialism and imperialism all over the world, but these have been national struggles, usually cloaked in nationalist or Marxist rhetoric and often involving wholesale slaughter of civilians justified as necessary to achieve self-determination and independence.

In contrast, our struggle was openly fought in the name of human rights.

We did not argue that the ends justified the means; we argued that only human rights means will achieve our end.

And our end was not to create an African nation where once there was a white nation, but to establish a society for all South Africa's citizens based on equal rights, justice and the rule of law.

We fought the system in the name of human rights, we fought the system using human rights principles and we replaced the system with human rights institutions and values.

How can I demonstrate this for you in the short time I have left?

Firstly, why did I fight the system in the name of human rights?

You will recognise the famous statement I made from the dock in the Rivonia trial – which resulted in my life sentence – where I spoke out against “racial domination of all kinds” and concluded:

*“During my lifetime I have dedicated myself 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 and with equal opportunities.*

*It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”*

In championing equality, and taking a different path to the nationalists in the Pan African Congress who opposed democratic elections that could lead to a multi-racial government, I of course held much in common with my admired brother Martin Luther

King whose ringing words “Free at Last” I quoted to the crowd at our election victory party in May 1994.

But as I once said in an interview with the *Washington Post*, ours was not a struggle for racial equality in a democracy with constitutional rights as Reverend King’s was. Ours was a struggle against totalitarianism, against tyranny and for the equal worth and dignity of every individual. It was “the lack of human dignity experienced by Africans” as a direct result of the policy of white supremacy, that I took as my main line of defence at the Rivonia sabotage trial.

It was because I challenged our oppression from the point of view of human dignity, and not just racial inequality, that I drew so much inspiration from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

When asked about this recently I explained that the UDHR was drafted in 1948 just as Apartheid was being formally introduced into SA.

*“For all the opponents of this pernicious system, the simple and noble words of the UDHR were a sudden ray of hope at one of our darkest moments...it was proof we were not alone, but part of a global movement against racism and colonialism, for human rights and peace and justice.”<sup>1</sup>*

This is what we were fighting for, not just *against* racism but *for* human rights and justice.

### So, how did I fight the system using human rights principles?

Uniquely amongst all the liberation movement fighting against colonialism and oppression we in the ANC, which I had the honour to lead, developed a programme for human rights – civil and political rights that at the time most revolutionary movements dismissed as bourgeois – as well as social and economic rights. In this we were entirely influenced and inspired by the UDHR.

The most important political document ever adopted by the ANC was the 'Freedom Charter'. As I said at my trial, it was by no means a blueprint for a Communist or even Socialist state along the lines of the Soviet Union and its satellites. The Freedom charter, drafted in the idiom of all the great Charters and Bills of Rights began:

[“We, the People of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no

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<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on the UDHR: a fiftieth anniversary anthology* (Kluwer, 1998) p.59.

government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people;]

[We] called for democracy, equality before the law, equal rights and in a specially dedicated paragraph – *Equal Human Rights* – including, freedom of speech, worship, privacy, movement and the right to education.”

When I stood in the dock defending myself from a likely death sentence I said that “I think that in the circumstances I am obliged to state exactly what my political beliefs are. I am an admirer of The Magna Carta, the Petition of Rights, and the Bill of Rights. [These] are documents which are held in veneration by democrats throughout the world.”

But, you will say, I practiced violence unlike the saintly Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King? How can I argue that I based my struggle on human rights principles when I advocated terrorism?

I do not deny, indeed I am proud of the fact, that I and my comrades in the ANC “when all channels of peaceful [and democratic] protest” been tried for decades and failed formed Umkhonte we Sizwe, the Spear of the Nation.

But it is a mistake to confuse human rights principles with pacifism. Does not the UDHR preamble itself acknowledge that if “human rights [be not] protected by the rule of law...man” may be “compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression?”

Is that sentiment not similar to that in the founding manifesto of Umkhonte:

“Th[e] time comes in the life of any nation when there remains only two choices – submit or fight...We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back...in defence of our people, our future and our freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

Yes, I was charged and found guilty of sabotage. But as I said from the dock, “the violence which we chose to adopt was not terrorism”. Terrorism denotes targeting innocent individuals.<sup>3</sup> “We chose to adopt [sabotage] and to exhaust it before taking any other decision. In the light of our political background [of peaceful protest] the choice was a logical one. Sabotage did not involve loss of life, and it offered the best hope for

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<sup>2</sup> *Umkhonto Manifesto* 16 December, 1961.

<sup>3</sup> “By terrorist I mean a person or a group of persons or a state which targets innocent individuals in order to accomplish its objects.” *Morning Star*, 28 Oct 2002.

future race relations. Bitterness would be kept to a minimum and, if the policy bore fruit, democratic government could become a reality.“

I believe history has already judged this assessment to be right.

### We have built a nation based on human rights foundations

The new South Africa we established is built on the rock, not just of struggle, but of a written constitution and Bill of Rights, championed by a Human Rights Commission and enforced by a widely respected Supreme Court one of whose first actions was to abolish the death penalty.

A Bill of Rights that I believe is viewed as inspirational to all human rights defenders everywhere in its pioneering protection, not only of classic civil and political rights, but of social, economic, cultural and environmental rights – such as healthcare, food, water, social security and conservation – which the courts are starting to interpret and enforce in ways that are changing peoples’ lives.

And the government today, although rightly criticised on many grounds, is still sufficiently routed in the principles of the rule of law and human rights for peaceful elections to occur, for the deputy president to be dismissed from office and charged with serious crimes and for the courts to hold ministers to account.

Sure the new South Africa is far from perfect. There is appalling crime, there is still rampant poverty and inequality, there is still injustice. But unlike most revolutions ours was not forged in blood. We set up a truth and reconciliation commission, controversial I know, because we judged that adversarial justice would have meant that nearly half the nation, black as well as white, would have had to be put on trial. Through the reconciliation process we were able to acknowledge the summary justice and indiscriminate violence that was at times meted out by supporters of the liberation struggle as well as the legalised tyranny and terror carried out by the state. We did not need Stalin’s legacy to establish that the deliberate killing of innocent civilians is a stain that no liberation struggle can justify. We drew this wisdom from human rights principles themselves and we applied them.

I am a humble man.

But I put it to you that if I am known as the embodiment of the moral conscience of mankind it is because I alone have demonstrated – in word and deed – not only the moral worth of human rights but their power.

I've established that they can be used not only to overthrow old oppressive regimes but to build new, just and tolerant ones.

In adhering to human rights principles throughout we have demonstrated to the world that it is possible to be both revolutionary and just, to overthrow a system using collective strength but to retain respect for every individual's dignity and worth. Sure we needed the wise words of Eleanor Roosevelt's UDHR to inspire us (and maybe even George Orwell's allegories to warn us) but we alone have established that human rights are not only values that protect individuals but are values that can change systems and, uniquely perhaps, change them in a way that inspires others to follow along a path that does not detour into tyranny and bloodshed but is guided by basic principles we all know to be right.

Thank you.