*Justice, Inclusion and Civility – Why Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela are still relevant today.*

By Wilmot James

Forgive me for introducing a lecture on the legacy of two great men – Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela – with a personal reference.

I was born in the rural town of Paarl 30 miles outside of Cape Town on the southern tip of the African continent in 1953, five years after the establishment of the apartheid system.

It was a dark period of our history.

During that time, some U.S. leaders have been a great source of inspiration to us.

I recall as a child seeing my mother in tears as she listened to the radio broadcast the day John Kennedy, a charismatic hero and champion of equality in the eyes of a vast number of South Africans, was buried.

Much as they wanted to, the apartheid government could not turn Robert Kennedy away when he gave a memorable speech on the invitation of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) on freedom and justice on the steps of the University of Cape Town in June 6 1966.[[1]](#footnote-1) Known as the *Ripple of Hope* speech (it turned out to be much more than a Ripple), Robert Kennedy was there to affirm the principles of freedom in a land premised on its very opposite.

When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, I wrote a naïve dedication to his moral courage as a contribution to my local high school magazine, citing his memorable and inspirational *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. Little did we know that Robert Kennedy, finding himself in the unenviable position of having to tell an overwhelmingly black gathering in St. Louis about King’s assassination while on his presidential campaign trail, was himself to fall victim to an assassin’s bullet two months later.

Mandela, in jail for life, and King, would never meet. Mandela referenced King in his acceptance speech when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1993. Speaking on behalf of all South Africans, Mandela said that ‘[I]t will not be presumptuous of us if we also add among our predecessors the name of another Peace Prize winner, the late Martin Luther King Jr.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

As a special illustration of Oscar Wilde’s idiomatic expression that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Mandela’s Nobel address is structured along the lines of King delivered almost 30 years before his (Mandela’s) on December 1964. This is evident from the text, but I also knew about the deliberate connection his speechwriters wanted to draw.

In his speech King said that while humanity made great scientific and technological progress in many domains of life, our biggest inability is the simple art of living together as brothers and sisters. In a language of which only he was capable, King spoke of the ‘spiritual lag’ between our best inner human qualities and the relentless advance of the material accumulation of things.[[3]](#footnote-3) He observed that we lacked the security of confidence to rise up and develop a ‘new estimate of [our] human worth’ by listening carefully and closely to the ‘inaudible language of the heart’, by tackling three problems:

Firstly, to confront the legacy of racial injustice by using mass action to non-violently challenge the remaining legal edifice of discrimination and exclusion – the ‘ramparts of injustice’ as he put it - and to affirm ‘the demand for dignity, equality, jobs and citizenship’. In a telling reference to Barry Goldwater’s epic defeat in the elections a month before he received his award, King was greatly encouraged by the fact that the majority of voters dealt a ‘telling blow to the radical right’ and those who ‘identified with extremism, racism and retrogression’. Had he been alive today, King would surely have been astonished to see the re-ascendance of the radical right in contemporary America, and perhaps give second thought to, if only to reaffirm, the aphorism inscribed in the monument erected in his honor in Washington D.C. which famously declares that the ‘arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.’

Secondly, it is to take on the ‘evil’ of poverty in a world of increasing abundance. Casting his eyes globally, King found it to be unconscionable that ‘almost two-thirds of the world goes hungry at night’. At home the economic gulf between rich and poor is so vast that a ‘war on poverty’ was needed. Pursuing his theme of brotherhood both abroad and at home, King asserted that ‘the rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied in a single garment of destiny.’ Poverty serves to ‘re-establish a broken community’ and makes ‘brotherhood impossible’.

Thirdly is to confront the steady drift towards war. ‘Nations are not reducing but rather increasing their arsenals of weapons of mass destruction’ King said at the height of the Cold War (at the time China had joined – October 16 1964 was its first nuclear bomb test - the race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union). ‘The best brains in the highly developed world are devoted to military technology’ he added. ‘If we flirt with war, [we] will turn our habitat into an inferno.’ Given the potential for global obliteration, his answer to the problem resided in global governance and robust multilateral agreements and not in unilateral action, self-interested nationalism, rogue infantilism and reckless populism.

In the conclusion to his Nobel acceptance address, Mandela paid tribute once more to King when he expressed the hope that ‘the strivings of us all, prove Martin Luther King Jr. to have been correct, when he said that humanity can no longer be tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war.’ About to become President of a democratic South Africa in April 1994, special weight was given to Mandela’s words when he said, in a land epitomized by organized racial and ethnic balkanization, that we ‘will demonstrate that the normal condition for human existence is democracy, justice, peace, non-racism, non-sexism, prosperity for all, healthy lives.’

Spoken three decades after King by a man who had spent 27 monumentally long years in prison, his ‘head bloody but unbowed’ (to reference Mandela’s favorite poem titled *Invictus* written in 1875 by William Henley, after which the film starring Morgan Freeman as Mandela was named[[4]](#footnote-4)), he upheld our fight for democracy, respect for human rights and justice; he yearned to release the poor from their material poverty and all South Africans from our racial baggage through reconstruction, development and education; and he believed, like King, that it was entirely conceivable to imagine a world relieved of war and aggression.

Mandela emerged from prison committed to reconciliation and hope. He was angry about lost opportunities, hurt by apartheid’s abuses but was genuinely without bitterness and incapable of hate. He deeply believed that all South Africans should and could make a life together, live in brotherhood and draw on all our assets and the best of our strengths to build a future as one, in peace, justice and prosperity. His resolve would be tested when he became South Africa’s first democratically elected President because he was in charge of a government with the unprecedented opportunity to bend the relic of apartheid towards justice, to be, as King put it, be ‘ecumenical rather than sectional’, and to navigate through the dangers of the world in order to find opportunities for salvation.

In *Dare Not Linger: The Presidential Years*, Mandla Langa recently describes Mandela’s fears and priorities as South Africa’s new President, chief among which were to contain and disarm the right, prevent a counter-revolution simmering in portions of the apartheid state apparatus and consolidate the democratic order.[[5]](#footnote-5) Langa uses Mandela’s unfinished and hitherto unpublished memoirs he began as he was preparing to leave office in 1999, a one-term president unusual for a continent used to having lifelong ones, both as his (Langa’s) principal source and the building blocks of a narrative to which he and Mandela’s wife Graca Machel added.

Langa documents how Mandela’s natural charm, ability to form fellowship and immense powers of persuasion won over many right-wing leaders whose cooperation he enlisted before and after the 1994 elections. Mandela’s personal efforts were supported by a wide range of institutional measures that had the longer-term result of marginalizing the right wing, integrating the defense forces and dismantling the apartheid era secret police, death squads and network of assassins that operated globally, none of which happened smoothly or without setbacks.

Firstly, the drafters of South Africa’s constitution settled on a pure proportional electoral system where we voted nationally for a party and not individual representatives. This ensured maximum inclusiveness. With no thresholds in place, a set number of votes from anywhere in the country guaranteed a parliamentary seat. The extreme right and left therefore had a voice in a democratic political system resting on universal franchise and a bill of rights that protected citizens from state abuse, binding everyone into the same set national institutions.

Secondly, the various armies were pulled together into a single force and placed under civilian control. The South African Defense Force (SADF) was the only real army into which the 5 homeland ones and the African National Congress’ and Pan African Congress’ unconventional guerilla forces were integrated. This ended well enough, but, as we will see later, the clandestine terror network that centered around military intelligence was never brought under any semblance of civilian control and properly dismantled.

Thirdly, because the South African settlement resulted from a stalemate between the apartheid state that had overwhelming military capability but no legitimacy, and Mandela’s African National Congress that projected a moral legitimacy but with no real military capability, there were no victors and no Nuremberg trials for crimes against humanity, of which many were committed. South Africa settled on a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* that offered amnesty to the perpetrators of such crimes in exchange for disclosing the truth, an approach that suited Mandela’s appetite for reconciliation rather than revenge.

Fourthly, Mandela had a unique approach to cultural and ethnic affairs. He had the greatest respect for peoples’ language and he said he would defend the right of any South African to speak in the language of their choice, including Afrikaans, a language that is often and wrongly associated with apartheid, as it is my first language and those of my people and spoken by many black people to boot. He did not favor the dismantling of colonial and apartheid era statues - how would the descendants feel to see their great-grandfather’s or great-great-grandfather’s likenesses to be so dishonored even if they were scoundrels in their time, Mandela asked?

Instead, new statues ones were to be built to honor their historical opposites and celebrate the modern democratic heroes of our time.

New museums were to be built to supersede the old ones.

Fifthly, in foreign affairs Mandela built on his predecessor F.W. de Klerk’s efforts to return South Africa to the international community. De Klerk ordered the dismantling of South Africa’s nuclear capabilities which was carried out and certified under international supervision. Some have argued that de Klerk’s motivation, supported by other governments suspicious of the African National Congress’ ties to the former Soviet Union, was to keep South Africa’s nuclear capability out of black and therefore communist hands. However, his instruction to end the clandestine biological and chemical warfare program was scuttled and the destruction of weapons and their precursors never certified.

In a landmark speech given on April 4 1967 at Riverside Church in New York City, Martin Luther King Jr. called for an end to the US bombing campaign in Vietnam. In a proposal that would alienate him from President Lyndon Johnson, he (King) called for a unilateral truce, a date to be set for troop withdrawal and a seat at the peace negotiations for the National Liberation Front. Many believe that the isolation that followed his acute distancing from Johnson made him more vulnerable to assassination.

The Vietnam War (or the American War, as the Vietnamese call it) lasted for twenty years, from 1955 to 1975. In a book titled *From Enemies to Partners: Vietnam, the U.S. and Agent Orange*, Le Ke Son and Charles Bailey tell the story of how 3.3 million Vietnamese (north and south) soldiers and civilians as well as 58,220 Americans were killed.[[6]](#footnote-6) They also tell the story of the use of defoliants and the effects of dioxin on the health of the combatants and local Vietnamese civilians there, an act that by today’s international law would, like apartheid, be considered a crime against humanity.

Had he been alive today, there is little doubt in my mind that King would have been appalled by the fact that no American President since the time, fearing liability, has taken responsibility for this extraordinary calamity in history. Le Ke Son and Bailey provide the facts: ‘Between 1961 and 1970, at several airbases in South Vietnam 19.5 million gallons of the herbicide were stored, mixed, handled and loaded into aircraft’ for spraying a land mass the size of Massachusetts. As many as ‘4.1 million Vietnamese and 2.8 million American military personnel may have been exposed to the herbicide’. American soldiers and the Vietnamese were victims. A large number are still live in Vietnam, no one knows how many exactly, with ‘profound disabilities’ linked to dioxin exposure.

Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont led the Congressional response, persuading the relevant committees to occasionally set aside funds to help, about $150 million for the purpose cumulatively I am told. Reparations for Vietnam never appeared in the routine budget of the executive branch. The Ford Foundation, to its great credit, spent $17.1 million on rehabilitation efforts. The United States did not establish a special commission to help the nation act on what clearly was its moral responsibility, other than to have its President include a line in the executive budget, something that even President Barack Obama did not, as far as I know, contemplate.

King spoke truth to power about a war where chemical weapons were being used in a foreign land . Mandela took over a government that, under apartheid, used chemical and biological weapons on its own people internally and the leaders and representatives of the liberation movements who lived abroad in exile. F. W. de Klerk had ordered the destruction of the chemical and biological weapons developed and deployed under programs called *Project Coast* and *Project Jiota* that supplied the riot police with better crowd control technologies and military intelligence with sophisticated poisons and assassination devices. De Klerk also dismissed the key staff part of both projects including its leader, the cardiologist Wouter Basson who became known by the sobriquet Dr. Death. But, unlike the nuclear program, the destruction of chemical and biological weapons, their precursors and plans, were never properly certified.

As part of the drive led by de Klerk and Mandela to have South Africa join and be accepted by the international community, government signed the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction* (OPCW) in 1993, which was ratified it by 1997. However, U.S. intelligence sources accused the democratic government in early 1995 of still possessing ‘chemical and biological weapons’ and added, explosively, ‘that Libya is recruiting South African scientists associated with them.’ Mandela issued a statement denying that government had any biological or chemical weapons in its possession, but admitted ‘that some of the experts who were involved in the chemical and biological weapons program in South Africa are visiting Libya, without the knowledge or consent of the government of this country.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

In their coverage of the hearings of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC), *The New Yorker* (January 15 2001) gave an account of South Africa’s capabilities in the isolation and possible weaponization of anthrax, cholera, salmonella, botulinum, thallium, E. coli, ricin, organophosphates, necrotizing fasciitis, Hepatitis A, Sarin, Ebola, Marburg and Rift Valley hemorrhagic-fever viruses. Paralyzing agents and poisons were made and used against Namibia’s South West African Peoples Organisation (SWAPO) guerillas (200 were incapacitated and dropped into the Atlantic ocean) and many ANC leaders and fighters were assassinated using delivery systems and devices engineering by machinists working at a Gauteng based company called QB. Hand-held riot control devices were developed and supplied to the police to suppress domestic protest.

Basson testified to the TRC but did not apply for amnesty. He was indicted in 1999 in the Pretoria Regional Court on 64 charges, including 16 for murder, 11 of conspiracy to murder, 6 relating to the illegal possession and trade in drugs, and 24 of theft and fraud. On 12 October 1999 the presiding judge ruled that 6 of the 8 conspiracy to murder charges against Basson be withdrawn. While out bail, Mandela re-appointed him (Basson) to the *South African National Defense Force* in order to maintain control over him, the Secretary of the Cabinet Jakes Gerwel said. On April11 2002 Basson was acquitted of the rest of the 46 criminal charges by a Judge Hartzenberg who dismissed the evidence of all 153 witnesses and argued that the state had not proved its case beyond a reasonable doubt. Finally, in 2013 a *Health Professional Council of South Africa* (HPC) tribunal found Basson guilty of ethical misconduct and his sentencing started in 2014. He lodged an appeal, but this was dismissed by the Pretoria High Court. However, on January 17 2018, a mere month ago, the Court of Appeal found in Basson’s favor, upholding his appeal on the grounds of bias and ordered the HPC to pay costs. Basson evaded justice again and again, outfoxing and outliving Mandela, who died towards the end of 2013.

Regarding South Africa’s biological and chemical weapons and their precursors, the *Nuclear Threat Initiative* (NTI) assembled a record that indicate how they found their way into the clandestine black market for pathogens and toxic chemicals ending up, it appears, in Libya, Iraq, Croatia and the former East Germany and Soviet Union, among others.[[8]](#footnote-8) A former US assistant secretary of defense once told me that with the collapse of the former Soviet Union, they found weaponized Ebola among the arsenal.

As for industry, a plea bargain with the South African Government involving a company called African Amines indicated that the commercial production of toxic substances were alive and well. Court records revealed that in 2014 that African Amines knowingly exported 120 tons of substance called *dimethylamine* (DMA) to an Iranian company in March 2003 and 11.8 tons to an Austrian company, without a permit issued by the *Council for the Nonproliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*. DMA is a precursor to the chemical warfare agent called *tabun,* a clear, colorless and tasteless liquid that is extremely toxic and, because it fatally interferes with the normal functioning of the mammalian nervous system classified as a nerve agent. African Amines is a private company contracted to the South African parastatal coal-to-fuel enterprise called SASOL which was fined $17,000, a mere slap on the wrist, for shipping its volatile cargo before obtaining an export-import permit from the relevant authorities.

Moral responsibility for public affairs abroad and moral responsibility for public affairs at home were priorities for both King and Mandela. So too was the importance of justice, involving both the principles of due process and equality before the law, as it involved the notion of fairness in the distribution of opportunities and of outcomes, the latter in the sense used by the liberal philosopher John Rawls where he argued that the resources flowing from social policy must benefit the least advantaged the most. That is why King and Mandela were, for example, supporters of affirmative action, to give those young people and women left behind a helping hand to enable them to succeed with support.

But what about civility? I have not known Martin Luther King Jr. or anyone who knew him, but his public record indicated that he was an extraordinarily dignified and civil personality. I was not part of Mr. Mandela’s inner circle but spent a number of occasions with him, some work-related. The Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) which I led assisted his office with community-based educational projects in constitutional governance among South Africa’s colored communities in South Africa as documented in a book titled *Now that we are free: Colored communities in a democratic South Africa.[[9]](#footnote-9)* I personally assisted his office with the renaming of his presidential estate in Cape Town from the colonial name *Westbrooke*, which in honor of the contribution colored people made to progress became *Genadendal*, 17th century Dutch name for ‘valley of mercy’, a small rural town in the Cape that was one of the first to give former slaves freehold tenure to land. Finally, I was one of the co-editors of his presidential speeches, published as *Nelson Mandela: In his own words*[[10]](#footnote-10) The last time I saw Mandela is when I took David Baltimore, President of the California Institute of Technology, to meet him in 2008. Baltimore gave the Nelson Mandela Science Lecture on HIV and paid a courtesy visit to the great man.

For those who have met Mandela would know all too well, he had the ability to focus intensely on the person he was with; he was curious about one’s background and heritage; and he had the effect some people have of making one feel the most important person in the world. Mandela was never late for a meeting, indeed he tended to arrive early, and he expected those who came to him to show the same degree of reciprocal respect. He exuded dignity, had Victorian manners and a very naughty sense of humor. He was angered by betrayal and dismissive of those he did not trust. He was deeply embarrassed by any talk of sex, as he was when a delegation from the University of Cape Town went to see him with the request that his government declare HIV/AIDS a national emergency. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. once said that leadership is what makes the world go around, to which one must add, in Mandela’s case, his natural dignity, like love, smoothed the way. His civility on an interpersonal level was certainly striking.

Projected in his relationships to citizens as President, his personal civility and common touch drew people towards him. His leadership style was inclusive and interactive. He could disagree on a point without being disagreeable, always desirous to persuade. Even though his party the African National Congress easily won elections to the point of having a permanent majority, he always reached out to what he referred to as minorities, and minorities amongst the majority. His choice of Cyril Ramaphosa, about to become President in 2019 if not before, to succeed him in 1999 was not because he thought him to be more talented than Thabo Mbeki, but that he (Ramaphosa) was from the minority Venda community and would break the pattern of ANC leaders drawn exclusively from the two dominant black groups, the isiZulu and isiXhosa speaking communities.

It is this order of leader-citizen civility, which a long line of US Presidents, not all of them from the Democratic Party, brought to the White House, that is so tragically missing today. This President insults and attacks his fellow Americans. He sees the children and young adults of DACA as negotiating fodder. He clearly and self-evidently is disrespectful of women, treats Native Americans as if they were cut-outs from old comic books and is wickedly pejorative towards the people of Africa. He shamelessly lies, takes no responsibility for his mis-statements and never, in his arrogance, apologizes. He draws a moral equivalence between neo-Nazis, black nationalists and liberally-minded protestors. He does not appear capable of shedding a tear or being sad in the face of others’ loss. He fails to grasp the meaning of the separation of powers in a constitutional democracy. He turns against the very institutions that serve the national interests.

America’s hope is to repopulate the executive and Congress with leaders who possess the modern 21st century equivalents of Mandela and King’s qualities, those who believe that principles and values matter, who animate and do not disable democracy, worry about the poor and the destitute, and who embody the fact that all human beings are equal in their humanity, the cement of King’s brotherhood. Living together in harmony is an enduring and ubiquitous human problem. In his book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* Yuval Harari writes about how we are today technologically capable of solving humanity’s ageless problems – plague, poverty and war – but we have difficulty in finding a unity of purpose to make it happen.[[11]](#footnote-11)

David Baltimore and I spent about 20 minutes with Mandela when I last saw him in 2008. Baltimore, a Nobel Laureate who discovered *reverse transcriptase* (he shared the prize with Howard Temin from my alma mater, the University of Wisconsin at Madison) took five minutes to describe the challenges of combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic with an order of scientific precision that only he is capable. Mandela absorbed Baltimore’s messages but Zelda le Grange, his personal assistant, noticed how quickly he had tired and signaled that the meeting had to end. Seated in a wheelchair with a blanket on his lap, Mandela turned to me and said ‘Wilmot, I am sure that you never thought that you will see me like this. Remember, when government does not do the right thing, you must take the fight to them.’ And that is my message to you: let’s take the fight to them, for justice, inclusion and civility.

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1. <http://www.rfksafilm.org/html/speeches/unicape.php> Robert Kennedy delivered five speeches while in South Africa, and the one given at the University of Cape Town was the most memorable. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nelson Mandela, Acceptance and Nobel Lecture (Oslo, December 10, 1993, <https://www.nobelprize>.org/nobel\_prizes/peace/laureates/). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Luther King, Nobel Lecture (Oslo, December 11, 1964, <https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_>prizes/peace/laureates/). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wilmot James, *Moments with Mandela and the challenge of his legacy* (Tafelberg e-book, Amazon.com, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nelson Mandela and Mandla Langa, *Dare not linger: The Presidential Years* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Le Ke Son and Charles Bailey, *From Enemies to Partners: Vietnam, the U.S. and Agent Orange* (Chicago, G. Anton, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ### All quoted material and references to South Africa’s chemical industries, products and weapons and their precursors are from [*South Africa Chemical Chronology - Nuclear Threat Initiative*](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=6&ved=0ahUKEwjzp87Io5rZAhWGUt8KHTqVC1IQFghKMAU&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nti.org%2Fmedia%2Fpdfs%2Fsouth_africa_chemical.pdf%3F_%3D1316466791&usg=AOvVaw3WH9T9GzrJY9RZUDvc9JV-)<https://www.nti.org/>media/pdfs/south\_africa\_chemical.pdf

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [*South Africa Chemical Chronology - Nuclear Threat Initiative*](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=6&ved=0ahUKEwjzp87Io5rZAhWGUt8KHTqVC1IQFghKMAU&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nti.org%2Fmedia%2Fpdfs%2Fsouth_africa_chemical.pdf%3F_%3D1316466791&usg=AOvVaw3WH9T9GzrJY9RZUDvc9JV-)<https://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/south_africa_>chemical. pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wilmot James, Daria Caliguire & Kerry Cullinan, Eds. *Now that we are free: Coloured communities in democratic South Africa* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kader Asmal, David Chidester & Wilmot James, Eds., *Nelson Mandela: In his own words* (Boston, Little Brown & co., 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A brief history of tomorrow* (New York, Harper, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)