

Part Democrat/Part Autocrat: Mandela The Pol

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When I began visiting South Africa 30 years ago, it was a police state that enforced official racism with a mad logic. Government employees classified people as white or colored (mixed race) by testing the curl in their hair. Hundreds of thousands of blacks were arrested every year for being in a “white area” without the right pass. Sex across color lines was a crime. A teen-age boy was sentenced to five years in prison under the Terrorism Act for writing an anti-white poem and “publishing” it by showing it to his girlfriend.

I thought then, and on many later visits, that South Africa was the most fascinating country on earth. There were exceptional human beings — bishops and writers and lawyers and political thinkers — whose struggle against the system seemed to deepen their characters. And there was a great unfinished drama. How long could whites, then 16 percent of the population, continue to hold all political and economic power? Would it end in an explosion, or would there somehow be a peaceful transition to majority rule? Richard Rive, a colored literary scholar, put it in a sentence to me in 1975: “The end is inevitable, but not predictable.”

To revisit the country now is a dazzling experience. The old sense of entering a vast prison is gone. There are no restraints on what political creed one may espouse. No one is “banned” or held in detention without trial. Life in South Africa is a human kaleidoscope of colors: in shops and business offices and not least in Parliament, that former bastion of whiteness. And at the center, where for two generations stern Afrikaner leaders enforced the ideology of racial separation, stands the benign, all-embracing figure who brought about the peaceful transformation, President Nelson Mandela.

Mandela is probably the most widely known political leader in the world, and without doubt the most revered. In an age of ethnic, religious and racial conflicts, societies of a very different character and history wish they had someone of his unifying qualities and unassailable standing; I have heard that from, among others, Israelis and Palestinians. He is one of the most written-about figures anywhere. Sidney Poitier

portrayed him in a television drama last month, and a full-length documentary on his life has just opened in United States theaters.

Yet in profound respects Mandela remains a mystery. What exactly is the magic of his leadership, the means by which he persuades diverse people in what was a riven country to join with him? What enabled him to survive 27 years in prison without disabling bitterness? What makes him Mandela?

The South African drama continues, the fascination of its central character undiminished. Now Mandela is coming under criticism for his government's performance; people are asking whether the qualities that enabled him to lead the country peacefully to freedom are right for the fretful business of governing. So I found on a visit last month to explore the Mandela mystery.

I first interviewed Mandela in March 1990, a month after he left prison. My wife and I — she comes from South Africa, where she was an anti-apartheid student leader — saw him in the temporary offices of the African National Congress in downtown Johannesburg. The place was in turmoil, people rushing in and out, going from meeting to meeting. Joel Joffe, a lawyer who had not seen Mandela and his fellow prisoners since the end of their trial in 1964, was there visiting from his home in England, hugging and being hugged. But when we sat down with Mandela in his office, there was serenity. It was as if he had nothing to do but talk with us. There was a profound courtesy, almost a courtliness, in his manner.

In the middle of our meeting he had a telephone call from Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the KwaZulu-Natal leader whose supporters in the province were fighting A.N.C. members. We rose to leave; Mandela motioned us to stay. Buthelezi was upset about the cancellation of what he thought was an agreement for the two of them to meet at a rural spot in KwaZulu-Natal. Mandela explained that it had not been finally agreed because his advisers thought the place was not safe. He tried to mollify Chief Buthelezi, deferentially. But Buthelezi was not mollified.

When the phone call ended, Mandela said it was “pointless to apportion blame” for the cancelled meeting. The need, he said, was “to unite all the anti-apartheid forces in the country” to win “basic human rights. We can't afford to be killing one another.” There was not a word of recrimination toward Buthelezi.

Later in that interview he sounded the note that was so startling in those early days but became the received view: that there would be no revenge for the crimes committed in the maintenance of apartheid. The reason again was the need for unity, now on a national scale. If there was to be a negotiated settlement, he said, it must “involve the entire community in its support. Otherwise it will be an intolerable situation.”

I talked with President Mandela last month in the presidential residence outside Cape Town. The house used to be called Westbrooke; a year ago he renamed it Genadendal, as a symbol of South Africa's diversity and unity. Genadendal was a Christian mission established in 1738, the oldest in South Africa; It was a sanctuary for former slaves after the abolition of slavery, and in Genadendal the Dutch dialect arose that helped to form the Afrikaans language.

At 78, Mandela is still erect and slim, though a knee injury slows his walking. A physiotherapist gives him massages to help the knee, and he works out on an exercise bike. He gets up at 4:30 or 5 in the morning — prison routine — then waits until 6 or 6:30 to telephone friends. If he can, he comes home at 4 P.M. to sit in the garden, take off his shoes and put up his feet. He works late but, I was told, needs only a few hours of sleep. He does not like to eat alone, so he will often invite friends for breakfast or supper: Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada, for example, comrades from Robben Island; Nadine Gordimer, the Nobel Prize-winning writer; George Bizos, a lawyer who has been his advocate and friend for 40 years, and Amina Cachalia, widow of a leader of the Transvaal Indian Congress.

Home is not really Genadendal, a place of large, empty rooms and overstuffed furniture, or the equally barren president's house in South Africa's other capital, Pretoria. He lives in a private house in Houghton, a suburb of fine homes and gardens north of Johannesburg. Sometimes he slips away to Qunu, the village where he grew up in the Transkei. A small house has been built for him there: a replica of the warden's cottage at Victor Verster Prison, where the authorities installed him in transition from prison to freedom.

His loneliness has been overcome, in the last six months, by his love affair with Graca Machel, the 51-year-old widow of the former President of Mozambique. They have decided not to marry, and she continues to live mostly in Maputo. But she comes to Houghton or Qunu or Cape Town to stay with Mandela, and recently she accompanied him on a state visit to Asia.

I asked friends what he does for leisure. The answer was that he does not have much. He expressed regret to a friend that he no longer has time to read. His life is largely official. He is driven around (in a sedan, not a limousine) in a security convoy. He has meetings in his office or at home. He travels on state business. But he does not complain. He never has complained. It has been a life of duty.

The personal cost of that life is indicated, tellingly, in a story from "Every Secret Thing," a new book by Gillian Slovo, Joe Slovo's daughter, to be published in the United States in May. Joe Slovo, who had been the commander-in-exile of the A.N.C.'s guerrilla

force and then Minister of Housing in the Mandela government, died on Jan. 6, 1995. A few hours after his death, in the early morning, President Mandela appeared at the house. He sat across from Slovo's daughters and somehow sensed their feeling that their father had abandoned them for politics. Gillian Slovo writes: "He told us how one day when he had gone to hug his grown-up daughter she had flinched away from him and burst out, 'You are the father to all our people, but you have never had time to be a father to me.' This, he said, was his greatest, perhaps his only regret: that his children, and the children of his comrades, had been the ones to pay the price of their parents' commitment."

But Mandela is not a melancholy person. Nor, for all the burdens on him, does he seem under stress. He still radiates calm, seeming so relaxed that he puts a visitor at ease. He tells little jokes on himself, for example mentioning when a photographer comes in during our talk that he was so unaware of technology when he came out of prison, he did not know what a fleece-covered microphone was when it was thrust at him.

The interview took place at 7 in the morning, in an alcove looking out across beautiful lawns and trees down the hill toward Rondebosch, a suburb that is the home of the University of Cape Town. The President came down after having breakfast in his room upstairs. No security men were in sight until an hour later.

I began by asking about the future, about where South Africa was headed. But seven years after his release from prison, with a new Constitution in place and himself in office after the country's first democratic election, he was still concerned about national unity. He wanted to talk first about the peaceful transformation. South Africa, he said, had avoided "tragedies such as Bosnia."

What lessons, I asked, did he think the South African story had for Bosnia and other conflicted societies? "It would be presumptuous of me to lecture" Bosnian leaders, he answered. But then he added:

"They thought through their blood and not through their brains. In countries where innocent people are dying, the leaders are following their blood rather than their brains."

It was a rare piece of self-revelation, I thought. The world sees Nelson Mandela as a man of extraordinary magnanimity, eschewing revenge for the cruelties of apartheid, reaching out to enemies: the nearest thing politics has to a saint. True, but not the whole truth. When you talk to those who know him best, you come to understand that Mandela is anything but benign. He is a map of powerful emotions, but even more powerful discipline. If he is saintly, he is saintly for a purpose. Through 27 years of prison and now 7 of public leadership, he has disciplined himself to suppress his feelings: to think with his brains and not his blood.

"He has a much keener sense of power than appears in that benign image," an

official close to him said. “He has a purpose even in gestures of reconciliation.” As an example, the official described what happened at the rugby World Cup final, played in Johannesburg in 1995.

Rugby has been a sport for whites, especially Afrikaners. Hence blacks scorned South Africa’s Springbok rugby team. Before the World Cup matches, President Mandela urged blacks to support the national team. When I asked him about it, he laughed and said he had worn a Springbok cap to black political meetings. “I told them, ‘We wish our boys success,’ ” he said, “and they would clap politely — not so enthusiastically.”

Against the odds, South Africa made it into the final, against New Zealand. Mandela went to the match and astonished the Springboks by appearing in their locker room before it started, wearing the No. 6 green jersey of their captain and wishing them luck. In a great upset, the Springboks won, 15-12. (“It almost shattered my nerves because of tension,” Mandela said when I interviewed him. “I’m still recovering.”) When the President walked out on the field to present the trophy, still wearing the green jersey, the Afrikaner crowd broke into a chant: “Nelson, Nelson, Nelson.”

A great emotional moment. But it was more than that. The official who told me about it said: “It had a devastating effect on the far-right white groups, the people who had refused to vote in 1994 or to recognize the new Constitution, saying, ‘It’s not our country.’ The groups simply disintegrated. Their people stopped using the symbols of the past, the old flag, the songs. Mandela became the symbol of the whole country.”

Symbols matter in the politics of any society, any culture, and Mandela is a master of them. That is one key to his leadership. There is a calculating aspect to what he does, of course: the sense of power that his official mentioned. But he puts so much into a gesture that people accept its good faith. He did not just casually support the rugby Springboks; he touted them to black audiences, he wore the jersey, he went to the locker room, he visibly cared.

Here is another example, a current one. Last month Mandela and the Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, went to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The country was going to be without a head of state for a day. To act in that role Mandela designated Mangosuthu Buthelezi, whose Inkatha Freedom Party is in the coalition government and who also serves as Minister of Home Affairs. But since 1990, Inkatha has led violent marches, carried out deadly conflict with the A.N.C. and boycotted the writing of the permanent new Constitution. Everyone was astonished at Buthelezi’s designation. I asked the President to explain it.

“Actually our relations have been on a sound basis ever since I knew him as a young man,” Mandela said. “And that relationship grew when I was in jail, because he was one

of the few public figures who were allowed to write to me whilst I was in prison. And he wrote me beautiful letters. Not only that. He was able on my birthdays to call large meetings to celebrate my birthday.

“And in the Cabinet, Buthelezi is one of the most supportive, the most constructive. The problem, of course, is when he leaves the Cabinet and appears on public platforms. Then he behaves like any other politician.

“The reason, therefore, why I appointed him to be President is that he is a capable person. He is experienced. And if that opportunity would also promote the spirit of reconciliation, I’ll be happy. But the real reason was merit. I appointed him on merit.”

Well, fine. But one does not have to be cynical to believe that the designation served a larger political purpose. Chief Buthelezi is a man with a fragile ego, always conscious of perceived slights. Here was a gesture that in the grandest way said he was respected. The result was to make it harder for him to pull Inkatha out of the government if things get dicey — an eventuality that the unity-minded Mandela wants to avoid. Some saw an even broader purpose in the gesture. President Mandela has been trying to help settle the intractable conflict in Angola, where the ego of the rebel leader Jonas Savimbi has so far kept him from fulfilling an agreement to join the government of President Eduardo Dos Santos. Mandela’s gesture was one those two could not miss: a sign that a great leader can gain by being generous toward a prickly antagonist.

To carry out the Mandela theme of reconciliation, not revenge, his new government as one of its first acts set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission with power to grant amnesty to individuals in return for full confession of a political crime. When I talked with the President, the commission had just received amnesty applications from five former policemen involved in what was probably the single most notorious apartheid killing: the murder of Steve Biko, the young Black Consciousness movement leader who died of brain damage while he was in jail in 1977. At the time, under oath, the police denied responsibility for his death. Now they said they had killed him inadvertently. The extent and truth of their confessions must be tested at hearings where in other cases, the details were so gruesome that the commission chairman, retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu, put his head down on the table and wept.

I asked the President whether the public would continue to support the policy of amnesty as the horrifying truth of what happened to Steve Biko and others came out. “In fact,” he answered, “some of the relatives of the victims have said, ‘We don’t want revenge, but we want to know what happened to our beloveds.’ And that is an indication. If a person who has actually suffered can say that, then you know people understand that you can’t build a united nation on the basis of revenge.”

Mandela never met Steve Biko, who rose to prominence while Mandela was in prison; Biko's name is not mentioned in his autobiography. Biko led a movement whose first premise, at least — that blacks should rely on themselves for liberation — was very different from the A.N.C.'s historic nonracialism. I asked the President what role he thought Biko would have played if he had lived.

“There can be no doubt that he was one of the most talented and colorful freedom fighters South Africa has produced,” he said. Then he placed Biko in his own pantheon of unity. “Young as he was, he was concerned with the question of unity. . . . Now that is a young man with realism, who could at that stage have felt that we were wasting our energies, our talents, by remaining divided.”

A realist: Mandela's highest praise. Neville Alexander, his fellow prisoner, said Mandela's realism was the more effective because he was “extremely patient and wise. He's always been prepared to wait for people to catch up with reality. We wanted to fight the prison authorities. He said, ‘Look, chaps, we're going to be here 10 years or more.’ ”

Alexander's view of Mandela, in the testing conditions of Robben Island, is especially interesting because his politics were different. He was a Marxist with a Ph.D. from Tubingen University in Germany, a member not of the African National Congress but of a student group called the National Liberation Front. We spoke admiringly of Mandela's single-minded pragmatic leadership even though the two men were ideologically apart in prison and, according to others, on cool terms personally.

“His goal always was the deracialization of South African society and the creation of a liberal democracy,” Alexander said. “For that end he was willing to make compromises with people of different views. He was able to concentrate on his goal with utter conviction and lucidity, and he was a man of extreme discipline. His aristocratic family background and training — one can use that term realistically — were reinforced by both legal practice and a jurisprudential cast of mind.”

Helen Suzman, who as an opposition member of Parliament visited the prisoners on Robben Island starting in 1967, said the same thing about Mandela's consistent goal: “ ‘I want to normalize things in South Africa.’ That was what he always said to me in prison.” What really mattered was ending the racial supremacy that dominated the country's life. Everything else — economic theory, social ideology — was subordinated in his mind to that end.

It was not easy for Mandela to make his view prevail, as the romance about his person may lead some to think. He had to fight for his pragmatism over many years. I talked with half a dozen alumni of Robben Island, and I learned something that surprised

me. There were deep divisions among the prisoners, not only political but personal, even among A.N.C. members.

Relations were tense in prison, I was told, between Mandela and Govan Mbeki, a senior A.N.C. colleague and a leading figure in the Communist Party. Mbeki was critical of Mandela's good relations with what he called right-wing elements. They included Buthelezi and some tribal chiefs whom Mandela, who was from a Xhosa chief's family, acknowledged as leaders of a kind. However sharp the dispute with Mbeki, Mandela did not visit it on the next generation. He has made Govan's son, Thabo Mbeki, the Deputy President and his heir apparent. As for Communism, the odd fact is that when apartheid fell, the Communist leaders Joe Slovo and Chris Hani played a crucial part in winning acceptance of the compromises necessary for a peaceful transition.

Many people told me that Mandela does not like what he considers ad hominem attacks or confrontations. One said: "With all the warm things he does, inside he can be hard. He has a terrible grudge against anyone who has crossed him — once you've lost favor with him, he never lets go. That's the mistake that Winnie made: thinking he would forever be at her beck and call. She will never get close to him again, because he has finally taken the turn."

As to Winnie Mandela, it must be added that he did not move immediately for a divorce when he understood that she would not live with him as a wife. He waited until her trial for kidnapping was over, lest their public separation disadvantage her. And his lawyer, George Bizos, represented her. Magnanimity — but it could also be said that the respectful way he dealt with her and the regret with which he announced the divorce minimized the possibility of antagonizing her young supporters in the A.N.C.

Whatever the differences among the prisoners on Robben Island, in the end they accepted his leadership. So several told me. Fikile Bam, a lawyer who is now Judge President of the Land Claims Court (set up to give justice to people whose land was seized over the last century), went to Robben Island, like Neville Alexander, as a member of the National Liberation Front. He said: "Mandela had this quality of being able to keep people together. It didn't matter whether you were P.A.C." — Pan-Africanist Congress — "or A.N.C. or what, we all tended to congregate around him. Even his critics — and he had them — deferred to him at the end of the day as a moral leader. He still has that quality. Without him I can't visualize how the transition would have gone."

Then Bam told a story about Mandela. Bam arrived in 1964 on Robben Island a few months before Mandela and his colleagues, after a different trial. When the Mandela group arrived, they were put in a separate wing of the prison.

"On July 18, 1964, my birthday," Bam said, "the guys in my section started singing

'Happy Birthday' to me early one morning. Then we could hear the others singing 'Happy Birthday.' We were not allowed to mix at that stage, but we had a way of communicating as we went to the showers, and we found that Mandela had the same birthday.

"Every year after that he had a gift for me on my birthday. We were allowed to buy sweets and biscuits over Christmas, and he would keep them seven months so he could give me a present. It embarrassed me, because I could never keep them for seven months." (Talk about self-discipline: those were the only treats a prisoner got in a whole year.)

I told President Mandela that Fikile Bam had told me about the birthday presents. He beamed. "Yes," he said, "black magic." Black magic? "Yes, Black Magic, they're a brand of chocolates. He couldn't imagine that somebody would keep a box of chocolates for seven months."

In politics, it was hard for some of the prisoners to accept the idea of negotiating with the apartheid regime. "I had to sit down with my colleagues," Mandela told me, "and say, 'Let us talk with our enemies. Let us suppress our feelings.'" That is what happened after 1990.

It was President F. W. de Klerk who opened the way for negotiations by his courageous decision to free political prisoners and end the ban on opposition movements. He and Mandela have often been pictured together, famously the two of them clasping hands aloft when they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

But the two are not friends. Alex Boraine, the deputy chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has said that the apartheid system rather than individuals was responsible for the crimes committed, so de Klerk, as a man who presided over the system for some time, should apply for amnesty. I asked President Mandela what he thought of that idea. "It is true that it is the system," he said, "and it would be a fine gesture if Mr. de Klerk admitted responsibility. Because it was his party that was responsible. . . . I agree with Dr. Boraine that that would be a fine gesture on his part."

Curiously, the President seems to have a better relationship now with Gen. Constand Viljoen, former chief of staff of the South African Defense Force, who heads a right-wing party called the Freedom Front. During the transitional period General Viljoen had ties with Afrikaners who seemed ready to use force to try to block political change. Mandela went to him and said, "General, you may defeat us now, but if you take the road of violence, some day you and your people will be destroyed." General Viljoen dissociated himself from violence and took the Freedom Front into the new political system. When

he asked the President to extend the time for amnesty applications to the truth commission last year, it was done.

In his character and his place in his country's history, Mandela brings to mind George Washington. Of course they are worlds apart, in time and culture. But Washington's biographers, too, describe him as a man of strong emotions who suppressed them in the interest of creating a nation. His disciplined leadership held the quarreling colonies together in war and kept such strong-minded political antagonists as Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton together in his Cabinet.

"There is in the life of a country but one such person; we are just lucky that he came along at this time." That was said to me of Mandela by his lawyer, George Bizos. It sounds like the standard appraisal of Washington. The face that Washington presented to the world was not Mandela's disarming smile but an austere formality. But the two seem similar in the controlled personalities that made them the irreplaceable fathers of their countries.

The question emerging in South Africa is whether the Great Reconciler is also a great President. In Washington's day there was world enough and time. In Mandela's, South Africans, like everyone else, have to compete pell-mell in a world economy. A fast-growing population suffers from unemployment that may be as high as 40 percent, a grotesquely unequal distribution of wealth, appalling crime. Voices are beginning to be heard complaining about Mandela's record on those and other problems.

"The young are fed up," a prominent black figure told me, "with 400,000 coming on the job market every year and few jobs. They think this old man has been too much of a moderate, too reconciliatory, too compromising." Kaizer Nyatumba, political editor of *The Star* in Johannesburg, wrote a tough column last fall after Mandela denounced some black journalists. "His unquestionable greatness notwithstanding," Nyatumba said, "Mandela is an ordinary man with feet of clay."

If one ranks the challenges facing South Africa by what is on people's minds, crime is the most serious. Across lines of race and class, it is the subject of conversation. Carjacking is a terrifying example. Drivers are jumped as they get into their cars outside their homes or stop at a red light, ordered out at gunpoint, sometimes killed. The president of the Constitutional Court, Arthur Chaskalson, and his wife were held up outside their home. It happened to another judge while I was in Johannesburg last month. "The main problem in the country is criminal violence," said Winston Floquet, the chief executive of Fleming Martin Securities. His brother-in-law was shot dead outside his home, and two people in Floquet's office were attacked recently. One of them

immediately left for Australia. White emigration has increased, and Floquet said Australians are vigorously recruiting South African financial professionals.

When I asked President Mandela about crime, he began by saying, “We don’t want to be complaining about what happened under the apartheid regime — we have now been in power for more than two and one half years, and it is our responsibility to solve problems as we find them.” But it is a reality, he said, that in the apartheid years the police concentrated “not on detecting crime but on suppressing political activity.” Others of varying political views made the same point to me. Not only did the white police devote most of their effort to putting down dissent; they also encouraged black policemen in Soweto to make deals with criminal syndicates that let the criminals operate in return for their help in the job of suppression. So corruption was and is a major problem. The President said his government had arrested more police on corruption charges in its brief life than previous governments had in the 45 years of apartheid: 400 police in the Johannesburg area alone.

The apartheid system did create conditions for crime: oppressive racial discrimination, deliberate denial of decent education to blacks, miserable housing and economic policies that left millions jobless. But the President was right that the responsibility is his government’s now, and its performance so far has to be judged a failure. In his address at the opening of Parliament in Cape Town last month he said, “Let me warn the criminals — the carjackers, the rapists — we will make their lives difficult.” Perhaps new policies will take hold, but the police are still undermanned and under-reformed.

Housing is a signal disappointment in the government’s record. The need is overwhelming, as even a casual visitor who looks around will understand. On the way to town from the Cape Town Airport you pass Crossroads, a squatter community that became famous 20 years ago, when the apartheid government bulldozed it, not just once but repeatedly. But the squatter problem persisted, as thousands of blacks fled the desolate “homelands” to which they were confined under apartheid. It is still not over. From time to time, residents of Crossroads are resettled, but new thousands move in and build their shacks. And not just in Crossroads. Around the country homeless families occupy land — often land on which the government plans to build houses. It is a serious enough problem that President Mandela, in his speech at the opening of Parliament last month, condemned the illegal “occupation of land.”

The A.N.C. promised in the 1994 election campaign to build a million new homes in five years; so far, according to the Department of Housing, 123,000 have been built or are under construction. On the plus side, millions of people have been provided clean water

and electricity for the first time. Mandela estimated that 1,700,000 more would get water this year: a remarkable accomplishment. The government has also tackled, through the Land Claims Court and legislation, the daunting problem of restoring rights to people who lost their land to whites in the apartheid years.

The contrast between Cape Town, which may be the most beautiful city in the world, and nearby Crossroads symbolizes a fundamental truth about South Africa. It is both a first- and a third-world country, with some people, most of them whites, living in a luxury scarcely matched anywhere else, and others barely surviving. The society's gross disparities in wealth remain essentially untouched, a time bomb for possible future social turmoil. When I asked Mandela about that, he said: "We must not overestimate the speed with which a democratic government can bring about change in the thinking of the community or the structure of the economy. We are determined not to be deflected from the aim of assuring that there's a proper distribution. But we must not be unrealistic. We want to bring about change without any dislocation to the economy." He added that a start had been made on equalizing wages and on what is called black economic empowerment, black ownership of major companies. A striking example of the latter is the move by Cyril Ramaphosa, who was the A.N.C.'s chief constitutional negotiator, from politician to capitalist as the head of a large industrial group.

Mandela's caution about "dislocation to the economy" reflects a big change in his thinking and that of his colleagues, a growing concern about killing the golden goose in pursuit of equality. The A.N.C.'s 1955 Freedom Charter called for nationalization in some areas of the economy, and that was still in the air in 1990. The word is not heard today. When I spoke with the President, one of the first statements he volunteered was, "Private sector development remains the motive force of growth and development."

Leaders of business say they are content with the government. Bobby Godsell, a high executive in the giant Anglo-American Corporation, said he was "robustly optimistic." His reason was that "at long last the fundamental diseases of the economy are being tackled." From the mid-1970's on, the apartheid government ran very high budget deficits. The effect, Godsell said, was "to depress saving and investment, which undermined our capacity to acquire new technology, to be globally competitive." Helen Suzman, one of the sharpest critics around, said: "You cannot undo 45 years of misgovernance in so short a time. In that light they've done amazingly well."

Inflation was down last year from double digits to 7 percent, the lowest figure in 25 years. But the value of the South African rand fell 25 percent, though it recovered some of that loss in the opening months of 1997. Government corporations built up in the apartheid years — owners of airlines, the railroad system, telecommunications and other

big companies — are being wholly or partly privatized. Annual economic growth is about 3 percent, not enough to make a dent in the unemployment rate.

The question is what the orthodox economic policy being followed by the government will do to meet the expectations of the poor majority of blacks, and how soon. Mandela was careful not to raise expectations high in the 1994 election campaign. And South Africans have always been patient — astonishingly so by American standards. Will that patience continue? Deputy President Mbeki has said that it will if people can see some improvement, however modest: a fresh water tap, a halt to the eviction of rural tenants. The government aims to raise the economic growth rate to 6 percent. But that will take lots of foreign investment, which has not flooded in so far, and an increase in worker skills.

“The worst legacy of apartheid is the lack of education,” Winston Floquet said. “People say South Africa is going to be another tiger economy, like the ones in Asia. But you can’t get there from such a low skills base. It will haunt us for at least another decade.”

Segregated schools and grossly disproportionate spending on white students played a key part in creating the separate worlds that the philosophers of apartheid wanted. But that is changing rapidly, as large numbers of black children enroll in the once all-white public schools in the suburbs of Johannesburg. “It is one of the most successful pieces of racial integration that I know about in the world,” Bobby Godsell said. “It is one area in which the two worlds have begun to overlap.”

But around the country most black children still get a sadly inadequate education. And critics say the government is leveling down rather than up. It set a national standard of 1 teacher to 40 pupils and then forced thousands of teachers in Western Cape Province to move or retire because the ratio there was only 1 to 25 or 30. (Almost all retired.)

Beyond these specific areas of doubt about the Mandela government’s performance, there is criticism from all quarters about the way it governs. The complaint is that the President is too autocratic, too loyal to failed Cabinet ministers who go into a defensive crouch when their mistakes are exposed. Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, vice chancellor of the University of Cape Town, who is close to Mandela, said, “The more insecure people are, the less open they are to constructive criticism. He’s not insecure, but his government is.”

Some of Mandela’s old A.N.C. colleagues have been successes in office, others surely not, a prime example being the Foreign Minister, Alfred Nzo, who is virtually invisible. The Minister of Health, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, spent the equivalent of \$4 million on a theatrical production that was supposed to tour the country advising people on how to avoid AIDS. The President did nothing when that misspending came to light,

and nothing when the same minister later announced that scientists at Pretoria University had found a cure for AIDS — without submitting the claim to normal scrutiny. (The country's AIDS problem is frightening. Nearly a fifth of the women who go to prenatal clinics in the Johannesburg area are HIV-positive.)

Mandela has rejected all calls for changes in the Cabinet. He made a joke of it when he spoke to Parliament last month. After delivering his written text for an hour, he put the manuscript aside, took off his glasses and ad libbed that he had rejected all the reasons advanced for reshuffling his Cabinet, but he had looked over during his speech and seen several members asleep — “A good reason to drop them,” he said. But then, he added, he had noticed the same thing among opposition M.P.'s, “so in equity I won't reshuffle the cabinet.”

There are questions, too, about the way President Mandela has anointed Thabo Mbeki as his successor. At least some in the A.N.C. would have preferred an open contest between him and Cyril Ramaphosa for the party leadership when Mandela gives it up at the end of this year, with the presidency following almost inevitably. Mandela is sensitive on the subject, insisting that he has not forced the choice but that it will be made democratically by the A.N.C. He told me that he had agreed to Ramaphosa's wish to go into private business only after once turning him down. And he said he continues to speak frequently with Ramaphosa: “I am not going to allow him to escape from political duties. Cyril Ramaphosa is a son to me.” Opinions differ on whether Ramaphosa will some day again seek public office. He would do so from an interesting new position: wealth.

Finally, among the felt doubts about Mandela as President, there is a concern that he has carried his emphasis on unity too far, to the point of dampening the criticism that characterizes democracy. He recently invited the Pan-Africanist Congress to join the government — and the Democratic Party, heir to Helen Suzman's Progressives, which has modest white liberal support. The Democrats' leader, Tony Leon, has been a vigorous critic, saying recently that President Mandela has too often “sacrificed accountability to loyalty.” Suzman snorted at the idea of his joining the government. She said she had told the President that “that would emasculate Tony Leon.” (After considering the invitation for weeks, Leon declined the invitation.)

Those are the main criticisms of Nelson Mandela as President. To me, they are overshadowed — overwhelmed — by his achievements in the last three years. He has taken a country utterly divided by race and made it one where people of different races actually share a vision: where “the two worlds have begun to overlap,” as Bobby Godsell of Anglo-American put it. He has transformed the political system without creating unrealistic expectations in the newly enfranchised. He has taken a country where fear was

everywhere and made it free. He has given a society marked by official murder a culture of human rights.

I find South Africans today less resentful, less guilty, less prickly about race than many Americans. The submissiveness of some blacks is fading along with white lordliness. Young black lawyers call senior white colleagues by their first names: a social revolution.

But it is the acceptance of a human rights culture that struck me most powerfully on this visit. Law used to be an instrument of oppression. It dictated where you could live, whom you could marry, what you could read. The masters of that system rejected all demands for legal protection of individual rights, and many feared that when change came the new masters would be as unrelenting toward the old. But Mandela the lawyer, together with Cyril Ramaphosa and Arthur Chaskalson and George Bizos and other lawyers, carried out a revolution by law and in law.

A written Constitution and Bill of Rights as protective as America's now defends South Africans against official abuse. President Mandela told me with pride how the new Constitutional Court, where Chaskalson now presides, had overturned as unconstitutional his proclamation of elections in the Western Cape: "Arthur Chaskalson defended me when I was sent to Robben Island for 27 years. But when it came to the question whether I was entitled to issue those proclamations, he felt I had no right. And he overrode me. And within an hour of his ruling I came out and made a public statement to say this is the highest tribunal in constitutional matters, they handled a complicated case with great skill, and I called upon members of the A.N.C. and the public to respect the decision. I had to do so. It was a fitting opportunity for us to assert the independence of the structures we have put up to show that the bill of rights is a living document."

Neville Alexander, Mandela's Marxist fellow prisoner, said: "I don't think his South Africa is going to do much for the people in economic and social terms. But the crucial point of agreement is on a human rights culture."

For me, South Africa remains the most moving, the most exhilarating of countries: a land of possibility. Nelson Mandela made it that, made it a country whose people feel like proud citizens rather than pariahs. And that is not just a product of the transitional years after 1990. It could all have been lost when it came time to form and run a government. Whatever the faults of the Mandela government — and the critics have a case — the transformation of South Africa into a free and rights-oriented society has been secured. The critics, most of them, recognize that. Richard Steyn, former editor of *The Star*, said: "Mandela is so intent on reconciliation that governing takes second place. We need some tough decisions. But just think where we were!"

There is an autocratic element in Mandela. He is both an autocrat and a democrat, an old colleague said. But he has an unyielding respect for human beings, and for law. What other leader of a liberation movement has subjected himself to legal limits when he won power: Castro? Mao? Arafat?

What, then, is the source of Nelson Mandela's leadership? The friends I have quoted mentioned his discipline, his mastery of symbols, his single-minded purpose, his magnanimity, his patience, his realism, his sense of power. Helen Suzman spoke of the way he establishes personal contact: "When I stuck my hand through the bars of his cell in 1967, it was almost an instant rapport."

Patrick (Terror) Lekota is a younger man who met Mandela on Robben Island and became an A.N.C. supporter there. He has just been made chairman of the new upper house of Parliament, the National Council of Provinces. When I asked him, he listed these qualities: "First of all, consistency. I cannot think of a day when he seemed to flag in his commitment to the struggle for freedom or even for better prison conditions. His stamina, to pursue an issue right to the end. There's a certain deliberateness. If you are deliberate in taking the risks of a certain course of action, then nothing can shock you because you've already come to terms with the possibility. And he is at peace with himself."

Nadine Gordimer said: "It's his total lack of personal self-protection and vanity. And an honesty of what he feels and thinks — for me, that's what makes him absolutely unique." No vanity, I said, but isn't there pride? "Not pride," Ms. Gordimer said: "Self-respect. You're entitled to that when you know who you are and what you stand for."

Yes, Mandela knows who he is. Magnanimity came easily to him because he regarded himself as superior to his persecutors. There is an inner confidence in him as great as any I have sensed. And a moral quality: It is hard to imagine him doing a mean act.

But if those are some of the qualities that account for his ability to lead, where do they come from? His childhood in a chief's family cannot explain it, I said to George Bizos; hundreds and thousands have come from such a background, and the same with prison. What was it that made Mandela what he is? Bizos said, "I don't know that you'll ever find an answer."

Toward the end of the interview, I asked the President how he would like to be remembered. I mentioned Jefferson's tombstone, which by his choice says nothing of his having been President. Laughing, Mandela said, "Well, that would be very egotistic of me, to say how I would like to be remembered. I'd leave that entirely to South Africans."

But he said that he had “reached the stage of planning my death.” Then, in a soft voice, he added, “I would just like a simple stone on which is written, ‘Mandela.’ ”

The Heir Apparent

Thabo Mbeki, Deputy President and Mandela’s almost certain successor as party leader and President, is 54. He was in exile during the years of Mandela’s imprisonment, acting as the African National Congress’s top diplomat and as such developing friendships with officials and journalists around the world.

He has his critics. They say he can be edgy, seeming to lack Mandela’s inner core of security. There are also admirers, by no means all in the A.N.C. Several business and financial leaders told me they find him well informed and sensible. Fikile Bam, a judge who was a prisoner with Mandela on Robben Island, said he thought Mbeki had the same natural courtesy as Mandela. “He’s good at economic issues and foreign policy,” Bam added, “and he might be able to handle the problem of the wealth gap better; by training he’s an economist.” Mbeki is already the government’s hands-on leader. Mandela leaves the details to him.

I asked Mbeki what kind of South Africa he saw 10 years from now. He replied, in part, as follows.

“This country today continues to be characterized in good part by the old racial divisions — whether you talk about the economy, skills, housing. . . . Ten years down the road I think you will see a South Africa that is much, much, much less segregated.

“Secondly, you will see a much better educated South Africa. I’m talking about levels of literacy, numeracy, but also about access to knowledge: a South Africa that will not be as ignorant of the rest of the world as it is today. Some of us who spent quite a bit of time in exile can see the gaps in knowledge. There is tremendous enthusiasm to be educated.

“It’s a fortunate circumstance that the possibility of lifting people out of ignorance, reintegrating them in the world of knowledge, occurs at the time of the information revolution. We’ll get on the information superhighway much quicker than the developed countries could. For one thing, we don’t have the huge communications infrastructure that New York or Los Angeles does. There’s nothing to dig up. Our telecommunications infrastructure will be built at today’s level of technology. That will have a rapid uplifting impact.

“The other big question is poverty, which is huge and expressed in numberless ways, whether it is unemployment, homelessness, landlessness. We ought to have a South Africa 10 years from now that has done something very meaningful about that.”