

Writer recalls going to see Nelson Mandela

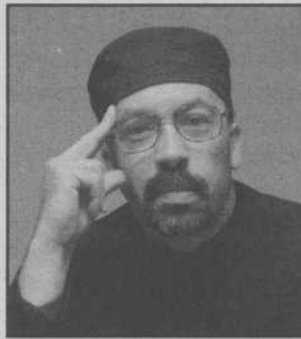
By Bill Fletcher Jr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I recently went to an event at the Brookings Institute in Washington, D.C., to see and hear former South African President Nelson Mandela. The event was over in about 20 minutes. President Mandela was introduced and then delivered prepared remarks, comments that were carefully worded and very diplomatic. Upon completion, he was applauded and then left the building. There were no questions and no discussion.

There were a number of things that struck me about the event, but I must tell you what was most prominent for me was who was in the room and who was not. When I sat down and scanned the room, I saw a great many White faces and a sea of business suits. The first thought that came to my mind was this: How many of the people in this room and their organizations had demonized President Mandela prior to his 1990 release from captivity? How many had viewed him, as Vice

President Cheney did during that time, as a terrorist? How ironic, I further thought, that Mandela is now an icon.

There are three basic points that I believe to be worth considering in light of the Mandela trip. The first is the question of what is a terrorist. To borrow some words from Malcolm X, the word "terrorist" is being used loosely. During World War II, the Nazis used the term terrorist to describe the armed resistance to their occupation in countries such as Greece, the Soviet Union, France and Norway. In the U.S., we described the resistance as patriotic. In the 1940s, the Zionists military units that fought to proclaim the state of Israel were called "terrorists" by the British who were then occupying Palestine. Later, these same military units/terrorists became leaders of Israel and were welcomed into various halls of



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government. On the other hand, the Palestinians who have fought the growing occupation of their land are condemned as terrorists whether they use military or non-military tactics. The Irish Republican Army has been declared to be terrorists — and then non-terrorist military — and then, again, terrorists — so many times that my head keeps spinning!

So, in looking at the face of President Mandela, I found myself wondering about the definition of a terrorist. If a terrorist is someone who uses military means against civilians in order to accomplish political objectives, then I am fairly clear who is a terrorist and who is not. In other words, the term is not as relative as it may seem, but is used sometimes to accurately describe criminals, and in other cases, inaccurately to describe resisters to oppression. The U.S., for some reason, has a habit of doing a lot of the latter — even when, at the same time, it uses terrorist methods to accomplish its objectives — with a case in point being the contra war in the 1980s against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

The second point that the Mandela visit surfaces is that the opposite of demonization (that is, pre-1990 Mandela, at least as far as many U.S. political leaders were concerned) is deification. Both are dangerous. It is dangerous to try to turn someone — alive or dead — into a god because humans cannot be gods. Humans have failings, and deifying or canonizing someone runs the risk of our falling into disappointment or despair when we discover some of those failings. This has happened for many when it finally dawned on them that Martin Luther King Jr., as great a human being as he was, was, in fact, a human being with some failings.

The other problem with deification, however, is that the rich and powerful often enjoy deifying the people's real leaders as a way of transforming those same leaders — alive or dead — into acceptable and safe creatures. So, for instance, President Mandela is now supposedly acceptable to everyone. We have

gone from the U.S. ruling circles ignoring or castigating Mandela to treating him as if he has finally 'arrived.' Yet, President Mandela is, for them, inconveniently still alive. So try as they may, he remains unpredictable, as President Bush discovered in the lead up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq when President Mandela was an outspoken opponent of the war.

The rich and powerful wish to make of President Mandela a symbol that they can use to further their own objectives. They want to claim him as their own, which takes me to my final point. It is precisely for that reason that the room in which I sat had the types of people that were there. I did not see the activists who had put themselves on the line to fight the apartheid regime and their collaborators here in the U.S. I did not see those who had sat-in at the South African embassy, or those who had been involved in the boycotts to pressure for an end to White minority rule.

The image of President Mandela that the rich and powerful wish to project runs into the problem of both the real Mandela and the real people who gave so much of themselves in South Africa, here in the U.S., and around the world in order to fight oppression. It is almost like George Orwell's 1984: History is rewritten to serve those in power, and if many of us had not actually lived the anti-apartheid movement, we might think that it had all been a dream.

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Clingman

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master's table when they should be baking and eating from their own loaves. Many of us are still operating in a psychologically enslaved mode, holding our brothers and sisters down while White folks walk on them. Instead of going for the gusto, we acquiesce to the mediocre. Yes, we can build! Yes, we can develop! Thank you, Toledo, for giving us another positive example of those realities.

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Curry

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Through the aggressive reporting of Woodward and Bernstein, the Senate Watergate hearings chaired by Sam Irving, and the testimony and remarkable recall of fired White House counsel John Dean, the scope of the Watergate scandal was revealed and many of Nixon's closest aides went to prison.

Nixon operatives had engaged in a series of dirty tricks in 1973 and 1974 that included breaking into the office of the psychologist of Daniel Ellsberg, the anti-war activist that leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*; spreading false rumors about the wife of Sen. Ed Muskie, a potential Democratic rival, and bugging the office of DNC chairman Larry O'Brien.

In addition, Nixon ordered his aides to compile an Enemies List so that they could be harassed by the Internal Revenue Service and other federal agencies.

At the Watergate Senate hearing, it was revealed that a secret tape-recording system had been installed in the Oval Office. When

investigators sought the tapes, Nixon refused to release them.

A unanimous U.S. Supreme Court ordered him to turn them over. The combination of that order and the House having approved three articles of impeachment forced Nixon from office. On one of the tapes, Nixon and Chief of Staff H.R. "Bob" Halderman discussed trying to get the CIA to obstruct the FBI's investigation of the Watergate break-ins.

While the Watergate stars went on to earn millions, Wills had difficulty getting and holding jobs. He moved back to North Augusta, S.C., in 1990 after his mother suffered a stroke. He did odd jobs and complained, "I was treated like a criminal myself." In 1983, a Georgia court convicted him of stealing a \$12 pair of sneakers.

Wills, who died penniless five years ago in Augusta, Ga., at the age of 52, remains a forgotten hero.

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ACLU

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and CEO of the Silver Ring Thing, told Women's eNews that he is limiting his comments to selective media outlets. He sent an e-mail press release that affirms that the program received federal funds and is a faith-based abstinence program. "The Silver Ring Thing is aware of the proper designation of the Federal Funds received and asserts that these monies have been properly directed at all times."

Officials at the Health and Human Services Department did not respond to phone and e-mail requests for comment.

Immediately after the filing of the lawsuit, The Silver Ring Thing altered elements of its Web site, said the ACLU, which has before-and-after snapshots. The ACLU said the site added nonreligious follow-up steps to complement the religious suggestions. But it left "Deb's Diary," a Web site column on how girls can remain chaste, with commentaries on finding purity and blessing in God.

"Their makeover is ineffective in many ways," said Sternberg.

The ACLU is also in federal court in Louisiana, where it argued that the state is in violation of a 2002 court settlement over its abstinence-only education programs by failing to root out all religious messaging. The governor's office believes the state is in compliance with the settlement. A decision is pending.

Current federal mandates for funded abstinence-only programs require teaching that "a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity," and that "sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects." The programs do not teach safe sex practices, such as condom or contraceptive use. A study released by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) last year found that 11 of the 13 most popular curriculums contain misleading information.

Abstinence-only education grant programs are promoted prominently on the White House Web site under "faith-based and community initiatives." They are the result of a presidential executive order in

January 2001 creating faith-based initiatives and another in December 2002 declaring that religious institutions can retain their religious autonomy and still participate in government-funded programs, sometimes described as "charitable choice."

To implement the executive order, the Health and Human Services Department announced new regulations in July 2004, permitting organizations to obtain abstinence funds even if they are "pervasively" religious. In explaining the apparent contradiction with the Supreme Court 1988 ruling, the department asserted that a majority of the justices no longer accepted the underlying analysis of the decision.

"Where a religious organization receives direct government assistance, any inherently religious activities that the organization offers must simply be offered separately, in time or location," the department explained in comments published along with the adoption of the new regulations.

The government rejected the idea of separate monitoring to prevent religious indoctrination.

"There is no accountability. As a practical matter, there is no monitoring," said Rob Boston, a staff member of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a watchdog organization in Washington, D.C.

A review of grantees by Women's eNews indicate that several abstinence-only grants went to Christian-based "pregnancy centers," such as Door of Hope Pregnancy Care Center in Madisonville, Ky., which states on its Web site that it is a ministry "administered without funding from any government agencies."

Life Network in Colorado Springs, Colo., which presents its mission as "human life ministry that impacts and transforms people with the love of Christ" and is affiliated with the Christian conservative and vocally anti-choice Focus on the Family, also received funding.

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. found that \$26 million in federal abstinence funds in fiscal year 2004 went to anti-abortion groups.