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Mandela, For All Seasons

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THE RELEASE of Nelson Mandela from behind bars after 27 years of uninterrupted imprisonment in South Africa has given the world an intriguing and impressive public figure.

Mandela's remarkable stature among South Africans of all races seemingly overshadows earlier black leaders such as Albert Luthuli as well as other present-day activists such as the Rev. Allan Boesak and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Comparing Mandela's unique status to other, almost mythical figures of recent times helps illuminate both the opportunities and the burdens that come with such an overwhelming symbolic importance.

Mandela's 27 years in prison far exceed the jail time served by any other notable political figure of recent decades, but his imprisonment is far from unusual. One year ago Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel was still in captivity, as were other leaders of the new Czechoslovak and Romanian governments. Imprisonment not only signifies the previous extent of oppression in those countries, it also arguably adds depth, integrity and conviction to the subsequent public service of many who experience it.

Observers see parallels, too, between Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. It's true, King suffered imprisonment, though never more than a few weeks' time, and King also, like Mandela, was a relatively privileged and well-educated offspring of a leading family, someone who believed that his advantages obligated him to serve his community and people. But for King, unlike Mandela, an absolutely total commitment to nonviolence, both spiritually and physically, was at the very center of his being, and would have limited his ability fully to support the struggle of the African National Congress.

Like King, Mandela has a firm and clear vision of a multiracial democratic society, a vision that is in no way communistic but that instead reflects the values of a democratic or Christian socialism. King would refer to his ideal of a democratic, egalitarian society as "the beloved community," and he rejected both the economic excesses of laissez-faire capitalism and the controls of leftist and rightist totalitarianism. Mandela, in "The Struggle is My Life," has articulated a similarly humanitarian worldview, criticizing societies where "individuals . . . are but tiny organisms with private lives that lead to private deaths: personal power, success and fame are the absolute measure of values, the things to live for." Instead, Mandela says, in an ideal society individuals view themselves as "interdependent aspects of one whole, realizing their fullest life . . . where communal contentment is the absolute measure of values."

In bearing and demeanor, as in political tactics, the African-American leader whom Mandela most closely parallels is not King but Malcolm X. Just as Malcolm in the last year of his life rejected the racial antipathies of his own earlier years and began moving toward positions that might have put him in tandem with King, Mandela, too, rejects the racial exclusiveness of South Africa's Pan Africanist Congress in favor of a multiracial democracy.

Neither man shies away from the need for black freedom by - in Malcolm's most famous words - "any means necessary," but both Mandela and Malcolm have articulated visions of racial justice and interracial cooperation that contradict racist notions.

No parallel should be overdrawn, however, and Mandela is no more a duplicate of Malcolm than he is of King.

Nevertheless, Mandela in many ways can be viewed as an amalgam of the most impressive qualities of both Malcolm and King. Many African-Americans for more than 20 years have sought to highlight the dissimilar though complementary strengths of those two men. In Nelson Mandela, South Africa - and the world - may well be witnessing the closest real-life parallel to that idealized joining of King and Malcolm that anyone is likely to see.

Recent weeks have witnessed a greater acknowledgment of Malcolm's symbolic stature by the mainstream American press than at any time in the 25 years since his assassination. This revival of popular interest in Malcolm, coupled with the simultaneous public emergence of Nelson Mandela as a figure of worldwide significance, inescapably heightens both the standards and the expectations that will be applied to African-American public figures in New York and the nation.

Selfless humility and not first-class airplane seating; explicit multiracial inclusiveness, not parochial, race-first breast-beating; and honest unflinching pursuit of stated goals, not evasive, overreaching rhetoric, will be the subliminal if not explicitly conscious expectations that many black - as well as many white citizens - will now have for African-American spokespersons at both the New York and the national level.

Photo-**David J. Garrow**