

How the Western Media Distorts the Historical Legacy of Nelson Mandela

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There's anger amidst the apprehension in South Africa as the numbers of "journalists" on the Mandela deathwatch grows. Members of his family have about had it, comparing what even the New York Times called a "media swarm" to African vultures that wait to pounce on the carcasses of dead animals.

President Obama was soon in South Africa, carrying a message that he hyped as one of "profound gratitude" to Nelson Mandela. The Times reported,

"Mr. Obama said the main message he intended to deliver to Mr. Mandela, "if not directly to him but to his family, is simply our profound gratitude for his leadership all these years and that the thoughts and prayers of the American people are with him, and his family, and his country."

It doesn't seem as if the South Africa's grieving for their former president's imminent demise are too impressed with Obama seeking the spotlight. Some groups including top unions protested his receiving an honorary degree from a university in Johannesburg.

Interestingly, NBC with its team buttressed by former South African correspondent Charlayne Hunter-Gault did not bother to cover the protest but relied on Reuters reporting "nearly 1,000 trade unionists, Muslim activists, South African Communist Party members and others marched to the U.S. Embassy where they burned a U.S. flag, calling Obama's foreign policy "arrogant and oppressive."

"We had expectations of America's first black president. Knowing Africa's history, we expected more," Khomotso Makola, a 19-year-old law student, told Reuters. He said Obama was a "disappointment, I think Mandela too would be disappointed and feel let down."

South African critics of Obama have focused in particular on his support for U.S. drone strikes overseas, which they say have killed hundreds of innocent civilians, and his failure to deliver on a pledge to close the U.S. military detention center at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba housing terrorism suspects." (Oddly, The South African police detained a local cameraman who used his own drone to photograph the hospital from above. He was stopped for "security" reasons.)

For symbolic reasons, as well as because of his global popularity, Nelson Mandela seems to

be of special interest to the American media with the networks, nominally in an austerity mode, busting their budgets to have a dominant presence.

South African skeptic Rian Malan writes in the Spectator, “Every time Mandela goes into hospital, large numbers of Americans (up to 50) are flown here to take up their positions, and the South African network is similarly activated. Colin, (A cameraman who works for a US network) for instance, travels to Johannesburg, hires a car and checks into a hotel, all on the network’s ticket. Since last December, he’s probably spent close to 30 days (at \$2000 a day, expenses included) cooling his heels at various poolsides. And he has yet to shoot a single frame.

As Colin says, this could be the worst disaster in American media history, inter alia because all these delays are destroying the story. When the old man finally dies, a lot of punters are going to yawn and say, Mandela died? Didn’t that already happen a year ago?”

Hostility to the this media is satirized in an open letter by Richard Poplak from the foreign media to South Africa that appears in The Daily Maverick:

“As you may have noted, we’re back! It’s been four long months since the Oscar Pistorius bail hearing thing, and just as we were forgetting just how crappy the Internet connections are in Johannestoria, the Mandela story breaks.

We feel that it is vital locals understand just how big a deal this is for us. In the real world—far away from your sleepy backwater—news works on a 24-hour cycle. That single shot of a hospital with people occasionally going into and out of the front door, while a reporter describes exactly what is happening—at length and in detail? That’s our bread and butter. It’s what we do.

And you need to get out of the way while we do it.”

Why all the fanatical interest? The US media loves larger than life personalities, often creating them when they don’t exist. Mandela has assumed the heroic mantle for them of Martin Luther King Jr. whose memory enjoys iconic status even as his achievements like Voting Rights Act was just picked apart by right-wing judicial buzzards in black robes. (Kings image was also sanitized with his international outlook often muzzled).

It wasn’t always like this. For many years, The US media treated Mandela as a communist and terrorist, respecting South African censorship laws that kept his image secret. Reports about the CIA’s role in capturing him were few and far between. Ditto for evidence of US spying documented in cables released by Wikileaks.

In the Reagan years, his law partner Oliver Tambo, then the leader of the ANC while he was in prison, was barred from coming to the US and then, when he did, meeting with top officials. Later, Dick Cheney refused to support a Congressional call for his release from jail.

In 1988, I, among other TV producers, launched the TV series South Africa Now to cover the unrest the networks were largely ignoring as stories shot by US crews ended up on “the shelf,” not on the air.

A 1988 concert to free Mandela was shown by the Fox Network as a “freedom fest” with artists told not to mention his name, less they “politicize” all the fun. When he was released

in 2000, a jammed all-star celebration at London's Wembley Stadium was shown everywhere in the world, except by the American networks.

Once he adopted reconciliation as his principal political tenet and dropped demands for nationalization anchored in the ANC's "Freedom Charter," his image in the US was quickly rehabilitated. He was elevated into a symbolic hero for all praised by the people and the global elite alike. Little mention was made of his role as the creator of an Armed Struggle, and its Commander in Chief,

US networks also did not cover the role played by the US dominated IMF and World Bank in steering the economy in a market-oriented neo-liberal direction, assuring the new government could not erase deep inequality and massive poverty and that the whites would retain privileges.

The American press shaped how Mandela was portrayed in the US. The lawyer and anti-nuclear campaigner, Alice Slater, tells a story of her efforts to win Mandela's support for nuclear disarmament.

"(When)... Nelson Mandela announced that he would be retiring from the presidency of South Africa, we organized a world-wide letter writing campaign, urging him to call for the abolition of nuclear weapons at his farewell address to the United Nations. The gambit worked. At the UN, Nelson Mandela called for the elimination of nuclear weapons, saying, "these terrible and terrifying weapons of mass destruction -why do they need them anyway?" The London Guardian had a picture of Mandela on its front page, with the headline, "Nelson Mandela Calls for the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons." The New York Times had a story buried on page 46, announcing Mandela's retirement from the Presidency of South Africa and speculating on who might succeed him, reporting that he gave his last speech as President to the UN, while omitting to mention the content of his speech."

And so it goes, with his death seeming to be imminent, he has become reduced to a symbolic mythic figure, a moral voice, not the politician he always was. He became an adorable grandfather praised for his charities with his political ideas and values often buried in the ether of his celebrity. He has insisted that he not be treated as a saint or a savior. Tell that to the media.

As ANC veteran Pallo Jordan told me,

"To call him a celebrity is to treat him like Madonna. And that's not what he is. At the same time, he deserves to be celebrated as the freedom fighter he was."

Watch the coverage and see if that message is coming through, with all of its implications for the struggle in South Africa that still lies ahead.

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