



*Nelson Mandela* (AP/Wide World Photos)

*“Never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another.”*

### Overview



On May 10, 1994, Nelson Mandela was sworn in as president of the Republic of South Africa. The moment was a triumphal celebration of the transition from apartheid rule to a democratic South Africa and from white minority rule to black majority rule.

Mandela, who had led the resistance to white rule and who had been imprisoned for that resistance from 1962 to 1990, became the first black man to become South Africa's head of state. His inaugural address was a conciliatory, forward-looking celebration of the changes that had taken place in South Africa.

In the 1980s, when white minority rule was still strong and the apartheid policy still tried to separate whites and blacks, few could have predicted that within a decade apartheid legislation would be repealed and all citizens would be able to vote freely for a new head of state. At that time, most commentators predicted that South Africa would descend into a bloody racial civil war. But that racial war did not come to pass. Instead, after a gradual dismantling of the apartheid system, Mandela became president through a relatively peaceful democratic process. Many spoke of this as a miracle. The new leader was a man who had endured imprisonment for more than a quarter of a century and had emerged from that imprisonment without bitterness toward those who had imprisoned him. His reconciliatory attitude and remarkably open and charismatic personality gave him a saintly aura, and his inauguration as president of the country that only a few years earlier had been despised for its apartheid policies was celebrated around the world. It was on the occasion of his inauguration that Mandela delivered this speech.

### Context

South Africa had a long history of racial segregation before the National Party government's adoption of a policy of apartheid in 1948. Black Africans had always formed a majority of the population of the area that in 1910 became the Union of South Africa, a nation that comprised

Cape Colony, Natal, Transvaal, and the Orange Free State, under primarily British dominion. The borders of the state formed in 1910 are virtually coterminous with those of the modern state. But the white population had conquered the indigenous peoples and dispossessed them of their land, and though whites wanted to use black labor, they kept blacks in subordinate positions.

Black challenges to colonialism had been in vain, and it was only gradually that new forms of resistance emerged. In the cities, members of the black African elite began to organize politically and to campaign for equal rights. To that end, the South African Native National Congress was formed in 1912, and in 1923 it changed its name to the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC went through a period of decline in the 1920s and 1930s, but under the influence of its Youth League, of which Mandela was a member, it revived in the 1940s.

The Afrikaner National Party came to power in 1948 on a program of rigid and more extensive racial segregation than before, known as apartheid. (“Afrikaner” refers to an ethnic group descended from seventeenth-century settlers from northwestern Europe.) In response, the ANC launched a new campaign involving civil disobedience and strike action. In 1952, for example, the ANC joined with the South African Indian Congress to embark on the Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws, a passive resistance protest launched on June 26 in which more than eight thousand people, including some whites, defied key racial laws. Many were imprisoned, including Nelson Mandela. The campaign lost steam after the government banned all meetings of more than ten Africans. Further, the Public Safety Act suppressed future campaigns by allowing the government to declare a state of emergency in response to threats to the public peace, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act imposed severe penalties, including fines, imprisonment, and whipping, for publicly protesting a law. During the campaign, the ANC attracted more members, growing to more than one hundred thousand, but the organization's leaders were unsure how to maintain the momentum of protest action.

One step taken to continue the momentum was the drafting of the Freedom Charter of South Africa, which became a key document in the struggle against apartheid. It was drafted by a small committee, on the basis of a large

## Time Line

1912

- **January**  
The South African Native National Congress is founded.

1923

- The South African Native National Congress changes its name to the African National Congress.

1948

- **May**  
The white National Party comes to power and begins to introduce apartheid.

1949

- **December 17**  
The ANC conference adopts a program calling for direct action against apartheid.

1952

- **June 26**  
The Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws begins.

1955

- **June 25–26**  
The Congress of the People convenes and adopts the Freedom Charter.

1990

- **February 2**  
President F. W. de Klerk announces the unbanning of the ANC and other organizations and the impending unconditional release of Nelson Mandela.

number of submissions, and during the Congress of the People, held at Kliptown outside Johannesburg on June 25–26, 1955, the charter was adopted. It became a document of immense symbolic importance, for it embodied a vision of a future democratic South Africa that was not organized around distinctions of race. It would later become significant in the 1980s, when “charterists,” or those whose philosophy was based on the charter, dominated resistance to apartheid; after apartheid had come to an end, the nation’s new constitution, adopted in 1996, was in part based on ideas in the Freedom Charter.

The apartheid regime retaliated against this and other instances of activism with more brutally repressive policies, and in March 1960, in the township of Sharpeville, south of Johannesburg, the police shot dead sixty-nine black Africans who were engaged in peaceful protest against the law that required them to carry identity books, which prevented them from moving around the country freely.

After that, Mandela and others in the ANC decided that they had to take up arms to challenge the state. Mandela himself became the commander in chief of a new organization formed to lead the armed struggle. Known as Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), meaning “Spear of the Nation,” this group became the armed wing of the ANC. Within a few years, however, the leadership of MK had been arrested, and Mandela and others were imprisoned on Robben Island in Table Bay, off the coast of Cape Town. After Mandela was released on February 11, 1990, South Africa went through a turbulent period in which there was considerable political violence, but eventually the government of President F. W. de Klerk agreed to meet in a negotiating forum in Cape Town with leaders of the ANC to hammer out a settlement. The settlement took the form of an interim constitution and provision for the election of a new parliament, comprising the Constitutional Assembly and the National Council of Provinces. The democratically elected parliament was to be responsible for drawing up a final constitution. The interim constitution specified that the head of state was to be elected by the parliament for a five-year term. In May 1994, Mandela became that president.

### About the Author

Nelson Rolihlahla (meaning “troublemaker” in the Xhosa language) Mandela was born in 1918 in the rural Transkei in what is now the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. He attended a leading missionary school in that region and then the University College of Fort Hare before he moved to Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa, where he became active in the ANC in the early 1940s. In the 1950s, based in Johannesburg, he was one of the leading figures in the ANC’s resistance to the apartheid state. The ANC was banned in 1960, and the following year he and others formed MK to challenge the state by violent means, first sabotage and later guerrilla war.

As commander in chief of MK, Mandela left the country in 1962 to organize military training for guerrillas from

South Africa in other African countries. On his return to South Africa, he was arrested and jailed. Then, on June 12, 1964, he and his colleagues were given a life sentence for their involvement with MK. Mandela's statement in court before he was sentenced was widely quoted as a classic explanation of why he and others had chosen to adopt the armed struggle in resisting apartheid. He ended by saying,

I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die. (Karis and Carter, p. 796)

In 1982 he was moved, in part because of his growing international fame as a political prisoner, from Robben Island to Pollsmoor Prison on the mainland. It was there, a few years later, that he began discussions with government ministers about the possibility of a negotiated end to the conflict in the country.

By the late 1980s Mandela was the world's most famous prisoner and an icon of resistance to apartheid. The apartheid government knew that there would be an outcry if he were to die in prison, and its officials came to see him as a man with whom they could arrange a negotiated settlement, for unlike most of his close colleagues in the ANC, he was not a member of the Communist Party. All who met him recognized him as a potential future leader of the country. He was therefore moved to a house on the grounds of another prison, Victor Verster, where he was able to receive guests and conduct business.

By the time he became president in late 1989, F. W. de Klerk, the head of the National Party, had realized that apartheid had to go and that the enormous pressure to release Mandela could be resisted no longer. No one knew what Mandela's release would lead to, but de Klerk was prepared to take the risk. Lacking bitterness, Mandela was able to engage with his former enemies and work for a successful transition to a new society. He traveled extensively after his release, was elected president of the ANC at the first congress after it was unbanned, and took a leading role in the subsequent negotiations. In December 1993 he and De Klerk were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, for their efforts to bring peace to South Africa. Mandela then campaigned for the ANC in the first democratic election, after which he was elected the first president of the democratic South Africa. Little more than four years had passed since he was Prisoner 466/64, the number he received on arrival on Robben Island and which he retained until his release from Victor Verster.

Mandela made it clear that he would serve only one term as president. He hoped his example would be followed by other leaders on a continent where most remained in power for very long periods of time. In retirement, Mandela remained active on both the local and the world stages. He set up three foundations bearing his name, to do mostly

## Time Line

### 1990

- **February 11**  
Mandela walks out of Victor Verster Prison outside Cape Town and is driven to Cape Town, where he addresses the crowd gathered on the Grand Parade in the center of the city.
- **May**  
The ANC and the government hold their first formal bilateral meeting at Groote Schuur, an official government residence in Cape Town.

### 1991

- **December**  
The Convention for a Democratic South Africa meets at the World Trade Center in Kempton Park to begin the drafting of a new constitution.

### 1992

- **September**  
Mandela and De Klerk sign the Record of Understanding, which paves the way for the resumption of constitutional negotiations after the breakdown of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa.

### 1993

- **November 18**  
The Multiparty Negotiating Forum completes the drafting of the new interim constitution for a democratic South Africa.



## Time Line

1993

- **December**  
The draft constitution is approved by the South African Parliament.

1994

- **April 27**  
The first democratic general election is held, relatively peacefully. Mandela casts his vote at Ohlange High School, outside Durban, in honor of John Dube, a cofounder of the ANC, who is buried in a nearby cemetery.
- **May 2**  
The results of the election are declared, and the ANC celebrates its victory.
- **May 9**  
The new parliament elects Mandela president.
- **May 10**  
Mandela gives his inaugural address to a crowd gathered in Pretoria after having delivered a similar address in Cape Town the previous day.

1997

- Mandela hands over the presidency the ANC to Thabo Mbeki.

1999

- Mandela's five-year term as president of South Africa comes to an end; Mbeki succeeds him.

educational and charitable work: the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, and the Mandela-Rhodes Foundation. In the 2009 election campaign, a frail Mandela appeared in support of the new ANC leader, Jacob Zuma.

Ten years after Mandela had left office, little of the dream for a new South Africa contained in his inauguration address had been realized. South Africa remained a democracy, but there was little of the optimism and hope and idealism that Mandela had spoken of in his inaugural address fifteen years earlier.

## Explanation and Analysis of the Document

Mandela's inaugural address was highly symbolic. The very fact that he, a black man and former prisoner of the apartheid regime, was delivering it before a large crowd in which there were representatives of most of the countries in the world, demonstrated that South Africa had rejoined the world community after a long period of isolation under apartheid. Mandela speaks of humanity having "taken [South Africa] back into its bosom" and remarks, "We, who were outlaws not so long ago, have today been given the rare privilege to be host to the nations of the world on our own soil." Mandela was acknowledging that apartheid South Africa had long been isolated and treated as a pariah nation because of its racial policies, and he was celebrating that now South Africa had become a model for others to follow, a land in which it seemed that racial reconciliation had triumphed. And so Mandela thanks the guests from all over the world for attending and hopes that they would "continue to stand by us as we tackle the challenges of building peace, prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism and democracy." He was very conscious of the fact that South Africa was emerging from decades of conflict, isolation, and economic decline, and he knew that it would need much help from others if it was to overcome the challenges it faced.

In the first sentence of his address Mandela speaks of newborn liberty, referring to the fact that South Africa was experiencing a new dawn of democracy after the long night of apartheid. His references to "an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long" and to South Africa tearing "itself apart in a terrible conflict" point to apartheid and to the struggle against it, in which many had died and millions had suffered. For although far fewer people died in the South African conflict between 1948 and 1994 than in other conflicts on the African continent, such as in neighboring Zimbabwe in the 1970s or in the war for independence in Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s, the policy of apartheid had trampled on the dignity of black people.

In speaking of apartheid in this way, Mandela addressed not only the black majority who had suffered under it but also those whites who had supported apartheid until recently and who had served the apartheid state. Of course, he was speaking as well to the whites who had opposed apartheid. Mandela's general attitude of reconciliation ensured that he did not arouse antagonism among those





*A crowd gathers at the township of Sharpeville, south of Johannesburg, South Africa, on March 21, 1960, a few hours before white police opened fire on marchers.* (AP/Wide World Photos)

who had supported the old apartheid order. Although Mandela continued to fear a far-right backlash against his new government from Afrikaners who were not reconciled to the new order, no serious resistance occurred. This was in large part due to Mandela's personality and policies of reconciliation. Mandela here speaks inclusively. All South Africans, he says, were attached to the soil of their particularly beautiful country, and he specifies some of these beauties in his references to "the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the bushveld." His speech anticipated the reconciliatory spirit of his presidency, in which he would reach out to his opponents and do all he could to enhance nation building.

In his address, he singles out "the masses" for their role in bringing South Africa to the present moment. Most historians would agree that apartheid had been brought down by internal resistance in the 1980s rather than by the armed struggle waged mainly from outside or by the sanctions that other countries had imposed on South Africa. On the other hand, the masses had played very little part in the negotiated settlement, which had been reached by elites of the old apartheid order and the ANC leadership.

Mandela also singles out his second deputy president, F. W. de Klerk, who had been responsible for Mandela's release. Mandela had become disillusioned with De Klerk, whom he blamed for not acting to end the political violence that had plagued the country during the years of transition and in the campaign leading up to the general election. As leader of the National Party, De Klerk had been Mandela's chief opponent, but Mandela chose to credit De Klerk with what he had done to help bring about the new order and to accept him as a colleague in the new government of national unity.

Mandela also pays tribute to the country's security forces for helping secure the election and for defending against the "blood-thirsty forces which still refuse to see the light," a reference to those far-right whites who rejected the transition and from whom Mandela continued to fear violence might come. He reminds his listeners that the country had taken its "last steps to freedom in conditions of relative peace." He himself had long talked of walking to freedom, and his autobiography, published later that year, was titled *Long Walk to Freedom*.

In the remainder of the address, Mandela looks forward to the future. He talks of healing wounds, bridging the

## Essential Quotes

*“We dedicate this day to all the heroes and heroines in this country and the rest of the world who sacrificed in many ways and surrendered their lives so that we could be free. Their dreams have become reality. Freedom is their reward.”*

(Paragraphs 21–22)

*“We know it well that none of us acting alone can achieve success. We must therefore act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation building, for the birth of a new world.”*

(Paragraphs 25–26)

*“Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all. Let each know that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfill themselves.”*

(Paragraphs 27–30)

*“Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world. Let freedom reign.”*

(Paragraphs 31–32)

chasms of racial division, and building. He pledges that the new government will continue the process of emancipation by liberating the people from poverty, deprivation, and discrimination and by “the construction of a complete, just and lasting peace.” In calling for unity among blacks and whites in South Africa, he refers to the nation by the common image of a rainbow, where all colors merge to form a thing of beauty—perhaps an allusion to the “Rainbow Coalition” formed by the civil rights activist and Baptist minister Jesse Jackson in the United States. As a gesture of good faith, Mandela indicates that the new government will address the issue of granting amnesty to people in prison, probably referring both to those who were imprisoned for activism and protest and more important, to those who perhaps took part in human rights violation against blacks but had come forward to confess.

The final paragraphs of the address consist of a series of short, inspirational sentences. Mandela acknowledges that there is “no easy road to freedom,” but he expresses hope that if South Africans act as a “united people,” there can be

justice and peace, as well as “work, bread, water and salt for all.” He looks forward to a future without oppression and indignity, where freedom reigns and where the sun will “never set on so glorious a human achievement.”

### Audience

Mandela’s May 10 inaugural speech was directed at both a South African and an international audience. In what was in a sense a state-of-the-nation address, Mandela wanted both audiences to recognize the importance of the turning point that his address represented in the country’s history. He wanted the international community to see the new South Africa as a model state, which could teach others how to reconcile and overcome conflicts of the past. He hoped that South Africans would accept his message of the need to move away from the past and look to the future as a newly united people, who should work together to overcome the legacies of the past.



Never before had so many heads of state and other dignitaries assembled on South African soil as gathered for Mandela's inauguration—nor have so many ever gathered in South Africa since. Vice President Al Gore and Hillary Clinton, wife of President Bill Clinton, came from the United States; from the United Kingdom came Prince Philip; from Cuba, Fidel Castro; Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian National Authority also came. There was an atmosphere of great excitement as the crowd that had gathered at the impressive Union Buildings, the seat of government overlooking Pretoria, awaited the arrival of Mandela. The most emotional moment came when helicopters of the South African air force flew overhead displaying the new multicolored South African flag. For many people, not only within South Africa but also in the neighboring countries, those helicopters had previously represented the repression of apartheid and the threat of attack. Now, however, they stood for the victory of liberty and the commitment of the armed forces to the new democracy.

### Impact

While it is difficult to assess the precise impact of any speech, Mandela's inaugural address helped to promote the reconciliation agenda that was to be the hallmark of his presidency. Both blacks and whites were uplifted by his explicit commitment to bridging the chasms that had divided the two communities. In the course of his address, he made clear that as a "token of its commitment to the renewal of our country, the new Interim Government of National Unity will, as a matter of urgency, address the

issue of amnesty for various categories of our people who are currently serving terms of imprisonment."

This was done: The first parliament of the new democratic South Africa passed the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act in 1995. That act provided for the setting up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The commission addressed the issue of amnesty not only for people imprisoned but also for perpetrators of gross violations of human rights who came forward to avoid being sent to prison. In terms of the mandate given the commission, if they made full disclosure of what they had done, they would receive amnesty.

Mandela did not deliver his inaugural speech with the soaring oratory displayed by Barack Obama at his inauguration in Washington, D.C., in January 2009. Mandela's delivery was fairly matter of fact, except when he placed special emphasis on the word *never*. The timing of the flyby meant that he had to pause in his speech because of the noise they made. But his speech was well received and is generally regarded as both highly appropriate and inspiring. It went around the world and has often been quoted and cited. When Obama delivered his inaugural address, many commentators in South Africa referred it to a "Mandela moment" and reminded their readers of Mandela's speech.

In the years that followed Mandela's inauguration as president, the nation has only partially delivered on the promises he made in his address. On the one hand, the country is relatively high on an index called the Ibrahim Index of African Governance. This index examines and ranks the nations of sub-Saharan Africa along five dimensions: safety and security; rule of law, transparency, and corruption; participation and human rights; sustainable

### Questions for Further Study

1. The inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa was celebrated worldwide as a historical event of major importance. Why do you think this was so?
2. For more than four decades, since the passage of apartheid laws in 1948, the South African authorities resisted calls for a democratic form of government. Why do you think that resistance broke down? What factors led to the emergence of a democratic form of government and the election of Mandela as president?
3. Examine the rhetoric of Mandela's speech. What images does he create? How does the "poetry" of the speech add to the spirit of reconciliation that Mandela strove for?
4. What economic interests did F. W. de Klerk and his administration have to overcome to effect a fundamental alteration in South Africa's government?
5. Some form of racial prejudice and discrimination exists in virtually every country in the world, or at least is perceived to exist. Why do you think such prejudice and discrimination specifically in South Africa became the focus of worldwide attention?



economic opportunity; and human development. As of 2008 South Africa ranked fifth (behind Mauritius, the Seychelles, Cape Verde, and Botswana). The nation ranks very highly on rule of law and participation and human rights but less highly in the other three measures. Since the mid-1990s employment has remained high for blacks, and the number of whites living in poverty has increased. As of 2009 the overall unemployment rate was 23 percent. As of 2006 the nation ranked 125th on the United Nations Human Development Index, representing a decline from previous years and particularly from the mid-1990s. Reasons given for this lack of progress include the legacy of apartheid, but many observers question government policies, particularly undisciplined economic policies. Meanwhile, in 2009, rioting broke out across the nation in response to the government's inability to deal with the more than a million people who continue to live in shantytowns, or settlements, often on the edges of cities, where people live in improvised shelters made of scrap materials and lack such basic services as clean water, sewage facilities, and garbage collection.

### Further Reading

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—Christopher Saunders



## NELSON MANDELA'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Your Majesties;  
Your Highnesses;  
Distinguished Guests;  
Comrades and Friends:

Today, all of us do, by our presence here, and by our celebrations in other parts of our country and the world, confer glory and hope to newborn liberty.

Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud.

Our daily deeds as ordinary South Africans must produce an actual South African reality that will reinforce humanity's belief in justice, strengthen its confidence in the nobility of the human soul and sustain all our hopes for a glorious life for all.

All this we owe both to ourselves and to the peoples of the world who are so well represented here today.

To my compatriots, I have no hesitation in saying that each one of us is as intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the bushveld.

Each time one of us touches the soil of this land, we feel a sense of personal renewal. The national mood changes as the seasons change.

We are moved by a sense of joy and exhilaration when the grass turns green and the flowers bloom.

That spiritual and physical oneness we all share with this common homeland explains the depth of the pain we all carried in our hearts as we saw our country tear itself apart in a terrible conflict, and as we saw it spurned, outlawed and isolated by the peoples of the world, precisely because it has become the universal base of the pernicious ideology and practice of racism and racial oppression.

We, the people of South Africa, feel fulfilled that humanity has taken us back into its bosom, that we, who were outlaws not so long ago, have today been given the rare privilege to be host to the nations of the world on our own soil.

We thank all our distinguished international guests for having come to take possession with the people of our country of what is, after all, a common victory for justice, for peace, for human dignity.

We trust that you will continue to stand by us as we tackle the challenges of building peace, prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism and democracy.

We deeply appreciate the role that the masses of our people and their political mass democratic, religious, women, youth, business, traditional and other leaders have played to bring about this conclusion. Not least among them is my Second Deputy President, the Honourable F.W. de Klerk.

We would also like to pay tribute to our security forces, in all their ranks, for the distinguished role they have played in securing our first democratic elections and the transition to democracy, from blood-thirsty forces which still refuse to see the light.

The time for the healing of the wounds has come.

The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come.

The time to build is upon us.

We have, at last, achieved our political emancipation. We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination.

We succeeded to take our last steps to freedom in conditions of relative peace. We commit ourselves to the construction of a complete, just and lasting peace.

We have triumphed in the effort to implant hope in the breasts of the millions of our people. We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity—a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.

As a token of its commitment to the renewal of our country, the new Interim Government of National Unity will, as a matter of urgency, address the issue of amnesty for various categories of our people who are currently serving terms of imprisonment.

We dedicate this day to all the heroes and heroines in this country and the rest of the world who sacrificed in many ways and surrendered their lives so that we could be free.

Their dreams have become reality. Freedom is their reward.

We are both humbled and elevated by the honour and privilege that you, the people of South Africa, have bestowed on us, as the first President of a united, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist government.

We understand it still that there is no easy road to freedom

## Document Text

We know it well that none of us acting alone can achieve success.

We must therefore act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation building, for the birth of a new world.

Let there be justice for all.

Let there be peace for all.

Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all.

Let each know that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfill themselves.

Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.

Let freedom reign.

The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement!

God bless Africa!

Thank you.

## Glossary

**bushveld**

grassland with copious shrubbery and thorny vegetation