

Obama-Castro Handshake Stirs Old Revolutionary Ghosts at Mandela Memorial

A handshake between U.S. President Barack Obama and Cuba's Raul Castro stole the show at South Africa's memorial for **Nelson Mandela** on Tuesday, a resonant tribute to a man who brought old enemies together and straddled ideological divides and eras.

The gesture will not exorcise the Cold War ghosts haunting the Florida Straits, but it would have delighted Mandela, who was nothing if not loyal to old revolutionary allies like Raul's retired elder brother Fidel, who at 87 was too old to attend the memorial.

Had they been alive, Libya's Moammar Gadhafi and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat would also have been at the Johannesburg stadium where world dignitaries joined tens of thousands of South Africans paying emotional homage.

During his long career and even in the final years before his death on Thursday, Mandela, 95, maintained unswerving loyalty to veteran revolutionaries shunned by the West such as Castro, Gadhafi and Arafat, who had supported his lifelong fight to overturn apartheid in South Africa.

After he became South Africa's first black president in 1994, Mandela defended these political and personal allegiances, testily rejecting pressure to cut off ties with figures and regimes viewed as pariahs by many in the West.

"The enemies of the West are not my enemies and I'm not prepared to be dictated to at all by anybody," Mandela said in 1996, defending invitations to Castro and Gadhafi to visit him.

"I'm not going to take advice as to who my friends should be," he added, saying he was under pressure from at least one global power to break off ties with these anti-U.S. leaders.

The tsunami of tributes pouring in since his death has elevated the former African National Congress freedom fighter to the level of a modern-day saint, obscuring a historical truth some may find uncomfortable.

"We mustn't forget he was really, and remained, a leftist militant radical cast in the mold of 1950s and '60s Third World liberation," said Stephen Ellis, an Africa expert and professor at the African Studies Centre in Leiden, the Netherlands.

He said Mandela and South Africa's ANC imbibed deeply of the pro-Soviet and pro-Cuban ideological influences that drove liberation and independence movements in Africa in the late '50s and early '60s.

Reflections of this pan-African Third Worldism show up in South Africa's foreign policy to this day.

"The ANC, in its foreign policy, still sees itself as fighting for the liberation of the Third World," Ellis said.

'Deep Freeze'

At the time when Fidel Castro's revolution was inspiring radicals and liberation groups in Africa and Latin America, Mandela's arrest in 1962 and his jailing for sabotage and treason in 1964 locked him away from the world.

"He was in a deep freeze for 27 years," said Ellis.

When Mandela walked free from prison in 1990, the Berlin Wall had fallen and the Soviet Union was on the way to disintegration. But his worldview, formed in an earlier time, still saw Castro, Gadhafi and Arafat as fellow freedom fighters struggling to forge a different world.

So while Western leaders like U.S. President Bill Clinton and Britain's Tony Blair embraced Mandela as an uplifting icon of the post-Cold War planet—setting up the fuzzy modern celebrity cult that envelops his image—the South African made a point of honoring his and the ANC's older allegiances.

He had signaled this clearly in 1991 when he paid a three-day visit to Cuba to thank Castro and the Caribbean island for its support in the fight against apartheid—a conflict which included Cuban troops who fought and died in southern Angola.

“Cuba is our friend,” he said emphatically, drawing applause in Havana but howls of outrage from anti-Castro Cuban-Americans in Miami who continue to view him with hostility.

“We are now being advised about Cuba by people who have supported the apartheid regime for the last 40 years,” Mandela said sarcastically then about the United States. Fidel Castro sent Mandela rum and cigars on his birthdays, even though the aging statesman did not smoke or drink hard liquor.

Honoring Loyalty

For Gadhafi, too, who was seen by many in the West as a crackpot dictator, Mandela maintained an unflinching loyalty to a man he called “brother leader” before he was killed during a Western-backed revolt two years ago.

Mandela played a crucial role in persuading Gadhafi to surrender two Libyan suspects in the bombing of PanAm flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988, which killed 270 people and led to United Nations sanctions against Libya.

He visited Libya in the face of stern U.S. criticism and even decorated Gadhafi with South Africa's Order of Good Hope.

“Madiba had friends who were frowned upon, but you have to honor their relationship,” said Zelda la Grange, Mandela's former personal assistant, calling him by his clan name.

“It was important to him even in later years to remain loyal to the people who supported him and the ANC,” she added.

That loyalty also extended initially to Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe; Zimbabwe was one of the states that Mandela first visited after his release from prison in 1990 to offer thanks for its support for the ANC’s liberation war.

But relations between two of the grand old men of Africa’s freedom struggle went sour once Mandela stepped down in 1999 after a single term in office while Mugabe, buffeted by falling support, economic crisis and popular anger over a costly intervention in a Congo war, hung on term after term.

Finally, even Mandela joined the criticism of Mugabe, lamenting “the tragic failure of leadership” in Zimbabwe.

Mugabe, present at Tuesday’s memorial, did not flinch from swiping at the halo of the global icon when he criticized Mandela in an interview in June for being “too saintly, too good” in the way he reached out to South Africa’s whites.

For many though, Obama’s hand to Castro on Tuesday will validate Mandela’s gift for “speaking with the enemy.”

“He shook hands with the apartheid enemy when everyone advised him not to,” said former aide la Grange.

“The way you approach a person determines how that person treats you,” she added. “If we just adopt that in our lives, it makes the world a better place.”

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