

**ETHICS AND DIPLOMACY:  
WHAT I LEARNED FROM NELSON MANDELA  
Clinton School of Public Service  
University of Arkansas**

**By**

**Ambassador James A. Joseph  
Clinton Library  
September 13, 2006**

The ancient historian Tacitus once defined patriotism as praiseworthy competition with one's ancestors. I recall that definition of civic virtue today because it reminds us that members of each generation have an obligation, indeed a civic duty, to contribute something as meaningful, as significant, and even as extraordinary, as those who preceded them. And that is why I want to congratulate the Clinton School of Public Service on what you are doing to enhance the capacity of generations far into the future to contribute to the public good.

Two weeks ago, we commemorated the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. We were reminded of both the devastation it caused and the pre-existing conditions it revealed. Two days ago, we commemorated the fifth anniversary of 9/11. We were reminded of the depth of inhumanity in the hearts and minds of some and the depth of generosity in the hearts and soul of others.

This is without doubt an awesome and almost apocalyptic global moment, an extraordinary time to contemplate public service. We live in an era in which we have been witnesses to, or participants in, a lively debate about the role of ethics in public life, but the one area in which there has been very limited debate is the role of ethics in the conduct of the public business of our democracy beyond our borders.

This is, thus, a good time to talk about ethics and diplomacy, to ask whether the marriage of these two concepts is a conceptual contradiction that has no place in the real politick of the modern world as some claim or can there be principled diplomacy that considers both what is right and what is in the national interest? It is not my intention to re-open the debate among political philosophers about the relationship between power, diplomacy and the state. I want simply to suggest that much of what I learned from the beliefs and practices of Nelson Mandela during my four years as the United States Ambassador to South Africa seem to suggest that ethics in diplomacy is not only desirable, but also altogether feasible.

Some scholars in the realist tradition of international politics would undoubtedly raise a skeptical eye at the notion of placing ethical boundaries around diplomacy. Such an effort might even be dismissed as an attempt by an idealist to attribute good to an area of activity where one must be prepared to do and say anything to promote the interest of his nation. But one of the most important lessons I learned from Nelson Mandela is that ethics in diplomacy is not only desirable, but altogether feasible.

## **Principled Diplomacy**

For Nelson Mandela, principled diplomacy was not a theory. It was a way of being. The question future generations will want to know is why did an elderly African leader in a small country on the Southern tip of the African continent attract so much attention, affection and influence – not just in South Africa, but throughout the rest of the world - at a time when political leaders were more distrusted than ever before? It is in answering that question that we understand why he is still so revered and respected even in retirement. Mandela's response to those who had imprisoned him and taken away twenty-seven of his most productive years defied what we thought we knew about human nature. His capacity to win over even his adversaries was so complete that he not only made friends of the wardens in the Robben Island prison in which he was incarcerated, but they were his special guests at his inauguration as President of the Republic of South Africa.

When others doubted whether it was still possible for old enemies to beat their swords into plowshares, he showed us how. He was a healer who understood that diversity need not divide, that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced is a benefit and not a burden, that the fear of difference is a fear of the future. He was an astute observer of the human condition who believed with all his being that we diminish the preciousness and sacredness of life when we denigrate, disrespect or oppress people based on the color of their skin or their ethnicity or culture. He never allowed himself to be seduced by the trappings of power because he was grounded in a concept of community called ubuntu, an idea best expressed by the Xhosa proverb, "People are people through other people."

## **Mandela as a Prototype of Soft Power**

I want, thus, to look at five lessons from Mandela's life and legacy that I believe should be instructive for those who seek to provide leadership for the world in which we now live. The first has to do with the distinction between leadership by coercion and leadership by attraction, a strategic distinction that is increasingly made between hard power and soft power. Far too many Americans are still wedded to the notion that it is primarily through hard power, the use of military might or economic muscle that we will secure our liberty and provide its blessings to future generations.

I wish more of us understood the potential of soft power, the ability to attract and influence through the appeal of social, cultural and moral messages, acts of generosity and respect for local traditions and culture. As Professor Joseph Nye at the Kennedy School at Harvard put it, hard power is the ability to get others to do what we want. Soft power is the ability to get others to want what we do. We should have learned from Mandela's life story that while hard power can be used to inflict and even prevent pain, it is soft power that is most likely to develop attraction and influence that will long endure.

Nelson Mandela represents the epitome of soft power. As President, his moral standing and political stature in the world went far beyond that suggested by the size of the military or the Gross Domestic Product of South Africa. Even in retirement, he remains influential because his attraction comes from the power of his personal story, the elegance of his humanity and the strength of his ideals. He is the prototype of the leader whose influence comes not from military or economic might, but from the ability to capture the minds and hearts of people in all corners and all colors of the universe. Among the many lessons we should have learned from the life and legacy of Nelson

Mandela is the fact that diplomacy increasingly depends on a moral ecology that cannot be found in military or economic power.

I have been living abroad full or part time for more than a decade, but even from a distance it is clear that while the United States has vast reservoirs of hard power, our influence in the world is, nevertheless, on a decline because we seem to have forgotten that “seduction is always more effective than coercion” (Nye). As Nye reminds us, there is much about American values that are deeply attractive and, until recently, Americans have been very good at wielding soft power. Remember the attraction of Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms in Europe at the end of World War II; of Chinese students symbolizing their protests in Tiananmen Square with a replica of the Statue of Liberty; of Peace Corps Volunteers winning the hearts and minds of American critics through selfless service.

What is especially troubling about the relationship of the United States to the rest of the world at the moment is that just as soft power emerged as a major vehicle of influence, we deliberately dismantled some of our most powerful weapons. With half of the six million people on earth living on two dollars a day, one third not connected to any energy system and one fourth lacking clean water, Americans as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product are spending less than half of what we spent a decade earlier to help the world’s poor. The United States gives less than one tenth of one percent of its Gross Domestic Product for non-military foreign aid, but according to public opinion polls the public perception is that foreign aid is about fifteen percent. At the same time, according to the same polls, Americans believe that foreign aid would be right at five percent. Why, then, in an age of soft power, are we seeking a one tenth of one- percent solution to the problems of an interdependent world when the American people would be willing to do more if they knew more.

The public perception is that aid has largely failed. Yet, it is in large part due to foreign aid that that world literacy rose by nearly fifty percent in the last third of the twentieth century, infant mortality was cut in half, life expectancy tripled and 71 nations became free or partly free. Some critics of development aid even suggest that most countries receiving American assistance are poorer now than they were twenty-five years ago. They usually cite countries like Somalia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Rwanda and Liberia, all countries in Africa. But this distorts the success stories in at least two important ways: 1) the amount of assistance to these countries pales compared to aid bestowed upon countries like Egypt, Israel, India, Indonesia, the Philippines and others considered success stories; 2) the countries in Africa that have been notorious failures have been largely bypassed by the mushrooming flows of private investment funds that have offset the decline of foreign aid in other regions, such as East Asia and Latin America.

The need for a new constituency for development aid comes not simply from the decline in the amount we give, but from changes in the understanding of the nature of security. As Jim Wolfenson, the former president of the World Bank reminds us, security will be difficult as long as twenty percent of the global population receives more than eighty percent of the global income. Security will be difficult as long as the average income for the richest twenty countries is thirty seven times the average of the poorest twenty – a gap that has more than doubled in the past four years. Security will be difficult

as long as 1.2 billion people still live on less than a dollar a day and 2.8 billion still live on less than two dollars a day.

Wolfenson goes on to say that the conflicts that now plague our world are not merely accidents of history. With all the forces making our world smaller, it is time to realize that we live together in one world, not two; time to realize that the fight against poverty, racism and marginalization is the fight for global peace and security; time to realize that we have a historic opportunity that we dare not allow to pass us by.

Of course, it is also true that how we are perceived outside our borders depends on what we do to within our borders to deliver on the promise of our founders to form a more perfect union, to establish justice and promote the general welfare. It is increasingly clear that the best way to demonstrate the efficacy of our system abroad is to demonstrate that it can work equitably for all of our citizens at home.

### **Mandela As Reconciler**

The second lesson I learned from Nelson Mandela has to do with his belief that most conflicts can be settled by brains rather than blood. He saw reconciliation as the premier public value in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time. He promotes peaceful co-existence in international affairs with the same moral audacity and political tenacity that he promoted reconciliation in domestic affairs.

The first time I was asked to meet with him to register my government's concern about proposed visits to South Africa by the heads of state of Cuba, Libya and Iran, I delivered a carefully prepared demarche, as is the practice in such matters. He listened carefully and said "Tell your government that I negotiated with the representatives of the Apartheid State without compromising any of my values and there is no danger of my compromising them now." His commitment to universality in foreign affairs, and loyalty to the friends who had supported his cause when U.S. leaders considered the African National Congress (ANC) a terrorist organization, often caused alarm in Washington and London, but he remained true to his word and true to his basic values.

We can learn much from the fact that while the focus on values in the United States was on the micro-ethics of individual behavior, he was concerned with the macro-ethics of institutions and governmental systems. It was not that he was uninterested in the private virtues that build character. He sought to expand the public discourse to include the public values that build community. I don't know whether he every read any of the works of Reinhold Niebuhr, but he understood, like Niebuhr, that while we know much about how to apply ethics to our personal lives, we find it difficult to apply ethics to our aggregate existence.

It is appropriate that we associate Mandela with reconciliation, but it is also important to remember that different kinds of conflict require different forms and ways of reconciliation. Some in South Africa are now making the distinction between individual and personal reconciliation that may require the healing of deep psychological and emotional wounds and political reconciliation that require a different focus, one that requires less forgiveness than a desire and opportunity for sustained and meaningful interaction. Dr. Villa-Vicencio, director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in South Africa, likes to quote a Dinka elder, who on reflecting on the Sudanese conflict, said "reconciliation begins by agreeing to sit under the same tree with your enemy, to find a way of addressing the causes of the conflict."

The point that Dr. Vicencio is making is that political reconciliation is not dependent on the kind of intimacy that religious and some forms of individual reconciliation may demand. Rather statecraft and politics require peaceful co-existence. Forgiveness may come later, after the creation of confidence and the building of trust. The Dinka elder was right. Political reconciliation is about opening up the lines of communication. It often requires compromise, even sometimes breaking ranks with powerful influences in one's constituency

### **Mandela as a Multilateralist**

My third lesson from Mandela has to do with his understanding of the importance of working with, and through, others. His leadership style was honed in the political culture of the African National Congress with its emphasis on cooperative and consultative leadership, so it should be no surprise to hear that in the international arena he sought, first, and wherever feasible, to work through multilateral organizations like the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of African Unity and the Southern African Development Community. I was present in New York in 1998 for his speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations in which he argued that "The very right to be human is denied everyday to hundreds of millions of people as a result of poverty, the unavailability of basic necessities such as food, jobs, water and shelter, education, health care and a healthy environment." In accordance with his preference for working through multilateral organizations, he was speaking in his capacity not simply as President of South Africa but as Chairperson of the Non-Aligned Movement. While he became for a time the most important spokesperson for the developing world, he sought also to be a bridge builder between rich and poor nations.

Nelson Mandela was a champion of an appropriate sharing of wealth and technology between the rich and the poor, but he sought trade and development aid rather than charity. He preferred participatory development and assisted self-reliance that could help eliminate the causes of poverty rather than charity that seeks only to eliminate the consequences. He argued for African solutions to African problems and was a vigorous cheerleader for President Clinton's statement to the South African Parliament that the developed world had been asking the wrong question. "We have been asking what can we do for Africa, what can we do about Africa," President Clinton said. "We must now ask what can we do with Africa." This was a clear signal that the United States had heard and understood Nelson Mandela's plea for a partnership between rich and poor nations rather than benevolent big brother dominance.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. once wrote "Every great power has its warrior caste." Mandela emerged from his long incarceration at a time when the projection of state power beyond its borders had become the domain largely of the warrior caste with a concurrent emphasis on unilateralism. One of the most important insights from his life is what he has taught us about the difference between two distinct forms of multilateralism; one is hierarchical while the other is more egalitarian. The first pursues a form of engagement with the world that is reminiscent of George Orwell's contention in *Animal Farms* that all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others. The advocates of this hierarchical form of multilateralism derive their notion of what is best for the world almost exclusively from what seems best in the short run for them. Their passion and sense of mission come from the belief that they are called somehow to save

the world from itself. They are convinced that only they and a few chosen allies are in possession of ultimate truth and have, therefore, a monopoly on wisdom.

The underlying premise of those who take this position is that international relations are relations of power, not principle; power prevails and principles legitimize what prevails. The practitioners of this new internationalism are not without principles. They simply derive their principles from national self-interest. The values they seek to promote, and from which the world benefits, they argue, is American values. American power must, thus, be used to impose not just its interest but its views and values on the world.

Hierarchical multilateralism is a form of social Darwinism that ignores the role of cooperation in the survival of the fittest and puts all the emphasis on competition. Mandela revealed in different form of multilateralism. He was always seeking partners who shared his belief that the great issues could be settled by brains rather than blood, through a relationship of respect rather than rancor. He could have claimed moral superiority but he did not. He had been optimistic that he could penetrate the worst instinct of his adversaries because, while working to change their policies and practices, he demonstrated a respect for their humanity, an understanding of their traditions and sensitivity to the demands of their culture. As a diplomat, he made the profession seem noble. His biographer Anthony Sampson makes the claim that as a politician he was both pre-modern and post-modern.

The same could be said about his role as a diplomat. He was pre-modern in that he was very much a product of the older tribal tradition in which he had been brought up, of a chief accountable to his people, settling their disputes with careful courtesy, making them all feel important and representing them with a dignity and bearing that was as regal as anything we have seen in European royalty. Yet, he was also post-modern with a common touch, a brilliant sense of texture and timing, and a master of imagery who knew how to work a room or flatter an adversary. He was the master of the photo-op, the sound bite, the intimate handshake, the seductive smile and the disarming charm. The difference from so many other heads of state is that this all came naturally. It was not Nelson Mandela playing a role. It was simply Nelson Mandela being himself.

### **Mandela and Economic Diplomacy**

A fourth lesson from Mandela comes from the way in which he exercised economic diplomacy, a principle at the core of the Mandela foreign policy. While he believed that markets were good for democracy and democracy good for markets, he also understood that while the idea of democracy originally meant that the people would have the power it has now come to mean that the people have the vote, which is not always the same thing as having the power. That is why his government sought to ensure that economic growth contributed to the empowerment of the economically marginalized and not simply the small minority who continued to control most of the nation's wealth. Operating out of a paradigm of corrective action, Mandela's South Africa required potential investors to show what value, what social good, would be added by their presence. While the capitalism that took root looked remarkably like its Western counterpart, it had to undergo a vetting, market reforms and empowerment strategies that reflected South Africa's unique situation. No South African could simply say we are going to do it the American way. It had to look South African and be South African before there could be South African endorsement or South African ownership.

South Africa reflects the new reality of the world of foreign policy. Even the developing countries most desirous of economic engagement with the United States balk at any effort to induce or require them to do things the American way. We need to understand that many who reject globalization do so because they see it as essentially

Americanization. Protestors from Seattle to Beijing have denounced what they see as the disastrous effects of uncontrolled competition on the fragile economies of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Should they fear globalization? No. Should they be concerned about it? Yes. Kofi Anan argues that “the poor are poor not because of too much globalization, but because of too little – because they are not part of it, because they are excluded.” It is easy to observe from an American perspective the benefits of the global flow of capital, technology and people. It is easy for us as Americans to see the advantages of eliminating barriers to trade and travel. But the voices proclaiming the dangers of globalization are getting louder and more disturbing. The increasing discontent falls into two basic categories. The first involves the economic and political downside of globalization for developing economies; the financial volatility evident in the crisis a few years ago that led to the severe recession in some countries and an increase in inequality within and among countries.

Another category of discontent with globalization involves a crisis of expectation. Many of the new leaders of emerging democracies began their preparation for the assumption of power at a time when it was assumed that nation states, including developing nations, could manage their economies in ways that brought the benefits of a market economy to all of their people. As they came into power, however, they found that the ground had shifted and their economies were greatly affected by outside forces they could not control. In the end, no nation can avoid the challenge of globalization. But while we embrace the advantages globalization offers, we will need to help ease the anxieties it generates.

For Nelson Mandela, globalization had its limits, but his reservations were not about the reality of economic interdependence, but about the way the game seemed to favor the most competitive nations. As the leader of the non-aligned nations he felt it important to point out that even when governments wanted to do the right thing, to open markets and expand the architecture of democracy, AIDS, foreign debt and other impediments forced on them by globalization made it hard to reach the “lift off” stage that all parties desired.

### **Mandela as a Moral Leader**

Finally, there is much we can learn from Nelson Mandela’s role as a moral leader in international affairs, from his personal relationship and standing with the leaders of the rich nations as well as those from the developing world. Many of them constantly beat a path to his door, seeking his advice on world problems and hoping to increase their own stature by being seen standing next to him. But while Nelson Mandela shared many of their public values and understood the importance of the developed nations to South Africa’s developing economy, he did not hesitate to take an opposing stand on issues where he felt morally bound to speak out.

Let me, thus, conclude by highlighting several ethical norms and personal traits that provided the grounding for Nelson Mandela’s transforming role in international affairs.

1. His belief in, and his ability to appeal to, people’s better nature. He believes very strongly in the potential of individuals and even nation-states to change. This is not the naivete of an idle dreamer, but the convictions of a man who has been involved in causing major change, both publicly and behind the scenes. This

- belief that people can be lifted into their better selves is the secret to Mandela's success as a leader and as a person.
2. His ability to connect with other people, even his adversaries. Scott Peck, the eminent psychiatrist, once wrote that we build community out of crisis and we build community by accident, but we do not know how to build community by design. That may be true, but there is a lot we can learn from Nelson Mandela in this regard.
  3. His lack of bitterness after twenty-seven years of imprisonment. People throughout the world admired him, and saw him as evidence of the potential of the human spirit. They marveled at his ability to forgive and wondered whether this was a characteristic unique to his tribal community or culture, but his spirit also had a contagious affect on others. Peter and Linda Biehl, the American parents of Amy Biehl who was killed as the new democracy was about to be launched, never imagined that they too had the capacity to forgive, but one day they found themselves before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission publicly forgiving and recommending amnesty for the young men who had killed their daughter. Two of them now work for the Amy Biehl Foundation. Nelson Mandela reminds us that this same potential is in each of us.
  4. His commitment to changing the practice of the adversary while maintaining respect for his/her humanity. He understood the requirements of both duty and decency, the fact that the real superiority of any form of government comes not so much from how its leaders deal with their friends, but how they deal with their enemies. This is what Martin Luther King called loving the enemy. It was based on Christian moral theology. Mandela's respect for the humanity of the adversary seems to come out of the African notion of ubuntu, an idea that is best expressed by the Xhosa proverb "People are people through other people." It follows that to deny the dignity or damage the humanity of another person is to deny or damage one's own.
  5. His commitment to reconciliation as a public value and a public process. This may be his most important contribution to international affairs. While those who seek to emulate Mandela talk most about healing and forgiveness, they forget that reconciliation, for Mandela, was a continuum that also included confession, apology and some form of restitution. He and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu are the first to admit that while great strides have been made toward reconciling both racial groups and conflicting images of the past, the whole process of reconciliation has been placed at considerable jeopardy by the continuation of the huge gaps created between the rich and the poor, between those of European descent and people of color.

Howard Thurman, the black mystic, theologian and poet, could have been speaking for Nelson Mandela when he described his prescription for modern diplomacy in the simple words "I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you." Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say "I want to be an American without making it difficult for Arabs to be Arabs, Africans to be Africans or Asians to be Asians." Can you imagine how difficult our nation would be if more Christians were able to say I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for

Jews to be Jews, Muslims to be Muslims, Buddhists to be Buddhists or Hindus to be Hindus.” Can you imagine how different our world would be if we were blessed with more Mandelas. But since a leader like him comes around once in a generation or even once in a millennium, what we can do, what we must do, is to prepare a new generation of public servants who are willing to walk in his footsteps. Congratulations again on your efforts to do just that here at the Clinton School of Public Service.