

POLITICS TODAY



AN EXECUTIVE BACKGROUND BRIEFING FOR PROGRESSIVE BUSINESS

WINNIE MANDELA BORE THE SCARS OF BATTLE, HELPED HEAL A NATION

BY JESSE JACKSON
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This week, Winnie Madikizela Mandela will be laid to rest and honored at a state funeral in South Africa. To many, she was loved as the “mother of the nation” even in her final days.

When the roll is called of freedom fighters who changed the world and made it better, the name Winnie Mandela will rank near the top of the list.

She was the fourth of eight children born to two teachers in what is now Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. Her Xhosa name was Nomzamo (She who tries).

Despite all the obstacles of apartheid, she graduated from college and moved to Johannesburg as the city’s first black social worker. Her research on the high infant mortality rate in a black township was central to her politicization.

At the age of 22, she met and married a young lawyer and anti-apartheid activist, Nelson Mandela. They had two daughters together before he was sentenced to Robben Island, where he was kept for the next 27 years.

Even before Mandela was locked away, she was active in the anti-apartheid movement, jailed while pregnant for two weeks for participating in a women’s protest against apartheid.

With Mandela in jail and other leaders exiled or jailed, Winnie Mandela became the public face and voice of the anti-apartheid movement. She had children to raise and a nation to help emancipate.

Few outside of South Africa knew much about the ANC or Nelson Mandela or Robben Island where he was locked away out of sight. This is before cell phones, social media or cable networks. For 27 years, she was his voice, his social media, his Facebook, spreading the word, keeping the faith.

She faced death threats, house arrest, torture, internal exile, banishment, isolation and government slander.

She took the hits within and without. But she never bowed. She never surrendered.

Upon her death, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa paid public tribute to her sacrifice and leadership: “For many years, she bore the brunt of the senseless brutality of the

apartheid state with stoicism and fortitude. Despite the hardship, she faced she never doubted that the struggle for freedom and democracy would triumph and succeed.”

I will never forget the Sunday morning when she left Robben Island with Nelson Mandela, even as he forgave the prison guards that had kept them apart.

“The wife of a freedom fighter is often like a widow, even when her husband is not in prison,” Mandela wrote. And he added: “Winnie gave me cause for hope. I felt as though I had a new and second chance at life. My love for her gave me the added strength for the struggles that lay ahead.”

Winnie Mandela was always admired and loved by the people she helped to free. She served in parliament from 1994 to 2003, on the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress and was the head of its Women’s League.

Winnie and I talked for many hours about liberation and life, hopes and dreams in South Africa, Europe and the United States. One of the last times I saw her was in Selma, Ala. She had traveled to that small, historic city to join in honoring the struggle against apartheid in America.

The punishment she suffered took a brutal toll physically and psychologically. She and Mandela divorced a few years after his release, and as she later regretted, in the midst of the struggle, “things went terribly wrong.” In 2003, after being convicted for her misdeeds, she resigned from the parliament and the ANC Executive Committee. Her political career seemed finished.

But she internalized her pain, paid for her mistakes and kept moving forward. She was knocked down, but she always got up. She knew the ground is no place for a champion. The love and respect of her people never left her.

In 2009, the ANC, which had condemned her earlier misdeeds, listed her near the top of their election list, a true testament to her enduring popularity.

South African apartheid was a remorseless system of repression, as a small white minority brutalized an African majority. Standing up to that system took immense courage and required great sacrifice.

By her stripes, many are healed, and apartheid is behind us. She lived the first 50 years of her life under a violent racial apartheid system and now she goes on to live in eternal peace.

Now she stands with the righteous judge of all nations and all people.

For years, Nelson Mandela and the ANC were labeled terrorists by a U.S. government that saw the apartheid government as its ally. Against those odds, Winnie Mandela stood tall. She fought for freedom and demanded respect.

I am proud to join with millions across the world in paying her that respect.



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