

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

ON THE DEATH OF NELSON MANDELA

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

5:25 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: At his trial in 1964, Nelson Mandela closed his statement from the dock 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."

And Nelson Mandela lived for that ideal, and he made it real. He achieved more than could be expected of any man. Today, he has gone home. And we have lost one of the most influential, courageous, and profoundly good human beings that any of us will share time with on this Earth. He no longer belongs to us -- he belongs to the ages.

Through his fierce dignity and unbending will to sacrifice his own freedom for the freedom of others, Madiba transformed South Africa -- and moved all of us. His journey from a prisoner to a President embodied the promise that human beings -- and countries -- can change for the better. His commitment to transfer power and reconcile with those who jailed him set an example that all humanity should aspire to, whether in the lives of nations or our own personal lives. And the fact that he did it all with grace and good humor, and an ability to acknowledge his own imperfections, only makes the man that much more remarkable. As he once said, "I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying."

I am one of the countless millions who drew inspiration from Nelson Mandela's life. My very first political action, the first thing I ever did that involved an issue or a policy or politics, was a protest against apartheid. I studied his words and his writings. The day that he was released from prison gave me a sense of what human beings can do when they're guided by their hopes and not by their fears. And like so many around the globe, I cannot fully imagine my own life without the example that Nelson Mandela set, and so long as I live I will do what I can to learn from him.

To Graça Machel and his family, Michelle and I extend our deepest sympathy and gratitude for sharing this extraordinary man with us. His life's work meant long days away from those who loved him the most. And I only hope that the time spent with him these last few weeks brought peace and comfort to his family.

To the people of South Africa, we draw strength from the example of renewal, and reconciliation, and resilience that you made real. A free South Africa at peace with itself -- that's an example to the world, and that's Madiba's legacy to the nation he loved.

We will not likely see the likes of Nelson Mandela again. So it falls to us as best we can to forward the example that he set: to make decisions guided not by hate, but by love; to never discount the difference that one person can make; to strive for a future that is worthy of his sacrifice.

For now, let us pause and give thanks for the fact that Nelson Mandela lived -- a man who took history in his hands, and bent the arc of the moral universe toward justice. May God Bless his memory and keep him in peace.