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## Mandela, RFK and the Sacrifice of Statement

Today marks two decades since Nelson Mandela walked to freedom, released from prison after 27 years in 1990.

By then, the anti-Apartheid struggle had become a favorite cause among American activists and celebrities. College campuses were a hotbed of the divestment movement. President Obama writes in *Dreams From My Father* that his earliest political activism was in opposition to the Reagan administration's support of the Apartheid regime.

Mandela was jailed for leading the armed resistance to Apartheid, in which 4 million whites oppressed 25 million blacks, Asians and non-whites. But there were others, less celebrated on the world stage, whose nonviolent actions led to their exile from their fellow countrymen as well.

And long before the struggle in South Africa became fashionable in the U.S., some American leaders rallied to their side, sending forth a ripple of hope on behalf of the entire free world.

The story, which is recounted brilliantly in a new film, *RFK In The Land Of Apartheid*, tells of the historic trip in which Robert Kennedy traveled to South Africa in an effort to show them how free societies ought to treat their people.

For the Apartheid regime was emphatic about its membership in the 'free world.' They fashioned themselves the African bulwark against the Soviets, despite their totalitarian rule over the vast majority of their country. Anyone opposed to them was labeled a 'communist,' and they even instituted a law called the Suppression of Communism Act, which literally banned activists from taking part in society. The disregard for freedom, property and livelihood was boundless.

Into this equation came New York's junior senator. In June of 1965, Kennedy began giving a commencement address, dubbed by a staffer, "The Revolution Now In Progress." In it, he spoke about the special place young people occupy in our society as a force for change. Somewhere along the way, it came to the attention of Ian Robertson, a leading South African student activist. Through his organization, the National Union of South African Students, he invited the Senator to come to Johannesburg and address them on their Day of Affirmation. It was a day in which they professed their adherence to human rights, equality of the races and the basic dignities of a free society.

To much surprise, Kennedy accepted their invitation in late October 1965.

The Apartheid regime was faced with a quandary. Should they keep Kennedy out, refusing to grant him a visa, and thus face ridicule from their allies in the West? Or should they let him in, and let Kennedy travel around their country, ridiculing them in person?

Ultimately, they had no choice but to grant his visa. There was a strong likelihood that Robert Kennedy would one day be president of the United States and how could they possibly claim to be a part of the 'free world' if they kept its potential leader from a visit?

Though Kennedy was not afforded the treatment reserved for visiting dignitaries. The Apartheid government did their best to conceal his trip from the rest of the world, and from as many South Africans as possible. They succeeded in curtailing images and interactions, in part by denying entry to members of the foreign press. Only now are these events getting a new airing, in the film produced by Larry Shore and co-directed by Tami Gold.

*RFK In The Land Of Apartheid* contains archival footage of the young Ian Robertson, which is rare because he was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act shortly before Kennedy's June 1966 visit. Robertson was not allowed to be in the same room with more than one other person, speak to the press or appear in public, facing a worse kind of imprisonment if he did. Kennedy would go to see him at his house in the hours before delivering the Day of Affirmation address, which became famous for its "ripple of hope" quote.

The film also explores the visit Kennedy made to another banned individual, Chief Albert Luthuli. Luthuli was the leading black South African, president of the African National Congress and one of only three black men to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Another black Nobel laureate, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also accepted an invitation to South Africa in the fall of 1965. But that was one American that the Apartheid regime had no compunction about denying a visa to.

Of course, Nelson Mandela was not forgotten by Kennedy on his trip, either. Upon leaving the country, the Senator's plane was to fly over Robben Island, where Mandela was imprisoned. Kennedy asked the pilot to tip the wing, in the only gesture he could convey to the man and other political prisoners.

The pilot was stripped of his license for Kennedy's tribute. He would not fly again for years.

Which just goes to show that sometimes statement can require great sacrifice. Few know that better than those like Mandela and his brothers and sisters in the early anti-Apartheid movement.

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