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On Nelson Mandela and the Congressional Gold Medal

delivered 23 September 1998



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

President Clinton, President Mandela, first lady Graca Machel and other distinguished leaders:

It is a distinct honor to take part in the presentation of this prestigious Congressional Gold Medal.

I commend the gentleman from New York, Representative Houghton, for his leadership and efforts to see that President Mandela receive this award. Today marks another highlight in the world-defining moments of the release of Nelson Mandela from 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island and the dismantlement of apartheid in South Africa.

From me and the members of the Congressional Black Caucus, and freedom-loving men, women, and children around the globe who joined with the brave and courageous suffering men, women, and children of South Africa to fight against the unconscionable racist apartheid system of South Africa -- our lives took on a new meaning. We will never, ever be the same.



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During the struggle, as a member of the state legislature in California and a board member of Trans-Africa, working with Randall Robinson, we organized the free South Africa movement in the United States.

Congressman Ronald Dellums and members of the CBC offered the sanctions legislation in Congress, and they won. I, then the state legislator, authored the divestment legislation, and after seven years of struggle, we won.

We protested in front of the South African embassy. We were arrested. We organized marches throughout the country. We visited universities and campuses where students staged sit-ins and demonstrations.

We joined the struggle with a determination inspired by the long-suffering millions of black South Africans who were putting their lives on the line every day.

As we worked, we were humbled and inspired by the pre-eminent warrior Nelson Mandela, whose history in the struggle and fierce determination was unmatched by any human being in the history of mankind.

Nelson Mandela led a long list of imprisoned freedom fighters -- Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Govan Mbeki, to name a few.

We all embraced the ANC. We worked to break down the lies and distortions the world had been fed about the ANC. We took our leadership from the ANC. And when the ban was lifted on the African National Congress, many of us travelled from the United States to Durbin, South Africa. And we joined with anti-apartheid activists from around the world.

We began to feel the power of our work inspired by the prince of peace, truth and justice, Nelson Mandela. When Nelson Mandela walked out of Robben Island, the world watched and witnessed a truly defining moment of the triumph of good over evil; freedom over oppression of the indomitable human spirit; the will and determination to live over the temptation to give in.



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Nelson Mandela and the people of South Africa fought for freedom with no money, no guns, no government, no ships, no planes. School children in Soweto died in the struggle. Babies died in the Bantustans. Millions were brutalized.

But Nelson Mandela never gave in. He led us all. His life stands as a shining example of what we could be, what we should be.

Nelson Mandela is truly the voice and symbol of hope, fairness, and justice. On Nelson Mandela's first visit to the United States, I led the organization of the effort to receive him in Los Angeles. We filled the coliseum with over 90,000 people who joined in a celebration I shall never forget.

I take personal pride in joining with Nelson Mandela today. Nelson Mandela strengthened my resolve to forever fight against the evils of racism and discrimination wherever it pops its ugly head.

He taught me -- He taught me no fight is too tough for justice, no struggle too long for equality; no cause is greater than the struggle for freedom.

Today, I stand here as a proud African-American woman with the son of our ancestors as we present him with the highest recognition bestowed to anyone by the Congress of the United States of America.

I stand here as a proud member of the most powerful government in the world.

I pray our symbolism today with Mandela will match our actions tomorrow.

I pray the meaning of this moment -- I pray the meaning of this moment will not be lost on my colleagues here in Congress.

I pray we will all be better, more thoughtful forever, and most just in our work, because we have been touched by Nelson Mandela.