

REMARKS OF CONGRESSMAN GEO. W. CROCKETT, JR.
TO THE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
SATURDAY, MAY 3, 1986

I am honored to be here this morning to pay tribute to Nelson Mandela, a man known and revered throughout the world as a living symbol of the on-going struggle against racial oppression.

I am also proud to join you in this public protest against our University's decision not to confer an honorary degree today on this black South African leader. I have, as you know, expressed my profound disappointment in a letter to Dr. Shapiro and the members of the university's board of regents in which I said the following:

"The denial of a degree to Mr. Mandela for the reasons publicly stated -- that is, in accordance with a prevailing tradition of not awarding honorary degrees to those "in absentia" -- is truly unfortunate. I believe such a denial demeans the truly meaningful traditions of our University, and exhibits either a disregard for, or an ignorance of, the extraordinary circumstances of the current situation in South Africa."

"In addition, by making this honorary award to Mr. Mandela, the University of Michigan would tell America's non-white community that, notwithstanding some recent perceptions to the contrary, the University of Michigan continues steadfast in its determination to support forces of justices, equality and freedom for all men and women everywhere.

I congratulate you who are assembled here today on your decision to honor Nelson Mandela and, through him, the courageous non-white people of South Africa who today fight for their lives in the streets and Bantustans of South Africa.

Nelson Mandela has been effectively entombed by his government for 24 years, his lips sealed and his pen crushed by laws which threatened with imprisonment anyone who repeated his words in public or published his writings. It is ironic that this unconscionable imprisonment should now be seized upon by this great University as the justification for its refusal to honor him.

Yet despite the persecution of his country, Nelson Mandela looms large over the landscape of South Africa as the single unifying leader of his people's intensifying struggle for freedom.

Who is the Nelson Mandela we honor today. He was born in the Transkei, in 1918, the son of a Tembu king. He earned his law degree at the University of Witswatersrand in Johannesburg, and became the first black lawyer to practice in South Africa.

In 1944, he joined the African National Congress, and remained an active and leading figure in this organization until his final imprisonment. In 1953, the Transvaal Law Society petitioned the Supreme Court to strike his name from the rolls and bar him from practicing law because of his conviction as a leader in the nonviolent campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws. The court, to its credit, held that it was not dishonorable for a lawyer to identify himself with his clients who were fighting for their political rights, even though their activities may violate the laws of the country.

In 1956, Nelson Mandela and 155 other leading figures in the anti-apartheid movement, including people of all races and ethnic backgrounds, were indicted for treason. The charge focused on the Freedom Charter which had been adopted the previous year by the most representative congress ever assembled in South Africa.

The spirit of that Charter was embraced in its initial statement:

"We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all of the people."

The trial continued for five years with Mandela participating both as a defendant and as defense counsel. It concluded with the three-judge court finding that the government had failed to prove that the defendants had advocated the elimination of apartheid through violent means.

It was during the period of this trial that he met; wooed and married the young social worker, Winnie, his wife, who is today not only his surrogate in the anti-apartheid struggle, but has become a heroine in her own right. After the trial, Mandela sought unsuccessfully to find ways of developing organized opposition to apartheid by peaceful means, while the Nationalist Government continued to adopt new and more stringent laws to enforce apartheid.

Mandela finally reached the point where he could no longer continue to struggle for the political rights of his people without violating the draconian laws of apartheid. He had to make a choice-- for a lawyer a particularly difficult one -- a choice to obey the unjust apartheid laws of his country or to follow his conscience, disregard those laws, and accept the consequences.

Other lawyers have been faced with just such a choice, from those lawyers who joined and led the American Revolution, to the German judges whose duty it was to enforce the racial laws of the Nazis.

Mandela's choice was to organize and lead an underground movement against apartheid. After 17 months underground, where he became popularly known as the "Black Pimpernel", he was arrested, and convicted under South Africa's Suppression of Communism Act and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Today, we honor Nelson Mandela for his heroic stand. And in doing so, we join most of the people and nations of the world who salute the greatness of this man. For he is considered by the international community to be a champion of freedom and democracy and has been honored by numerous governments and international organizations for his strong leadership and vision.

The United Nations has called for his unconditional release by the South African Government as have the European Parliament and more than 2,000 Mayors from 56 countries.

He has been granted India's "Nehru Award" and Venezuela's Simon Bolivar Award; the city of Rome has made him a honorary citizen; and both Britain and France and other nations of the European ~~Community~~ Community have told the Pretoria Government that Mandela must be freed if violence is to end in South Africa.

Here in the United States, the 98th Congress in 1984 passed my Mandela Freedom Resolution calling on President Reagan to use his good offices to secure the release and freedom of Nelson and Winnie Mandela. Since that time, the Administration and particularly, Secretary of State Shultz in a New York Times Interview, have indicated the importance of freeing Mandela.

Through the efforts of our recently-formed Lawyers Campaign to Free Nelson Mandela there have been Mandela Freedom Resolutions introduced in ten state legislatures and four(4) have already been passed by the Michigan House of Representatives, the New Jersey General Assembly, the California General Assembly, and the Georgia General Assembly.

The Campaign to free Mandela has also been endorsed by the State Bar of Michigan, the National Lawyer's Guild and the National Conference of Black Lawyers.

Nelson Mandela represents the determination of the Black majority in South Africa to be free. And in that context, he symbolizes the determination of man to be free anywhere and everywhere. You have made an excellent choice. And by honoring him here you have illustrated the meaning of freedom to our University. Thank you for allowing me to participate in this important lesson.