

OBAMA, OSAMA, AND TRUMP—AND NELSON MANDELA’S GHOST...

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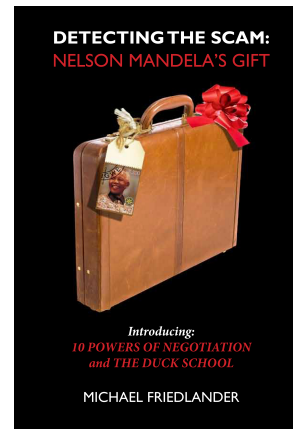
Days before the daring raid on the bin Laden compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, I was asked about Nelson Mandela’s relevance in our modern world. As news later crept out about the events leading up to the raid—and in the aftermath of the raid, I thought I saw unmistakable signs of the ghost of Nelson Mandela in the White House... And as the signs of the ghost appeared, it also revealed more about Donald Trump...

THE POWER OF PATIENCE...

During his long years on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela came to understand the power of patience. He used every opportunity to develop this skill—even in the context of playing board games. When playing chess, for example, while others described his style as “relentless,” he preferred to describe it as slow and deliberate. Before committing himself to a move, he would consider the ramifications of every option and would take a long time between moves—thereby apparently driving those with whom he played to distraction. He would later admit that this was his preferred style in politics too.

In his historic negotiations with the South African apartheid government, he used patience as a surgeon wields a scalpel. While never confusing patience with the need to make decisive and timely decisions, there are numerous examples of how he considered every consequence of each tactical move in his negotiations—before he made it. And, ironically, there are just as many examples of how the South African government in its dealings with him did not.

In reading accounts of how United States intelligence services tracked bin Laden to that compound in Abbottabad and how they watched that compound for months and months, one can only marvel at their patience too. In



reading accounts of how President Obama's national security team also considered the ramifications of every option that they would present to him, this too reflects Nelson Mandela's style. And once the President decided on the option of calling upon the Navy Seals to carry out their mission, their preparation too was quite remarkable. This was yet another quality for which Nelson Mandela became an icon. He would have been proud of the President's team.

And what does this say about Donald Trump, who displayed no patience whatever in taking the time to get the results from his investigators before making his extravagant birther claims? Unlike Nelson Mandela and President Obama, Trump revealed himself as a high-stakes gambler. By showing no patience and by not considering the ramifications of his statements before making them, he ran the risk of becoming marginalized should the President disclose his long-form birth certificate—as he later did. Trump rolled the dice—and lost.

A CRITICAL FOCUS...

In his struggle against the apartheid regime, Nelson Mandela identified four indispensable attributes:

- The importance of carefully defining and articulating goals;
- The need for a focused, solution-oriented approach in reaching those goals and handling the inevitable setbacks;
- The importance of meticulous preparation and planning; and
- The importance of maintaining his high moral authority.

These were the attributes that would come to define his fight against apartheid. During his long and difficult stay at Robben Island, he would hone these skills.

It now appears that President Obama's national security team approached the bin Laden project in exactly the same spirit. They too appeared intent to seize the high moral ground. Quite apart from doing whatever they could to avoid collateral damage to innocent civilians in Abbottabad, they were determined not to act in a manner that might be interpreted as disrespecting the Muslim faith. This explains why they were so careful in handling Bin Laden's body.

Their focused and solution-oriented approach went beyond just killing or capturing Bin Laden. They were determined to seize computer and other records that might help in their goal of defeating the larger Al Qaida organi-

zation. This reflected a focused and solution-oriented approach that Nelson Mandela would admire.

And what does this say about Donald Trump and his birther campaign? While his goal may have been clear, namely, to undermine the President's legitimacy and to pander to the birther movement, none of the other three attributes were anywhere in sight...

DECISION-MAKING...

Nelson Mandela has long acknowledged the profound impact that one of his earliest experiences had upon him. He was 9 when his father died. The regent of Thembuland became his guardian and the young Nelson regularly attended the tribal meetings over which his guardian presided. These meetings were called to discuss national matters, such as a looming drought, the culling of cattle, or new laws decreed by the white government. All Thembus could attend those meetings—and many did.

How the regent presided over these meetings would make a lasting impression on the young Nelson, who remembered how the regent conducted and approached those meetings. He remembered, for example, that the regent wanted to give those who attended the opportunity to be heard. He wanted the opportunity to hear all shades of opinion. In particular, he didn't want those opinions to be influenced by the perception of what others thought he wanted to hear. His approach gave him the benefit of considering many different views before reaching a decision—and in deciding how to bring together a consensus. In particular, Nelson Mandela recalled how the regent—

- considered everyone's opinion valuable;
- encouraged everyone to express his opinion;
- would not interrupt speakers;
- would not end meetings until everyone was heard;
- would respect differing opinions;
- would listen without comment to criticism—even when it was personal;
- would always retain his dignity;
- would only provide his own opinion at the very end of the meeting—thereby not coloring the debate;
- would offer his opinion finally to reflect a consensus he was attempting to forge.

While it is presently largely unknown what transpired in President Obama's national security council meetings as his security advisors considered a number of different bin Laden options—or how the President conducted himself in those meetings, what was revealed is that the President encouraged a vigorous exchange of views between members of his team. This mirrored the approach Nelson Mandela used to such great effect used over the years.

What is also notable is how this process differed sharply from the meetings of President George W. Bush's security advisors leading to the Iraq war. According to the accounts of insiders on President George W. Bush's national security team and cabinet, he reached his decision to invade Iraq without the same level of vigorous internal debate that Nelson Mandela and now President Obama insisted upon.

And what does this tell us about Donald Trump and his birther campaign? There is no evidence that he gathered together a high-power team to debate vigorously the merits of his birther claim and the strategy for making it such a high-profile issue.

THE POWER OF COMMON SENSE...

Nelson Mandela understood the power of common sense and the dangers one faces in applying it. He understood, for example, the importance of balance and in the natural tendency to see only what we want to see. The rules of [*The Duck School*](#) lay out the process that Nelson Mandela followed. The first rule of *The Duck School* couldn't be easier to understand—or more difficult to follow:

If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, we must trust ourselves to recognize that we may just be looking at a duck...

As they sifted through the intelligence data they received, President Obama's national security team asked themselves what they were looking at. Although no physical sightings of bin Laden existed at that Abbottabad compound, the President's team connected the dots while mustering all the objective common sense they could.

And what can we say about Donald Trump's approach to the birther issue in the context of common sense? Not much...

COURAGE...

Nelson Mandela's courage is legendary. What is often overlooked, however, is the courage he displayed not only in confronting the terrifying power of the apartheid government, but also in confronting groups within his own followers who demanded radical action that he believed would undermine the high moral ground he wanted to maintain.

Examples of this were contained in the recent motion picture *Invictus*, which was a remarkably accurate portrayal of Nelson Mandela's remarkable qualities. In this case, it was his determination not to put his finger in the eyes of the Afrikaners by agreeing to the ANC decision to rename the South African rugby team. While it was important for him to maintain ANC support, he had the courage to disagree with his most loyal supporters and persuade them not to pursue their chosen path. Similarly, when he insisted in offering white security police officers the opportunity to join his security team, he understood the alarm and consternation this would cause his personal security team. After all, these were the very white officers who had viciously targeted anyone in the anti-apartheid movement.

In refusing to release photographs of Bin Laden in the face of intense pressure from those on the extreme right and left of the political spectrum, President Obama demonstrated similar courage. While it might have been politically expedient to release those photographs and thereby to satisfy the demands of his political opponents and staunchest allies, he too wanted to maintain the high moral ground for America. Again, Nelson Mandela would be proud of the President.

And, finally, as for Donald Trump, was there any sign of similar courage—even when the President released his long-form birth certificate? His fear to confront those who continued to believe in the extraordinary conspiracy that President Obama's parents had apparently conceived was disappointing...

Our best hope is that Nelson Mandela's ghost does not abandon our leaders—be they political, financial or academic leaders...

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