

Obama's Path Was Shaped By Mandela's Story

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WASHINGTON — Without Nelson Mandela, there might never have been a President Obama.

That is the strong impression conveyed from Mr. Obama, whose political and personal bonds to Mr. Mandela, the former South African president, transcended their single face-to-face meeting, which took place at a hotel here in 2005.

It was the fight for racial justice in South Africa by Mr. Mandela that first inspired a young Barack Obama to public service, the American president recalled on Thursday evening after hearing that Mr. Mandela, the 95-year-old world icon, had died. Mr. Obama delivered his first public speech, in 1979, at an anti-apartheid rally.

Mr. Obama's first moment on the public stage was the start of a life and political career imbued with the kind of hope that Mr. Mandela personified. "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," Mr. Obama said on Thursday.

"Hope" would eventually become the mantra for his ascension to the White House.

On two continents separated by thousands of miles and vastly different political cultures, the lives of the two men rarely intersected. Weeks before their only meeting, Mr. Obama wrote Mr. Mandela a letter that Oprah Winfrey carried to South Africa. As Mr. Obama later emerged as a national political leader, he and Mr. Mandela occasionally traded phone calls or letters.

But the trajectories of the two leaders, who broke political and social barriers in their own countries, were destined to be connected, even if mostly from afar. Mr. Obama wrote about Mr. Mandela as a distant but inspirational figure in the forward to Mr. Mandela's 2010 book, "Conversations With Myself."

"His sacrifice was so great that it called upon people everywhere to do what they could on behalf of human progress," Mr. Obama wrote. "In the most modest of ways, I was one of those people who tried to answer his call."

Mr. Mandela and Mr. Obama served as the first black leaders of their nations and both were looked to by some as the vehicles for reconciliation between polarized

electorates. Both won the Nobel Peace Prize, in part for their charisma and their ability to inspire and communicate.

Mr. Obama often referred to Mr. Mandela by the former president's clan name, Madiba — a term of affection for the aging, beloved leader in South Africa. On Thursday, Mr. Obama spoke of the goals that Mr. Mandela worked decades for, and eventually achieved.

“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,” Mr. Obama said from the White House as news of Mr. Mandela's death spread.

But the American president regularly shied from direct comparisons with Mr. Mandela. Mr. Obama often noted privately and publicly that his sacrifices would never compare to Mr. Mandela's.

Aides to Mr. Obama said he was uncomfortable when people drew parallels between them, as they often did. Robert Gibbs, the former White House press secretary, accompanied Mr. Obama on his first visit to the tiny prison cell on Robben Island where Mr. Mandela had been jailed for years.

“Having stood in that space that day, you realize that whatever analogies you might draw, that Mandela is and always will be a singular figure in the history of the world,” Mr. Gibbs recalled this summer. “I don't think the president would look at even the hardest days as equal even to the very best day that he might have spent inside of Robben Island.”

And yet, the struggle by Mr. Mandela has been a beacon to Mr. Obama, drawing him to South Africa twice to pay homage.

The last trip came in June of this year, as Mr. Obama traveled to Senegal, Tanzania and South Africa on a visit overshadowed by the possibility that the ailing Mr. Mandela might die at any moment.

On the trip, Mr. Obama did not visit with Mr. Mandela, who was fighting a lung infection. Officials said a visit would have been disruptive and unhelpful to Mr. Mandela's recovery. Instead, Mr. Obama and the first lady, Michelle Obama, visited with Mr. Mandela's family.

“I don't need a photo-op, and the last thing I want to do is to be in any way obtrusive at a time when the family is concerned about Nelson Mandela's condition,” Mr. Obama said at the time.

During the trip, Mr. Obama reflected repeatedly on the impact Mr. Mandela had on him, and people around the world. Moments before he again stood in the cell on Robben Island, Mr. Obama told his daughters of Mr. Mandela's legacy.

“One thing you guys might not be aware of is that the idea of political nonviolence first took root here in South Africa because Mahatma Gandhi was a lawyer here in South Africa,” the president told them. “When he went back to India the principles ultimately led to Indian independence, and what Gandhi did inspired Martin Luther King.”

In a speech to students at Cape Town University, Mr. Obama lauded Mr. Mandela as a leader whose “spirit could never be imprisoned” and a man who serves as an inspiration for all.

“Nelson Mandela showed us that one man’s courage can move the world,” Mr. Obama told the students. “And he calls on us to make choices that reflect not our fears, but our hopes — in our own lives, and in the lives of our communities and our countries.”

The 2005 meeting between Mr. Obama and Mr. Mandela was brief, just a few minutes, as a young American senator shook the hands of an elderly man. The moment was captured in a photograph taken by Mr. Obama’s driver. It shows Mr. Obama, silhouetted against a bright window, holding hands with Mr. Mandela, who is reclining on a couch.

One copy of the photograph has sat for years on a desk in Mr. Mandela’s office in South Africa. Another copy is on Mr. Obama’s desk in the Oval Office.