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Nelson Mandela

By Scott MacLeod

History's great men and women ordinarily become myths by fighting their spectacular battles for all to see. Nelson Mandela became the stuff of legend while languishing in South African jails for 27 years, seen only by his guards, his family and a handful of friends. True, he had earned a wide following before his imprisonment in 1962. But it was during his time behind bars and away from the public that Mandela came to symbolize an entire people's struggle against apartheid.

Transition from myth to man has not been easy. Yet Mandela, 72, has managed it with amazing grace. In the space of one extraordinary year, South Africa has moved from its nightmare of eternal racial conflict to a hopeful dawning of racial reconciliation — and that is largely due to Mandela's statesmanship. He, in fact, initiated the current negotiation process in 1986 when he received a visit from South Africa's Justice Minister. Three years of secret talks followed between Mandela and government ministers on the country's future. Hard-liners within the African National Congress disapproved, but Mandela's initiative prepared his militant organization for the eventual necessity of a negotiated settlement.

Mandela has not looked back since that sunny afternoon in February when he strode through the gates of Victor Verster Prison, clenched fists raised skyward. Trading smiles and handshakes with his former jailers, he exhibited uncommon magnanimity in guiding the A.N.C. through two rounds of historic talks with President F.W. de Klerk's government. The discussions at Groote Schuur and Pretoria began solving some of the probpolitical prisoners — that stood in the way of negotiations on a new constitution.

If Mandela has disappointed many of his admirers, it is because he has been unable to stamp his authority fully on his organization and its restless following. Within days of his release, Mandela was largely ignored in the township of Soweto when he called on students to end their boycott and return to school. He was again dismissed a few weeks later in the Natal port city of Durban when he pleaded with rival black factions to "throw your pangas into the sea." The year of Mandela's long-awaited freedom witnessed the worst black-vs.-black violence in South Africa's history.

In prison Mandela expressed a desire to end the bitter fighting between the A.N.C. and the Zulu-based Inkatha movement, headed by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Yet, bowing to the pressure of his A.N.C. comrades, Mandela has repeatedly refused to hold peace talks with Buthelezi. A.N.C. strategists seem to find Mandela more useful as a fund-raising machine. He has spent about half his time since his release outside South Africa, traveling to North America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia in search of money.

South Africa may not cleanse itself of violence soon, but without Mandela the country would be even less likely to achieve peace. No other leader commands the respect not only of many blacks but also of De Klerk and his fellow Afrikaner reformers. Mandela the man has not measured up to Mandela the myth. That was inevitable. But it is a sign of Nelson Mandela's greatness that he continues to inspire such expectations — and dreams of a free South Africa.