

Ways & Means Season 5 Episode 6 What Makes a Great Political Leader

From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University this is Ways & Means. We share bright ideas for how to improve society. I'm Lindsay Foster Thomas.

Voice: "It's safe to say that America is expecting a really dirty election."

Voice: "We need a leader that stands next to the people, and not in front of the people."

Biden: "Leadership matters. Leadership matters."

Voice: "Well the problem Christiana is we need a leader."

Trump: "I think I am a great moral leader and I love our county..."

On the eve of a critical election when the United States is intensely divided and facing a pandemic, we're hearing calls for leadership. But what makes a great leader?

Today we explore that concept through the experience of another nation and the leader who guided another nation through a time of great division.

NEWS CLIP: And the crowd—getting excited.

Bruce: But I still remember the scene.

Duke professor Bruce Jentleson is remembering a snowy February morning in Washington D.C. He's tuned his television to live coverage.

Bruce: And he's in a car and the door opens and he gets out of the car and starts walking.

NEWS CLIP: There's Mr. Mandela. Mr. Nelson Mandela a free man, taking his first steps into a new South Africa.

Bruce: And here's this elegant man with white hair, this smile on his face.

NEWS CLIP: After 27 years his head was high and his fist was clenched. Nelson Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison today like a chief of state.

It was 1990. People all over the world were watching as Nelson Mandela left captivity after serving 27 years of a life sentence for charges of sabotage against the state of South Africa. He was one of the most well-known leaders in the fight against South Africa's racist system of segregation called Apartheid. As professor Bruce Jentleson puts it, this was a breakthrough in history.

Bruce: Definitely this was a very special moment...And then you just wondered what would happen next.

From this point, Nelson Mandela would go on to be a critical player in South Africa's peaceful transformation into a new era. At the time of his release, though, South Africa was an extremely divided nation in danger of slipping into more violent conflict.

Bruce: You could imagine, even if the will among the leaders, the white Afrikaner National Party was there, that some of these nationalist groups would, you know sew violence and the other side would respond to violence. It's not a straight line.

Even on the day he was released from prison, there was a violent clash between white police guards and the crowds of Black South Africans waiting for Nelson Mandela to arrive in Cape Town.

CBS NEWS: Police opened fire again. Volley after volley of buckshot. At least two people were reported dead tonight. Hundreds were injured. The violence only stopped when suddenly without warning Nelson Mandela appeared on the steps of city hall.

(MUSIC, different theme music: [Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika by Duke Amandla Chorus](#))

On this episode of Ways & Means: what makes a great leader during a deeply divided time? And what can we learn from one of the most striking examples of leadership in history? We look at the story of Nelson Mandela and some of the surprising strategies that made his leadership work.

This season of Ways & Means is supported by Polis, the Center for Politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. I'm Deondra Rose, Director of Research for Polis. We prepare future political leaders, and foster innovative scholarship related to the most pressing political issues of our time. Find out more at polis.duke.edu.

Bruce: In the academic world, when you study like I did, political science and international relations, very little attention is paid to leaders. It's all about systems and structures and processes and things like balance of power and all these broad forces.

Bruce Jentleson set out to study the leadership of 20th century statespeople in the context of the historical moment in which they lived. The Duke Professor focuses on leaders who used statesmanship to bring about peace in times of division.

Bruce: I tried to approach this thinking about situations in which international affairs would have been very different had it not been for a particular leader.

Bruce is also a baseball fan, and in baseball there's a statistic used to measure an individual's contribution to the overall success of the team. In other words, how well would the team have done without this player?

In his book, Bruce uses a similar idea to compare the worlds' greatest peacemakers by asking what would the world look like without these leaders. In baseball terms, Bruce thinks Nelson Mandela would be up there with Babe Ruth.

Bruce: Mandela, you know, gets, he would've gotten the highest ranking if I used stats...

Mandela's upbringing and early life prepared him for a life of leadership. He was raised as an aristocrat in the Xhosa tribe in South Africa.

At the time, South Africa was heavily segregated racially, socially, and economically. Eventually this system of segregation was ratified in a code of laws called Apartheid.

Bruce: So the whole Apartheid system in South Africa was, in the 20th century, the most racist system, I would say.

As a tribal aristocrat, Mandela received some of the best education that he could get in the Apartheid era. As a college student, he joined the ANC, the African National Congress.

He earned a law degree and opened the first Black African law firm in the country and started rising through the ranks of the ANC.

Mandela would of course later become famous for his nonviolent approach, but early in his career, he was actually chairman of the armed branch of the ANC. Here is Mandela in his first TV interview in 1961.

MANDELA: There are many people who feel that it is useless and futile for us to continue talking peace and nonviolence against a government whose reply is only savage attacks on an unarmed and defenseless people. And I think the time has come for us to consider in the light of our experiences in this state at home, whether the methods which we have applied so far are adequate.

Soon after this interview, Mandela would secretly leave South Africa in part to train for guerilla warfare.

When he returned to the country, he was arrested and imprisoned. Two years later, he and 12 colleagues were then tried on charges of sabotage.

Here's Mandela in his now-famous opening statement at trial.

Mandela: "I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities."

He spoke for three hours and closed by saying that a democratic and free society, quote "is an ideal which I hope to live for and to see realized..."

Mandela: "But my lord, if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Mandela was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. For the next 27 years of his life, he was locked behind bars with other political prisoners.

But, this trial and the moving speech helped solidify Mandela's image as a key leader in the anti-apartheid movement.

He spent most of those 27 years on Robben Island, a prison just off the coast of Cape Town. It's close enough to mainland South Africa that you can see the land from the prison.

Mandela was robbed of a lot during that time — but what couldn't be taken from him was something Bruce Jentleson calls personal capital. He never lost that aristocratic bearing which earned him respect among Black South Africans. He never lost his captivating way of speaking, nor his courage.

Bruce: His willingness to go to jail. Right, so that he was on the front lines like a great military leader would be with his or her troops out there. He showed a lot of personal courage, made a lot of personal sacrifices.

But, when it comes to leadership, personal capital by itself is not enough.

Bruce: unless you have political skills, you're not going to take people from point A to point B. And those skills he developed through his mentors, through some trial and error, the years in prison, there were different factions in the prison just among the Africans. Some were more radical than the others.

A lot is changing in this time. By the mid 1980's, Mandela was still in prison but international opposition to apartheid was growing.

The South African president at the time, P.W. Botha was running a violent attempt to silence unrest.

From prison, Mandela sent a 10 page memo to the president asking him to meet to discuss a path forward. Botha agreed. He even agreed to release Mandela as a way to make peace, but none of the other prisoners would be released.

Bruce: And he knew what leadership was about. He said, no, I'm going to basically negotiate this.

Mandela denied the offer and waited. Six weeks later, Botha resigned the presidency and when a new leader was elected, a man named FW de Klerk, Mandela had a chance to try again.

Before becoming president, de Klerk was no reformer—he had supported the system of apartheid before. But pressure was mounting, so de Klerk released some of Mandela's fellow prisoners. Mandela stayed in jail.

Finally, the two met. De Klerk brought a proposal, which Mandela rejected. Mandela — again this is all happening while he's still in jail — Mandela reiterated his demands for the end of apartheid. He used his international celebrity and his imprisonment as leverage for negotiation.

De Klerk didn't concede during the meeting, but he listened. Four months later, on opening day of parliament de Klerk announced a whole series of reforms. Effective immediately, the ban on the ANC was lifted, Black Africans would have the right to vote, and there would be equality measures under the law.

Then, he announced that he would release Nelson Mandela from Prison.

de Klerk: He is committed to a peaceful solution and a peaceful process.

Mandela used both his personal capital — including a willingness to stay in jail — and his political skills to negotiate the breakthrough.

On February 10, 1990, after 27 years, a grey-haired Mandela emerged from prison into a violent, divided country.

He immediately had to activate his leadership skills. Mandela reached out to Black and white political groups. Eventually after a four-year back and forth battle with the government, his negotiations brought on another historic day.

On April 27, 1994 Black South Africans stood in lines for hours and hours in order to cast their first ballot.

The ANC won 62.6% of the vote. Mandela would be the country's first truly democratically elected president, and its first Black president.

INAUGURATION: “The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement. Let freedom ring. God Bless Africa. I thank you.” (Applause)

And under his leadership, the government did rapidly change. As President, Mandela helped forge a new constitution and a new bill of rights. He also helped to reform the courts.

Mandela also launched an ambitious effort to confront the nation's divided racial history head on. He established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1995. People who had committed politically motivated crimes during the period of apartheid could apply for amnesty. That included folks on all sides of the divide like government officials, right-wing vigilantes, and African radicals. And African radicals. Here is professor Bruce Jentleson again:

Bruce: After 27 years as a political prisoner, it's like close our eyes and think about that right? Comes out and chose reconciliation over retribution. You know, it's really hard to say I would have done the same thing, right? And one of the extraordinary qualities that he had was his ability to be able to do that in a sincere way and not say, “Well I'll be for reconciliation, but I want to settle these 5 or 10 scores I have.” Extraordinary person that he evolved to be, and it wasn't like he was totally born that way but he went through his violent period and others and like anybody who's successful in life as a leader or otherwise, he learned and thought as he, as he moved along.

And then Mandela did something as a leader that's almost unfathomable today. After holding out for so long, after dreaming of equality his whole life, after finally landing at the head of the country he loved, he stepped down.

He decided not to run for another term as president.

Bruce: It was two reasons. One was sort of the George Washington principle. Here you were in Africa, where all these leaders of the African independence movements in the 50s and 60s had stayed in power forever. And whatever their virtues to the beginning, they didn't last. And the other was—he knew he wasn't a policy guy. That wasn't his expertise to say now. Okay. What's the best policy for developing housing in the neighborhoods that need it the most? Or how do you reform the economy? And so that self-awareness. It's another amazing leadership quality.

Bruce: I mean, imagine that, you know you ---don't get drunk on power and to continue all the way through to think about what was best for the country and to have that a little bit of that sense of what I'm good at, what I'm not.

MANDELA: To the extent that we have still to reconcile and heal our nation. To the extent that the consequences of apartheid still permeate our society and define the lives of millions of South Africans as lives of deprivation. Those challenges are unchanged.

With these words to parliament, Mandela retired from his leadership post.

(MUSIC)

This season of Ways & Means is supported by Polis, the Center for Politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. Find out more at polis.duke.edu.

Ways & Means is a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Dr. Bruce Jentleson is the William Preston Few Distinguished Professor of Politics and Public Policy and Political Science at Duke University. He wrote the book The Peace Makers: Leadership Lessons for Twentieth-Century Statesmanship.

Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones, and Hunter Stark. Our associate producers are Malu Frasson Nori, and Matt Majsak.

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The music you heard was performed by Amandla, Duke University's African Chorus. The song was the national anthem of South Africa: Nkosi Sikelel 'iAfrica.

Artwork by Rae Hsu.

Thanks so much for joining me -- I'm Lindsay Foster Thomas.