His was a voice they meant to silence forever. To display his picture or print his words became a crime as the government sought to drive even his memory from the hearts and minds of the people.

But on February 11 the voice of African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela rang out once again across the shanty towns and ghettos of apartheid South Africa. Imprisoned in 1962 after the banning of the ANC and the beginning of armed resistance to white rule, Mandela has emerged 27 years later as the embodiment of the spirit of resistance and democratic aspirations of his people.

Inside prison, Mandela served as a mentor and model for the generations of freedom fighters who followed him into apartheid’s prisons. Outside the walls, his uncompromising adherence to the principles and ideals of the struggle, and his commitment to a united, democratic, and nonracial South Africa made him a legend.

To millions of people around the world, Nelson Mandela’s name has become synonymous with the suffering and the resistance of his people. He is the world’s best-known political prisoner — a champion of human rights and dignity on the order of Mahatma Gandhi and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1953 the Africa Fund’s associate, the American Committee on Africa, was formed to support an anti-apartheid civil disobedience campaign being led by a brilliant young lawyer named Nelson Mandela. Today we are privileged to reprint in full the speech which returns him to his rightful place — at the head of the South African liberation struggle.
Cape Town, February 11, 1990

Amandla! Amandla! i-Afrika Mayibuye! [Power! Power! Africa it is ours!]

My friends, comrades, and fellow South Africans, I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy and freedom for all. I stand here before you not as a prophet but as a humble servant of you, the people.

Your tireless and heroic sacrifices have made it possible for me to be here today. I therefore place the remaining years of my life in your hands.

On this day of my release I extend my sincere and warmest gratitude to the millions of my compatriots and those in every corner of the globe who have campaigned tirelessly for my release.

I extend special greetings to the people of Cape Town, the city which has been my home for three decades. Your mass marches and other forms of struggle have served as a constant source of strength to all political prisoners.

I salute the African National Congress. It has fulfilled our every expectation in its role as leader of the great march to freedom.

I salute our president, Comrade Oliver Tambo, for leading the ANC even under the most difficult circumstances.

I salute the rank-and-file members of the ANC. You have sacrificed life and limb in the pursuit of the noble cause of our struggle.

I salute combatants of Umkhonto We Sizwe ["Spear of the Nation," the armed wing of the ANC], like Solomon Mahlangu and Ashley Kriel, who have paid the ultimate price for the freedom of all South Africans.

I salute the South African Communist Party for its steady contribution to the struggle for democracy. You have survived 40 years of unrelenting persecution. The memory of great communists like Moses Kotane, Yusuf Daidoo, Bram Fischer and Moses Mabhida will be cherished for generations to come.

"To lift sanctions now would be to run the risk of aborting the process toward the complete eradication of apartheid."

I salute General Secretary Joe Slovo, one of our finest patriots. We are heartened by the fact that the alliance between ourselves and the party remains as strong as it always was.

I salute the United Democratic Front, the National Education Crisis Committee, the South African Youth Congress, the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses. And Cosatu. And the many other formations of the Mass Democratic Movement.

I also salute the Black Sash and the National Union of South African Students. We note with pride that you have acted as the conscience of white South Africans. Even during the darkest days in the history of our struggle, you held the flag of liberty high.

The large-scale mass mobilization of the past few years is one of the key factors which led to the opening of the final chapter of our struggle.

I extend my greetings to the working class of our country. Your organized strength is the pride of our movement. You remain the most dependable force in the struggle to end exploitation and oppression.

I pay tribute to the many religious communities who carried the campaign for justice forward when the organizations of our people were silenced.

I greet the traditional leaders of our country. Many among you continue to walk in the footsteps of great heroes like Himtisa and Sekhukhuni.

I pay tribute to the endless heroism of youth. You, the young lions, have energized our entire struggle.

I pay tribute to the mothers and wives and sisters of our nation. You are the rock hard foundation of our struggle. Apartheid has inflicted more pain on you than on anyone else.

On this occasion we thank the world community for their great contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle. Without your support our struggle would not have reached this advanced stage.

The sacrifice of the front line states will be remembered by South Africans forever.

My salutations will be incomplete without expressing my deep appreciation for the strength given to me during my long and lonely years in prison by my beloved wife and family. I am convinced that your pain and suffering was far greater than my own.

Before I go any further, I wish to make the point that I intend making only a few preliminary comments at this stage. I will make a more complete statement only after I have had the opportunity to consult with my comrades.

Today the majority of South Africans, black and white, recognize that apartheid has no future. It has to be ended by our own decisive mass action in order to build peace and security. The mass campaigns of defiance and other actions of our organizations and people can only culminate in the establishment of democracy.

Nelson and Winnie Mandela salute over 100,000 supporters in Soweto at mass rally on Feb 11, 1990

The apartheid destruction on our subcontinent is incalculable. The fabric of family life of millions of my people has been shattered. Millions are homeless and unemployed. Our economy lies in ruins and our people are embroiled in political strife.

Our resort to the armed struggle in 1960 with the formation of the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto We Sizwe, was a purely defensive action against the violence of apartheid. The factors which necessitated the armed struggle still exist today. We have no option but to continue.

We express the hope that a climate conducive to a negotiated settlement would be created soon so that there may no longer be the
need for the armed struggle. I am a loyal and disciplined member of the African National Congress. I am therefore in full agreement with all of its objectives, strategies and tactics.

"We call on our white compatriots to join us in the shaping of a new South Africa. The freedom movement is the political home for you, too."

The need to unite the people of our country is as important a task now as it always has been. No individual leader is able to take all these important tasks on his own. It is our task as leaders to place our views before our organization and to allow the democratic structures to decide on the way forward.

On the question of democratic practice, I feel duty bound to make the point that a leader of the movement is a person who has been democratically elected at a national conference. This is a principle which must be upheld without any exceptions.

Today I wish to report to you that my talks with the government have been aimed at normalizing the political situation in the country. We have not as yet begun discussing the basic demands of the struggle.

I wish to stress that I myself had at no time entered into negotiations about the future of our country, except to insist on a meeting between the ANC and the government.

Mr. de Klerk has gone further than any other Nationalist president in taking real steps to normalize the situation. However, there are further steps as outlined in the Harare Declaration that have to be met before negotiations on the basic demands of our people can begin.

I reiterate our call for, inter alia, the immediate ending of the state of emergency and the freeing of all, and not only some, political prisoners.

Only such a normalized situation which allows for free political activity can allow us to consult our people in order to obtain a mandate. The people need to be consulted on who will negotiate and on the content of such negotiations.

Negotiations cannot take place above the heads or behind the backs of our people. It is our belief that the future of our country can only be determined by a body which is democratically elected on a nonracial basis.

Negotiations on the dismantling of apartheid will have to address the overwhelming demand of our people for a democratic, nonracial, and unitary South Africa. There must be an end to white monopoly on political power, and a fundamental restructuring of our political and economic systems to ensure that the inequalities of apartheid are addressed and our society thoroughly democratized.

It must be added that Mr. de Klerk himself is a man of integrity who is acutely aware of the dangers of a public figure not honoring his undertakings. But as an organization we base our policy and strategy on the harsh reality we are faced with, and this reality is that we are still suffering under the policies of the Nationalist government.

Our struggle has reached a decisive moment. We call on our people to seize this moment so that the process toward democracy is rapid and uninterrupted. We have waited too long for our freedom. We can no longer wait. Now is the time to intensify the struggle on all fronts.

To relax our efforts now would be a mistake which generations to come will not be able to forgive. The sight of freedom looming on the horizon should encourage us to redouble our efforts. It is only through disciplined mass action that our victory can be assured.

We call on our white compatriots to join us in the shaping of a new South Africa. The freedom movement is the political home for you, too.

We call on the international community to continue the campaign to isolate the apartheid regime. To lift sanctions now would be to run the risk of aborting the process toward the complete eradication of apartheid. Our march to freedom is irreversible. We must not allow fear to stand in our way.

Universal suffrage on a common voters roll in a united, democratic, and nonracial South Africa is the only way to peace and racial harmony.

"I pay tribute to the mothers and wives and sisters of our nation. You are the rock hard foundation of our struggle. Apartheid has inflicted more pain on you than on anyone else."

In conclusion, I wish to go to my own words during my trial in 1964. They are as a true today as they were then. I wrote: I have fought against white domination and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.

It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

[In Xhosa] My friends, I have no words of eloquence to offer today except to say that the remaining days of my life are in your hands.

Amandla!
THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES: SOUTHWEST AFRICANS RESPOND TO NELSON MANDELA'S RELEASE

On February 2, the president of South Africa's white government, F.W. de Klerk, unbanned the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress and other anti-apartheid groups, announced his intention to release Nelson Mandela and some other political prisoners, and took other measures to "create a climate" for negotiations with representatives of South Africa's Black majority.

Below are excerpts from the responses of some of South Africa's leading democratic organizations.

The African National Congress: Today, President F.W. de Klerk made important announcements which go a long way toward creating a climate conducive to negotiations. We are, however, gravely concerned that the Pretoria regime has taken the decision that some political prisoners will not be released, that the state of emergency is not lifted in its entirety, and that the practice of detention without trial will continue.

The normalization of relations between South Africa and the rest of the world must continue to depend on ending the apartheid system. We therefore expect that no country committed to ending white minority domination in South Africa will do anything to lessen the isolation of the apartheid regime.

Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU): By President de Klerk's and the National Party's standards, today's announcements were far-reaching and courageous. But in terms of the expectations of the aspirations of the majority of South Africans and the world...it falls far short of the fundamental steps needed to end the political conflict in our country.

The cornerstones of apartheid still remain intact. The Group Areas Act, the Land Act, Population Registration Act etc. still remain on the statute books. The Internal Security Act, the Public Safety Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, and many other pieces of repressive legislation still prevent free political activity in our country...this was seen today when the South African Police used dogs, tear gas, and batons to crush the joyful demonstrations of our people.

South Africa will never know peace as long as our people don't have the right to decide their future...We believe that it is only a democratically elected constituent assembly which can legitimately usher in this South Africa we are all longing for.

Until then we call on all South Africans and the international community not to relax the pressure. Step up the struggle against apartheid so that the momentum for change in South Africa is not arrested. If we fail to do so we will have tragically missed a historical opportunity to end the suffering and conflict in our country.

The United Democratic Front: We happily welcome the steps which have been taken by the State President. These steps are a direct result of the struggles which have been waged by our people, particularly in the last few years.

The State President has said that there is today free political association in the country, but we hold a different opinion. There remains a large number of laws which curtail political activity....Many of our comrades who are in exile cannot come back to the country. They have not been offered immunity from arrest.

Over and above these, apartheid remains in place. The government has not removed some of the laws which constitute the pillars of the system. For instance the Group Areas Act, the Land Act, the homeland system. The policy of apartheid will continue to bedevil political relations in this country. Our own objective is a single, nonracial democratic state.

On an occasion such as today it is important that we must address a word to our Afrikaner compatriots in particular, but the whites in general. We urge them to shed the fears of the past, to welcome the return of the African National Congress to our political life as a public participant.

To the mass of our people we say that freedom is now in sight. Now more than ever before there is greater urgency to intensify our struggle on all fronts. Through our mass actions let us ensure that the process that has begun today...is irreversible.

Now is the time to pressurize the de Klerk government to move quickly toward democracy. To this end the sanctions campaign must be maintained and indeed intensified. To lift sanctions now would be to run the risk of aborting the process to democracy.

If anything the speech that de Klerk has made shows that all the pressures we have been calling for and all the demands for sanctions were pointed in the right direction. Therefore this is no time to relent.

THE AFRICA FUND: The Africa Fund was founded in 1966 to provide humanitarian aid to African people struggling for independence and to work toward increased American understanding of African issues through a program of research and literature production. Contributions to The Africa Fund are tax deductible. Additional copies are 30¢ each. 15¢ on orders over twenty. Please add 15% postage. A complete list of available titles is free on request. Cover photo courtesy of The International Defence and Aid Fund.

The Africa Fund (associated with The American Committee on Africa), 198 Broadway, New York, NY 10038 (212) 962-1210