



Dumisani S. Kumalo

Back to the Embassy—But This Time No Handcuffs

NEW YORK—This evening I will be in Washington to attend a reception in honor of Nelson Mandela at the South African Embassy. As someone who for many years regarded that embassy as a symbol of the former apartheid regime, walking through the heavy doors of this staid and solid building will be reminder of how my country has changed.

For example, during a nationwide campaign in the United States to free Mr. Mandela, the Africa Fund collected tens of thousand of keys in churches, union halls and schools, which we then took to Washington and dumped at the front door of the embassy. We were sending a dramatic message to the apartheid rulers in Pretoria through their representatives to unlock your jail cell.

However, the Metropolitan Police of Washington, D.C., were not overly impressed with our demonstrations. They always arrested us for trespassing and littering on the grounds of the embassy, albeit our detentions were mostly symbolic.

Once, after yet another such arrest, we were forced by the police to pick up our keys from the steps of the

embassy and take them along to the police precinct for our perfunctory booking. Upon release, Prof. Bob Edgar of Howard University and I took the boxes full of keys to a depot of United Parcel Service and asked that they be delivered on the following day to the South African Embassy. We wrote on the delivery form that these boxes were sent by Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, Robben Island Prison, Virginia 22201.

The following day I returned to the embassy and waited across Massachusetts Avenue for the UPS truck to deliver the keys. The unsuspecting driver carried the boxes right into the embassy, something we had not been able to do during many protests there. Within minutes, an embassy official came rushing out of the embassy, shouting and shaking his fists in the air while looking up and down the avenue to see if whoever sent the keys was watching. When the official saw me across the street, I flashed him a big smile of satisfaction, knowing that we had won a small battle in the long fight for Mandela's freedom and that of thousands of political prisoners in South African jails.

I never found out what happened to those keys. But I know that this was one more reason why I would never be invited inside the doors of the embassy.

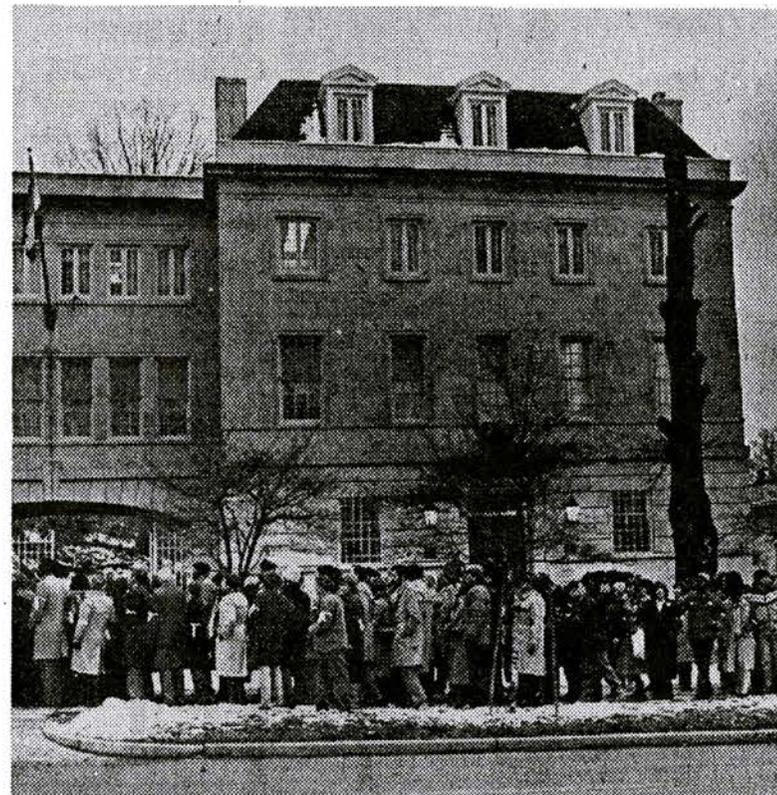
Just recently, though, I received a fancy card in the mail which read:

In honor of the President of South Africa, Mr. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, on the occasion of his State Visit to the United States of America, Ambassador and Mrs. Harry Schwarz request the pleasure of the company of Mr. Dumisani Kumalo at the Reception on Friday the seventh of October 1994 . . .

Until then, I thought the invitation to attend the Mandela inauguration in Pretoria was the greatest personal honor I had ever received. This invitation, however, is in its own way a validation for the actions those of us living in the United States took to bring an end to apartheid.

So I will walk with great pride through the doors of the embassy tonight to toast Nelson Mandela, and I will not need a key to open them.

The writer, a South African, is projects director for the Africa Fund in New York.



DEMONSTRATION AT THE SOUTH AFRICAN EMBASSY, WINTER OF 1985.
BY HARRY NALTCHAYAN—THE WASHINGTON POST