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Issues for Dialogue: Six Things Nelson Mandela Believed That Most People Won't Talk About

In the desire to celebrate Nelson Mandela's life — an iconic figure who triumphed over South Africa's brutal apartheid regime — it's tempting to homogenize his views into something everyone can support. This is not, however, an accurate representation of the man.

Mandela was a political activist and agitator. He did not shy away from controversy and he did not seek — or obtain — universal approval. Before and after his release from prison, he embraced an unabashedly progressive and provocative platform. As one commentator [put it](#) shortly after the announcement of the freedom fighter's death, "Mandela will never, ever be your minstrel. Over the next few days you will try so, so hard to make him something he was not, and you will fail. You will try to smooth him, to sandblast him, to take away his Malcolm X. You will try to hide his anger from view."

As the world remembers Mandela, here are some of the things he believed that many will gloss over.

1. Mandela blasted the Iraq War and American imperialism. Mandela [called Bush](#) "a president who has no foresight, who cannot think properly," and accused him of "wanting to plunge the world into a holocaust" by going to war in Iraq. "All that (Mr. Bush) wants is Iraqi oil," he said. Mandela even speculated that then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan was being undermined in the process because he was black. "They never did that when secretary-generals were white," he said. He saw the Iraq War as a greater problem of American imperialism around the world. "If there is a country that has committed unspeakable atrocities in the world, it is the United States of America. They don't care," he said.

2. Mandela called freedom from poverty a "fundamental human right." Mandela considered poverty one of the greatest evils in the world, and spoke out against inequality everywhere. "Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times — times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation — that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils," he [said](#). He considered ending poverty a basic human duty: "Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life," he said. "While poverty persists, there is no true freedom."

3. Mandela criticized the "War on Terror" and the labeling of individuals as terrorists without due process. On the U.S. terrorist watch list until 2008 himself, Mandela was an outspoken critic of President George W. Bush's war on terror. He warned against rushing to label terrorists without due process. While forcefully calling for Osama bin Laden to be brought to justice, Mandela [remarked](#), "The labeling of Osama bin Laden as the terrorist responsible for those acts before he had been tried and convicted could also be seen as undermining some of the basic tenets of the rule of law."

4. Mandela called out racism in America. On a trip to New York City in 1990, Mandela made a point of visiting Harlem and [praising African Americans' struggles](#) against "the injustices of racist discrimination and economic equality." He reminded a larger crowd at Yankee Stadium that racism was not exclusively a South African phenomenon. "As we enter the last decade of the 20th century, it is intolerable, unacceptable, that the cancer of racism is still eating away at the fabric of societies in different parts of our planet," he said. "All of us, black and white, should spare no effort in our struggle against all forms and manifestations of racism, wherever and whenever it rears its ugly head."



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5. Mandela embraced some of America’s biggest political enemies. Mandela incited shock and anger in [many American communities](#) for refusing to denounce Cuban dictator Fidel Castro or Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, who had lent their support to Mandela against South African apartheid. “One of the mistakes the Western world makes is to think that their enemies should be our enemies,” he [explained](#) to an American TV audience. “We have our own struggle.” He added that those leaders “are placing resources at our disposal to win the struggle.” He also [called](#) the controversial Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat “a comrade in arms.”

6. Mandela was a die-hard supporter of labor unions. Mandela [visited](#) the Detroit auto workers union when touring the U.S., immediately claiming kinship with them. “Sisters and brothers, friends and comrades, the man who is speaking is not a stranger here,” he said. “The man who is speaking is a member of the UAW. I am your flesh and blood.”